

# The learner's own language

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## Abstract

The learner's own language (commonly referred to as 'L1' or 'first language') has been neglected as a resource in the learning of another language and, in some contexts, it has been banned altogether. The arguments in favour of own-language exclusion are not supported by research and the policy is not followed by a majority of teachers. A reconsideration of these arguments and an awareness of practical suggestions for drawing on the learners' own language as a resource for learning may help language teachers to enrich their repertoire of teaching techniques and activities.

**Key words:** own language; L1; translation.

Despite its centrality to the processes of learning and teaching another language, there is no generally accepted and acceptable way of referring to the learner's own language. In our multicultural world, a learner's dominant language may not be that of their mother, so 'mother tongue' is problematic. Similarly, in many contemporary classrooms, the shared language of the class (German, for example, in a school in Vienna) may not be the language which many students consider their own (which might be Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, Albanian, Serbian, etc.). For this reason, the term 'first language' is also problematic. Following Cook (2010), Hall & Cook (2012, 2013) and Kerr (2014), I use the terms 'own language' for individual learners and 'shared language' for the language that is shared between teacher and students.

Despite its centrality to the processes of learning and teaching another language, own-language use has, until quite recently, been largely absent from discussions of English language teaching methodology. Early editions of the most widely used teacher training manuals (e.g. Harmer, 1983; Scrivener, 1994) paid scant attention to the topic. It is absent from the syllabus of pre-service training courses such as CELTA (the Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and is very rarely the subject of ELT conference presentations. It has been 'treated as a pariah in almost all the fashionable high-profile language teaching theories of the 20th century – so much so that towards the end of that century, other than at university level, it was no longer discussed in the aca-

demic literature as a serious candidate for aiding the learning of a new language' (Cook, 2010: xv).

Instead, there has been a mostly unquestioned assumption that the best way to learn and teach English is through English, and English alone. This assumption finds concrete expression in the complete banning of the learners' own language in some institutions around the world (see, for example, Mouhanna, 2009; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). More commonly, there are no stated policies regarding own-language use in ELT, but teachers, drawing on their experiences in pre-service and in-service teacher-training programmes, where own-language use is typically discouraged, believe that they are expected to teach English only through English, and that this approach is favoured by their educational ministries (Hall & Cook, 2013). The result, suggests Prodromou in his introduction to Deller & Rinvoluceri (2002: 5), is that the potential of own-language use as a resource 'has been cramped and distorted by the guilt and prohibitions that have accompanied its use.'

The history of the English-only idea is relatively easy to trace. It emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century in private language schools which taught adults (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004: ch. 15) and which sought to differentiate themselves from state-run institutions where translation was standard practice. Berlitz, the founder of one of the most well-known chains of schools and an extremely influential voice, described all own-language use in the learning of another language as "necessarily defective and incomplete" (Berlitz, 1916: 3 - 4). The close connections between the private sector and English-only policies remain strong to this day. Teachers in private institutions are approximately twice as likely as their counterparts in state institutions to adopt an English-only policy (Hall & Cook, 2013: 42). In state-run institutions, some elements of own-language use appear to be the norm (Macaro, 1997: 96), but it also appears that teachers are reluctant to admit to deviating from a policy of English-only. The process by which state-funded teachers in countries from the 'Expanding Circle' (to use Kachru's (1992) categorisation), such as Bosnia, come to embrace the ideas (but not necessarily the practices) of the private-sector-driven norm-providing 'Inner Circle' countries, such as the U.K. and the U.S.A., has been well described by Holiday (1994).

Strangely, however, the assumption that an English-only approach is the most effective way of learning and teaching English is very rarely supported in any recent publications. Slightly more common are arguments against the use of translation in English language classes, but these (e.g. Newson, 1998) suffer from the 'straw man' fallacy where a particular and limited approach to translation is criticised. An English-only approach is also not supported by any research at all. The arguments most frequently advanced against own-language use are the following (Kerr, 2016):

1. Translation is less important than the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, and, in any case, is not a useful skill for most learners to acquire.

2. Time spent using own language is time lost using English.
3. Learners need to learn to think in English and own-language use discourages them from doing so.
4. Own language use encourages the false belief that there is a word-for-word equivalence between languages, and therefore leads to language interference problems.

These arguments do not stand up to close inspection. Formal translation of a traditional literary kind may well be of little benefit to most learners of English, but if translation is more loosely defined as mediation between two languages, its importance can hardly be overestimated. It must be considered 'on a par at least with the traditional four skills' (Cook, 2008: 81). The second argument fails to account for the fact that judicious use of the learners' own language may actually result in greater use of English. One example of this is when learners fail to completely understand what is required of them for a particular classroom task (because the instructions were given in English) and, therefore, do not carry out the task. The third argument falsely assumes that different language systems are separately compartmentalized in our minds: they are not (Grosjean, 1989). Furthermore, even though teachers might be able to prevent their students from speaking their own language, they cannot prevent them from thinking in it. In any case, the language of thought is almost invariably one's own language, unless a proficiency level of B2 or C1 has been reached (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009: 5–6). Finally, the fourth argument fails to account for what most teachers know all too well: the best and most efficient way of drawing learners' attention to false friends (both lexical and grammatical) is through contrastive analysis.

These, and other, arguments against own-language use have been extensively and comprehensively countered by both researchers and methodologists, including, *inter alia*, Malmkjær (1998), Vermes (2010), Cook (2010), Hall & Cook (2012), Laviosa (2014), and Ellis & Shintani (2014). I am unaware of any research or published work of the last fifteen years that supports an English-only approach to English language learning or teaching. There is, however, increasing research evidence (Kerr, 2016) which suggests that some own-language use may be beneficial to language learners. One example of this is the research which demonstrates the positive effects of translation (e.g. bilingual dictionaries and bilingual wordlists) in the learning of vocabulary (Nation, 1997).

It is high time that we stopped asking whether own-language use is a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing' in English language learning and teaching. More useful and productive questions concern the 'how' and 'how often' of own-language use. Self-evidently, the more that learners use English, the better, but the extent to which their own language will help them to use English will depend on many factors, not the least important of which will be their age and their level. Methodologists can provide suggestions, but they cannot make firm recommendations that would be

relevant to all contexts. In order to investigate the practical possibilities of own-language use, a useful starting point is to consider what both teachers and students already do.

Both Ellis (1994) and Kim & Elder (2005) have studied the functions of own-language use by the teacher in language classrooms. Combining the classificatory systems of these studies, we may say that there are two broad functions: 'medium-oriented' or 'core' functions, concerned with the teaching of the language, and 'framework' or 'social' functions, concerned with classroom management. There can be overlap between these functions so it is not always possible to allocate a given intervention by the teacher to one of them. The division remains useful, nevertheless, as a way of reflecting on own-language use.

Research (Hall & Cook, 2013) suggests that own-language use by teachers is more common for the first function than for the second, and the two most frequent examples of this were 'explaining when meanings in English are unclear' and 'explaining grammar'. Such interventions are often unplanned and improvised, and teachers would benefit from having a greater repertoire of techniques and activities from which they can select. One technique, which could be employed more regularly, is own-language mirroring (Butzkamm and Caldwell, 2009: 106-111), where a teacher gives a literal translation, into the learner's own language, of an incorrect word, phrase or structure, as a way of drawing attention to problems with language transfer. Kerr (2014) describes a number of other possibilities for activities and teaching materials which incorporate own-language elements. These include the analysis of typical mistakes made by learners from specific language backgrounds, the use of bilingual word cards (especially digital flashcards) for vocabulary development and the exploration of bilingual resources such as dictionaries and online translation services.

One particular technique, reverse translation, deserves more detailed description here. Reverse translation, or back translation, has been documented as a technique for language teaching since at least the sixteenth century when the Spanish humanist, Juan Luis Vives, and the English educationalist and scholar, Roger Ascham, recommended it. It is hardly complicated: students are given a text to translate from one language to another; later, they translate it back again (without, of course, referring to the original). It is now generally agreed that the first of these translations should be from English (the target language) into the learner's own language. The technique can be used with virtually any text, preferably one that students have already engaged with in some way. This might be a portion of a text for reading comprehension, an audio script from a listening comprehension, a text which provides a model for a particular written genre, or an exercise (such as a gap-fill) which has been used to practise grammatical or lexical items. Reverse translation can also be usefully combined with automatic online translation: students correct a translation into their own language of a text they have previously studied (this raises awareness of the limitations of automatic online translation)

and, in a subsequent lesson, translate this back into English before comparing their work with the original.

The 'framework' or 'social' functions of own-language use, although less frequent than the 'core' functions, also offer possibilities for extending a teacher's repertoire. Students are likely to benefit from clear classroom rules which establish when they can use their own language, and when only English is permitted. Teachers can monitor and record instances of own-language use, and time can be set aside at the end of a lesson to explore how these might have been expressed in English. In group work, students can take on the responsibility of monitoring and recording examples of own-language use within their group, and such activities can also be rounded off with an exploration of English equivalents.

Teachers often use the shared language of the classroom to give instructions and administrative information. Even with low levels, much of this could be done in English if the teacher uses the technique of 'sandwiching'. When the teacher wants or needs to use an English word or phrase which they think the students in the class are unlikely to know, they provide a quick gloss of it in the students' own language, repeat it in English, and then carry on. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009: 33) suggest that this should be 'a central technique of any foreign language teacher as it is the quickest way to make authentic classroom communication possible'. Large amounts of incidental language learning can take place in this way, but the technique can also be used systematically as a way of moving towards a situation where only English is used to give instructions.

Research has also been carried out into the learners' use of their own language in English language classes. Teachers, especially of monolingual groups, know that one of their hardest tasks is to minimise the amount of own-language use and maximise the use of English. Paradoxically, this can be achieved by a degree of tolerance towards the students' own language. Preparation for speaking activities (e.g. brainstorming what to say) is often more productive when own-language use is permitted. One way of managing this is to allow for 'own-language moments' (Kerr, 2014: 26–29): short bursts of own-language speaking designed to facilitate more extended production of English subsequently. 'Own-language moments' can also be introduced at any point in any class when students are tired, frustrated or stuck.

Research also indicates that a majority of learners, especially at lower levels, have positive attitudes towards the use of their own-language in their study of English (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Lee, 2012). From a purely affective perspective, a strict English-only policy has little to recommend it.

Although English-only policies remain in place in many contexts around the world, the arguments for them are, at best, "not proven" (Macaro, 2000: 174), and, at worst, "detrimental" and "untenable" (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009: 182–186). The body of literature in support of some own-language use has grown sub-

stantially since the turn of the century. Most teachers will need little persuading, 'since the emerging critical consensus on own-language use confirms their own practice-driven understanding of language classrooms' (Kerr, 2016). This understanding may be summarised as English mainly, rather than English-only. Precisely how and to what extent teachers exploit their students' own language will be determined by the teachers themselves, based on their practical understanding of their teaching contexts and the needs of their students.

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