Using Students’ First Languages in the Multilingual Classroom

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Teaching experience
Learner experience

Similarities
• Multiple nationalities and languages
• Mostly young adult students
• Focus on the use of the target language in class

Differences
• No exclusive language policy
• First languages acknowledged and used for clarity/comparison
Why the difference?

• No shared language

• ‘Monolingual mindset’ (Adoniou 2007)

• First language ignored in texts/teacher training (Ellis 2007)

• Learner’s first language viewed as ‘a nuisance and a source of interference’ (Sridhar cited in Ellis 2007)
Find ways to stop students speaking their own languages in class.

Encourage maximum use of English while respecting and understanding the role of the first language in class.

Find ways of using the first language to develop joint linguistic understanding.
Outline:

• Arguments for the use of first language
• The current classroom situation
• Practical classroom activities
• Benefits for teachers
Arguments for the Use of First Language Acquisition

• ‘FL is our most formidable cognitive resource’ (Swain and Lapkin 2005)
• ‘TL processing cannot be cut off from FL’ (Cook 1992)
• ‘Successful (second language) learners capitalise on the...linguistic experience and world knowledge they have accumulated via (their first language)’ (Butzkamm 2003)
Arguments for the Use of First Language Learner Identity

• ‘The adult learner’s sense of self is inextricably intertwined with their mother tongue’ (Forman cited in Ellis 2007)

• ‘The learner’s perspective, experience, opinions and linguistic resources remain untapped if the FL is rendered inaccessible’ (Murray & Wigglesworth 2005)
Arguments for the Use of First Language

Real world skills - translation

• ‘The current movement... towards bilingual teaching and translation as a part of that is very important... for the contemporary situation in a globalised world’

(Cook 2010)
How do students use first language?

A fly on the wall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beginner</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Upper-intermediate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension checks</td>
<td>Sub-vocal language</td>
<td>Strong understanding of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grammar</td>
<td>(composing text/working with</td>
<td>the need to use TL (90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vocabulary</td>
<td>numbers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification of task</td>
<td>• Strong understanding of the</td>
<td>78% used FL sometimes or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL as meta-language to</td>
<td>expectation to use TL</td>
<td>often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complete a task</td>
<td>• Reluctance to use FL</td>
<td>• Understand vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learner perception of FL</td>
<td>• Understand a grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as ‘helpful’</td>
<td>point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Clarify instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feels ‘more natural’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Implications

• **First language should not be prohibited in pair and group work**
  - a language learning resource (Chau 2007)
  - a normal psychological process (Storch & Wigglesworth 2003)
  - a part of the adult learner’s identity (Grasso 2012)
How can we use students’ first languages in our multilingual classes?
Using the first language in class

*Tools of Translation*

– Smart bilingual dictionary use
– Bilingual flashcards – eg Cram app

![Cram app 2016](image)

– Process-oriented text translation activities
  • Back translations
Using the first language in class

*Translation – Authentic Texts*

- **Use of authentic FL texts**
  - *Find* a news article
  - *Take* short notes
  - *Explain* to a friend
- **Language rich**
- **Motivating/engaging**
- **Student as expert**
Using the first language in class
Promoting confidence and embracing learner identity

All levels: First language show and tell
Using the first language in class

Promoting confidence and embracing learner identity

Lower Levels:

• Pair/group work with same language group
• Preparation for writing/discussion in FL
Using the first language in class

Understanding linguistic transfer

• Grammar comparison – multilingual groups
Using the first language in class

Understanding linguistic transfer

- Pronunciation comparison – multilingual groups

Sounds in Indonesian that is difficult for foreigners
- There is no /ʃ/ in BL.
  - ex: baca (read)
- No stress put in a word

Sounds in English difficult to pronounce
- /i/ - Long vs short sound
- /p/ - Pine
- /θ/ - the way to read & to write is different
  - Grammar → Verb
- /ts/, /ʃ/, /ch
- /ə/ - light sound
- /wu; yu/
Benefits for teachers

- Less ‘policing’ of language use
- Increased linguistic understanding
- More open dialogue with students

What is in it for us?
Final Considerations

• The Change:
  – English only ➔ English mostly
  – Limited, deliberate and critical use of the first language in the classroom

• The Challenge:
  – Increased flexibility and openness
  – Finding a balance
Resources


