

L1 As a Tool For Reducing the Affective Filter

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Abstract. The utilization of the first language (L1) as an instructional tool in second language (L2) classrooms has sparked an intense debate in the realm of language education. This essay aims to delve further into the multifaceted discourse surrounding the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, particularly within the context of adult English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) teaching. To provide comprehensive insights into the implementation of L1 in L2 classrooms, the essay draws upon examples from the authors' pedagogical experiences, encompassing roughly 33 hours of ESL instruction within an agency affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania, United States. Furthermore, this essay employs relevant theories from the three primary fields of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which include second language development, language use, and language pedagogy. By synthesizing these theories and exemplars, this essay aims to shed light on the intricate nuances of utilizing L1 as an instructional tool in L2 classrooms, and ultimately to inform and enhance pedagogical practices in the field of ESL/EFL instruction.

1 Introduction

The use of the first language (L1) as a tool for instruction in second language (L2) classrooms has long been a contentious issue in the field of language education. Howatt [4] highlights that L1-based bilingual practices such as code-switching and code-mixing (CS/CM) and translanguaging have been viewed as indicators of language inadequacy. In this view, omitting L1 usage could reduce interference and allow learners to immerse themselves in the target language, which was deemed the ideal pathway for foreign language instruction.

Conversely, research has indicated the benefits of incorporating CS in bilingual classrooms, particularly in terms of language acquisition. Cummins' [10] linguistic interdependence theory is among the most influential in this field. This theory posits that L1 academic knowledge can enhance L2 comprehension by enabling learners to transfer linguistic or conceptual components from their L1 to their L2 [10]. Consequently, Cummins advocates for educators to promote, rather than prohibit, such transfer during instruction.

The studies conducted by Cummins and other scholars ([5], [10], [11]) have yielded encouraging results, emphasizing the potential value of L1 use in the L2 classroom. Against this backdrop, this essay seeks to explore the use of L1 as an instructional tool in adult ESL/EFL teaching, drawing on relevant theories from the three primary fields of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL): second language development, language use, and language pedagogy. To gain greater insight into L1 use in the L2 classroom, this essay will provide examples from my teaching practices, encompassing roughly 33 hours of ESL instruction in the

United States. By synthesizing practical examples with relevant theories, this essay aims to shed light on the complex nuances of using L1 in L2 classrooms and to contribute to pedagogical practices in the field of ESL/EFL instruction.

1.1 Context of Instruction (Demographics & Logistics)

The English course I have taught is intended for Chinese citizens sponsored by Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church and the University of Pennsylvania. However, due to the pandemic, the course was delivered via Zoom. According to the institution's schedule, it is a two-and-a-half-hour Sunday program. Furthermore, there is no prescribed curriculum, and the instruction is thus subjective. In other words, the instructor is responsible for the educational environment and the accompanying materials, such as textbooks and PowerPoint presentations. Additionally, because this is a single-session teaching course, the instructor must prepare well in advance of the session.

The course's primary goal is to assist Chinese immigrants who experience difficulty communicating in everyday English. Therefore, the course primarily focuses on developing the students' Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which are the language skills required for everyday, face-to-face social interactions [2]. These skills include but are not limited to playground language, telephone language, and language used in interpersonal interactions. Consequently, the language used in social interactions is contextual and meets the students' daily life needs.

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The class comprises seven regular students who are primarily senior citizens and Chinese immigrants. They speak Mandarin or Cantonese as their first language, although those who can communicate well in Cantonese can also communicate in Mandarin, indicating a common language background. Regarding their motivations and goals for learning a second language, they wish to acquire basic L2-based social communication as they encounter difficulties with daily tasks such as shopping and opening bank accounts. According to the Qualitative characteristics of spoken language usage - Table 3 (CEFR 3.3), the following language levels are suitable: they are transitioning from beginner to intermediate level, which may be quantified in terms of range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. The students are currently at the A2 level, which is defined as "using simple sentence patterns with memorized phrases, groups of a few words, and formulations to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations." However, their accuracy level remains at A1, which is defined as "demonstrating only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorized repertoire." In addition, their fluency and interpersonal abilities are at the A2 level, characterized as "making oneself intelligible in extremely brief statements, despite the presence of pauses, false starts, and reformulation." Furthermore, their coherence level is at the A2 level, which is described as "Can respond to simple statements and queries. Can indicate whether he/she is following but is seldom able to grasp sufficiently to continue the topic independently," and "Can link groups of words using simple connectors such as "and," "but," and "because."

In terms of demographics, the students are primarily senior citizens and Chinese immigrants who speak Mandarin or Cantonese as their first language:

Table 1. Students General Backgrounds.

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	First Language	Language Proficiency
A	Female	35-40	China	Mandarin	A2
B	Female	35-40	China	Mandarin /Cantonese	A2
C	Male	40-45	China	Mandarin	A1-A2
D	Male	40-45	China	Mandarin	A2
E	Female	55-60	China	Mandarin	A2
F	Female	55-60	China	Mandarin	A2

1.2 Potential Issues During Instructions

During the current semester, I have observed that students view their native language (L1) as a haven that facilitates language learning and potentially lessens their affective filter. For instance, when tasked with a written assignment requiring them to respond in three to four phrases about a given topic, students B and F initially expressed reluctance and apprehension. However, I introduced an example in L1 as a translanguaging technique to encourage and motivate them. This approach enabled them to comfortably articulate their ideas, and they subsequently became more participative, confident, and relaxed in using L1 as a communicative tool.

Moreover, I have discovered that providing feedback to students in L1 is more effective than in L2. Gwyn [5] contends in his work, Linguistic Interdependence and the Development of Bilingual Children, that L1 is a valuable resource for L2 instruction because there are connections between L1 and L2, which students can leverage to enhance their comprehension of the target language. In light of this assertion, L1 and visual aids based on L1 are often employed to facilitate English language acquisition in the classroom, with positive outcomes. The class observer, Eve, who is a language specialist responsible for the Intensive Program in Coursera, and was previously my academic mentor in another course, has commented on the use of L1 in my classroom:

We approached one of your more hesitant students, who has traditionally been discouraged by family members from using English, possibly leading to shyness and a lack of confidence. It's great that you can keep this student engaged by discussing language acquisition without pressuring them into performing for the class. I'd like to encourage you, however, to be more mindful of your use of L1. It appears that L1 dominates this lesson. Your students will benefit from hearing you speak both the target language and L1, and their fluency will improve if you guide them to do so in a structured and supervised manner.

In light of theory and my instructional experience, exploring the use of L1 in L2 classrooms provides valuable insights into the pedagogical advantages of language acquisition. Specifically, given the benefits of L1 in reducing the affective filter, it is critical to consider its proper application in adult ESL/EFL classrooms. Thus, this paper will investigate the use of L1 as an instructional tool in adult ESL/EFL classrooms and its role in reducing the affective filter.

2 Theoretical Framework and Needs Interview

The phenomenon of language anxiety has been widely researched and debated by scholars in the field of language learning. It is commonly understood that anxiety is an emotional state that arises when an individual's self-esteem and self-confidence are frustrated due to an inability to achieve a goal or overcome obstacles, resulting in a sense of failure, guilt, and nervousness and fear [6]. A number of scholars have pointed out that language anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon unique to language learning that is influenced by many external factors and is a combination of emotional states ([7], [11], [12]).

Furthermore, language anxiety has been defined as a feeling of tension and fear that is related to the second language context, such as speaking, listening, and acquisition ([1], [6], [11]). Scholars have also suggested that anxiety can have either a positive or negative effect and can be classified as "promoting type" or "delaying type" ([8],[9], [12]). While the former stimulates learners to challenge new tasks and generates motivation, the latter makes learners feel nervous, afraid, and evasive towards learning tasks.

The impact of language anxiety on language learning has been a significant focus of research in the field of ESL/EFL classrooms. Several studies have shown that if foreign language learning consistently brings about anxiety in learners, it may become a potential issue that leads to nervousness and fear, which in turn affects learning energy and attention, and reduces the energy used for thinking and memory ([1], [6], [7]). Language anxiety can also reduce the effectiveness of language storage and output, as demonstrated by Almohaimeed [1], who identified four kinds of language learning signs related to the negative performance brought by anxiety: forgetting the answer, pretending to be careless, being late, and leaving early; body movements such as twisting, playing with hair or clothes, and shaking the body; physical discomfort symptoms such as complaining about a headache, muscle twitch, and inexplicable pain in body parts; and other signs such as overwork, perfectionism, avoidance of reality, fear of facing others, and hostility.

Moreover, scholars ([11], [12]) have shown that language anxiety inhibits learning motivation, causes students to deliberately avoid all foreign language-related learning, and makes them tired of foreign language learning. Students who experience anxiety may also feel disgusted and even afraid to see foreign language teachers. They often hope not to attract the attention of teachers and other students and subconsciously resist foreign language learning in class. They may rarely or never spend time previewing and reviewing foreign language content after class, skip classes to avoid anxiety, and avoid taking the initiative to learn.

To further illustrate the impact of language anxiety, I would like to present a case that occurred in my teaching site. During my first class, I asked my student to pronounce the vocabulary that was commonly used in Starbucks, which had been taught earlier. The video transcriptions are presented below:

1. Me: X, What's the meaning of "Can I have a cup of ice coffee without cream and sugar?"
2. Student X: Mmmmm (silence for seconds), 老师我没听懂。。。。。。 (*teacher, I don't understand.....*)
3. Me: Translate "Can I have a cup of ice coffee without cream and sugar?" (lower speed)
4. Student X: mmm mmmm..... 让我看看 (*let me see.....*)..... (silence again, heads down, did not look at the screen)
5. Me: Can I have a cup of ice coffee without cream and sugar? (much lower speed, almost word by word)
6. Student X: Can I have....(very low voice and did not look at the screen). 哎呀老师我不行 (ugh teacher I can not do that), 你不要提问我咯! (*please don't ask me....*) (suddenly head up with a complaining face)
7. Me: come on, try it!
8. Student X: 哎呀老师我真不行, 你让我听听就好, 你问的我也回答不上来, 不要再提问我咯! (*ugh.....teacher, I really can not answer it, just let me listen! Please don't ask me again....*) (complaining again, with a harsh tone, and then turn off the camera)

9. Me: 好吧。。。。。。 (*fine...*)

During the course of instruction, I afforded X additional preparation time given his beginner-level language proficiency. However, it was noted that he exhibited a reluctance to answer questions, which was attributed to feelings of nervousness and anxiety. Subsequently, he discontinued attendance in my class. Inquiries were made among my other students as to X's absence, and it was relayed to me that he experienced significant stress when questioned, particularly when devoid of first language support, which ultimately led to his withdrawal from the class.

In light of this case, I endeavored to investigate methodologies for alleviating students' language anxiety and enhancing their motivation, thereby fostering an improved learning experience. Based on a review of extant literature and my own teaching experiences, I have found that reducing the affective filter engenders a sense of security for learners. Saruwatashi [11] expounds upon the idea that an English-only environment in a classroom setting featuring students with low English proficiency is not conducive to the development of a secure classroom atmosphere, which negatively impacts student affect and learning outcomes. In fact, she highlights that English-only instruction in the context of poor English proficiency causes significant nervousness, particularly when English language questions are posed by teachers, resulting in students remaining silent or experiencing language anxiety. Drawing upon Saruwatashi's [11] assertions, I conducted brief interviews with four of my students who exhibit timely attendance to class. These interviews were conducted in breakout room sessions and focused on instances when they experienced anxiety or a lack of motivation in class. An excerpt from the October recording of one such interview is presented below.

1. Me: 我想问大家一下, 大家上课的时候会感觉紧张吗? (*let me ask you guys, do you sometimes feel nervous in the class?*)
2. Student A, C, E: 会 (yes.)
3. Me: 为什么呢? 我觉得我们上课的氛围还挺轻松的啊。 (*why? I think our classroom is pretty relaxing. Isn't it?*)
4. Student: E 老师, 是这样, 主要你口语很好。但是你用英语问我们的时候, 我们有时候光想不起来什么意思, 脑子转不过来, 就感觉很紧张。 (*teacher, here is the thing, you have good oral English. But my brain usually shuts down when you use English to ask, which makes me feel anxious.*)
5. Me: 那我不是每次会给大家思考和消化的时间嘛。 (*But I usually give you guys more time to think the question*)
6. Student C: 但是你用英语问我们的时候, 我就感觉像是在和老外聊天一样, 大脑一片空白。。 (*but when you ask, I feel like I am talking with a native speaker, and my brain is usually blended when I talk with native speakers*)
7. Me: 哦哦我明白了, 那如果我英文和中文混着来会好点吗? (*I see, so what if I ask you guys English questions mixed with Chinese?*)

8. Student A: 如果你给我们中文解释的话会感觉好一些。 (*that will be more relaxed for me*)

During discussions with my students above, it became apparent that their reticence in answering questions was due to their apprehension about the correctness of their answers. Their anxiety was compounded by the absence of explanations in their native language. Several students expressed their discomfort in classes without adequate L1 support, conveying their fear of being asked questions by me, as they were unable to comprehend or articulate their responses in English, resulting in a sense of embarrassment and nervousness.

Against this backdrop, I have come to appreciate the potential benefits of employing the mother tongue in classroom interactions to promote a positive impact on language acquisition and the cultivation of a sense of security. By leveraging L1, students may be less anxious and more inclined to take risks when communicating in L2. Building on earlier research and my own pedagogical experiences, the present paper aims to elucidate the ways in which L1 can serve as a tool to alleviate students' language anxieties and enhance their motivation to achieve optimal performance, particularly in the domains of breaking the ice and explaining intricate concepts.

2.1. L1 as a Tool for Building a Sense of Security in Ice-breaking

Drawing on my own teaching experience and the insights of previous scholars, I have identified the first main section where L1 is employed as a tool for reducing the affective filter at the beginning of the class. I firmly believe that a successful ice-breaking session is vital since it not only captures students' attention but also encourages them to participate actively [12]. Furthermore, an effective ice-breaking session can serve as an opportunity to motivate students and alleviate their language anxiety. For example, during one of my classes in October, I taught my students Hospital English. To reduce their affective filter, I used L1 at the beginning of the class. The transcription of my interactions with my students is presented below:

1. Student A: Good morning teacher
2. Me: 大家好啊~how are you? (*hello guys~*)
3. Student A, C, D: Good, good~
4. Me: 诶我问一下大家, 平时去医看病的时候都怎么和医生交流啊? (*so, how do you guys usually communicate with doctors?*)
5. Student E: 大部分医院都提供翻译服务的 (*relaxed tone*) (*they usually have translation services*)
6. Me: 哦哦是这样啊, 诶, 你刚才提到了翻译服务, 那用英语怎么说啊? (*ah, I see. You just mentioned "translation services" how to say that in English?*)
7. Student E: 我想想啊, 应该是 translation services 吧 (*let me see.....it should be "translation services"*)
8. Me: 没错! 那, 大家能分享一些你们知道的描述生病的英语词汇吗? (*very good! So, can anyone*

share some words that we usually use in the hospital?!)

9. Student C: 哦, 这个好说, 你像是 pain 啦, headache 啦, cold 啦, fever 啦。。。 (*that's easy, "pain", "headache", "cold", "fever"*)
10. Me: 诶, 不错不错, 那我随机问你们一个询问症状的句子, 你们试着回答一下? (*good, good! So I will ask you a question, and try to answer me? Okay?*)
11. Student E: 行 (*emmmm, sure*) (*relaxed, but a little bit hesitated*)
12. Me: What's going on with you?
13. Student C: 你怎么了? (*does it mean: "what's going on?"*) (confusing tone)
14. Me: 没错, 那应该怎么回答? 给我一个具体的回答, 随便举例子。 (*correct! try to answer it!*)
15. Student C: I have a cold (**not sure, but still relaxed**)
16. Student E: I have a headache. (**relaxed**)
17. Me: 不错不错, 看来大家基础的都掌握的不错, 那我们今天就学一点稍微复杂的, 提升一下大家的表达 (*perfect, it seems you guys know some basic words. Now let's learn more about it!*)
18. Student E: 那老师快开始吧, 这对我们还挺重要的。 (*teacher, let's get started, I think it is important*)
19. Student C: 哈哈哈哈哈, 来, 学习一下 (*haha, study! study!*)

The aforementioned dialogue occurred during the initial stages of the class. Upon exchanging daily greetings (line 1-3), I intentionally initiated a topic related to the hospital, encouraging my students to voice their opinions and perspectives (line 4-5). Subsequently, I gradually incorporated L1-based questions pertaining to the topic to assess my students' knowledge and engage them progressively (line 6-9). By utilizing L1 and everyday topics, my students did not perceive my approach as a formal assessment, but rather as a casual conversation, thereby creating a relaxed linguistic environment. Following this, I began to incorporate more L2 by posing sentence-level questions, all of which were answered correctly. Lastly, when I sensed a sufficiently comfortable environment, I used a turn-taking sentence to formally commence the lesson (line 17-line18). Several students provided positive feedback, which served as evidence that the employment of L1 at the outset of the class effectively lowered students' affective filter.

2.2 L1 as a Tool for Reducing Language Anxiety in Complex Content

In addition to implementing L1 at the beginning of the class to create a low-affective environment, I have discovered, in conjunction with the aforementioned scholarly works, that the use of L1 can reduce language anxiety when my students are confronted with complex content that they find difficult to comprehend. For instance, during a lesson in November where I instructed my students on how to read English labels, such as

receipts, L1 played a crucial role in mitigating their language anxiety.

To facilitate this lesson, I instructed my students to upload several labels and receipts they had received recently to the group chat, and I then walked them through the process of reading them step by step. One of my students encountered a receipt while shopping at a mall, and another encountered a label on a piece of clothing. In order to keep them engaged, I asked them to explain each section of the receipt from top to bottom. At the outset of the instruction, I requested my students to elucidate the vocabulary used in the receipt, beginning from the top and working their way down. Prior to this, one of my students expressed her displeasure with the receipt, as it was written entirely in English, causing her to feel disheartened and less motivated:

1. **Student:** "Every time when I read the English-only labels, I feel my head is blowing up, and I just want to quit and let my son deal with that." (*face betrayed her nervousness and anxiety*).
2. **Me:** (*To allay her fears, I employed L1*) "it doesn't matter, I had the same feeling when I began learning English. Let's read it word by word. I think you probably know some of the words."

As the instruction progressed, she gradually discovered that she did recognize some of the words, which we had previously covered in class, and exclaimed excitedly

3. **Student:** (*in L1, except for the keywords*) "ah, I know 'sale,' 'exchange.' You taught me before!"
4. **Me:** (*responded by asking*) "so could you guess other words based on your shopping memory and your vocabulary storage?"

To my surprise, she gradually deciphered the entire receipt with my encouragement and guidance, combined with her memory. When she had comprehended the entire receipt, she said softly:

5. **Student:** "teacher, it seems not quite hard to understand with your guidance."
6. **Me:** (*laughed*) "do you still feel nervous now?"
7. **Student:** "no, much better."

Based on the reactions of my students as mentioned above, it can be concluded that when L1 is employed for teaching language (TL) and content subjects (CS), students begin to feel more relaxed and are willing to read the given material under my verbal guidance. Moreover, they are even able to recollect their previous memory and apply it to the current content, indicating that their affect has been gradually reduced. Additionally, the observations noted in my records suggest that their affect is further reduced when I employ L1 to explain complex content.

3 Conclusion

Through the observation, it can be found that the use of L1 in the foreign language classroom can play a significant role in reducing students' affective filter and improving their language learning outcomes. As demonstrated in the literature and in my own teaching experience, L1 can be a powerful tool for ice-breaking and

reducing anxiety at the beginning of class, as well as for explaining complex content that might otherwise be difficult for students to understand.

Furthermore, the use of L1-based strategies such as TL and CS can be particularly effective in reducing students' anxiety levels and increasing their motivation to engage with the material. By providing students with a sense of security and familiarity, instructors can create a more relaxed and positive learning environment that encourages active participation and engagement.

It is important to note, however, that the use of L1 should be used judiciously and appropriately, and should not be relied upon as a crutch or substitute for effective foreign language instruction. Rather, it should be seen as a valuable tool in the teacher's toolbox, to be used when appropriate and in a way that supports the ultimate goal of helping students achieve fluency and proficiency in the target language.

Overall, the use of L1 can be an effective way to reduce students' affective filter and foster a positive learning environment in the foreign language classroom. As such, it is a strategy that should be considered by all foreign language instructors as they seek to support the success and achievement of their students.

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