

Anne M. Edstrom
Montclair, NJ, USA

Teacher reflection as a strategy for evaluating L1/L2 use in the classroom

Die Autorin regt Zweit- und Fremdsprachenlehrer dazu an, die Wirksamkeit ihres eigenen L1- und L2-Gebrauchs im Unterricht zu evaluieren und macht zahlreiche Vorschläge zur konkreten Durchführung solcher Evaluierungen. Ihre Empfehlungen basieren auf Ergebnissen der Forschung und einer eigenen detaillierten Untersuchung ihres persönlichen Sprachgebrauchs im Unterricht. Hier argumentiert sie, dass Entscheidungen darüber, welcher Sprachgebrauch jeweils angemessen ist, zu einem grossen Teil direkt von der spezifischen Unterrichtssituation abhängen und fordert Lehrende dazu auf, ihre eigenen methodisch-didaktischen Vorstellungen zu analysieren. Schliesslich zieht sie die Schlussfolgerung, dass es wohl wenig zielführend ist, Lehrende zu kontrollieren oder ihnen vorzuschreiben, was sie zu tun und zu lassen haben. Ziel sollte die Stärkung der Eigenverantwortung im Unterricht sein, die aufrichtige Reflexion über den tatsächlich stattfindenden Unterricht und seine Effektivität und schliesslich die Veränderung von Sprachverhalten, das sich nicht rechtfertigen lässt.

Introduction

The role of the first (L1) and second language (L2) in the foreign language classroom has been the subject of much discussion and considerable controversy among linguists and language teachers. The communicative and proficiency-based approaches currently embraced by many practitioners in the field are based on the assumption that the L2 is the language of instruction. However, there is no set formula that prescribes exactly how much L2 use is necessary or ideal. Most researchers endorse near exclusive use of the L2 though some maintain that maximizing L2 use does not completely exclude the L1 and cautiously endorse “bringing [it] back from exile” (Cook, 2001). This article offers suggestions for foreign language teachers in approaching this complex issue.

The language of instruction

Current theories of second language acquisition support both the importance of the L2 in providing input for the acquisition process and the potential role of the L1 as a cognitive tool in interaction. Krashen’s (1982) Input Hypothesis, the Input Processing Model (VanPatten, 2004), and Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (1981) emphasize the centrality of comprehensible L2 input in second language acquisition. On the other hand, Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) posits a role, albeit limited, for the L1, maintaining that it constitutes an important cognitive tool that facilitates scaffolding and private speech and, in turn, language

acquisition. The findings of numerous studies suggest that L1 use should not be prohibited in collaborative work given that it “may be a normal psychological process that allows learners to initiate and sustain verbal interaction” (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2003).

When considering the relevance of these theoretical models, it is important to distinguish the use of the L1 on the part of learners in the process of completing an L2 task from the use of the L1 by the language teacher. Most data that support a role for the L1 refer to its use by learners in their collaborative attempts at L2 interaction (Antón & DiCamilla, 1999; Thoms, Liao & Szustak, 2005) rather than to teacher L1 use. Thus, much of the justification for limited and occasional use of the L1 as the language of instruction in foreign language classrooms is more anecdotal in nature; for example, Turnbull (2001) concurs with the opinion that “it is efficient to make a quick switch to the L1 to ensure that students understand a difficult grammar concept or an unknown word” (p. 535), and Bateman’s (2008) study of pre-service teachers found tremendous variation in their goals for their own L2 use in the classroom. Consequently, there is no established norm for how much L2 use constitutes “good teaching” or data that quantify the amount of target language input necessary for learning to occur.

The quantity of L2 input is an important factor in evaluating the effectiveness of a teacher’s language use. It is also necessary, however, to analyze one’s perceived “lapses” into the L1 and identify the reasons for those changes. Though some may find all such in-

stances of codeswitching unjustifiable, others argue that some instances of the L1 are more defensible than others. The first step for language teachers who wish to address this issue is to become more aware of their own pedagogical practices and language use in the classroom.

Reflection as a strategy

Many foreign language teachers are unaware of the extent to which they use the L1 and L2 (Polio and Duff, 1994) as well as the particular functions for which they use it; nevertheless, such awareness is the key to evaluating the appropriateness of their language use. Language teachers often find that their perceptions of their classroom practice do not match up with what they actually do (Edstrom, 2003, 2006; Oskoz & Liskin-Gasparro, 2001). For instance, in Edstrom (2006), I reported having estimated my L1 use at 5-10% but after carrying out a reflective study of my own teaching found that it was approximately 23%. Reflection is a particularly valuable tool for practicing teachers in assessing their own practice and an important step in fostering their professional development. However, effective reflection is an active, informed process that requires the systematic analysis of concrete data or observable facts, not merely the mulling over of random thoughts or perceptions.

There are several ways in which language teachers can collect data that later serve as the object of systematic reflection. One is to record themselves by audio and/or video. For instance, I wore a lapel microphone and recorded my language use in a first semester Spanish course throughout one semester; I then transcribed the recordings and analyzed them in detail to calculate both the quantity and nature of my L1 use (Edstrom, 2006).

However, it is not necessary to have extensive recordings or transcriptions

in order to gain valuable insights about one's pedagogical practices. Language teachers will find that simply listening to or watching a recording of one of their language classes is helpful in identifying how often they used the L1 and for what purposes they used it. Further reflection then enables them to assess the appropriateness of those instances in light of current research as well as their own pedagogical beliefs.

In addition to self-recording, keeping a journal is also an important tool both for pre-service (Good & Whang, 2002; Uline, Wilson, and Cordry, 2004) and practicing (Edstrom, 2006) teachers. One suggestion is for teachers to set aside 5 or 10 minutes after class to jot down observations about their use of the L1 and/or L2 during that particular session; this type of journaling creates a space for the subjective feelings and perceptions that are inevitably a part of a teacher's daily experience with language use in the classroom. Perhaps more importantly, journals also facilitate comparisons between these perceptions or experiences and one's actual practice; that is, comparing journal observations about how one remembers using the L1 in class on a particular day with a recording of that particular class session can be particularly enlightening.

Finally, learner feedback is also an excellent source of data and a valuable object of teacher reflection (Edstrom, 2006). Learners can provide formal feedback on their teachers' language use through questionnaires and surveys or they can offer informal observations through a more open-ended format. Especially useful are their perceptions of the quantity and function of their teachers' L1 use as well as their judgments about its appropriateness and its impact on their language learning experiences. Though their comments are subjective, they provide a unique perspective. For instance, students may report that their teacher "speaks the L2 all the time" when in fact he

or she uses the L1 quite often. Such a perception may indicate the degree to which students feel immersed, or even overwhelmed, by the L2 and suggests that judicious L1 use on the part of their particular teacher may not have a negative effect on their learning experience. It is also possible that a group of motivated learners who want all the benefits of an immersion experience express a desire for their teacher to conduct the class entirely in the L2. This is not to say that teachers should do whatever learners request or that learners always have enough language learning experience to access accurately their own needs. The point is simply that learners should be central in all teacher decision making whether in regard to the selection of an appropriate curriculum, the design and quantity of assessments, or the use of language in the classroom.

In sum, recordings, journals and learner feedback provide essential data for teachers who want to reflect on and analyze their actual language use. Previous research offers several frameworks or categories of language use that are helpful to foreign language teachers in assessing the data they have collected and in making decisions that enhance their pedagogy.

Evaluating L1 Use

Polio and Duff (1994) identified 8 common uses of the L1 on the part of second or foreign language teachers: (1) administrative vocabulary like "homework" or "midterm", (2) grammar teaching, (3) classroom management, (4) communication of empathy or solidarity, (5) language practice for the teacher, (6) translation of unknown vocabulary, (7) clarification when students are confused, and (8) in response to a student's use of the L1. These researchers conclude their article with suggestions for how language teachers can maximize their L2 use, recommendations that have

been echoed by many others in the field. They advocate, for instance, practices such as the establishment of an “L2 only” policy from the first day of class, the modification of input through repetition and simplified syntax as well as visual aids, and an emphasis on the fact that learners do not need to understand every word spoken by the teacher.

I agree with Polio and Duff (1994) that language teachers should maximize L2 use and in my own practice implement most of the strategies they suggest, but the results of my self-study led to slightly different conclusions. I did find that I used the L1 for a variety of functions in my first-semester Spanish class, many of which corresponded to the list compiled by Polio and Duff (1994). For instance, there were instances in which I used the L1 to answer questions about grammar, deal with classroom management, and establish solidarity with students. But in analyzing all instances of my L1 use more closely, I found some of them more justifiable than others.

I ultimately identified three main reasons or motivations for my own L1 use in the first semester language course that I studied. First, on the negative side, my analysis revealed numerous examples of sheer laziness. There were many instances in which I could have used the L2 and could identify no reason, other than laziness, for having done so. This observation reflects one of the primary concerns with a pedagogical posture that permits L1 use. As Turnbull (2001) states, “I

know from personal experience that it is tempting to use the L1 to save time, especially when one is tired or when students are particularly agitated. I fear that licensing teachers to speak the L1 in their SL or FL classes will lead to an overuse of the L1 by many teachers” (p. 536). Turnbull’s fear is well-founded, and most language teaching practitioners, myself included, hesitate to endorse publicly a controversial practice without knowing the particular audience by whom it will be received, the pedagogical framework through which it will be interpreted, or the learning context in which it will be applied.

Second, on the positive side, I recurred to a notion that I called a “moral obligation” (see Edstrom, 2006) to my students. Reflecting on my own teaching experience, I identified a variety of incidents that I would place in this category. One example are those times when I, as a teacher, consciously switch to the L1 because I sense that I might have offended a student and any L2 attempt to right the perceived wrong will not be comprehended.

Third, I reported using the L1 in response to the multiple goals that I have as a language teacher; these goals include helping beginning learners who may never have another experience in a foreign language class to avoid stereotypes of the L2 culture and to better understand the relationship between language and perception of reality. Once, during the second week of a beginning Spanish course, several students expressed inaccurate

generalizations about the use of terms of address; however, these comments went beyond erroneous usage and implied that the distinction between “tú” and “usted” in Spanish was illogical. Though I did not pause at that moment and consciously weigh the pros and cons of switching to the L1, I did have a sense that the cultural stakes were high in this particular situation and that clarifying the matter, and thereby addressing the questionable attitudes that had surfaced, was more important than staying in the L2. This example highlights the factors that I considered, albeit somewhat spontaneously, and the relative weight I gave to them, ultimately deciding that I needed to use the L1. The point is not that teachers should use the L1 to teach certain concepts or to carry out certain functions in the classroom. In fact, I would argue the opposite and maintain that all legitimate use of the L1 cannot be defined or determined a priori.

Decisions about appropriate L1 use are, in large part, inextricably tied to classroom circumstances and cannot be predetermined nor easily generalized from one context to another. Some researchers have indicated the need for concrete guidelines about L1/L2 use that would presumably sanction specific quantities of or functions for L1 use, but such “rules” inevitably simplify the complexity of the language teaching and learning experiences.

For example, some language teachers maintain that using the L1 to teach grammar is justified; however, I be-



Alexander Calder, *Jeux 1*.

lieve that what is appropriate or justifiable depends on a number of factors including the grammatical concept to be presented, the learners' level and prior language learning experience, the reason for which learners need to learn or use that particular grammar point, as well as the unanticipated student reactions, comments or observations that surface on the spot during the lesson. In other words, there are numerous grammatical concepts that can be easily contextualized and presented in meaningful and engaging ways with minimal explanation, let alone any comment in the L1. Furthermore, the degree of detail included in the introduction of a new grammatical concept depends upon a variety of factors including students' needs and the means of assessment or evaluation; more detail may justify use of the L1, but not necessarily. The learners themselves constitute an extremely important variable in determining whether or not the L1 is appropriate; learners of Spanish who have already studied another Romance language are likely to grasp certain grammatical concepts more quickly, for example, than monolingual English-speaking learners and may need little or no explanation, especially in the L1. In short, I would argue that there are some grammar teaching scenarios in which L1 use is positive or perhaps necessary and others in which it is not.

Generalizations about L1 use become even more problematic when one evaluates the more subjective aspects of language teaching I highlighted from my own classroom. There is no hard and fast rule for what language to use when one offends a student or when a learner makes a stereotypical comment about the target culture. Consequently, language teachers need to think through the countless variables they confront and learn to make principled decisions on the spot in their own classroom. The subjective nature both of this process and of the criteria for evaluation I used

when assessing my own teaching may be a bit disconcerting for some. There is undoubtedly an element of trial and error in this approach, but language teachers who are willing to take an honest look at their practices, by analyzing recordings, reflecting in journals or examining student feedback, will find that taking ownership of their teaching frees them both to accept certain instances of language use and to reject others.

Conclusions

The issue of the language of instruction in foreign language classrooms is likely to remain controversial. Research findings, personal experiences, and professional opinions will continue to shape our notion of best practices in this regard, and yet, ultimately, decisions about using the L1 or the L2 will be made by individual language teachers, oftentimes behind a closed classroom door. Efforts to control teachers or mandate what they should and should not do are probably not as effective as supporting each other in taking responsibility for our own teaching, honestly reflecting on the actual nature and effectiveness of our pedagogical practices, and committing to change that which we cannot justify.

References

- Antón, M. & Dicamilla, F. (1999). Socio-cognitive functions of L1 collaborative interaction in the L2 classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 83, 233-247.
- Bateman, B. (2008). Student teachers' attitudes and beliefs about using the target language in the classroom. *Foreign Language Annals* 41, 11-28.
- Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 57, 402-423.
- Edstrom, A. (2003). What My Students Heard that I Didn't Know I Said: Reflections on Learner Feedback in a Spanish Composition Course. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 60, 205-222.
- Edstrom, A. (2006). L1 use in the L2 classroom: One teacher's self-evaluation. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 63, 275-292.
- Good, J. & Whang, P. (2002). Encouraging reflection in preservice teachers through response journals. *The Teacher Educator* 37, 254-265.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.
- Long, M. (1981). Input, interaction and second language acquisition. In H. Winitz (Ed.), *Native language and foreign language acquisition* (pp. 259-278). *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 379. New York: Academy of Sciences.
- Oskoz, A. & Liskin-Gasparro, J.E. (2001). Corrective feedback, learner uptake, and teacher beliefs: A pilot study. In X. Bonch-Bruevich, W.J. Crawford, J. Hellermann, C. Higgins, and H. Nguyen (Eds.), *The past, present, and future of second language research* (pp. 209-228). Somerville, MA: Cascadia Press.
- Polio C. & Duff, P. (1994). Teachers' language use in university foreign language classrooms: A qualitative analysis of English and target language alternation. *The Modern Language Journal* 78, 313-326.
- Storch, N. & Wigglesworth, G. (2003). Is there a role for the use of the L1 in an L2 setting? *TESOL Quarterly* 37(4), 760-770.
- Thoms, J., Liao, J. & Szustak, A. (2005). The use of L1 in an L2 on-line chat activity. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 62, 161-182.
- Turnbull, M. (2001). There is a role for the L1 in second and foreign language teaching, but ... *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 57, 531-540.
- Uline, C., Wilson, J. & Cordry, S. (2004). Reflective journals: A valuable tool for teacher preparation. *Education* 124, 456-460.
- VanPatten, B. (Ed.). (2004). *Processing Instruction*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Anne M. Edstrom

is Associate Professor of Spanish at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. Her primary research interests center on issues of applied linguistics and foreign language pedagogy. She has published several articles on investigations of L1/L2 use, learner and teacher perceptions, and the role of reflection in the professional development of second and foreign language teachers.