



Live Moderated Chat Transcript

Using the Mother Tongue – July 17th 2003

- <Jill> Hi Jeremy, hi everyone - if you have any questions then send them in and we'll try and get through them all. We'll make a start in a few minutes
- <jeremy_harmer> Hi Jill, looking forward to today's chat!
- <argie> ok, hi there
- <jeremy_harmer> Hello argie..
- <Jill> Where is everyone from?
- <argie> Argentina
- <MartyB> hi - I'm from HK
- <argie> the topic is quite interesting
- <jeremy_harmer> Glad you think so, argie. Our attitudes to the L1 have certainly changed over the years, I think.
- <argie> yeah, but I use translation in class, otherwise my students tend to day dream
- <argie> I mean it's not a matter of overusing it, but it's important sometimes
- <argie> hi, MartyB
- <MartyB> hi argie
- <MartyB> Jeremy, is the activity of translating texts from L1 to English valid?
- <jeremy_harmer> Hi MartyB. That's quite a question. I think we have to separate out different kinds of L1 use and translation from one text to another is certainly valid, though as a reading activity I'm not sure I would do too much of it!
- <argie> or perhaps it would be good for students to use translation as a part of games activities
- <MartyB> what kind of texts would be good - literature, news, etc?
- <jeremy_harmer> argie, I think the use of the L1 often boils down to how much and when - if you see what I mean. Are we getting ahead of ourselves a bit? I mean I'm thinking the big question is how we feel in general about L1 use and then, perhaps we can go on to talk about specific translation opportunities. Or is that just me trying to direct the 'conversation' a bit? Probably!
- <Jill> Well, to kick things off - there was an English teacher from Malaysia here earlier, Kimlam, who couldn't stay but wanted to know how much English should be used in class, what do you think?
- <MartyB> L1 is unavoidable I think
- <jeremy_harmer> I think I'm quite clear about the fact that in an English class (which I think is different from, say a translation class or an interpreting lesson), well then English has to predominate. From my own point of view I have 'dis'enjoyed' lessons in other countries where I've heard the teacher explaining grammar in the L1 for hours with just a bit of English thrown in for examples!
- <MartyB> when you are in a monolingual situation L1 will occur, especially with teenagers and trying to discipline them!
- <jeremy_harmer> MartyB I quite agree with you there. L1 occurs because, well, it does and there's nothing we could or should do about that! Students translate in their heads automatically, especially at lower levels, and that may well be part of the whole process of learning.
- <argie> sorry, got to go, bye
- <jeremy_harmer> Oh argie, that's a pity. Come back soon!
- <Karina> should I worry about that and keep a tighter rein if that happens in my class
- <jeremy_harmer> I'm thinking, MartyB and Karina that L1 use happens so we don't need to be paranoid about it the thing we want to encourage, however, is activities which give students some incentive to use English too - and as much as possible. In particular, I guess that getting students to read and listen to



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English with enjoyment (and understanding it) is one of the best things we can do for some part of lessons, anyway, and whether they end up translating if we can get their initial response to these texts when they are received in English, well then that's pretty good.

<Karina>

so should we be using lots of songs and games?

<jeremy_harmer>

I think songs are really good ways of getting students really engaged and involved with English! And actually, with current songs, students will 'do' English on their own. We don't have to drag them to it!

<Karina>

but I sometimes worry that my students learn strange words from the music they hear outside the class

<jeremy_harmer>

Karina, yes, that's a bit of a problem because songs of the moment are often written in the language 'of the moment' and of a particular sub-group of society, so it's pretty ephemeral stuff. Still if songs can engage their English interest then that's something we can use in class to promote English-ness

<neil>

what do you think of comparing English tense and aspect with students' first languages to help them grasp the similarities and differences?

<jeremy_harmer>

Neil, I think comparing really works in a monolingual setting. Just saying to students 'look in your/our language we say this when we mean something, but in English they do it a bit differently can help some of the students who respond well to that kind of explanation. (By the way Karina, I think games really work for certain students)

<Karina>

really - which ones Jeremy?

<MartyB>

what about in a multilingual class - we don't have the luxury to compare easily

<jeremy_harmer>

MartyB, no, you can't compare in that way, though you can say 'how do you all say this? Is it the same as in English?'

<neil>

I've used it to some extent with multilingual adults and it is interesting to see all the differences but it is difficult to check if the students really understand of course

<MartyB>

yes, the checking would be difficult

<jeremy_harmer>

Yes neil, that's right, of course. But it's quite good fun sometimes asking students about how they express metaphorical meaning (idioms etc) my favourite was some Turkish students who told me that the Turkish equivalent of 'it's as plain as the nose on the end of your face' (= it's obvious) is 'when you can see the village you don't need to ask for directions!'

Karina, sorry to keep you waiting! Depends on the age of the students etc, doesn't it, when we decide about games. But games where students hear stress and intonation patterns (with unclear words) and have to match them up with phrases of the fish expert game (I'll explain if you want) of the fish bowl (why am I obsessed with fish today? work well with almost any age.

<Jill>

I think we need to know about the fish - I'm curious anyway!

<Karina>

well I teach teenagers - 13-16

<jeremy_harmer>

OK, quick fish experts: you have 5 students sitting in a row. Tell them they are fish experts or music experts or anything you want. Students write questions for them as if they really were experts, and when they ask the experts, the experts have to answer in turn with one word each and keep the sentence/answer going. They go up and down the line producing 'and' and 'but', 'perhaps' etc to keep the thing going. great. (Did that make sense. I first learnt this activity from Ken Wilson who had taken it from a British TV show)

<Karina>

thanks Jeremy that sounds fun!

<MartyB>

so it's like a chain story?



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- <jeremy_harmer> MartyB, yes, kind of, except that because they can only say one word each time their turn comes up they really concentrate.
- <jeremy_harmer> In 'fish bowl' you (or they) write down words and phrases on pieces of paper which you then fold and put in a bowl students start talking about a topic, and when you (or one of them) blows a whistle, claps or whatever, they have to take a piece of paper from the bowl and use that phrase in their conversation instantly. Ridiculous, but fun.
- <Jill> When you are teaching then (all of you!) how easy is it to get your students to speak just English?
- <MartyB> well as I said with teenagers it's tricky so it's all about motivation, don't you think?
- <jeremy_harmer> Yes, I think so MartyB, but that's why I make a special deal of reading and listening and why, too providing activities with some guidance (rather than totally free speaking activities) is often pretty useful.
- <Karina> so having a more controlled environment is better?
- <jeremy_harmer> Well, Karina, I'd be interested to hear what MartyB, neil and bluey have to say about that, but everything seems to depend on how prepared the students are to 'go along with' you. If they have real trouble getting into the English habit then long stretches of free groupwork ain't going to help them or you much!
- <MartyB> well, I generally have a lot of controlled practice for 80%% of the lesson and the freer activity at the end - does that sound right. It works OK for me
- <jeremy_harmer> MartyB, I can't see anything wrong with that especially if students know that the more they use English in freer activities the more they'll get to do it (provided they seem to be engaged by this)
- <MartyB> I recently asked everyone to bring in something about their favourite English music and they had to talk about it and that worked well - they were motivated
- <Karina> I think fun games like the ones you described, Jeremy, help as an end activity
- <jeremy_harmer> Karina, that's interesting. Maybe you can all help me, by the way. I'm currently thinking about what to say on the topic, precisely, of the best way of ending things: lessons, terms, course etc. Any ideas?
- <MartyB> I think teenagers like to talk about themselves so getting them to talk about their favourite hobby, music, sport etc is a great end of term activity - especially when it's done like a mini-presentation, and others have to ask questions.
- <MartyB> I try to make it light hearted so it's not an ordeal!
- <neil> Yeah -presentations are always a winner with any age it seems
- <jeremy_harmer> MartyB, I really like the lesson you described. Getting students to talk about what they really want to talk about, especially if it is done in the right kind of atmosphere (and if they have a bit of time to think about what they are going to say) is really great.
- <Karina> yes, I've tried something like that. what about putting on a play or sketches?
- <jeremy_harmer> Karina, yes, yes. Love plays and sketches, especially if the teacher spends real time 'directing' - really working on making it sound right, appropriate, dramatic etc
- <Karina> luckily my school has a stage and equipment
- <jeremy_harmer> Wow! Where do you work, Karina?
- <Karina> its a state school in Germany
- <jeremy_harmer> Sounds good!
- <MartyB> Jeremy - I have a private student who is beginner (25) and is struggling and frustrated and is constantly asking me to translate everything. Should I give in? When should I give in?



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- <neil>** sorry - I keep getting students in my room asking questions...
- <jeremy_harmer>** MartyB, I reckon it's a question of making a bargain with him/her. I'll translate in a minute if you try and say this I'll trade translations for Englishes sort of thing!
- <neil>** I think the biggest thing for the teacher to get used to in these activities is to take a back seat so the students don't keep looking to them for guidance, and finally get the confidence to just use what they know and for the students to understand when the teacher is a 'resource' and when they are on their own
- <Karina>** I agree neil. its a matter of making sure they are clear about their objectives and what they have to achieve and how they achieve it.
- <jeremy_harmer>** neil, yes that sounds absolutely right. And in the context of L1 use, they will be in a much better position if we make it clear when we think L1 use isn't on (e.g. during a communicative tasks of the kind neil is describing) and when we are more relaxed about it (if a student is checking instructions etc). But it's worth remembering that a recent exchange of articles in the ELT Journal differed totally about this, with one writer saying instructions, classroom management is much better in the L1, while the other said L1 was one of the really good sources of comprehensible input.
- <neil>** I think rewarding the students ability to use what they know as well as they can, as opposed to the search for accuracy all the time will wen the students off he constant need to translate
- <wall>** Hi! I think it's our responsibility to train them and teach them how to become independent learners. I am from Argentina
- <MartyB>** I agree wall
- <jeremy_harmer>** Hi Wall. Yes, training is really important.
- <Karina>** so Jeremy, which side of the argument do you fall in?
- <neil>** L1 instructions are certainly better than target language instructions given badly, as they often can be as giving careful instructions is a bit of an art
- <jeremy_harmer>** Karina, I think good experienced teachers are good at giving instructions in English - and that English IS good comprehensible input - but I also agree with neil too, so I favour a blend. It usually works out as giving instructions (and class management) in English but allowing (or even encouraging) checking in the L1 and then perhaps using L1 if (probably only if) you are finding it impossible to get things over in English.
- <Karina>** Thanks. Jeremy, sadly I have to go now. Thank you for your great tips. Thanks MartyB and neil for your input. lots to think about.
- <jeremy_harmer>** Karina, lovely to have you along with us. Come again!
- <MartyB>** Bye Karina
- <wall>** I find that problem specially with my adult students. Children tend to be more open minded in that sense. Bye Karina
- <MartyB>** interesting!
- <jeremy_harmer>** I guess, Wall, that adults have more to lose in some senses. Perhaps that's why.
- <wall>** Sure but is still think I can find a way to forget they are learning a new language and enjoy. I find it really hard, though
- <Jill>** Has anyone got any final questions or comments they'd like to make, I think it's time to draw to a close shortly.
- <MartyB>** actually ill need to go too. Thanks everyone. Been a pleasure Jeremy see you next time
- <MartyB>** see you next time
- <jeremy_harmer>** Yes, wall, how do you get them to 'forget' - and lower their barriers?
- <jeremy_harmer>** MartyB, thanks so much for your contributions. great having you along. See you next time.
- <neil>** maybe the answer to that is some L1 - if it will reassure them a little - make them feel safer then it may actually serve to take the edge off a little??



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- <jeremy_harmer>** I think that's right neil. We probably need to direct our energies more towards encouraging more English rather than clamping down on L1 use I know that sounds a bit corny but it may be an important psychological shift!
- <wall>** Well I try to create an atmosphere in the classroom. I try to make them forget that we are in a classroom and that we are just doing something we are supposed to be enjoying.
- <jeremy_harmer>** sounds good, wall. I bet you do that well.
- <wall>** Thank you, Jeremy, I don't know. I feel more comfortable with children and teenagers.
- <jeremy_harmer>** I can never decide about that. Just when I think I prefer one age group, something makes me change my mind thanks Heavens they are all different, anyway!!
- <neil>** -they do come with less baggage about how the language "should" be taught -says me who must be the worst person ever to have as a language student!!
- <jeremy_harmer>** Yes, neil, that's absolutely right. Good teenagers (whatever good means) are the absolute best!
- <wall>** And thanks heavens they have different teachers!!
- <Jill>** Well, I think that's all we've got time for this evening. Thanks for coming along everyone - the next chat will be on teaching Primary in September. Keep an eye on the website and your email to find out the date
- <Jill>** Thanks as ever Jeremy!
- <neil>** Thanks everyone. Ta very much.
- <jeremy_harmer>** Jill, thanks for the fantastic job you do to keep the whole thing going so smoothly, and thanks to all of you who joined in. Great. Good fun. See you all soon, I hope.
- <wall>** Thanks a lot. It was my first time and I really enjoyed it
- <Jill>** Glad to hear that Wall, hope to see you next time. See you Neil, speak to you again next time I hope.
- <jeremy_harmer>** So once again, many thanks. Pleased people enjoyed it. I did anyway. Goodbye Jill, goodbye everybody