The Use of L1 in the English Classroom: The Case of Addis Ababa Secondary Schools*

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Abstract: The issue of whether or not to use the mother-tongue (L1) in the EFL (L2) classroom has for a long time remained controversial. In spite of efforts to understand the process of L2 acquisition and ultimately provide a solid theoretical foundation for L2 teaching, it appears that the jury is still out. As a result, opinions tend to be sharply divided on the relative value of L1 in the process of L2 instruction. Teachers may hold a certain view about the role of L1 in L2 learning depending on such factors as their training, their views of the nature of language, their personal philosophy, and the model of teaching to which they subscribe. This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of the role of L1 in teaching English in the high schools of Ethiopia. In particular, the study seeks to establish the extent to which English teachers use the target language in executing a range of pedagogic classroom functions. The study draws on the self- report data obtained from 66 teachers of English in Addis Ababa. The teachers were presented with a list of common classroom activities performed by teachers and were asked to indicate whether they typically used English (L2), Amharic (L1), or a mixture of both in carrying out the pedagogic tasks. The results showed that teachers tend to believe that 100 % use of the target language is neither feasible nor desirable. The overwhelming finding is that they do not share the view that advocates total avoidance of the students' first language in favour of rigid adherence to the target language. Instead, they seem to believe that students will benefit from a judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classroom as some classroom tasks are best handled using the students' language. Moreover, the results emphasise the view that a more prudent use of language in the classroom does not lie in adopting an extreme position where the L1 is rejected as counter productive. Nor does it lie in the lavish and unprincipled use of the students' L1 simply because it offers an easy option.

* Please note that the study was conducted before the introduction of the Plasma mode of instruction.

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Introduction

A quick survey of the history of language teaching reveals that it has been dominated by a search for the best method of teaching. For quite a long time, language educators have focused attention mainly on how best to teach languages. As a result, the field of language teaching has witnessed a great number of proposals for teaching a language. An analysis of the methods of language teaching developed reveals that developments in the field over the century were prompted by several fundamental questions. In their analysis of methods, Richards and Rodgers (1986) observed that one of the basic issues that prompted innovations and new directions in language teaching concerned the use of the native language in teaching another language. Thus, one key difference between the language teaching methods proposed over the century has to do with the way the methods address the role of mother tongue in foreign or second language instruction.

Most historical surveys of the methods done by several reviewers (e.g. Richards and Rogers 1986; Stern 1983; Larsen –Freeman 1987) consider the Grammar Translation Method as the oldest approach to language teaching that has dominated the field for most of its existence. As its name suggests, this approach is characterized by a view that emphasises the grammatical system of the language as the object of language teaching and learning. This method is also known for its extensive use of translation as a principal practice technique. Thus, it was dominated by practice activities that required learners to translate from one written language to another. Furthermore, this method assigns a key role to the native language, which is also considered as a major tool in the teaching and learning of another language. The student's native language served as the medium of instruction. Teachers used native language to explain new items and to draw comparisons between the target language and the mother tongue of students. Hence, one characteristic feature of this approach is that it made extensive (and apparently almost exclusive) use of the student's native language. Students who were taught using this approach were able to

acquire a detailed knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language but were unable to use the language for communication.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, however, language educators began to criticise the grammar-translation approach for failing to prepare the learner for real life communication. This led to the emergence of alternative methods of foreign language instruction. One such alternative which came into existence as a reaction to the inadequacy of the translation method is what is known as the Direct Method. A key feature of this method is that it placed a greater emphasis on spoken language development as opposed to the written language which was given prominence in the earlier method. In contrast to the Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method is characterised by the exclusive use of the target language as a medium of instruction and communication in the language classroom. It thus encouraged teachers to avoid the use of the first language and of translation as a technique. It is interesting to note that such basic principles of the Direct Method continue to be upheld by practitioners. In line with this, Stern (1983) wrote:

> ….as a result of the influence of the direct method many teachers down to the present have regarded as an ideal in language pedagogy, although unattainable in practice, the total avoidance of translation as a practice technique and the total avoidance of the use of the first language as a means of explanation and communication in the foreign language classroom. The direct method debate has thus introduced into the conceptualization of language teaching a rift between what teachers actually do in the language class and what they believe what they ought to do (p. 458).

However, it should be noted that there are several variants of this method. Some of these variants permit some degree of mother tongue explanation

and grammatical statement to help learners use the language with a reasonable degree of accuracy (Crystal, 1987).

The principles of the Direct Method were also reinforced by approaches that subsequently came into existence. For instance, in the twentieth century, methods such as Audio-lingualism stressed the primacy of the spoken language and the need for avoiding the use of the first language in the classroom although it paid a particular attention to structural contrast between L1 and L2. Furthermore, there is a tendency for even more recent approaches to language teaching to downplay the role of L1 in the teaching and learning of another language. For instance, a very limited use is made of the first language in Communicative Language Teaching, which emerged as a reaction to the inadequacy of foreign language teaching methods that emphasised the teaching of formal features of a language and formal accuracy. The primary focus of this approach is on helping the learner to be able to use the target language for effective communication through extensive practice in it. According to Nunan and Lamb (1996), certain variants of Communicative Language Teaching tend to assign little role to the first language.

It is also worth noting that humanistic approaches to foreign language teaching also tend to differ in terms of the role of learners' mother tongue. For example, the Silent Way, which stresses the need to help learners become self-reliant by keeping the amount of teaching to a minimum and by encouraging them to develop their own way of learning the language elements presented to them, seeks to avoid the use of the first language. In contrast, in approaches such as Suggestopedia and Community Language Learning, some use may be made of the learners' mother tongue in the instructional process. For example, in Suggestopedia, learners are presented with a large amount of the foreign language in the written medium and are made to practice it against a background of a classical music. Here, they are given the option of translating the material before it is read out. Similarly, in Community Language Learning, where the emphasis is on building personal relationships between the teacher and the students as well

as among the students themselves, learners may use their first language for communication and may ask for foreign equivalents of what they want to say.

The controversy surrounding the role and status of the mother tongue in the context of foreign language teaching continues to attract the attention of language educators. Some have thus attempted to defend the use of the first language. In fact, there have been some suggestions to reinstate the mother tongue in the language classroom. Some language specialists (e.g. Nunan and Lamb, 1996; Prodromou, 2001) argue that a judicious use of the first language can greatly facilitate the management of the learning process. Atkinson (1993), for instance, suggests that the use of L1 may serve different purposes in the instruction of L2. One basic function of L1 may be in dealing with managerial matters. He argues that using L1 in handling procedural matters, for instance, setting up pair and group work, sorting out an activity which is clearly not working, and checking comprehension may be desirable. The main reason for such procedural use of L1 is that it keeps the lesson from slowing down. It is also argued that careful and limited use of L1 can help students to get the maximum benefit from their lessons by overcoming the problems that arise when teachers insist on using the target language and try to totally avoid using the first language in class. Strict adherence to the exclusive use of the target language may lead to clumsy explanations which are likely to consume valuable class time and which will probably be not understood by students. It is suggested that in such situations a resource to L1 in terms of providing a quick translation would short circuit such a torturous process. Thus, apart from its managerial function, L1 can be used as a valid teaching technique through translation. Nunan and Lamb (1996) wrote:

> …. as with other aspects of the management of learning, knowing how, when and how frequently to use the student's first language can not be reduced to an algorithm. We believe that in foreign language contexts, for teachers who speak the students' first language, attempting to adhere rigidly to the target language at lower proficiency levels is probably unrealistic and counter productive. In most foreign language contexts, using the learner's first language to give brief explanations of grammar and lexis as well as explaining procedures and routines can greatly facilitate the management of leaning (p. 100).

On the other hand, those who argue against the use of student's first language raise the following reasons for using only the L2 as a matter of principle. Firstly, the use of L1 robs students of one important force capable of enhancing their acquisition of the target language-the desire to communicate. It is argued that the use of the mother tongue in the classroom removes a great deal of what motivates us to learn and undermines the very reason we learn a language.

Secondly, the sole use of L2 in the classroom is also thought to have a beneficial effect as students learn quicker because they get more exposure to the language. The literature also contains some theoretical arguments in favour of the exclusive use of L2 in the classroom. For instance, acquisition theories (Krashen, 1981) suggest that acquisition is more important than learning and for acquisition to take place there is one important condition that needs to be met- i.e. the availability of comprehensible input (i+1). It follows that the introduction of L1 in the classroom appears to have little contribution to the process since acquisition is thought to take place in a target language environment. In fact, the use of the mother tongue (L1) is seen as having the negative effect of depriving learners of a valuable input.

Finally, arguments in favour of a methodology involving 100% use of L2 emphasise the need for students to be situated in a target language milieu in order to avoid the risk of students adopting counter-productive habits and expectations. For example, it is argued that too much dependence on translation or L1 in classroom communication may lead to the undesirable result of reluctance or failure to think in the target language. It is, thus, suggested that teachers will have to do their best to get students to understand the language within the language. As an alternative to L2, teachers are encouraged to look for other means such as the use of visuals, body movement, and miming to help students understand complicated language elements.

At this point, a brief discussion of local research in the area would be in order. The first thing to say is that it appears that there is little research on the use of the vernacular in the context of foreign language teaching. However, the literature contains some work on the classroom language of teachers of English in Ethiopia. One such study was made by Yoseph (1990). This study looked at the frequency with which different language functions occurred in the classroom discourse involving English teachers and students. The study found that asking questions represented the most common language function accounting for nearly 60% of the lesson time. The function, informing, which included explaining, exemplifying and summarizing was the second most frequent category. The study also noted that teachers tended to experience more difficulty in using English to perform the functions of explaining, summarizing, evaluating and giving instructions compared with functions such as asking questions and checking attendance.

Another study by Tafese (1988) looked at the use of a vernacular language in teaching English. The study covered six schools located in what was known as Zone 4 of Addis Ababa. The overwhelming finding of this study is that about one-third of the class time involved the use of Amharic by both teachers and students. Thus, it showed that a significant proportion of the

classroom discourse involved abandoning the target language in favour of the students' first language.

Although they were conducted many years ago, the two observational studies referred to above provide some indications about the nature of the language used by teachers in Ethiopia. While we know at least something about the actual classroom behaviour of teachers, there appears to be no research in the area of teacher cognition that is aimed at finding out what teachers think about the way they use language in the classroom. The primary concern of this study is, therefore, to assess teachers' views about how they use English and the extent to which they see themselves using students' vernacular in the classroom. The study is based on the assumption that understanding the cognitive dimension of teaching is as important as the behavioral aspect of it. The study thus deals with the belief of teachers as opposed to observed behaviour, and investigating the relationship between teachers' views and actual classroom behaviour falls outside the scope of the study.

The Present Study

As indicated earlier, the issue of whether or not to use the mother-tongue (L1) in the English language (L2) classroom has for a long time remained controversial. In spite of the attempts made to understand the process of L2 acquisition and provide a solid theoretical foundation for L2 teaching, it appears that the jury is still out. As a result, opinions tend to be sharply divided on the relative value of L1 in the process of L2 instruction. Partly because of the inconclusive nature of the findings and perhaps because of the complex nature of the relationship between L1 and L2, the issue of L1 represents one area in which teachers' views are likely to differ. Teachers may subscribe to a certain view about the role of L1 in L2 learning depending on such factors as their training, their view of the nature of language, their personal philosophy and the model of teaching to which they subscribe. This study, therefore, aims to explore the use of L1 in teaching English in the high schools of Ethiopia. In particular, the study seeks to

establish the extent to which English teachers think they use the target language in executing a range of pedagogic classroom functions. The study draws on the self- report data obtained from teachers themselves to answer the following research questions:

1. What do teachers say about the way they use English in carrying out different pedagogic tasks in the classroom?
2. To what extent do they see themselves as relying on students' mother tongue in performing different pedagogic functions in the classroom?
3. What pattern does teachers' perceived use of language reveal?

Methodology

The subjects for this study were 66 teachers teaching English in the secondary schools of Addis Ababa. The sample was drawn from a group who attended a workshop organized for English teachers. Thus, the sampling procedure employed in this study involved availability sampling technique. The overwhelming majority of the teachers had a BA degree while a very small fraction of them had either an MA or a diploma. As regards their training, most of them studied English as a major area of specialization whereas a small proportion of them studied other subjects such as Educational Management and Pedagogical Science as their main field of study. However, those who studied other subjects for their degree had received some training in English as a minor subject. In terms of gender mix, 55 were male while 11 were female teachers. It should also be noted that the sample used for this study was not homogenous in terms of experience in teaching. Having graduated way back in the 1960s, some had had as long as 35 years of experience while others joined the profession quite recently and had only one or two years experience by the time data for the study were collected.

The teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire aimed at eliciting information concerning their typical classroom behaviour regarding the use of language in their classrooms. While the questionnaire was distributed to 90 teachers, only 66 returned the completed questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from Doff (1987). It required teachers to indicate which language they typically (normally) used in performing specific teaching functions. In particular, they were asked to indicate whether they used only English (L2), only Amharic (supposedly L1 to most of their students) or both English and Amharic in carrying out 13 classroom activities. The questionnaire consisted of 14 items, of which only one was open- ended. The open- ended one required them to provide any additional information about the way they used language in the classroom.

Results

The quantitative data gathered through the questionnaire yielded some interesting findings. One general picture that emerged from the data is that there appears to be a fairly higher degree of agreement among teachers as to which language is more appropriate in carrying out certain pedagogic tasks. For instance, most (93.9%) perceived themselves as using exclusively L2 (English) in *asking questions on a text*. A comparable level of agreement was also observed with regard to *setting homework;* 92.4% of the teachers considered English (L2) as the most appropriate language for this purpose. Table 1 below presents data on the 13 classroom activities.

Table 1: Teachers' use of English, Amharic, or Both in Performing 13 Activities

Activities	Language typically used					
	English		Amharic		Both	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Asking questions on a text	62	93.9	2	3.0	2	3.0
Setting homework	61	92.4	0	0	4	6.1
Praising correct answers	56	84.8	1	1.5	7	10.6
Checking attendance	54	81.8	2	3.0	9	13.6
Introducing a text	53	80.3	0	0	13	19.7
Correcting errors	48	72.7	1	1.5	15	23.4
Introducing the lesson	46	69.6	0	0	19	28.8
Criticizing for wrong answer	44	66.6	1	1.5	16	24.2
Presenting new language	42	63.6	1	1.5	22	33.3
Organizing where students sit	38	57.5	1	1.5	23	34.9
Giving instructions	36	54.5	1	1.5	28	42.4
Explaining a new concept	24	36.3	2	6.1	40	60.6
Disciplining students	23	34.8	3	4.5	40	60.6

A rank ordering of the activities in terms of whether or not they are normally carried out in English produced a result where *praising correct answers* (84.8%)*, checking attendance* (81.8%) and *introducing a text* (80.3%) came in third, fourth and fifth place respectively. Activities such as *correcting errors*, *introducing the lesson*, *criticizing for wrong answer*, and *presenting new language structure and vocabulary* appeared to involve relatively less use of English in executing them. In fact, the data on these activities suggest that teachers are more likely to resort to using L1 to perform these functions compared to functions such as *asking questions on a text, setting homework etc.,* which appeared to involve a greater use of English*.*

This is not, however, to suggest that there is exclusive use of L1 to execute these pedagogic functions. As can be seen in Table 1 above, while a

considerable number of teachers saw themselves as not using exclusively English, they at the same time saw themselves as using a bit of L1 and L2 to handle such activities.

Another interesting finding is that the proportion of those who saw themselves as using exclusively L1 to deal with a specific activity was surprisingly low. Given the general public concern that high school classes are dominated on the extensive use of L1 by both teachers and students, this claim failed to be born out in this study. Only very few teachers admitted using Amharic to carry out specific activities in the classroom. A considerable number of those who admitted using less of L2 only to deal with certain activities perceived themselves as switching from English to L1 and swiftly returning to L2. Such a mixture of L1 and L2, accounted for as high as 60% for some activities.

The data on L1 only and/or a mixture of L1 and L2 would seem to suggest that disciplining students accounts for the greatest proportion of non-use of English in favour of using a mixture of both or resorting to mother-tongue; 65.1% said they used either L1 or both L1 and L2 to deal with problem students. The second activity which is most likely to involve resorting to L1 is *explaining a new concept*; 63.6% of the teachers believed they used mainly a mixture of L1 and L2 to make a concept more accessible to their students. *Giving instructions* (43.9%), *organising where students sit* (36.9%), and *presenting a new language structure or vocabulary item* (34.8%) came in third, fourth and fifth place respectively in terms of attracting the use of L1 or a bit of L1 and L2.

In view of the argument that the use of L1 in certain contexts in the instructional process can benefit learners, it was necessary to re-examine the data with a view to establishing a further pattern of language use. Such re-analysis of the data called for categorising the 13 activities in terms of whether they basically served the managerial purpose of teaching, or they were teaching techniques as such. Such revisiting of the activities to determine their function in the entire instructional process led to the following grouping.

A) Managerial Function

The following activities were believed to involve the management of teaching as opposed to the actual delivery of content or skill to be learned.

Table 2: Data on Classroom Management and Use of English

Classroom Management	Percent
Disciplining students	34.8
Organizing where students sit	57.5
Giving instructions /directions	54.5
Checking attendance	81.8
Correcting errors	72.7
Praising correct answers	84.8
Criticizing for wrong answers	66.6
Setting homework	92.4

Of the nine activities considered to have managerial functions, only four were closely associated with the use of English. That is to say, teachers said they were more likely to use English in performing managerial tasks such as *setting homework, praising, checking attendance, and correcting errors.* On the other hand, they saw themselves as being more likely to resort to Amharic to deal with disruptive behaviour, and since instructions about what students should do and how they should behave at different stages in the process of a lesson.

B) Teaching Function (as a teaching technique)

Regarding the activities that were thought to basically involve teaching in the sense of delivering content of instruction, teachers perceived themselves as using a great deal of English in handling a text intended to teach comprehension. For instance, the data suggested a stronger link between two activities, namely *asking questions on a text* and *introducing a text*. In

contrast, the likelihood of English being used in certain contexts appeared to be considerably low. This was particularly true of the activity labeled *explaining a new concept*, which seemed to involve a higher degree of non-use of English in favour of Amharic.

Table 3: Data on Teaching Functions and Language Use

Teaching Functions	Percent
Asking questions on a text	93.9
Introducing a text	80.3
Explaining a new concept	36.3
Presenting a new language structure and vocabulary	63.6
Introducing a lesson	69.6

It appears that teachers make use of Amharic in performing activities aimed at both delivering content and managing the classroom. The data suggest that teachers are more likely to turn to L1 as a viable option in helping students understand a new concept and in introducing language elements and lexis which they think their students have not seen or met in any form before. Of the activities falling in the category of managerial function, two activities stand out as being clearly associated with greater non-use of English in the classroom: *disciplining students* and *giving instructions* for doing something. On the other hand, teachers are likely to use English in carrying out managerial activities such as *setting homework*, *checking attendance* and *praising good performance* by students.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the following observations and conclusions can be made. The first thing to say is that most teachers do not seem to share the extreme view that regards the use of L1 as a sin or evil that must be avoided at all costs. They tend to believe that it does make pedagogic sense to resort to the use of the students' first language, albeit

sparingly, to accomplish certain pedagogic tasks for expediency. The close link between language use and specific pedagogical goals evidenced in the result of the study would seem to indicate that teachers do not uphold the view that suggests the superiority of a methodology which advocates the exclusive use of the target language in performing *all* classroom functions. Instead, the pattern that emerged from the data would seem to indicate that most teachers maintain the view that there are a number of situations in which the use of the mother tongue (L1) offers a valuable aid to the teaching and learning of the target language.

Another observation that can be made concerns the consistency of the views of the teachers with the patterns of language use that are advocated by educators. For example, the tendency for the teachers to resort to the L1 in performing a range of procedural matters is in agreement with what has been recommended in the literature. For instance, the finding that they are more likely to use L1 in dealing with the procedural aspects of a lesson is consistent with the recommendation by educators for using the mother tongue to explain how to do a new activity as it cuts down the time spent on giving directions repeatedly. The use of L1 in this situation is believed to have the advantage of allowing students to actually spend more time doing the activities in English.

It is also interesting to note that the close link between certain pedagogic functions and language use appears to reflect the possible areas of application extensively discussed in the literature (Harbord, 1992). For example, the tendency for the teachers to switch to L1 in disciplining students is in agreement with the view that using the target language in dealing with cases of student disruption is likely to have little or no effect, even when understood (Chambers 1992).

The teachers in this study seem to adopt a more tolerant view of the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. They also seem to believe that an either-or-attitude to L1 use in ELT is not helpful (Tang, 2002; Hawks, 2001;

Gabrielatos, 2001). However, teachers also need caution against misusing L1 in the classroom. For example, they have to guard against the possible danger involving overuse in any situation and over-dependence on the mother tongue as an easy option. Thus, the use of L1 must be treated with great care, and decisions to switch to the mother tongue should be based on prior assessment of its necessity in a given situation. To conclude, echoing Stern's (1983) recommendation, a more constructive role for the use of L1 in the EFL classroom requires a principle of language use governing 'why' 'when' and 'to what extent ' it can be used in the classroom.

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