

## USEFULNESS OF USING MOTHER TONGUE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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**ABSTRACT:** *In Foreign language class, Target Language should be the primary vehicle of communication but L1 (first language) has an important role to play in the Foreign language (FL) or Second language (L2) classroom. In Foreign Language Class most of the teachers have been using First Language for a long time and do not question the reasons behind using it. The study focuses on identifying the reasons of using mother tongue, benefits of using it and disadvantages of using it. Qualitative method has been used for data collection. I hope, the result of this study will help the language teachers to know about the reasons of their conscious or unconscious use of L1 use. By knowing the reasons of using first language in Foreign Language classes' teachers may modify their classroom management to reduce the frequency for first language use and use mother tongue as an essential tool.*

**Keywords:** Foreign Language (FL), Target Language (TL), Mother Tongue (ML). Second Language (L2), First Language (L1),

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the on-going debates among language teachers is whether or not to use students' First language in foreign language classrooms. It is claimed that the mother tongue interferes while students are learning a new language. Some researchers believe that the use of L1 works as a facilitator in L2 or FL classroom and helps to develop TL learning processes. They think it is necessary for all teachers to give their students a comfort zone and allow them to express themselves. On the other hand, some teachers and researchers do not agree on this point, they think excessive use of L1 may hamper the foreign language learning process. However from some recent researches it is known that an occasional use of L1 in classroom can be a useful tool for effective learning. The main objective of the research will be to find out the reasons behind using L1 in FL classes. I expect this research will be beneficial for those teachers who consciously or unconsciously use mother tongue in Foreign Language class. I hope the result of my study will help the language teachers to know about the usefulness of using mother tongue. By knowing the usefulness of using first language in foreign language class teachers may modify their teaching method and use mother tongue as an essential tool.

Methods of Language teaching: Throughout history, many English language-teaching methods have developed. Some methods were used to encourage using first languages and some were not. One of the first English languages teaching methods that highly encouraged and depended heavily on the use of first language was The Grammar Translation Method. Larsen-Freeman (1986) had given a detailed description of this method and other teaching methods in her book named *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. She pointed out how the teacher in her class depended heavily on translations from English to L1. All the vocabulary and texts that were taught during class were instantly translated into the first language. Grammar was taught in a deductive way that means teacher used to give the grammar rules and examples and tell students to memorize them and then ask them to apply rules to other examples. All the

communications and interactions between students and teacher were almost entirely in L1. Instructions were given in the first language as well. Students' success was measured depending on how good they were in translating from English to L1. This method had been used for centuries before teachers and educators started to think of using different methods. However, in many countries, teachers still use this method to teach FL. As the method encouraged to use first language, students feel attached to first language as a result it came to be looked upon uncommunicative, boring, pointless and irrelevant (Harmer, 2001). In other words, this method was challenged for doing "virtually nothing to enhance students' communication ability in the language" (Brown, 2000, p.16).

Along with the huge spread of the Grammar Translation Method to teach English in many countries, other methods developed. Some of these methods almost banned the use of the first language. Direct Method is one of the methods that did not allow students to use their first language. In this method students were taught using different objects e.g. realia or pictures and direct connections between the language and what it implies. The first language was not used at all in the classroom. Teachers give answer to the questions of the students through demonstration not translation and teach to think in target language. In direct method grammar is taught in an inductive way that is examples are presented first and students are asked to figure out the grammar rules from the examples. Other methods such as Audio-Lingualism, Community Language learning and Silent way did not encourage the use of the first language, but allowed first language whenever it was needed to facilitate language learning. These methods encourage learners' autonomy. The students' role is vital for learning a new language. Self-correction is encouraged by these methods and if students are unable to do this teacher provides support. In community language learning the purpose of using mother tongue is to provide a bridge to familiar to the unfamiliar. If necessary, literal first language equivalents are given by the teacher to the target language words. This makes the meanings of those words clear and permits learners to combine the target language words in different ways to create new sentences. In this method teacher provides a secure environment and encourages students' initiative and independence.

Eventually, the total use of English to teach English as a foreign language was propagated throughout the 1970s and 1980s, according to the communicative approaches, the use of L1 was considered as undesirable (Mahmoud, 2006). This trend was enhanced by the cognitive psychology postulation that people acquire FL in a manner similar to the way they acquire their L1. Actually, many language teachers still have reservations about using L1 in FL classroom, because they think that it limits exposure to the target language and keep students thinking in their first language. Each method is unique and has its own strengths and weaknesses but they are not suited to all situations. A method can be successful if teachers can use it in an appropriate way.

Nowadays, the taboo against using L1 in the classroom is breaking down, and the attitude towards using L1 in FL class. Now most of the emphasis is given on communication rather than just learning a language. In fact, a relatively new teaching method which deliberately uses L1 in teaching EFL has appeared. It is the New Concurrent Method which requires teachers to balance the use of the L1 and the FL. Here, referring to L1 might be possible in four areas: introducing concepts, reviewing a previous lesson, capturing learners' attention and praising them. Moreover, as research continued, it has been discovered that in addition to negative language transfer, positive transfer also seems to be significant, which means that FL learners might get benefit from being exposed to the similarities of the two languages.

The Monolingual Approach: Generally, throughout history there have been several methods some of them encouraged teachers and students to use the first language and some did not allow it. As a result, both teachers and students followed different principles to address this issue. As they did not get opinion on how to address it, has made it even more confusing to the students to either use it or not as they come through different teachers who either encourage or prohibit it.

Thus, two approaches have appeared with regard to using the L1 in EFL teaching: The Monolingual approach and the Bilingual approach.

Many linguists opposed to use L1 in EFL teaching, because they think that it hinders learning. In short the Monolingual approach maintains that the foreign language should be the only medium of communication in the classroom. This approach believes learners need to learn synonymous words in the target language directly and encourages communication in target language. Many educators think that the use of L1 can become habit which is difficult to change later, thus, whenever students face some difficulty in using the target language they will shift to the mother language. As a result, students will be less exposed to the target language. According to Sharma (2006), the rationale for using only the target language in the classroom is that "the more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it to begin to think in English; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it." (p. 80), the reason behind this approach could be the fear of becoming dependent on L1 in L2 or FL class which may create an obstacle learning second language or foreign language.

The Bilingual Approach: The monolingual approach had been criticized by some learners, researcher and teachers as they believe that first language can play an important role in second language or foreign language learning. They looked mother tongue as beneficial tool to teach a foreign language. Macaro (2001) argues that it is not only impractical to exclude the L1 from the classroom, but that it is also likely to deprive learners of an important tool for language learning (p.7). (Auerbach, 1993) argue that L1 represents a powerful source that can be used to enhance FL learning, but it should be used in a principled way. It can be a bridge to learn unfamiliar words with familiar meaning. If the learners understand the meaning they can learn in an effective way. " Meaningful learning takes place when the learners comprehend the material and can relate it to their present knowledge system." said by Chastain ( 1971, p.135). According to Mukattash (2003) using L1 in EFL or ESL teaching has been found to " facilitate both teaching and learning, systematize comprehension of EFL structures and items and hence leads to meaningful learning." (p.224). However, teachers should know when and how to use L1. The mother tongue can probably be more beneficial to beginners. Since their English proficiency is very low, they need some support to build up grammar and vocabulary knowledge. So it's better to teach students adapting proper method for getting good output otherwise main aim of teaching may not be found.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Whether teachers should use L1 in foreign language classroom or not is an ongoing debate among language teachers. Cook (2001) reminded language teachers by saying that they want it or not native language is always present in the minds of FL learners (p. 403). Many teachers have been using first language in FL classes without knowing the reason behind using it. They

also don't know that L1 can be an effective tool to teach foreign language. Although the use of L1 may hinder FL learning but it may contain several advantages too.

Reasons behinds using L1 in FL classes: Although teachers try their best to separate L1 and TL but students always try to make a connection between the two languages. Consciously or unconsciously L1 always comes to their mind. In general, some teachers feel that it is necessary to start an FL class through L1. They think mother tongue can be a useful tool to give students a sense of security because insufficient language proficiency may create nervousness among students in the foreign language class. Students learn a new language non-defensively when they feel secure. Through L1 teachers can create connection with students which can help the teacher to fulfill the aim of the lesson. If students are comfortable in the class, it is easier to make them involve in various class activities. Rapport is also a means for establishing empathy with the students. Building a good relationship with the students is very important to keep them open to the learning process. To let students use their mother tongue is a humanistic approach which permits them to say what they want. "Starting with the L1 gives a sense of security and validates the learner's lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English." (Schweers, 1999, p.6). During anxious moments, L1 can be a valuable source to relax students. Students' security can be provided in a number of ways e.g. allowing them to use L1, telling students precisely what they will be doing during the class, giving proper amount of language input etc. So students' security can be easily enhanced by using mother tongue at the beginning of the class. According to Krashen (1985) there is an emotional barrier which prevents learners to receive any kind of input from the environment. This emotional barrier may be caused by negative attitude towards language, lack of motivation or just negative emotional/ physical states e.g. stress. The use of mother tongue may assist students in reducing affective barriers and increasing their confidence to comprehend the target language successfully. So if the learner is stress free his lowered affective filter may lead to a successful language acquisition.

Weschler (1997) asserts that suppressing students' natural tendency to use their L1 only adds to the counter-productive tension already existed in the class and raises the affective filter of the students that much higher. L1 strategies are efficient in terms of time spent explaining. This is certainly the reason most commonly given by teachers who advocate L1 use in the classroom. But Duff (1989) says, mother tongue should be used to provoke discussion and speculation, to develop clarity and flexibility of thinking, and to help us increase our own and our students' awareness of the inevitable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language that occurs during any type of language acquisition. Again, it has been observed by Liao (2006) that if the students are asked to discuss something only in target language, most of them remain silent due to their lack of TL proficiency or nervousness. On the other hand, when both L1 and TL are allowed for discussions, there is more meaningful communication and participation. The communication sustains longer too.

Therefore, the use of L1 results in an increased willingness by students to communicate verbally and express their ideas (Akiston, 1987; Auerbach 1993). It may not be true that it is always necessary to use the first language in the FL class. If teachers feel the necessity of it, they must use it; but there should be a balance between uses of the two languages. Teachers should not use L1 to rescue themselves because they are not prepared for the class. Teacher should know the appropriate use of mother tongue. While arguing for the option of using L1 in the classroom, most researchers have at the same time cautioned against the overuse of L1. According to Cole (1998), teachers will find for themselves when L1 is genuinely needed and

beneficial. By regularly considering when and how to use L1, and the circumstances under which it will facilitate student learning without making it an onerous experience, teachers can provide a safe and stimulating environment for language learning (p.95). "Teachers should use English where possible and L1 where necessary" (Atkinson 1987, p. 243). It is important for teachers to keep in mind that students should not over-rely on L1. There are some situations when L1 can be used. Auerbach (1993) suggested the following possible occasions for using the first language: negotiation of the syllabus and the lesson, record keeping, classroom management, scene setting, language analysis, presentation of rules governing grammar, phonology, morphology, and spelling; discussion of cross-cultural issues; instructions or prompts; explanation of errors; and assessment of comprehension. So there are numbers of ways where teachers can positively use first language to teach foreign language. Perhaps judicious use of L1 can save a lot of time and confusion.

Advantages of using L1 in L2/FL classrooms: Before banning the mother tongue in FL class if teachers consider the native language as a tool like mimes, images, videos, etc. It can be beneficial resource for effective L2/ FL learning. If the meanings are clear to the student they can easily use and remember them. According to Atkinson (1987) in some cases if there is a need for comprehension check translation can still be used. Wills (1981) says about the scope of using L1: there are times when it is preferable and more economical as far as time is concerned to drop English for a few seconds. It may not harmful for students to drop target language for a moment. When teachers prefer to use L1 they may use it in an economical way, for example, to explain the meaning or to use of a new word, to explain the aims of your lesson, to check your students' understanding, and to discuss the main ideas after a reading (p. xiv). A teacher can use students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of TL. For example, if students understand the concept of a noun, it is much simpler to translate the word "noun" than to describe it in TL. Cook (2001) argues that L1 should be used for grammar instruction because lower proficiency students possess limited linguistic information. Students often want to know exactly what a new grammatical structure or lexical item means in the first language So L1 can provide an easy association between L1 and TL knowledge in students' mind. As a result they may be able to easily understand the grammar rules of TL.

Again Weschler (1997) suggests using L1 for warm-up brainstorming. If teacher starts with L1, students get a sense of security. So warm-up activities can be done by using students' mother tongue. Again abstract words or expressions are difficult to explain (or demonstrate using Total Physical Response) in FL are better translated. Even for advanced level students, there is much less tendency to "fall back" upon L1 and translation may save time. Sometimes teachers can save time by using L1 translation and use the time for other activities related to TL learning. If learners understand everything they will be more willing to participate in the class and take part in various activities in the class. Again, it is said the more we know about a word, the easier it is for us to retrieve it. If students have a clear idea about the words they can easily remember those words.

Disadvantages of using L1 in L2/FL classes: Again some of the researchers believe that L1 should be avoided in FL class. Ellis (1984) claims that more language acquisition will take place if learners do not depend on their L1, or if they do not translate. Frequent use of mother tongue in foreign language class may create dependency on using it which can be an obstacle to learn target language in an appropriate way. Many linguists insisted that the target language be used for all purposes in the classroom, even when the reasons for using it remained unclear

(Hawks, 2001, p.47). Students need as much exposure as possible to the target language in order to acquire it. That requires them to use the TL as much as possible. Target language acquisition depends on exposure, the more learners exposed to a language the better they will acquire it. Krashen encouraged language teachers' maximum exposure to the target language. He stated that all the lesson or as much as possible should be in TL, and that there was a definite relationship between comprehensible input in TL and proficiency (Krashen, 1985, p.14). If teacher provides comprehensible input students may learn better. It may not always a good decision to use L1 in FL class. Atkinson (1987) suggests that L1 should be used no more than five percent of the time in the foreign language or second language classroom. Others such as Lewis and Hill (1992) agreed and said that the language being studied should be the mode of communication in the lesson. That means the FL lesson should be taught in FL, in order to maximize exposure, and thereby learning, is perhaps the key concept which monolingual supporters have based their approach on. Many ELT professionals maintain that too, much L1 use might deprive learners of valuable input in TL. They encouraged thinking in English rather than translating it into L1 and remembering it. Balanced and sensible use of mother tongue may increase the chance to acquire the target language quickly. Classroom situations can create various experiences for students such as real life situations through simulations (McDonald, 1993); if the teacher uses the MT to a great extent, students may lose the chance to benefit from these situations. Overuse of L1 may deprive them to think in target language

### **Purpose of the Research**

The focus of this study will be to identify the usefulness behind using mother tongue (L1) in Foreign Language (FL) classes. If teachers use mother tongue to represent similarities and dissimilarities between two languages then it might be a great idea to use L1 in FL class. By using L1 in an appropriate way teachers may enhance target language learning. If the teachers know the reasons, they may use L1 as an effective tool for teaching L2/ FL. However this paper may give the language teachers an insight into the reasons of using L1 in English class and how can it be a beneficial tool for learning foreign language. This study aims to answer the following questions:

### **Research questions**

- What are the reasons behind using L1 in FL classroom?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in the class?

**Research Method:** Qualitative method has been used for data collection. Qualitative method includes interview from both students and teachers

## **FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH**

**Students Interview:** While taking the interview fifty students from two separate foreign language elementary level language learner were asked by the researcher why they want his/her teacher to speak in Bangla in English class. Almost everyone said they feel comfortable when their teacher uses Bangla in the class. They also said if their teacher gives Bangla examples while explaining difficult meaning or giving some examples they learn better. This is because they can understand everything. If the meanings are clear and if they can relate the examples with practical examples described by their own language their learning capability improve.

They also said it is easier for them to remember words described in L1. It indicates L1 assists learners in retaining new vocabulary items. Among fifty eleven of them said they don't like L1 in their English class. They think if they listen to target language all the time their FL acquisition process will be improved. They also said if the practice using TL inside the class their pronunciation will be developed too. Most of them think Bangla is a helpful tool to learn better English. They again said if they understand everything they will automatically learn FL. They said when their teacher starts class by using L1 they feel less stressed. Some of them (9 among 50 students) said too much L1 in the FL class is not good for them. It will make them dependent on the language. They find it beneficial when teacher corrects their mistakes in L1 but they want their teacher to use synonyms for clarifying difficult meaning. Almost 20 students said they prefer to ask question in L1 rather than English because while asking questions most of them cannot find proper TL words to express their problems. In addition some students said they want their teacher to use both L1 and FL. They expect they will get the class instructions in L1 rather than FL. So, allowing L1 to clarify instructions and confusing points may decrease the stress of students and help them perform with more accuracy on the tasks assigned by the teacher.

**Teachers Interview:** In this study, the researcher asked five teachers from same institute the question how many languages they use in the FL class. All of them told they try to use only TL in the class but sometimes they can't totally avoid L1 in English class. Again some of them think L1 helps the students to learn better English because their students seem more confident when they understand everything. According to them with the elementary level learners to explain meaning and to teach grammar in L1 is almost inevitable. All most all of them said, they use L1 when it is absolutely necessary for them e.g. While explaining a difficult word, teaching abstract topics (grammar), managing the class, giving instruction, correcting the errors and most importantly to give students a sense of security. Almost all the teachers believe the use of students L1 to support FL acquisition is appropriate but teachers must not use L1 because they are not prepared for the class. Moreover some of them said that L1 is a useful tool like other tools such as: demonstration, picture or diagram, real object etc. but over use of L1 may work as an obstacle for the learners. They also said with appropriate techniques and a nurturing atmosphere, students can feel comfortable in FL from the first class. So almost all teaches agreed that L1 has an important role in FL Classroom. They said while cautious use of L1 may faster the learning process, switching to students' mother tongue should certainly be limited.

**Major Findings:** The overall positive comments from students and teachers showed their recognition of the significant contribution of mother tongue towards learning Foreign Language. From comments of teachers, students' response it can be gathered that occasional use of L1 is useful in Foreign language Classroom. For the elementary level learners L1 can be a beneficial tool to be used by the teachers. Teachers often use L1 while explaining difficult words, simplifying grammar rules, correcting errors and giving instructions. As a result L1 saves time and helps to understand the content better. L1 also help teachers to build rapport with students and gives the students a sense of security. Communication is very important for learning a new language. With elementary level students it is very difficult for the teacher to communicate as they have very limited word stock. Thus L1 encourages students to communicate with teacher. Therefore in the light of this survey it can also be suggested that there must be a balanced use between L1 and FL, whenever teacher feels the FL task is beyond the capabilities of students, a little amount of L1 can be a useful device to overcome the obstacles. If the learners can understand their task and instruction they may feel more secure which will give them the confidence to learn better Target Language. When the students

prohibited from speaking mother tongue in the classroom, especially during free time, the students may become timid and afraid to say anything, even in TL. On the other hand it may be harmful for student's motivation if the teacher uses L1 in whole the class, it may lower their interest about learning the target language, make them more dependent on L1, make them unable to think in TL and hinder their learning. From the study it has also found that if the teacher gives instruction in L1 students can understand better and follow the class more easily. They can also communicate with the teacher easily, give response if they cannot answer in FL, and ask questions in L1 when they need clarification. This reveals that the mother tongue can work as linguistic 'scaffold' for these students who cannot accomplish tasks alone. So, teachers should allow students to use L1 where it helps students to increase their performance in TL. The judicious use of the mother tongue as a teaching tool can be advisable as a means to increase knowledge of students' foreign language. Because sensible use of L1 can enhance effective language acquisition.

## CONCLUSION

While teaching FL most of the teachers feel the necessity of using first language but they do not know the reasons behind using it and how much they should use it. Many teachers who participated in this study believe that the use of L1 is unavoidable while teaching elementary level language learner. Before the research it was hypothesized that L1 use in the classroom does not hinder learning, as many have claimed, but that it actually helps learning. In classrooms if students and teachers share the same mother tongue, there is a tendency for using it in various aspects and activities especially while clarifying meaning, explaining grammatical examples, correcting the errors and giving instructions. The results of this research can prove that L1 can be a beneficial tool for FL learning and L1 can bring a positive attitude and sense of security to the process of learning Foreign Language. Research studies have revealed that L1 is not only an efficient learning tool but also a useful teaching method if pedagogical activities are well designed. L1 may be a cognitive bridge to the FL which helps learners to analyze language and work at a more demanding level than using FL only. Moreover, use of L1 gives insights in to language and it has also been suggested that for maximizing the use of TL it is important to avoid L1 as much as possible. Though the frequent use of L1 has been criticized yet teachers cannot overlook the importance of using L1 in FL classes. Obviously, it is more natural to use L1 with students especially who are the beginners and share it as it is easy and more communicatively effective, to teach a foreign language communication is much important. Above all, using TL all the time could be a reason of embarrassment particularly for shy students. These issues suggest that L1 is crucially important in the process of language teaching and learning. In short, the findings of the present study revealed that teachers had an acceptable belief in the various pedagogical uses of L1 to extend interactions in FL classroom e.g. explaining meaning and new vocabulary, illustrating grammatical rules, transmission of lesson content, correcting errors, organizing classrooms and praising and encouraging students. L1 can be a valuable teaching strategy in FL classrooms for its different functions. Consequently, students' L1 should not be devalued or underestimated. The idea of total prohibition or avoidance of L1 in FL classrooms was not supported by the FL teachers by the present study. Qualified and properly trained teachers can play an important role in developing learners Target language skills by using L1 properly. So to ensure strong basic knowledge of students teachers should be provided proper training so that they can use mother tongue in an effective way. After reading the report of this small research on the topic "Usefulness of using

Mother tongue in Foreign Language Classroom”, I think may teachers obtain sufficient and valid information about why they are using L1 and the benefits of using it in FL class. However, if L1 used judiciously, the mother tongue may become a teaching and learning resource which can greatly enhance the acquisition process and encourage learners to focus on similarities and differences between their mother tongue and foreign language.

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