

Using the Mother Tongue – Part 5

Over-using L1 in the classroom?

Before you read '**Over-using L1 in the classroom?**', complete the following task:

In your lessons, what percentage of time is the students' L1 used

- a. by the students?
- b. by the teacher?

Now read '**Over-using L1 in the classroom?**'. Are your percentages the same as those found by the author in her action research procedure?

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Over-using L1 in the Classroom?

by Linda Bawcom

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An enlightening piece of action research

Do you use your students' mother tongue in the classroom? If so, do you know how much of the class takes place in the mother tongue? You might be as disturbed as Linda Bawcom was when she decided to investigate her own class. The results of her research made her think about why the L1 was being used and about ways of reducing what she felt was its over-use.

Curious as to when and why my two adult, elementary level students and I were using L1 in the classroom (in this case Spanish), I taped, transcribed and categorized by function, the Spanish spoken in two one-and-a-half-hour classes.

The results, for those who might be interested, were:

- affective factors (e.g. sense of identity, security, social interaction) 36%
- learning strategies (e.g. checking comprehension, going over homework) 41%
- expediency (e.g. translation of directions for activities and passive vocabulary) 18%.

The remaining 5% was unintelligible. The outcome was interesting as far as my purposes for the action research were concerned.

However, I also discovered a disturbing fact. The results also showed that 33% of our conversation was done in L1. I cannot say that I was completely surprised, but I confess that seeing such a high figure in black and white did engender concern.

Granted, there is an abundance of literature which advocates the use of L1 in the classroom or suggests that it can be productive or may even be necessary at times (see, for example: Rinvolucri 2001, Stevick 1990, Ellis 1988, Atkinson 1987, Bolitho 1983, and Rivers 1978). Nonetheless, although no percentage was ever mentioned in my reading, common sense tells a language teacher that 33% is indeed high. Some serious reflection was needed here.

Techniques used to correct the situation

After some thought and a little research, I decided to experiment with four techniques. I did the following:

- a) taped and transcribed the Spanish spoken in the next class and chose some of the turns to be used as a translation exercise
- b) gave my students a glossary of useful classroom language
- c) did a bit of learner training by discussing the students' reasons for taking English
- d) used verbal cues such as saying: Pardon? or repeating in L2 what had been said in L1.

Results of techniques

By the ninth hour of class (I was still taping and transcribing), the use of these techniques reduced the amount of L1 spoken in class by 10%. I would say the most useful were the verbal cues and the glossary of classroom language, which was added to as common and useful expressions arose. I also insisted that this glossary be kept close at hand at all times. Therefore, I imagine that the success of this item was due to the fact that it was visual and easily accessible.

Curiously enough, although taping did not seem to influence my students' use of L1 at all, I noticed, as if being observed, that my own use abated immediately!

I also noted from this action research that, starting with the fourth hour, another strategy became more noticeable, which was the mixture of L1 with L2 (I counted this mixture as L1) and self correction. Examples are: 'estamos en el (we are on) number 4', and 'te toca' followed by 'your turn'. I considered this to be progress, since the students were becoming more aware of their ability to use English and they were gaining more confidence.

Despite the progress shown in these results, consideration needs to be given as to when the use of L1 is becoming a hindrance to learning, and reflection is necessary as to its overall appropriateness in each situation. There would obviously be a difference between the rather informal beginners' class I taught with only two students, and the more common teaching situation with a class of perhaps fifteen adult students, in which the dynamics would change considerably due to the wants and needs of all of the students.

Insights

It probably would have been better to be firmer from the outset of the classes so as not to have to do any repair work at all. However, both my students had often mentioned how much they looked forward to the classes simply as a way to relax, have fun and forget the stress of their jobs. This explains the high percentage of the use of L1 when joking and talking about daily life.

Nonetheless, it is hard to say how much of our laxness, paradoxically, led to improved confidence in using English. I noticed a great deal of improvement in one student's pronunciation. And the other, the greater offender in using L1, did nevertheless, over the next few months, become much more willing to take risks and experiment with English. Furthermore, I found that I too have an 'affective' side, in that I also want to be liked and appreciated and, perhaps for these reasons, also used L1 when I could have used English. Thus, what I realized was needed, while not an easy task, is to find a comfortable balance by taking into consideration (and discovering) my own philosophy of teaching and then weighing the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in the classroom.

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- Linda Bawcom

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Now that you have read '**Over-using L1 in the classroom?**' complete the following task:

- What did Linda Bawcom find out when she did her research and what did she feel about it? Do you think she was right to feel that?
- Complete the table with the techniques Linda Bawcom used to 'correct the situation' and the results of these techniques.

	Technique	Result
a		
b		
c		
d		