# The use of L1 in the classroom

**Alexandra Reynolds** *Université de Nantes, France*

How L1 is used in the language classroom will depend on a variety of factors. Do your students all share the same L1? Do you share the same L1 as your students? What is their motivation for learning English? How does the classroom affect which language your students interact in?

This debate over the use or avoidance of L1 is often associated with “the direct method”. It is difficult to pinpoint a single inventor of the direct method – many teachers and linguists, including Jean-Paul Sartre’s grandfather, Charles Schweitzer (Sartre 1964:12), claim to have invented the method. However it seems to have been generally embraced at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries as part of “The Great Reform” which turned away from the Grammar-Translation method. This ‘antiquated method’, which constantly referred to L1, was based on Latin instruction, and was compared to ‘dissecting the dead body of language and sticking its fragments upon a grammatical lancet’ (Krause 1916: 54). The direct method offered a *live* method for *living languages* which were primarily spoken, not read.

As with the current Dogme Methodology, students were invited to ‘close their books’ (Krause 1916: 16) and experience the *now* as they listened and then repeated directly in the L2. Using gesticulation, miming, visual aids and acting techniques, the teacher uses L1 only ‘as a last resort’ (Krause: 10). The focus moved away from translation and explicit grammar tasks towards a more communicative approach in which content is privileged over form.

The advantage of the direct method is that the learners are immersed in the L2. This communication breakdown stimulates the brain to engage in *emergency* L2 learning and, hopefully, production. The teacher may even encourage his/her learners to “Think in the L2!” This, however, does not take into account how we acquire our L1. Our *lingua materna* is very much part of our personal identity. Although language learning modifies pre-acquired language(s) it certainly doesn’t erase them. Asking learners to “think in English” or not to translate from their own L1 is like asking them to erase a part of their mind.

Nevertheless, many language teachers, including myself, persist with the direct approach because we think it is “good” for our learners but cannot help but recognise that L1 avoidance doesn’t always guarantee L2 learning. Learners may have understood the hand gestures, but can they understand and repeat the words? As far as creating utterances directly in the L2, learners will construct new language upon an L1 *scaffold* that already exists. When the L1 and L2 are very different languages, the learner will have to make greater mental leaps. An L2 English learner may have no analogue of the English BE+ING form in their L1, for example.

Even if a teacher chooses to avoid using L1, this does not mean that L1 will not be used at other times. As we have seen, teachers cannot ‘control’ how learners refer to L1 in their own minds or how they privately, or openly, communicate among themselves. This brings us to how our students use L1 in the classroom. Teachers may forbid open L1 use in the classroom but encourage the use of reference dictionaries and online tools. Interpreting and translation between the L1 and L2 are also a useful skill for our students to acquire through in-class practice.

The classroom layout itself will influence how and in what language students chose to interact with you and their peers. Grouped formats, instead of rows, make learners responsible for their own interactions, whether in L1 or L2.

Encouraging reflective practice by interviewing learners will enable us to gain valuable information about attitudes to L1 use in the classroom. During 2011-12, I conducted filmed interviews with EFL Masters students about how they had experienced L1 use during their 12 years of EFL learning. Students shared feelings of L1 use being labelled as a failure and that they were aware that their teachers felt disappointed when they reverted to L1 exchanges with their peers. They also revealed that their motivation to use L2 rather than L1 when not under direct supervision, or outside of the classroom, was down to personal affinity with present and/or past teachers who had inspired them.

An awareness of how learners identify with their L1 and L2 selves should help us to adapt to specific student needs. Hopefully this will lead to positive teacher development and encourage reflection devoid of the old guilty hang-ups.

alexandra.reynolds@univ-nantes.fr

References

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