

The Role of Native Language in The Teaching of The FL Grammar

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the problem of L1 application in the process of L2 grammar teaching, its advantages and disadvantages. The goal of both the analysis of literature on the topic and the survey held with International Black Sea University Prep Program 41 students (aged 17-19) and 12 teachers who have taught grammar is to find out whether L1 can be used in a beneficial way in the process of language teaching. It is suggested that probably, the question can be put differently, not "to use or not to use", but "if to use, how much, when and how".

Key words: FL grammar, Grammar-Translation Method, Direct/Natural method, Audio-Lingual Method, Audio-Visual method, student-centered teaching, ESL, EFL, Zone of Proximal Development, monolingual classroom, multilingual classroom, L1 application

Introduction

The topic of the role of native language in the teaching of the foreign language grammar still is an ongoing discussion among language teachers and linguists. As I teach grammar at Prep Department and my students often request me to explain some grammar rules in their native tongue (while the policy of the department is to speak only English to them in order to create an English-language environment), I was interested in finding out to what degree (if at all) the application of L1 is appropriate in the process of teaching L2. With this purpose I both studied literature and held a questionnaire with students and teachers.

After the dominance of Grammar-Translation Method, everybody were so fed up with it that further (especially, Direct/Natural, Audio-Lingual and Audio-Visual) methods often totally denied any application of L1 in L2 classroom. Steven Krashen (2003), with his Natural Approach to language acquisition, proposed that students learn their second language much in the same way that they learn their first, and that L2 is best learned through massive amounts of exposure to the language with limited time spent using L1. This persuaded both academics and practitioners in the necessity to totally exclude L1 from the L2 classes.

However, Prodromou points out in his article that *"Until recently, the mother tongue in the EFL classroom has been a skeleton in the cupboard... the skeleton has been there all the time, we just haven't wanted to talk about it"* (Prodromou, 2002,p.7). About the use of L1 in target language teaching there are various debates: some argue that using L1 has a negative effect on L2 acquisition, while others argue that using L1 prevents having language barriers and psychological complexes. It looks like there is no universal recipe for everybody on the issue.

Pros

Viewing the situation and the problems with English Language Teaching in Turkey, Kayaoglu (2011:33) concludes that "avoidance of the L1 is/was associated with good teaching during the heydays of Direct and Audio-Lingual methods. The judgment on a foreign language teacher's quality often is related to his/her ability to do the whole class in the target language." However, recently many language teachers as well as researchers in the sphere of ESL and especially EFL are trying not to be so straightforward and extremist and come to a conclusion that a reasonable by amount and effective by form application of L1 benefits foreign language learning. 44 teachers at Karadeniz University (Turkey) were involved in Kayaoglu's study. A questionnaire and an interview were used as research methods. The position of the majority of teachers turned out to be both communicative and pragmatic instead of already "traditional" total exclusion of L1 from the educational process. Certainly, the attitude may differ from country to country, taking into consideration the teaching traditions, the students' aptitude to FL learning, their motivation, etc. (subjective reasons). But the attitudes may differ depending on various overwhelming (not culturally-specific), objective factors.

To be student-centered, we cannot totally ignore students' requests to explain some sophisticated, difficult to comprehend things in their native language, even if their views on language learning are, to our mind, outdated. We do not have, or more exactly, cannot fulfill all their desires, we have to explain to them why we object some of their requests, but some compromise is necessary, if we want to create a positive learning environment.

L1 is in students' minds, you can't erase it from there.

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If there is a chance for interference of L1 skills, it can occur whether we use it in class or not. More than that, if we leave such cases uncontrolled, probability of error focalization increases. Another thing is the fact that if we talk too much in L1, little time is left for students' practice in L2. So the most pragmatic approach would probably be "much L2 + little (when very necessary) L1".

Grammar is very intellectually demanding, it is a kind of "algebra of language". Due to this to learn an EFL grammar totally by practice and subconscious acquisition or through explanations done in L2 (correspondingly, probably, not totally clear), as it is often recommended/demanded today, it is unrealistic.

Students often use L1 when doing pair work to construct solutions to linguistic tasks and evaluate written language. The use of L1 allows them to work within their Zone of Proximal Development, as proposed by Vygotsky (Wells, 1999). By working in pairs and using L1 intermittently with L2, students may be cognitively processing at a higher level with regard to linguistic tasks than if they were limited only to communicating in the language they are trying to learn. L1 vocabulary allows learners to use language which they may not yet possess in L2 in order to process ideas and reach higher levels of understanding. This applies both to social talk between partners and private talk intended for the learner alone.

The answer to the question whether to use or not to use L1 in the process of L2 teaching/learning depends on several factors:

- what we mean by "using L1"
- context (EFL or ESL, in EFL case, is the class monolingual or not, does the teacher know students' L1; how much time is available for teaching grammar)
- teaching goal (communication and/or translation)
- learners' age
- language learning traditions students have already experienced
- L2 proficiency level
- students' learning style (synthetic/analytical)

If by "using L1" we mean speaking to students only in their native tongue and asking them to fulfill only translation drills, this is out of the question, as this would mean return to Grammar-Translation method with all its disadvantages. No L2 communication would be achieved and this is obviously inadequate. But if we mean brief and comprehensible grammar rule explanations, accompanied by – probably – few translation exercises helping to avoid native tongue interference, this may be viewed as a possibility, taking into consideration the viewed below factors.

ESL is English as a Second Language (learned in L2 environment), EFL is English as a Foreign Language (learned without such an environment). Learning an L2 in corresponding environment permits students to practice it not only in class, but also outside it. Due to this, not only

more time is spent on language learning, but also students receive a lot of authentic input, which improves their language skills. When immigrants learn English in the US or UK, as well as in countries like India and Pakistan where English is taught as a second language, I don't think that there will be a real need of using L1 in L2 classrooms, since learners have a strong L2 background and have quite a good amount of input of target language. As for an EFL context, Rose (1999, 169) suggests that the L1 and L2 be used side by side: "In an EFL setting there is the possibility of an in-depth comparison between learners' L1 and English, which can be helpful in clarifying difficult points" such as grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, and cultural subtleties. Students have told me that they appreciate my using their language because it makes comprehension easier for them. In an EFL class the teacher can exploit the linguistic homogeneity of the students as a valuable resource. I would like to give as an example International Black Sea University IEP program students; they are EFL learners and majority of the students are Turkish (those who are not, usually know Turkish well enough). They generally do not have any input of target language, so while I am presenting them a new grammar structure either, they try to find an equivalent in Turkish; when they can't, they only look with blank eyes. I believe in such cases using an acceptable amount of L1 to provide comprehension is extremely vital.

Of course, if a teacher is a native speaker, this cannot be done. But even s/he, in case of serious comprehension problems, can take the trouble of consulting non-native teachers on this issue and then explaining this to his/her students. By the way, this will increase respect towards him/her among students, as they will realize that their teacher does his/her best to help them understand the material under study. Besides, if the class is linguistically heterogeneous, using L1 is technically impossible. Thus, we have several situations:

1. A native speaker teacher in a monolingual classroom
2. A nonnative teacher in a monolingual classroom,
3. A bilingual teacher in a monolingual classroom,
4. A native speaker teacher in a multilingual classroom

I believe that each situation would have its separate set of challenges when deciding how much or should any L1 be used in teaching students.

How many hours are devoted to teaching/learning English and what part of them can be spent on grammar teaching/learning also matters. When our time is limited, it may be time-saving to provide a short explanation in students' native tongue instead of forming an intuition by abundant practice (and what is the student isn't a synthetic one? s/he may never form it) or instead of providing incomprehensible L2 explanations.

Some students need to combine the two languages – for example, those whose future jobs involve translation and interpreting. Translation is a skill which needs to be

taught. Besides, even if they don't have such a job, a person knowing English on a high level is usually expected to be able to do some translation to provide communication.

Young learners quite naturally participate in communication in L2, if the teacher (a native or a non-native speaker) communicates with them only in this language. The communication is generally so simple, that no grammar has to be explicitly taught, it is learned intuitively through abundant practice.

Middle school students and older learners deal with more complicated language, this is why some explanation is obligatory. Here it is the question of their proficiency level. If it permits to understand explanations in L2, that's fine, but if the level is beginner/elementary and even lower intermediate, their L2 does not provide a good basis for clear explanations in L2. Besides, the older the learners become, the more conscious they are and they want to understand grammar, not only to use it thoughtlessly.

When you are your students' first foreign language teacher, you are lucky, as everything depends on you. But when your students come to you with a certain "baggage" of language learning experience, you have to take it into consideration. They often insist on getting a native-tongue explanations, otherwise they feel desperate, even irritated. The queer thing is that they may have acquired almost no language during the school years, but the "baggage" of Grammar-Translation teaching/learning style is there, as it often is with students from Turkey. It does not mean the teacher should follow the students' wrong concepts of language learning. But s/he cannot totally ignore this situation (then learning motivation will drop dramatically) and has to direct students towards L1 application only step by step.

The learning style is really an important question about using L1 in L2 classrooms. Some students are auditory. For them a verbal explanation and providing oral examples are enough. Others are visual. They need written explanations and examples, probably pictures and formulas. This is a more complex explanation, so it requires a deeper comprehension, which in some cases cannot be achieved without the participation of L2. Synthetic learners tend to "pick up a language" – from comprehensible input (what they hear and read). Other learners are analytical and need to understand everything deeply before using it practically. Most probably they will need some L1 explanations. Even if the teacher doesn't use L1, students will do it – in their minds. And if they come to wrong conclusions, L1 interference is guaranteed. So, why not have it under teacher's control? Anyway to my mind using a reasonable amount of L1 in L2 classrooms is really necessary to make our students say "Ahhaa" before confusing their mind.

Teachers, according to Tang (2002) often use L1 in beginning and intermediate classes to:

- give instructions
- explain meanings of words

- **explain complex ideas**

- explain complex grammar points

Students, according to Wells (1999) use L1 while speaking in order to:

- **ask each other clarifying questions**

- express frustrations concerning their lack of understanding

- **clarify meaning of words in L2**

find new words in L2 which correspond to already known words in L1

- **use language to process complex concepts**

- build shared meaning while evaluating written tasks through shared discussion

The research by Tang (2002), Schweers (1999), Qoura (2005), Al-Buraiki (2008), and Hidayati (2012) done, correspondingly, in China, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Indonesia supports the application of L1 in EFL classrooms. Both teachers and students in these researches expressed their positive attitude to reasonable application of L1 in L2 classrooms. However, teachers realized some limitations to its application as well.

Cons

Contrary to the above-mentioned, some practitioners say that using L1 is the easiest way of teaching but it has too many negative results like: students do not acquire the language in its natural process, they always try to translate L2 things into their native language, they can't get the ability of thinking in the target language. In addition to these the use of the L1 in language teaching makes students dependent on it, and not even try to understand meaning from context and explanation, or express what they want to say within their limited command of the target language (L2) – both of which are important skills which they will need to use when communicating in the real situation. Maniam (2010) is only reasonably positive about the contribution of L1 to English grammar teaching, but we need to keep in mind that his research concerns Malaysia, where English is a second and not foreign language.

My supervisor and I participated in a blog discussion on LinkedIn on the issue of using or not using L1 in L2 classes. There were about as many supporters as opponents of it, both giving a lot of reasons stated above.

To sum up, we can say that there are about as many researchers and practitioners who are supporting or rejecting the application of L1 in L2 classes. I think that those who reject it, forget that we cannot control what is happening in students' mind, and in the mind L1 of course not only participates, but also dominates. Krashen (2003) himself has modified his view on L1 application and now admits its modest but positive role on beginner level. So, I think that by totally withdrawing it from classes we somehow occupy an ostrich position.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Saves time	Is inauthentic, concentrates attention in L1 instead of L2
Increases motivation for analytical learners, also for beginner students	Decreases motivation of synthetic learners, upper intermediate and advanced students
Is rather appropriate for EFL (compared to ELS) learners	Is inappropriate for ESL learners
When needed/requested by students, it should be taken into consideration (only self-confident students can communicate in L2; it is part of student-centered teaching)	Is believed to be outdated and non-communicative
Takes into consideration teaching traditions in the country	There is risk that little if any time is left for communication
Our primary goal is to provide L2 communication, but some translation skills are also useful	
Takes into consideration students' proficiency level in L1	
Makes learning conscious	There is danger to turn the educational process into teaching about grammar, not teaching grammar (its practical application)

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of L1 application in L2 classrooms

Flexible Attitude

Probably, the question can be put differently, not “to use or not to use”, but “if to use, how much, when and how”?

Much talk in the students' native tongue will have a negative impact, at it will:

- decrease student target language practice time
- correspondingly, make students less confident while communicating in L2
- make the lessons boring and practically less useful: they will be lessons about the language, not language lessons

By saying “not much”, how much do I mean? Well, it is difficult to hold research concerning this, but intuitively, it may be about 5-10 minutes in a class of 45-50 minutes, not more, and not in each class, only when it is really necessary.

When there is danger of making mistakes (later becoming fossilized) under the influence of the native language, or when students already are making such mistakes, it is a good idea to provide an explanation in L1 or to compare sentences in L1 and L2, marking the differences. And no mistakes – no reason to address L1

Many of the practitioners say that on beginner level and elementary level using student's native language is useful and necessary and also they claim that if students are not aware of the grammar topics of the L2, they will not be able to successful in other language skills too. The list of useful L1 applications will be as following:

- According to Krashen's (2003) creative input theory, students shouldn't be made to speak or write in target language until they have enough input (understanding while listening and reading). But if they don't participate actively in class, how can we know they are learning? How can they learn in a receptive/passive way? So, in some situations one way of letting students demonstrate the receptive skill is by allowing them to respond using the L1. Students can also demonstrate receptive skill by discussing their understanding of a text in their L1.

- It can be used with beginners for pre-lesson small talk which allows the teacher to get to know the students as people, and for considerations to explain the course methodology etc. In addition, beginners will be less tense if they know they can at least ask for, and possibly obtain, explanation in the L1.

- When students are trying to say something but having exertion, they can say it in their own language and the teacher can reformulate it for them, possibly rephrasing and abridging to show them how they could have expressed themselves within the language they already know.

- If the teacher does not speak the students' language, it can be useful for the students to have a bilingual dictionary in the classroom so that they can double check their comprehension of lexical explanations.

- In the process of error correction, especially if we deal with fossilized errors, sometimes a brief explanation in mother tongue is effective.

To my mind, if the teacher analyzes deeply his stu-

dents' age, target language proficiency level, typical errors, learning styles, and uses L1 only for teaching grammar skill, in a reasonable amount, when it is really necessary, in an effective way, it will be useful and motivational for the language learners. In my experience when students don't understand me during my explanation of new grammar topic in L2, there appear an insurmountable block or barrier with learning. I think we should adjust theories to life and not life to theories. So, not to have these barriers I use a reasonable amount of L1 in teaching grammar skill. Outcomes of using a reasonable amount of L1 are quite visible within exam results. In the class where I use L1 there is a rapid increase in students' learning level of grammar structures but in the classes where I only use L2 there is a little increase in students' skills sometimes even there is decrease.

Problem

At International Black Sea University tuition language is English. Those international (mostly Turkish) students whose English skills do not satisfy the requirements for directly becoming BA students (having at least Intermediate level) study at the Prep Program. Unfortunately, even after the graduation of Prep Program and getting positive grades in tests, while being undergraduate students, they have substantial problems listening to lectures and participating in seminars.

Method and Goals

As I believe that insufficient grammar skills are the basis of this problem and they may be improved through effective application of mother tongue. Thus, I decided to find out what is the students' and teachers' attitude to the application of a reasonable amount of L1 in the process of teaching English grammar. The goal of the questionnaire was to define whether students and/or language teachers support the idea that a little of L1 in the process of L2 grammar teaching is adequate.

The same questionnaire was applied to students and teachers (separately) at International Black Sea University Prep Program to see whether their opinions on the issue are similar or different. 41 students (aged 17-19) and 12 teachers who have taught grammar answered the questionnaire. (Questions where more than 1 answer could be chosen yield totally more than 100 %.) To students the questionnaire was given in Turkish, to be sure they understand it well.

The questions/answer options were:

1. Do you think that L1 can be used in the process of teaching L2 grammar? A) Yes B) No
2. In case of students' request would you (should the teacher) use L1? A) Seldom B) Rather often C) Never

3. If yes, when? A) During explanation B) During practice (translation exercises) C) During error correction

4. If yes, to what degree? A) when very necessary (up to 5 min.) B) to some degree (5 - 15 min.) C) Quite often (half a class or more)

5. If yes, why do you think it is beneficial? A) Saves time B) Increases motivation for analytical learners, also for beginner students C) Rather appropriate for EFL (compared to ESL) learners D) When needed/requested by students, should be taken into consideration (only self-confident students can communicate in L2) E) Takes into consideration teaching traditions in the country F) Our primary goal is to provide L2 communication, but some translation skills are also useful G) Takes into consideration students' proficiency level in L2 H) Makes learning conscious

6. If you think that L1 is totally inappropriate in a grammar class, why? A) Is inauthentic, concentrates attention in L1 instead of L2 B) Decreases motivation of synthetic learners, upper intermediate and advanced students C) Decreases EFL skills' level D) Is believed to be outdated and non-communicative E) Is believed to be outdated and non-communicative F) There is danger to turn the educational process into teaching about grammar, not teaching grammar (its practical application)

7. Teaching to students of what level can we use L1? A) Beginner B) Intermediate C) Advanced D) Any

8. Teaching to students of what age can we use L1? A) Primary School B) Middle School C) High School D) Preparatory Department E) Undergraduate student

Results

In tables 2 and 3 below see the results (where the sum exceeds 100%, more than one answer could be chosen). Also it is necessary to take into consideration that some respondents skipped some questions.

Question/answer	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	58.5%	41.4%					
2	78.0%	17.1%	4.9%				
3 (out of 41.4%)	33.3%	5.1%	61.5%				
4(out of 41.4%)	58.3%	36.6%	4.9%				
5(out of 41.4%)	40%	45.0%	37.5%	2.5%	75%	5.0%	45.0%
6 (out of 58.5%)	33.3%	46.7%	33.3%	13.3%	10.0%	20.0%	
7	73.5%	17.1%	2.4%	7.3%			
8	25.0%	15.0%	20.0%	40%	0%		

Table 2. Student questionnaire results

Question/answer	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	83.3%	16.7%					
2	83.3%	8.3%	8.3%				
3 (out of 83.3 %)	72.7%	9.1%	45.5%				
4(out of 83.3%)	81.8%	27.3%	0%				
5(out of 83.3%)	45.5%	63.6%	9.1%	36.4%	18.2%	36.4%	63.6%
6 (out of % 16.7%)	0%	0%	50%	100%	0%	50%	
7	83.3%	33.3%	0%	0%			
8	75.0%	33.3%	41.7%	50%	8.3%		

Table 3. Teacher questionnaire results

Discussion

Surprisingly for me, teachers (83.3%) even more often answered “yes” to the question whether L1 can be used in grammar teaching than students did (58.5%). The positive attitude may be caused by a mixture of country traditions and pragmatic approach. If the application happens on student’s request, both students (78.0%) and teachers (83.3) quite unanimously answer to use L1 “seldom”. Both teachers (72.7% and 45.55) and students (33.3% and 61.5) support the application of L1 during presentation of new grammar and error correction (the AHAA! factor). However, teachers stress presentation, while students stress error correction. L1, according to both students’ (58.73) and teachers’ (81.8) opinion, should be used only when necessary (up to 5 minutes in a class). But a still noticeable part of them (36.6% and 27.3%, correspondingly) even think that 5-15 minutes in a class is appropriate. For students “takes into consideration teaching traditions in the country” is the most popular motive, while for teachers - “Increases motivation for analytical learners, also for beginner students” and “Makes learning conscious”. The few stu-

dents and still fewer lecturers who believe that L1 is totally inappropriate in grammar classes agree that it is so as it decreases EFL skills’ level (33.3% and 50%, correspondingly). However, students also name among major reasons “Is inauthentic, concentrates attention in L1 instead of L2” (33.3%) and “Decreases motivation of synthetic learners, upper intermediate and advanced students” (46.7%), while lecturers think the main reason is “Is believed to be outdated and non-communicative” (100%) and an important reason is “There is danger to turn the educational process into teaching about grammar, not teaching grammar (its practical application)” (50%).

Limitations

As our questionnaire was applied to one group of students and teachers from one university (and country), it only shows the tendency, but cannot describe the situation on a wide scale. The decision on whether to use or not to use L1 in the process of L2 grammar teaching, of course, has to be taken in each particular case, taking into consideration the variety of factors we have mentioned above. What our research shows is that lecturers and students at IBSU look at the reasonable application of L1 in L2 gram-

mar classes positively enough.

Conclusion

In research literature there are arguments for and against the application of L1 in the process of L2 teaching in general and its grammar in particular. Majority of these arguments are acceptable, but we should not forget about the counterarguments, either. This is why I think that a compromise is necessary: some very limited time can and even should be dedicated to explanations and error-correction in the native language. The most important reasons for this are:

- student-centered teaching,
- intellectually demanding nature of grammar,
- communicative teaching (result and not tool oriented),
- time-saving and practical teaching
- realistic approach vs. hypocrisy

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