Chapter 5

Bringing Back the L1 From Exile: Reconsidering the Role of L1 in Teaching and Assessing L2

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the effectiveness of second and foreign language learners using their L1 within their zone of proximal development to improve their L2 acquisition, and explores the usefulness of assessing specific L1 language skills to provide a more accurate analysis of learner acquirement. This theoretical approach will be examined in light of Lev S. Vygotsky and Vivian Cook’s concepts of using the L1 in teaching and assessing the L2. One of these methods is the “new concurrent method” which identifies “code-switching” as a one of its important elements in creating real life situations in the classroom. In addition to theory, this chapter provides practical ESL/EFL assessments and trends of their application. By briefly exploring some of the justifications behind banning the L1 in ESL/EFL classrooms, the chapter criticizes and refutes the pedagogical claims and assumptions made throughout the reform movement which have affected many generations of students and influenced teacher training and instruction for a number of years.

INTRODUCTION: PREVIOUS STUDIES AND CURRENT OBJECTIVES

The most remarkable aspect about second and foreign language teaching to adults is that, for these learners, mastering another language plays an essential part in interacting with a wider community. Although they seem different, learning a language and utilizing it to process information about the world are very closely related. All processes of conscious and unconscious thought are examined within the cognition realm as these processes “operate by manipulating information-laden mental representations, which are either retrieved from memory or constructed from sensory information” (Aukrust, 2011, p. 3). Studies in relation to Cognitive Learning Theory (CLT) regularly look at the information processing features and characteristics of the mind. In other words, CLT has been used to explain how extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors influence mental processes that ultimately formulate learning in any individual.

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Learning and Cognition in Education (2011) examines two major paradigms that have dominated motivation related studies since the 1970s. One of these paradigms distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation from a sociological viewpoint. Extrinsic motivation is linked to what people – mainly parents and teachers – demand and expect an individual to behave like under a reward-punishment system. It is expected that this would lead the individual to be more socialized to act in a certain way, and that the motivation to fulfill specific expectations would come from within, which is defined as intrinsic motivation.

One of the intrinsic motivational factors that influence learning in any individual is the interference of the learner’s first language. Earlier studies of the relation between the L1 and L2 focused on the role of the L1 in L2 learning “as a source of language transfer or cross-linguistic influence of the native linguistic system on the target language system” (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998, p. 315). This cross-linguistic influence has always been condemned as one of the causes that delay the attainment of a second or foreign language or that even hinder the learner from mastering its skills. However, many writers, including Jim Scrivener (2005), believe that the learner’s first language can be a beneficial resource in the classroom even if, at certain times, using it can interfere and hamper the learning process.

In the context of vocabulary learning, researchers have identified a number of vocabulary instruction strategies. Three general categories of these strategies are intralingual, interlingual, and extralingual. According to Jiang (2004):

Intralingual strategies involve the use of linguistic means of the target language such as synonyms, definitions, or linguistic contexts. Interlingual strategies utilize the L1 in the form of a bilingual dictionary, cognates, or L1 translation equivalents, often associated with word lists. Extralingual strategies make use of pictures, objects, physical contexts, and other multimedia aids (p. 426).

Many educators have regarded the use of the learners’ L1 as a common problem in ESL/EFL classes for decades. As a result, it has become a well-known trend for the intralingual position to override the interlingual position in teaching as many educators do not even attempt to consider cross-lingual objectives (Stern, 1992). The preference to use intralingual strategies while teaching stems from the fact that they are “pedagogically correct” as they reflect what the principles of communicative language teaching dictate (Jiang, 2004, p. 426).

More recent studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA) have shifted focus to analyze how L2 input is negotiated by learners and, therefore, made coherent and comprehensible with the use of conversational devices such as repetition, comprehension checks and so on. Such linguistic negotiation plays a significant role in collaborative learning and education. However, Anton and DiCamilla (1998) argue that, “While these studies recognize the importance of collaborative interaction in SLA, their focus on negotiation of L2 input provides an incomplete picture of the learners’ interaction in an L2 classroom setting” (p. 315).

The learner’s first language can actually be utilized to give a more accurate assessment of their cognitive abilities in processing information not only in their first language, but also in other languages. For example, testing students’ inferential reading skills in both their L1 and L2 can, in fact, provide a more detailed and reliable analysis of their acquirement of those skills, while also assessing the effect of the skills on learners’ abilities to process information. In addition, in almost any L2 teaching environment, students often resort to using the L1 when working on classroom activities and during peer review in class. In other words, resorting to the L1 frequently occurs as a result of interaction between students of
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