Using the First Language in the Classroom

Vivian Cook¹

Abstract: This paper argues for the re-examination of the time-honoured view that the first language should be avoided in the classroom by teachers and students. The justifications for this rest on a doubtful analogy with first language acquisition, on a questionable compartmentalization of the two languages in the mind, and on the aim of maximizing students’ exposure to the second language, laudable but not incompatible with use of the first language. The L1 has already been used in alternating language methods and in methods that actively create links between L1 and L2, such as the New Concurrent Method, Community Language Learning, and Dodson’s Bilingual Method. Treating the L1 as a classroom resource opens up several ways to use it, such as for teachers to convey meaning, explain grammar, and organize the class, and for students to use as part of their collaborative learning and individual strategy use. The first language can be a useful element in creating authentic L2 users rather than something to be shunned at all costs.

Résumé: Ce qui est proposé est une mise en cause de l’idée traditionnelle selon laquelle la langue maternelle ne doit pas, en principe, être utilisée dans une classe de langue étrangère. Cette attitude s’est toujours justifiée en faisant appel à une soi-disant analogie avec l’acquisition de la langue maternelle, un compartimentage supposé des deux langues dans l’esprit de l’apprenant et un désir d’exposer au maximum l’apprenant à la langue étrangère – but louable en soi, mais nullement incompatible avec l’emploi de la langue maternelle. En fait, la langue maternelle figure déjà dans certaines méthodes – celles qui alternent les langues et celles qui cherchent à créer activement des liens entre les deux langues, telles que la New Concurrent Method, Community Language Learning et la Bilingual Method de Dodson. Il suffit de considérer la langue maternelle comme une ressource pédagogique, disponible en salle de classe, pour qu’apparaissent diverses possibilités de l’exploiter, permettant à l’enseignant d’indiquer les valeurs sémantiques, d’expliquer la grammaire et d’organiser le déroulement de la

© 2001 The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 57, 3 (March/mars)
Using the First Language in the Classroom

Introduction

This paper suggests that it is time to open a door that has been firmly shut in language teaching for over 100 years, namely the systematic use of the first language (L1) in the classroom. Starting from the current reluctance latent in most teaching methods to allow teachers or students to use the L1, it examines possible justifications. It outlines teaching methods that actively employ the L1 and goes on to describe some of the different ways in which the L1 may be used positively by teachers and students.

The paper is written from a background in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and language teaching in England. While some of the diverse aspects of teaching and learning that are discussed here may be peculiar to certain situations, the issue of the L1 itself is pertinent to all foreign language teaching.

One preliminary assumption is that language teaching has many goals. A broad distinction can be made between external goals that relate to actual second language (L2) use outside the classroom and to internal goals that relate to the educational aims of the classroom itself (Cook, 1983). The UK National Curriculum for modern languages, for instance, lays down both external goals, such as developing ‘the ability to use the language effectively for the purposes of practical communication,’ and internal goals, such as promoting ‘learning of skills of more general application (e.g., analysis, memorizing, drawing of inferences)’ (Department of Education [DES], 1990). Language teaching methodology has to be responsive to the multiple goals within one educational context and the varying aims across contexts. The question of using the L1 may not have a single answer suitable to all teaching goals.

Avoiding use of the L1 in the classroom

While fashions in language teaching ebbed and flowed during the twentieth century, certain basic assumptions were accepted by most language teachers, traceable mostly to the ‘Great Reform’ of the late nineteenth century (Hawkins, 1987). Though these assumptions have affected many generations of students and teachers, they are rarely
discussed or presented to new teachers but are taken for granted as the foundation of language teaching. Among them are the ideas that spoken language is more basic than written, explicit discussion of grammar should be avoided, and language should be practiced as a whole, rather than as separate parts.

Part and parcel of this tradition is the discouragement of L1 use in the classroom. This convention can be phrased in stronger or weaker forms. At its strongest, it is 'Ban the L1 from the classroom.' Only in circumstances where the teacher does not speak the students’ L1 or the students have different L1s could this be achieved. At weakest, the rule is 'Minimize the L1 in the classroom,' that is to say, use it as little as possible. A more optimistic version is 'Maximize the L2 in the classroom,' emphasizing the usefulness of the L2 rather than the harm of the first. To generalize a specific remark from Polio and Duff (1994, p. 324), 'teachers have some sense, then, that using the TL as much as possible is important.' However the assumption is phrased, the L2 is seen as positive, the L1 as negative. The L1 is not something to be utilized in teaching but to be set aside.

Most teaching methods since the 1880s have adopted this Direct Method avoidance of the L1. According to Howatt (1984, p. 289), 'the monolingual principle, the unique contribution of the twentieth century to classroom language teaching, remains the bedrock notion from which the others ultimately derive.' Stern (1992, p. 281) feels that the 'intra-lingual' position in teaching is so strong that 'many writers do not even consider cross-lingual objectives.' Audiolinguistics, for instance, recommended 'rendering English inactive while the new language is being learnt' (Brooks, 1964, p. 142). Recent methods do not so much forbid the L1 as ignore its existence altogether. Communicative language teaching and task-based learning methods have no necessary relationship with the L1, yet, as we shall see, the only times that the L1 is mentioned is when advice is given on how to minimize its use. The main theoretical treatments of task-based learning do not, for example, have any locatable mentions of the classroom use of the L1 (Crookes & Gass, 1993; Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1998). Most descriptions of methods portray the ideal classroom as having as little of the L1 as possible, essentially by omitting any reference to it. Perhaps the only exception is the grammar/translation method, which has little or no public support.

Avoidance of the L1 lies behind many teaching techniques, even if it is seldom spelled out. Most teaching manuals consider this avoidance as so obvious that no classroom use of the L1 is ever mentioned, say by Halliwell and Jones (1991). The L1 occurs in Scrivenor (1994, p. 192) only in the list of problems – 'students using their own language.' Even
Using the First Language in the Classroom

writers who are less enthusiastic about avoiding the L1 take issue primarily with the extent to which this is imposed, for example Macaro (1997). Duff and Polio (1990) wind up their discussion of the high variability of L2 use in the classroom by listing suggestions for enhancing the proportion of the L2 component, not for utilizing the L1 component. Those arguing for the L1 to be mixed with the L2 on a deliberate and consistent basis in the classroom are few and far between, to be reported below. Thus, this anti-L1 attitude was clearly a mainstream element in twentieth-century language teaching methodology.

This is not to say that teachers do not actually use the L1 every day. Naturam expelles turca, tamen usque recurret. Like nature, the L1 creeps back in, however many times you throw it out with a pitchfork. Lucas and Katz (1994, p. 558) report that even in English-only US classrooms ‘the use of the native language is so compelling that it emerges even when policies and assumptions mitigate against it.’ The UK National Curriculum still needs to remind teachers 120 years after the Great Reform that ‘the target language is the normal means of communication’ (DES, 1990). Teachers resort to the L1 despite their best intentions and often feeling guilty for straying from the L2 path. Those interviewed by Mitchell (1988, p. 28) ‘seemed almost to feel they were making an admission of professional misconduct in “confessing” to low levels of FL use.’

One reason that this position has not been more challenged may be the influence of EFL which, for historical or political reasons, has concentrated on classes where the teacher does not speak the language of the students and where the students often speak several L1s (Atkinson, 1993). The avoidance of the L1 is a practical necessity in much EFL, even if it reinforces the political dominance of English (Phillipson, 1992).

Thus, a core belief arising out of nineteenth-century theories of language teaching is probably held in some form by the majority of the teaching profession. If it has proved successful for over 100 years, perhaps it should be left alone: if it works, don’t fix it. The use of the L1 can be dismissed as yesterday’s question; let us get on with the burning issues of today. In a survey of advice offered by 19 Local Education Authority advisors in the UK, ‘not a single respondent expressed any pedagogical value in a teacher referring to the learner’s own language’ (Macaro, 1997, p. 29).

Yet dismissing the L1 out of hand restricts the possibilities for language teaching. Whatever the advantages of demonstrating ‘real’ classroom communication through the L2, there is no logical necessity that communicative tasks should avoid the L1. The six types of tasks
used in task-based learning are described in Willis (1996, p. 26-27) without mentioning the L1 but are followed by the by now familiar advice 'Don’t ban mother-tongue use but encourage attempts to use the target language' (Willis, 1996, p. 130). Avoidance of the L1 may well be totally justified for all time, and there may be no cause to ever question it again. Yet there have been periods in the past when L1 avoidance was not seen as a self-evident truth, and a minority of people in every period have rejected it.

**Reasons for avoiding the L1 in the classroom**

Let us try to find some of the reasons for avoiding the L1, difficult as they are to locate in the literature. To simplify matters, the discussion assumes a teacher who can speak the L1 of the students.

**Argument from L1 learning**

The original justification was probably the way in which monolingual children acquire their first language. If the only completely successful method of acquiring a language is that used by L1 children, teaching should be based on the characteristics of L1 acquisition, as many teaching methods have claimed since the Great Reform. For example Total Physical Response 'simulates at a speeded up pace the stages an infant experiences in acquiring its first language' (Asher, 1986, p. 17).

The fact that monolingual L1 children do not have another language means that L2 learners should not rely on their other language. The comparison of L1 and L2 acquisition is a vast question. L2 learners have more mature minds, greater social development, a larger short-term memory capacity, and other differences from L1-only young children (Singleton, 1989); above all, L2 learners already know 'how to mean' (Halliday, 1975). The non-existent other language in L1 acquisition is in the class of unalterable differences from L2 learning. By definition, the L1 monolingual child does not have another language; it is the one element that teaching could never duplicate. A more effective argument would be based on young bilingual children, as Dodson (1985) points out. The argument for avoiding the L1 based on L1 acquisition is not in itself convincing. It seems tantamount to suggesting that, since babies do not play golf, we should not teach golf to adults.

A related argument is the belief that L2 acquisition is usually unsuccessful, as voiced in the following quotation: 'Very few L2 learners appear to be fully successful in the way that native speakers
are' (Towell & Hawkins, 1994, p. 14). The L2 learner is a failure for not achieving the same competence as the L1 child, that is to say becoming a native speaker. The goals of L1 acquisition and L2 learning are treated as identical, except that the L2 learner seldom gets there. As argued elsewhere (Cook, 1997a; 1999), this attitude sees L2 users as failing to achieve membership in a group to which they can never belong; they are shadows of native speakers, not L2 users in their own right. L1 children achieve native speaker competence in one language; L2 users achieve competence in more than one language (Cook, 1997b). Whether L2 learners are successful or not has to be measured against the standards of L2 users, not those of native speakers. Therefore, L1 ‘success’ in becoming a native speaker is different from L2 ‘success’ in becoming an L2 user.

*Argument from language compartmentalization*

A second argument is that successful L2 acquisition depends on keeping the L2 separate from the L1. This implies that the goal of L2 teaching is coordinate bilingualism, in which the two languages form distinct systems in the mind, rather than compound bilingualism, in which they form a single compound system (Weinreich, 1953). Hence L2 learning should happen solely through the L2 rather than being linked to the L1. The mid-twentieth-century rationale for this reasoning included transfer theories such as Contrastive Analysis (Lado, 1957); if the major problems in L2 learning come from the L1, then let us eliminate it as much as we can. This compartmentalization is particularly evident in the many twentieth-century attempts to teach meaning without recourse to the L1. Teachers explain the L2 word, define or mime its meaning, show pictures, and so on, without translating, in the long-term hope that this builds up the L2 as a separate system.

Yet the two languages are interwoven in the L2 user’s mind in vocabulary (Beauvillain & Grainger, 1987), in syntax (Cook, 1994), in phonology (Obler, 1982), and in pragmatics (Locastro, 1987). L2 users are more flexible in their ways of thinking and are less governed by cultural stereotypes (Cook, 1997b). The L2 meanings do not exist separately from the L1 meanings in the learner’s mind, regardless of whether they are part of the same vocabulary store or parts of different stores mediated by a single conceptual system (Cook, 1997b). Learning an L2 is not just the adding of rooms to your house by building an extension at the back: it is the rebuilding of all internal walls. Trying to put languages in separate compartments in the mind is doomed to failure since the compartments are connected in many ways.
The uniqueness of L2 use is seen in code-switching where both languages are simultaneously on-line. One language is switched to another according to speech function, rules of discourse, and syntactic properties of the sentence (Cook, 1996). Code-switching is a highly skilled activity – the ‘bilingual mode’ of language in which L1 and L2 are used simultaneously, rather than the ‘monolingual mode’ in which they are used separately (Grosjean, 1989). It forms part of normal L2 use in many L2 situations outside the classroom where both participants share two languages. Such non-compartmentalized L2 use may well be part of the external L2 goals of teaching and could form part of the classroom if not nipped in the bud.

The L1 plays an integral role in L2 learning as well as in L2 use. Teachers using group work have often lamented students’ tendency to use their L1. Vygotskian-style research has, however, documented how this bias forms a valuable part of learning as a social enterprise and of the ‘scaffolding’ support that the learners need in order to build up the L2: ‘L1 is used as a powerful tool of semiotic mediation between learners ... and within individuals’ (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998, p. 415). Surveys of students’ strategies show the importance of this L1 use, for example, the 73% of students who ‘ask classmates for meaning’ (Schmitt, 1997). The theory of cultural learning sees collaborative dialogue as the essential means by which human beings learn (Tomasello, 1999). We learn by trying to see the world from the viewpoint of others.

As Stern puts it, ‘The L1-L2 connection is an indisputable fact of life’ (1992, p. 282). Keeping the languages visibly separate in language teaching is contradicted by the invisible processes in students’ minds. Language teaching that works with this fact of life is more likely to be successful than teaching that works against it. Many likely L2 goals for students involve mediating between two languages rather than staying entirely in the L2. Students trained in coordinate bilingualism will, for instance, find it difficult to carry out the jobs of interpreters, business negotiators, or travel representatives. Nor indeed can a separate L2 achieve the internal goals of language teaching; if the aim of learning a language is to improve the students’ minds cognitively, emotionally, or socially, the L2 had better not be insulated from the rest of the mind.

*Argument for second language use in the classroom*

Clearly the learner needs to encounter the language in order to learn it. One of the functions of teaching is to provide students with samples of the L2. The argument suggests that the teacher can maximize the provision of useful L2 examples by avoiding the L1. A further step is to
Using the First Language in the Classroom

insist that the L2 should be the language of real communication during the class rather than the L1. A typical communicative teaching view is that

Many learners are likely to remain unconvinced by our attempts to make them accept the foreign language as an effective means of satisfying their communicative needs, if we abandon it ourselves as soon as such needs arise in the immediate classroom situation. (Littlewood, 1981, p. 45)

The L2 will remain a set of odd and arbitrary conventions if the students do not experience it in meaningful ways. This is the basis for such claims as ‘The natural use of the target language for virtually all communication is a sure sign of a good modern language course’ (DES, 1990, p. 58). A teacher who uses the L1 for classroom interaction is depriving the students of the only true experience of the L2 that they may ever encounter. The teacher is wasting a golden opportunity if he says ‘What’s the time?’ or ‘Put your homework on my desk’ in the L1.

The language of classroom interaction is, however, a genre of its own, as Willis reminds us (1996, p.17). Classrooms use the interaction sequence Initiation, Response, and Feedback (IRF) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), peculiar to teaching whatever language it is done in. Use of the L2 for IRF demonstrates the language of classroom interaction and trains the students to participate in other classrooms. But, in itself, it hardly provides exposure to the full range of external language that students need.

The teacher also uses the L2 for social interaction with the students about the weather, the world, yesterday’s baseball game, or whatever they are interested in. This provides the students with natural samples of the L2 in action that go further than the language of teaching. However, such L2 use is likely to be restricted in conversational topics, roles, and language functions due to the different roles of students and teachers.

Despite these quibbles, so far as external goals of teaching are concerned, it is clearly beneficial to expose the students to as much L2 as possible. No one will quarrel with providing models of real language use for the students. Nor would anyone deny that it is important for the students to develop strategies for working out the meanings of the L2 from realistic classroom contexts. But these actualities are not necessarily incompatible with L1 use in the classroom. Overall, accepting that students should meet natural L2 communication in the classroom supports maximizing the L2 rather than avoiding the L1. Willis (1996, p. 49) gives the typical good advice ‘Explain to students that if they
want to communicate in the target language they need to practice.' However, the maximal provision of L2 input does not deny the L1 a role in learning and teaching. Having a large amount of meaningful L2 use, including samples of language relating to external goals, does not preclude using the L1.

To sum up, none of the three arguments from L1 learning, compartmentalization of languages, and the provision of L2 use strongly support the view that the L1 should be avoided. They rely partly on a comparison of concepts that are ultimately incommensurate – L2 learning is not L1 acquisition, and L2 users are not the same as L1 users – and partly on extension of the maximal provision of L2 to an avoidance of the L1. Useful as it may be to employ the L1 sparingly, this tenet has no straightforward theoretical rationale. The pressure from this mostly unacknowledged anti-L1 attitude has prevented language teaching from looking rationally at ways in which the L1 can be involved in the classroom. It has tended to put an L2 straitjacket on the classroom which has stifled any systematic use of the L1. If avoiding the L1 is merely sensible advice based on the reasoning that students should encounter as much of the L2 as possible, new avenues are opened for language teaching which involve the active, systematic use of the L1.

Teaching methods that deliberately involve the L1

How can the L1 be better integrated into teaching? One step is to licence what teachers now feel guilty about doing, namely falling back on the L1. At least teachers can be given absolution for using the L1 – even if in English secondary schools this would actually break the law of the land – so that they feel slightly more comfortable with their daily practice.

The next step is to consider overall teaching methods that make use of the L1 actively within the classroom. Some have been mentioned in the context of L2 user goals in Cook (1999). None of them have probably been practised on a large scale, nor do any represent a complete approach that can apply to a variety of situations. Their common factor is trying to use the L1 positively in the classroom rather than seeing it as a regrettable fact of life that has to be endured.

Alternating language approaches

In alternating language approaches, the students are at one moment learning their L2, at another using their L1. An important criterion is
reciprocality: both languages are involved without either one being taken for granted. While bilingual classes comprise groups with the same L1, these classes require mixed groups of speakers of two languages. One possibility is to assign computer 'e-pals' so that students can exchange messages in their respective languages, say through the Tandem system.²

A more radical approach is the alternation between languages for parts of the school day. The Key School Two-way Model teaches classes of mixed English and Spanish speakers through English in the morning and Spanish in the afternoon (Rhodes, Christian, & Barfield, 1997). The Alternate Days approach teaches the standard curriculum subjects to children with L1 Filipino using English and Filipino on alternate days (Tucker, Otanes, & Sibayan, 1971). Dual Language Programs strike a balance between two languages in the school curriculum, ranging from 90% in the minority language versus 10% in the majority language in the pre-school year to 70% versus 30% in second grade (Montague, 1997).

A European variant on alternating languages is found in Reciprocal Language Teaching (Hawkins, 1987). Pairs or groups of students learn each other's languages on alternating occasions. A reciprocal course for English teachers of French and French teachers of English alternated languages each day so that the students on Monday were the teachers on Tuesday (Cook, 1989). This applied not just to the classroom conversation but to everything that was said during the day and any social event in the evening. The course took place in England and France on alternate years. No constraints were placed on the teaching other than the language-of-the-day requirement. The unique feature of reciprocal teaching is the exchange of learning and teaching roles, as well as the alternation of languages.

While alternating language methods recognize the student as an L2 user, they still compartmentalize the two languages. Dolson and Lindholm (1995), for example, explain that one of the criterial features of the Two-Way Immersion Model is that 'the program involves periods of instruction during which only one language is used.' In some ways, they represent a doubled-up way of avoiding the L1; while the L2 changes, there is not necessarily any change in the role of the L1 in the teaching. The same is true of immersion education, in which languages alternate in a sense between the school and the world outside but not necessarily within the classroom itself. Alternating language approaches are limited by requiring two more or less balanced groups of L1 speakers. When the two languages are spoken by a majority and a minority group within the same country, the unequal relationships between the two groups also need to be taken into account.
Methods that actively create links between L1 and L2

There have nevertheless been teaching methods that have favoured using both languages within the same lesson.

New Concurrent Method

Here the teacher switches from one language to another at key points according to particular rules (Jacobson, 1990). While teaching English to Spanish-speaking children, the teacher can switch to Spanish when concepts are important, when the students are getting distracted, or when a student should be praised or reprimanded. Conversely, the teacher may switch to English when revising a lesson that has already been given in Spanish. This method acknowledges code-switching as a normal L2 activity and encourages the students to see themselves as true L2 users, at home in both languages. Hence the language classroom becomes a real L2 use situation in which both languages are concurrent, not a pretend L2 monolingual situation. Jacobson’s switch-points resemble the patterns in real-life code-switching, adapted to the classroom.

More radical concurrent teaching uses cognates as the entry point for the student (Giauque & Ely, 1990). In the early lessons, the teacher and students use the L1 to supply vocabulary items that they don’t know, for example ‘Je am having difficulty with this learning activity.’ This ‘franglais’ fades out rapidly, so that after two weeks the teacher is talking at least 50% in French. Code-switching is happening within the same sentence rather than between sentences as in Jacobson’s proposal. In general, the role of the L1 in concurrent teaching is to foster L2 learning through a more natural situation of L2 use.

Community Language Learning (CLL)

The core of the beginners’ lesson in CLL, alias counselling-learning, is that students talk to each other spontaneously in the L2 via the mediation of the L1 (Curran, 1976). At Stage 1, the student says something in her L1 which is then translated by the teacher into the L2 and repeated by the student in the L2; the other students overhear both the L1 and the L2 versions of the sentence. As the students progress, they depend less and less on the L1 translations. Though the follow-up techniques in CLL are conventional, this central technique uses the L1 as the vehicle for giving L2 meaning in whole sentences. It sees the L1 as the initiator of meaning and attaches the L2 to the L1.
Dodson’s Bilingual Method

This method requires the teacher to read an L2 sentence aloud several times and to give its meaning in the L1 (a technique termed ‘interpreting’ rather than ‘translating’). Next the students ‘imitate’ by repeating the sentence, first in chorus and then individually (Dodson, 1967). The teacher tests their understanding of the meaning by saying the L1 sentence while pointing to a picture, requiring them to answer in the L2. The method has been adapted for helping English-speaking children with Welsh (Dodson, 1985). In general, the role of the L1 is to help the students to grasp the meaning of the language. Like CLL, translation is used only to convey meaning, and it consists of whole sentences. Here, however, the process starts with a teacher’s L2 sentence translated into the L1, while in CLL it starts with the student’s self-created L1 sentence, which is then translated into the L2.

Ways of using the L1 positively in teaching

Let us see how the L1 could be used more positively by building on existing classroom practice, which has been well described in the studies to be cited during this section, namely those of Macaro (1997), who questioned 271 modern language teachers and 196 pupils in English schools; Franklin (1990), who looked at 201 modern language teachers in Scotland; and of Polio and Duff (1994), who concentrated on six US university classrooms.

If there is no overriding obligation to avoid the L1, each use can be looked at on its merits. One factor to consider is efficiency: Can something be done more effectively through the L1? A second factor is learning: Will L2 learning be helped by using the L1 alongside the L2? The third factor is naturalness: Do the participants feel more comfortable about some functions or topics in the first language rather than the second, as studies in code-switching have shown? The fourth factor is external relevance: Will use of both languages help the students to master specific L2 uses that they may need in the world beyond the classroom? Set against these four factors must be the potential loss of L2 experience. Despite reservations about avoiding the L1, it is clearly useful to employ large quantities of the L2, everything else being equal.

How teachers convey meaning

The age-old problem for the teacher is how to convey the new meanings of the second language to the learner, whether for words, sentences, or
language functions. Some mid-twentieth-century teaching methods treated this as the core element in methodology, for example, the filmstrips of audio-visual teaching or the situations in situational teaching.

Teacher use of L1 to convey and check meaning of words or sentences

The use of the L1 for conveying word and sentence meaning recognizes that the two languages are closely linked in the mind, as in the overall methods described in the last section. Thirty-nine percent of Scottish teachers (Franklin, 1990) used the L1 for explaining meanings, 8% the L2, and the remainder the L2 'with difficulty.' Trying to explain *hospitable* or *nuclear family* in Lesson 3 of an English beginners' course may be a waste of time (Mohamed & Acklam, 1992, p. 18). Explaining *la biologie* or *la physique* to a French class using cartoons of a frog and a mathematical formula is not likely to be successful – unless of course it relies on the surreptitious L2/L1 equation of cognates in the students' minds – (Terrell, Rogers, Barnes, & Wolff-Hessini, 1993, p. 25). This is not to say that teaching should relate all meaning to the L1. Many differences of vocabulary and meaning cannot be covered by giving a translation equivalent, say the deceptive English-Norwegian translation pairs *hate = hate* and *love = elsk* (Johansson, 1998). This L1 use extends to the checking of comprehension via the L1, also popular among teachers. Using the L1 to convey meaning may be an efficient way to help learning and to feel natural in using the L2 in the classroom.

Teacher use of L1 for explaining grammar

Explicit grammar teaching, discouraged during most of the twentieth century, has had some life breathed into it recently through the advocates of language awareness and of Focus on Form (FonF), who claim that grammar teaching, rather than being a starting point, may be used when it arises naturally out of classroom activities (Long, 1991). However, while the contributors to Doughty and Williams (1998) raise many questions about how to implement FonF, none of them asks which language should be used, presumably accepting the usual L2 default. Whether the L1 or the L2 is best for explaining grammar is a practical issue. Most studies of cognitive processing suggest that even advanced L2 users are less efficient at absorbing information from the L2 than from the L1 (Cook, 1997b). It is hardly surprising that teachers
are not enthusiastic about explaining grammar in the L2 (Macaro, 1997). Eighty-eight percent of Scottish teachers used the L1 (Franklin, 1990), as did all six teachers in Polio and Duff (1994). Given that Lesson 2 of the French beginners’ course Panorama (Girardet & Cridlig, 1996) includes ‘La conjugaison pronominale,’ ‘Construction avec l’infinitif,’ and ‘Les adjectifs possessifs et démonstratifs,’ what else are teachers supposed to do? The main argument for using the L1 for grammar, then, is efficiency of understanding by the students.3

Teacher organization of the class

The ways in which the teacher organizes the class also involve a choice of language. Some of the possibilities follow.

Teacher use of L1 for organizing tasks

To carry out a task, the students must understand what they have to do. The first page of Unit 1 of Atlas 1 (Nunan, 1995), a ‘beginning’ English course, starts with ‘1. Look at the picture and practice the conversation. 2. Learn key classroom terms. Label the pictures with these words....’ Unless translated into the L1, these instructions are unlikely to be more than words on a page, partially comprehensible through the teacher’s skill at demonstration. It is no wonder that the most common L1 use found by Polio and Duff was ‘words related to the academic context’(1994, p. 32). Interestingly, in reverse, Deux Mondes uses L2 French words in the advice to English students, such as ‘Getting started with the Étapes’ (Terrell et al., 1993, xxiv). Some teachers resort to the L1 after having tried in vain to get the activity going in the L2 (Macaro, 1997). Franklin (1990) found 68% preferred the L2 for activity instructions, 8% the L1. Again the argument for the L1 is efficiency, leading to more effective learning.

Teacher maintenance of discipline through L1

The need to maintain control over secondary school classes often calls for the L1. Saying ‘Shut up or you will get a detention’ in the L1 is a serious threat rather than practice of imperative and conditional constructions. One class reported that their teacher slipped into the L1 ‘if it’s something really bad!’ (Macaro, 1997). Forty-five percent of teachers prefer the L1 for discipline, 15% the L2 (Franklin, 1990, p.21).
Again the reason for the L1 may be partly efficiency of comprehension, partly to show the threat is real rather than pretend.

Teacher gaining contact with individual students through the L1

Eighty-four percent of English teachers try to provide feedback in the L2 (Macaro, 1997). Telling students how well they have done in their own language may make the praise more ‘real.’ The L1 is used predominantly for correction of written homework, as done by 56% of Scottish teachers (Franklin, 1990). The teacher may also switch to the L1 to make personal remarks to a student, for instance when a student has a coughing fit (Polio & Duff, 1994, p. 318). The main benefit of the L1 for personal contact is naturalness. When using the L1, the teacher is treating the students as their real selves rather than dealing with assumed L2 personas.

Teacher use of L1 for testing

At one level, running tests is an everyday classroom routine, for which the L1 is preferred by 51% of Scottish teachers (Franklin, 1990). At another level, students may have to take public examinations. A vexed question in the UK is the extension of L1 avoidance to examinations through the dictum that ‘The form of a Target Language exam assumes also rubrics in the TL’ (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1994). The students are tested not only on their ability to do the test but on their understanding of the instructions. On one hand, this may not also fully challenge the students’ L2 abilities; on the other, it may constrain the complexity of tests due to the limited language that can be used.

One alternative is to treat the examination as a test of L2 use involving both languages. The Institute of Linguists (1988, p. 2) has developed examinations in languages for international communication in which candidates ‘are called on to mediate between speakers and/or writers of these two languages’ through tasks in which both languages have to be handled. One of the institute’s recent advanced-level Italian examinations, for instance, requires students to adopt the role of a journalist preparing an article on young people in Europe. Their first task is to summarize in English the contents of two Italian newspaper articles for their editor to read; their second is to write two letters in Italian requesting the views of two authors on the information that they have uncovered. To succeed, students have to use both languages: they
are tested on whether they can use the L2 effectively, not on how close their abilities are to those of monolingual native speakers. The argument for using the L1 in testing, then, is sheer efficiency.

Student use of L1 within the classroom

Students' own use of the L1 has mostly been minimized by the teaching manuals, which provide many suggestions on how this may be achieved. Unlike the teacher uses discussed so far, student uses of the L1 do not necessarily mean that the teacher has to know the L1 since these can take place largely without the teacher's control, dangerous as this may be if the teacher knows nothing of the students' L1.

Student use of L1 as part of the main learning activity

The word 'translation' has so far been avoided as much as possible because of its pejorative overtones in teaching. Translation as a teaching technique is a different matter from translation as a goal of language teaching. A certain proportion of students may intend to translate or interpret from one language to the other, whether as professional translators or as business people. Like code-switching, translation is a unique attribute of L2 users and a normal part of many of their lives (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1991), for example, in the worldwide practice of minority language children acting as interpreters for adults who cannot speak the majority language.

Stern (1992) approves of teaching techniques using translation that go from the L2 to the L1, as they do not presuppose the knowledge that the exercise is supposedly teaching. The chief problem may be using translation as linguistic detective work rather than as a communicative exercise to convey in one language what has been expressed in another. Once avoidance of the L1 has been relaxed, there is no intrinsic reason why translation is wrong, even if it has other snags. As Malakoff and Hakuta (1991, p. 163) remark, 'translation provides an easy avenue to enhance linguistic awareness and pride in bilingualism.' Usawa (1997) surveys several positive approaches to translation.

If the L1 and the L2 co-exist in the same mind, both languages can be used simultaneously without the need to convert chunks of one into chunks of the other. The students are not treated as monolinguals in either language; they are working through both languages, for example, in exploiting L1 and L2 cognates, as in the New Concurrent Method. At the basis for using the L1 as part of the main activity is its potential contribution to learning and its relationship to external L2 user goals.
Student use of L1 within classroom activities

Advice to teachers on group work and pair work has mostly stressed minimizing the use of the L1: 'If they are talking in small groups it can be quite difficult to get some classes – particularly the less disciplined or motivated ones – to keep to the target language' (Ur, 1996, p. 121). Yet code-switching is a normal feature of L2 use when the participants share two languages. Without the distrust of the L1, there is no reason why students should not code-switch in the classroom. Furthermore, as we saw earlier, L1 provides scaffolding for the students to help each other. L1 use 'is a normal psycholinguistic process that facilitates L2 production and allows the learners both to initiate and sustain verbal interaction with one other' (Brooks & Donato, 1994, p. 268). Through the L1, they may explain the task to each other, negotiate roles they are going to take, or check their understanding or production of language against their peers. These purposes for the L1 clearly fit well with the overall rationale for the task-based learning approach, even if they have so far been discouraged or ignored.

Several other possibilities exist for students to use the L1 in learning, both in the classroom and outside, particularly as a way in to the meanings of L2 words. One is the use of bilingual dictionaries, which 85% of students find beneficial (Schmitt, 1997). Another possibility is dual language texts on facing pages, seen in the Penguin Parallel Texts series for adults, for example (Roberts, 1999), and in the Mantra books for ethnic minority children in England (Sanjivinie, 1995). A third is the use of L2 films with L1 subtitles, sometimes found as an option in video techniques in CD-ROMs. The students exploit L1 principally for mastering the meanings of the L2.

In conclusion, rather than the L1 creeping in as a guilt-making necessity, it can be deliberately and systematically used in the classroom. Some suggestions given here are:

- to provide a short-cut for giving instructions and explanations where the cost of the L2 is too great
- to build up interlinked L1 and L2 knowledge in the students' minds
- to carry out learning tasks through collaborative dialogue with fellow students
- to develop L2 activities such as code-switching for later real-life use

In all of these, the classroom is treated as a situation of L2 use where two languages are permanently present. They are only a hint of the
Using the First Language in the Classroom

Techniques that teachers can develop once they are free from their inhibitions about using the L1.

Howatt (1984, p. 289) suggested that 'if there is another "language teaching revolution" round the corner, it will have to assemble a convincing set of arguments to support some alternative (bilingual?) principle of equal power.' This article has suggested ways of introducing the L1 into the classroom to produce students who are able to operate with two language systems as genuine L2 users, not as imitation natives. Bringing the L1 back from exile may lead not only to the improvement of existing teaching methods but also to innovations in methodology. In particular, it may liberate the task-based learning approach so that it can foster the students' natural collaborative efforts in the classroom through their L1 as well as their L2. While this paper has tried to deal with the L1 issue on its own, the discussion forms part of a wider approach to language teaching that is emerging, based on the uniqueness of the L2 user (Cook, 1998; 1999).

Vivian Cook concentrated on linguistics and language learning, first at North East London Polytechnic (now University of East London), then at Essex University, after teaching and writing in the EFL field. His books include Young Children and Language, Chomsky's Universal Grammar, and Inside Language. His current interests are the linking of SLA research to language teaching, on which he has written Second Language Learning and Language Teaching, the concept of multi-competence (forthcoming edited book Portraits of the L2 User), and the English writing system. He was founding President of the European Second Language Association (EUROSLA).

Notes
1  I am grateful to Ignazia Posadinu, John Roberts, Phil Brew, and my MA students for reactions to earlier drafts, and to the anonymous reviewers of CMLR for helpful suggestions.
2  See tandem.uni-trier.de/Tandem/infbochum.html.
3  A little-mentioned problem with grammatical explanation is whether the grammar should come from the L1 or the L2 cultures. The logic of avoiding the L1 would mean that only the grammar of L2 grammarians is appropriate, creating additional problems when the grammatical traditions are different, say between English and Japanese.

References
Using the First Language in the Classroom


