

## The Learner's Mother Tongue in the L2 Learning-Teaching Symbiosis

### La lengua materna del estudiante en la simbiosis entre enseñanza y aprendizaje de una segunda lengua

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This paper has a two-fold purpose. One is to review the stances of language-oriented theorists, who are practicing foreign/second-language teachers and learners from various parts of the world, regarding the long-standing controversy over whether or not the learner's mother tongue plays a positive role in the foreign/second-language learning-teaching context. A second purpose is to offer, from a non-native-speaker L2-teacher standpoint, some suggestions on when and how learners' native language can be capitalised on in the process of learning another language. This implies that the learner's mother tongue can be a valuable tool at the disposal of foreign/second-language teachers in their classrooms worldwide.

**Key words:** language-oriented professionals, role of mother tongue, foreign/second-language learning context

El presente artículo tiene dos propósitos. Uno es examinar las posturas de expertos en el área del lenguaje, docentes de lengua extranjera o segunda lengua y aprendices de varias partes del mundo en relación con la controversia que ha existido desde hace mucho tiempo respecto a si la lengua materna del estudiante desempeña o no un papel positivo en el contexto de la enseñanza y aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera o de una segunda lengua. Un segundo objetivo es ofrecer desde un punto de vista de un profesor no nativo de segunda lengua, algunas sugerencias sobre cuándo y cómo la lengua materna de los aprendices puede ser una ventaja en el proceso de aprendizaje de otra lengua. Esto implica que la lengua materna del aprendiz puede ser un instrumento valioso a disposición de profesores de lengua extranjera o segunda lengua de todo el mundo, en sus aulas de clase.

**Palabras claves:** profesionales del lenguaje, papel de la lengua materna, contexto de enseñanza/aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera o segunda lengua

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The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.

Neils Henrik David Bohr

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, there will be some considerations on the role of the learner's mother tongue (L1) in the foreign/second language (L2) classroom in light of both foreign/second language learning/acquisition theories and research findings. Although worldwide language-teaching professionals and L2 learners have held widely divergent views on this issue to date, scrutinising it may help both L2 teachers and learners decide whether or not L1 plays a positive role in the L2 classroom. Thus, amongst the issues addressed herein, there will be some elaboration on (1) the origin of the controversy over the learner's mother tongue in the context of foreign/second-language learning/teaching; (2) some popular beliefs thence generated, as against language-oriented theorists' dissenting points of view about learner L1 in the L2 classroom; (3) the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), and (4) the significance of Language Universals to its credibility. Then, worldwide in-service L2 teachers' and learners' views over the role of learner L1 in the context of L2 classrooms will be examined. Lastly, from a non-native-speaker L2-teacher standpoint, there will be some suggestions as to what extent, how, and why learner L1 should be used in the L2 classroom, assuming learner L1 does play a role in the L2 learning-teaching symbiosis.

## TRACING THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE ROLE OF LEARNER L1 IN THE CONTEXT OF L2 CLASSROOMS

First and foremost, one should want to go back in time to the origins of the dissention as regards the role of the learner's first language in the process of foreign/second language learning/acquisition (L2

learning)<sup>1</sup>. Apparently, it can be traced back to the late nineteenth-century Reform Movement (Howatt, 1984), which arose from the excesses of the Grammar-Translation Method, which enjoyed widespread acceptance until the World War II (Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty, 1985). But the extremisms over the use of the mother tongue came from the Direct Method (Howatt, 1984), a movement on the rise at the twentieth century shortly preceded by Lambert Sauveur's Natural Method (Howatt, 1984) and followed by the Army's Method, or the Audiolingual Method (ALM), as it is widely known.

Deeply rooted in structural linguistics, the ALM is also cemented on the behaviourist school whose main contributor was the Russian psychologist, Ivan Pavlov (Newton, in Celce-Murcia & L. McIntosh, 1979). This trend in psychology, which was meant to account for the process of general learning, spread its roots to L2 learning; so much so that, in 1957, after Watson (1913) had termed Pavlov's findings *behaviourism*, B. F. Skinner (1957) established a new milestone in the world of L2 learning with his *Verbal Behaviour*. Thus, as the pendulum of methods and approaches swung forwards, bearing on the Skinnerian view of both language and language learning, the ALM was born; and for over two decades (from the 1950's to the first quarter of the 1970's), underrating the importance of learner L1 in the process of L2 learning, its sovereignty was indisputable. Yet, back in the 1960's, the cognitive psychologist David Ausubel (Ausubel, 1964) made some sound criticism about the ALM. He pointed out, amongst other things, that the rote learning practice of ALM drills could benefit neither L1 nor L2 learners; that L2 learners could potentially benefit from learning grammar deductively, and that learner L1 could function as a facilitator in the process of L2 learning. A number of other theorists also adduced

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth *L2 learning* will be used as an umbrella term for *learning/acquisition* to avoid the theoretical technicalities that set them apart. For the same reason, elsewhere *learn* will be used to cover the *learn/acquire* opposition.

evidence that cognitive paradigms (on which L2 teaching was now based) favoured the use of learner L1 in the developmental process of L2 learning. One such is Rivers (1972; 1981), another eloquent critic of the ALM. She underscores that learner L1 is ubiquitous in the process of L2 learning; therefore, teachers can capitalise on their pupils' L1 mainly for giving instructions or clarifying difficult language. It is implied in her work (1981) that use of learner L1 may help accelerate the process of learning a target language. During these centuries of controversy over the role of L1 in the L2 learning context, many 'untested' teaching practices involving (or excluding!) learner L1 have been adopted; they rely essentially on popular beliefs.

### **POPULAR BELIEFS REGARDING THE ROLE OF LEARNER L1 IN THE PROCESS OF L2 LEARNING**

That learner L1 has a bearing on L2 learning, and that this influence is always negative are two salient beliefs about its role in the L2 classroom (Ellis, 1985, p. 19). L2 learners' accented utterances seem to evince the former assumption. In fact, that L2 learners' phonology 'betrays' their non-nativeness is hardly questionable. Some, like Medgyes (1992, p. 342), even hold extreme views about it: '(...) for all their efforts, non-native speakers can never achieve a native speaker's competence. The two groups remain clearly distinguishable.' The latter is clearly expressed in the prescription of the ALM as a remedial measure to gradually eradicate 'sequelae' of learner L1 interference.

Some people assume that learner L1 in L2 classrooms is like, as Prodromou (1992) puts it, a "skeleton in the cupboard, (...) a taboo subject, a source of embarrassment, and on the part of teachers, a recognition of their failure to teach properly, i.e. using 'only English'". Seemingly, this prejudiced view of the use of learner L1 is deeply rooted in the native-speaker L2 instructor's (NSI) ideology disseminated worldwide as a safeguard device (consciously or otherwise) against the inconvenience, or unfeasibility of having to learn

several languages in his/her 'linguistic crusades' throughout the world (Harbord, 1992).

### **THE ROLE OF L2-LEARNER L1 IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF LANGUAGE-ORIENTED RESEARCHERS**

Ironically, some of the notions about learner L1 conceived of as popular beliefs spring from the discussion forum of language-oriented theorists. However, holding those notions does not mean to say that the controversy fostered by them over the role of the L2-learner L1 is uninformed by research. In this section, some of their divergent views will be discussed.

Ellis (1985) suggests that learner L1 is one vital determinant in the process of L2 learning, and that its contribution lessens gradually as the L2 learner closes the range towards native-like proficiency. Marton (1981, quoted in Ellis, 1985), however, maintains that from a psychological perspective not only at the moment of cognition but also when amassing fresh knowledge for his/her 'linguistic reservoir', the learner is faced with a belligerent conflict between his native language and the L2 system. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 53) seem to share Marton's views as to the negative effects of L1 interference:

Foreign-language learners are all too familiar with the interfering effects of their NL [native language] causing everything from accented speech to inappropriate non-verbal behaviour.

Felix (1980, p. 107, quoted in Ellis, 1985, p. 19), in turn, dismisses 'the notion of [L1] interference as a natural and inevitable phenomenon in L2 acquisition'. In other words, Felix sees learner L1 as a kind of 'thorn in the flesh' that the teacher has to manage to cope with in the course of his/her career.

Like Ellis, a number of other theorists suggest that the learner's mother tongue can be a valuable contribution to the L2 classroom. One such is Krashen and Terrell (1983), who suggests that learners should resort to their L1 to bridge the

gaps in communication due to their interlanguage insufficiency to initiate utterances. O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), which is partly based on their investigations into learning strategies, also evinces that learner L1 can be used as a useful learning aid. Corder (1981) seems to concur insofar as he considers the use of L1 as a 'heuristic technique' resultant from learners' strategies to master the target language (Krashen, 1981; Brown, 1987).

Lado is another defender of the positive role of learner L1, not without presenting some caveats though. He suggests that, when learning a foreign culture (FC), the learner's 'native-culture experience will facilitate learning' (Lado, 1964, pp. 27-30) insofar as 'patterns' of the new culture are comparable with those of his/her culture. Learner cultural experience, however, will interfere with the learning of FC 'patterns' that function differently in the learner's culture. An upper-class gentleman, for instance, in his *morning dress* at the horse race at Ascot would probably be said to be wearing a *saia* in a description of such British cultural trait provided by a Portuguese-speaking learner of English. Thus, since wearing *saia* is a prerogative of women or transvestites in Brazil, such depiction would certainly bear a pejorative connotation in that student's culture. Although focusing on culture, this argument can be extended to language learning. One should be quick to point out that Lado considers the cultural aspect an intrinsic part of other aspects in the process of L2 learning. Therefore, the limited role of L1 in the L2 classroom as seen by Lado has much to do with the fact that '*elementary meaning units* (...) differ from culture to culture and therefore from language to language' (Lado, 1964, p. 27).

Yet another L1 supporter is Rutherford (1987, pp. 7-14), who favours the thesis that no human being embarks on learning an L2 as a *tabula rasa*. Furthermore, he argues that, when attempting to learn an L2, the learner is equipped with two kinds of prior knowledge, which he labels *knowledge that*

and *knowledge how*. The first is, as he puts it, 'an unconscious "foreknowledge" or innate "inkling" of what shapes the organisation of the target language can assume'. This capacity is at the learner's disposal and is activated whenever he/she needs to infer the unknown in the target language on the basis of his/her rudimentary interlanguage. Then, the second, *knowledge how*, mirrors the learner's L1 learning experience: 'the ability temporarily to bend the new language into forms that will, with maximal efficiency, serve the initial desire for rudimentary communication'. Rutherford sounds quite adamant about learner L1's positive contribution to L2 learning: 'Both of these cognitive capacities are crucial, for without them, no language learning would be possible at all' (Rutherford, 1987, p.8). In light of the views presented above, it is clearly seen that the inevitable presence of learner L1 in the L2 learning environment, instead of being a 'natural nagging pain' one is doomed to bear throughout one's career, is likely to be considered a valuable learning/teaching aid to both teachers and learners.

### LEARNER L1 AND THE CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS HYPOTHESIS

According to Ellis (1985), from the point of view of behavioural learning theory, error had to be avoided at all cost lest it became a habit in the learner's interlanguage. As L1 was regarded as a plausible source of error, behavioural researchers set out to establish a typology of L1 transfer so that negative transfer (transfer that led to error) could be tackled successfully. The procedure used to predict potential errors is known as *Contrastive Analysis*.

Lado (1957) suggests that awareness of the differences and similarities between learners' L1 and the target language reveals their real problems, and therefore materialises as an essential teaching tool. Defenders of the ALM tried to use this tool so that they could identify and help learners eliminate errors as they struggled to learn the L2. Nevertheless, by applying Contrastive Analysis (CA)

to this end, they could not be less successful. For one thing, as Ellis (1985, p. 23) points out, 'the psychological aspect of CA that should deal with the conditions under which interference takes place' failed to do so for sheer lack of a well-developed psychological theory. For another, while the ideal CA necessitates drawing on variable-from-language-to-language universal categories, actual CA was carried out on the basis of the structuralists' surface structures, which again could not account for students' learning difficulties on the basis of linguistics differences.

But it was only when it came under the empirical scrutiny of researchers that the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis became drastically discredited, as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 55) point out as follows:

Moreover, when predictions arising from CAs were finally subjected to empirical tests (see, for example, Alatis 1968), serious flaws were revealed. While CA predicted some errors (see, for example, Duskova 1969; Chamot 1978; Arabski 1979), it clearly did not anticipate all, i.e. it underpredicted (e.g. Hyltenstam 1977). Furthermore, some errors it did predict failed to materialize, i.e. it overpredicted (e.g. Dulay and Burt, 1974).

Therefore, contrary to what CAH purported, in many cases, the more similar the items collated in two languages the greater the possibility of the existence of learning difficulty. This view is endorsed by Skaggs and Robinson (1927, as cited in Ellis, 1985, p. 35), who suggest that while enhanced by similarity, interference is mitigated by 'neutral resemblance'.

If CAH could not account for what caused learner errors (and the source should be found, inasmuch as has been mentioned, error was not tolerated by ALM advocates), who was the 'culprit' then?

Ellis (1985, p. 35) argues that 'any particular error may be the result of one factor on one

occasion and another factor on another. There is no logical or psycholinguistic reason why a given error should have a single, invariable cause'. In other words, L2-learner errors can occur any time for any particular reason. Needless to say then, learner L1 interference in the learning of an L2 is just one minuscule source of error. If that is the case, why should *interference* be treated as a fiendish foe? Could interference errors not help learners in the process of L2 learning?

### LEARNER L1 AND LANGUAGE UNIVERSALS

Chomsky's (1964) theory on the acquisition of the native language, which focuses on the child's continual brainwork regarding hypotheses (e.g. forming, testing, revising, reshaping, or even departing from them) (Brown, 1987), sheds light on the understanding of how useful interference errors can be for the development and strengthening of the L2 learner's interlanguage. Seemingly, this may be successfully achieved by resorting to language universals (Rutherford, 1987), which appear to have come to the rescue of Contrastive Analysis.

Shortall (1996) underscores that CA can indeed regain credibility if the process of collating learner L1 and a given L2 is undertaken on the basis of universal principles as well as in terms of parameters (e.g. head parameter, pro-drop and non-pro-drop parameter). Furthermore, he argues that apparently languages are strikingly symmetrical in that they display a universal, regular pattern of behaviour. Shortall sounds quite enthusiastic about prospective findings in the area of language universals and their applicability in the process of CA; and he goes on to say that perhaps, in the future, there will be agreement on Chomsky's (1964) claim that, when stripped of the lexicon, human languages merge into a single one. It is likely that many L2 teachers worldwide would share Shortall's enthusiasm insofar as the results of such a study may be seen as a prospective powerful tool for both L2 teachers and learners. Thus, from the perspective of raising L2 learners' awareness

on *language universals* (For a discussion of language universals, see Rutherford, 1987.), one might sense that the jigsaw of the systems of known languages can finally be assembled.

Apparently, Lado had the correct insight as to the necessity of L2 teachers' substantial understanding of the system of their pupils' mother tongue so that they could function better in the classroom – only the focus should be on universal factors rather than forms *per se*. Weschler (1997), for instance, in his introduction of the *Functional-Translation Method*, advocates that instead of a word-for-word translation (when helping students understand difficult language) an idea-for-idea approach should be employed. A further point he makes is that there are phrases or expressions that cannot possibly be translated verbatim from a given language into another anyway. This seems to be in accordance with Jakobson's (1966) assertion that although most lexical units are impossible to translate, every utterance can be translated.

### **PRACTISING TEACHERS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

On the face of it, the fast-changing L2 learning/teaching world (primarily in terms of methodology) is demanding from language-oriented researchers and teachers a relentless focus on what is currently happening in the classroom. Thus, many of these professionals would concur that such 'fresh' data have significant implications for the process of constructing one's teaching principles against L2 learning/teaching theories. If the discussion *vis-à-vis* the role of learner L1 in the L2 classroom can contribute to this end, then the views of practising teachers should be worth reviewing.

One is likely to agree that, throughout the world, there are many highly qualified (native and non-native) L2 teachers with each and every one of them holding his/her particular views on the role of their pupils' L1 in their classrooms. While to some this role may be played down, to others the learner's mother tongue is a valuable tool in the developmental process of L2 learning. Amongst

the most eloquent advocates of the 'return' of learner L1 to the L2 classroom environment is Prodromou (1992), for instance, who holds the view that the learner's mother tongue lends itself as an excellent instrument for the activation of his/her cultural schemata in the process of learning an L2 (Auerbach, 1993; Lado, 1964).

The article on the Internet titled *How I changed my mind and started using the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom* amply exemplifies Butzkamm's (nd) adherence to a positive role of learner L1. In his opinion, the use of the mother tongue in the L2 classroom is justifiable to the extent that it accounts for quick explanations of difficult words, and student preparation for L2-only activities.

Another educator voicing his support of L2-learner L1 is Buckmaster (2000), from the English Teaching Centre at the British Council in Warsaw. His main argument is that the use of L1 empowers the L2 learner. Moreover he underscores that, by using the pupils' native language (in a monolingual environment) the teacher not only expresses appreciation but also shifts to their standpoint as his/her L2 'imperfections' surface. Perhaps echoing Cook's (1999) thoughts, Buckmaster also suggests as follows that (again, especially in monolingual adult classes) the students can capitalise on the use of their L1 by the teacher:

The use of this language by the teacher allows students to compare and contrast English with the language they know best, to use translation as a means to study form and meaning, to understand jokes, to check comprehension, to understand complicated instructions, to check exercises with their partners and to learn vocabulary with direct equivalents.

(Buckmaster, 2000, p. 2)

Matsuda (1996) is yet another supporter of learner L1 in the context of L2 learning. She nonetheless gears the L1 contribution to the acquisition of writing skills in her capacity as an English composition instructor at Purdue University.

Drawing heavily from her L2 learner/teacher experience, she overtly allows her pupils to avail themselves of their L1 as a technique to unleash creativity and reflection. Furthermore, being herself very much in favour of a target-language-only approach in the early stages of her schooling as a student of English, she does not discourage those amongst her pupils who choose such learning mode. In short, she maintains that the various common aspects between learner L1 and an L2 (if worked at on a consciousness-raising basis) can evolve into precious interchangeable material to amass qualitative composition skills in both languages. Tuck (1998) shares the same stance on this issue. However, he observes that L1 should be used primarily 'for writing practice with lower levels and/or children'.

The teachers presently in action who dismiss learner L1 as harmful to the L2 classroom are mostly 'spectral creatures': they are more often than not alluded to, but rarely materialise. After an unsuccessful search through a number of papers written by contemporary teachers for some defender of the over-decanted target-language-only approach, a questionnaire was randomly emailed to practising teachers around the world. While the 23 emails in reply to the questionnaire cannot be assumed to be representative of the views of in-service L2 teachers throughout the world, the results of the enquiry only reinforce the notion of the phantasmal character of those amongst these professionals who see an insignificant, or no role at all, for learner L1 in the L2 classroom: only *one* Japanese teacher, *one* teacher in Italy, and *one* American teacher admitted overtly favouring the 'Direct Method'. Another teacher, in Taiwan, who may be prototypical of a large section of L2 teachers in action worldwide and whose classroom performances reflect their compliance to administrative guidelines, admitted to following the institution's target-language-only policy. He also added the fact he *does not* speak Chinese, and that a Chinese teacher remains in his

classroom ninety-five per cent of the time. Thus, one might concur that the notion that (...) the role of L1 in language classrooms is extremely limited, if not nonexistent, as vented in Pellowe (1998), is unlikely to be tenable in most L2 learning/teaching environments nowadays. Nevertheless, in the administrative quarters of some language teaching institutions, the kind of phobia about L2-learner mother tongue, as vented in the response of the teacher working in Taiwan, seems to be nourished indeed (Klevberg, 2000; Kent, 1996; Cummins, 2001; Weschler, 1997).

What seems to emerge from the target-language-only policy, as was mentioned heretofore, is an attempt to accommodate the native-speaker teacher in settings where s/he is not prepared to cope with the learner's mother tongue (Weschler, 1997). In other words, the filtering through of the BANA<sup>2</sup> countries' ideology (Holliday, 1994; see also Auerbach, 1993, p. 29 on ideological implications in the L2 classroom).

### THE LEARNER'S STANDPOINT

Because of their pivotal position in the learning/teaching scenario, L2 learners seem to be inevitably affected by this torrent of discrepant views on whether or not their mother tongue (MT) is of any value as to somehow facilitating L2 learning/acquisition. Thus one might argue for the extreme relevance of their opinions on the issue.

Schweers Jr. (1999) has carried out a study on the role of Spanish (L1) in the English classroom (L2) at the University of Puerto Rico, Bayamon Campus, where he presently lectures in English. As part of the research, he enquired of teachers and students regarding the role of Spanish. The results show an overwhelming 88.7 per cent of the students concurring as to the viability of their mother tongue in the English classroom, primarily to explain difficult concepts. In another study, Terence Doyle (1997, as cited in Schweers, 1999) demonstrates that 65 per cent

<sup>2</sup> Britain, Australasia, and North America

of the students in the enquiry would accept the use of their MT either sometimes or often during their English lessons.

For one thing, the kind of L2 classroom described in Kent's (1996) *Investigation into the factors influencing the learning of foreign languages in S5 and S6 in Scottish schools* is prototypical of L2 classrooms in many parts of the world as much as is the quintessential hostile mood of many students when faced with an L2 teacher reluctant to resorting to their native language, to wit:

"I had a teacher who never spoke a word of English (L1) and it nearly drove me nuts. You sat there going 'What?' ... I think it's better to have a balance between the two (foreign language and mother tongue)."

"You might think that you have picked up some meanings but they might be the wrong meanings."

(Scottish students quoted in Kent 1996: Results – part 1)

Yet another study revealing students' viewpoints on the role of L1 for enhancing the process of L2 learning is that carried out by Burden (2000), of the Okayama Shoka University. When 290 university students, ranging from pre-intermediate to advanced, were asked whether or not they and their teachers should use MT in the L2 classroom, 211 (73%) of them said 'yes'. Nonetheless, there are L2 learners who prefer otherwise. Matsuda, mentioned previously, testifies to that herself, to wit:

I felt my Japanese was nothing but an obstacle in learning English, because I thought English and Japanese were two completely different languages that had nothing to do with each other. This attitude toward English learning and Japanese language encouraged me to come to the US where I could be immersed in an English-speaking environment.

(Matsuda, 1996, pp. 1-2)

However, it is apparent that the level of proficiency in the target language is brought to bear on the learner's 'eagerness' to participate in foreign language-only programmes, as Burden (2000, p. 4) observes '(...) the ability level differences create marked changes of opinion and seem to support the truism that the better the student, the less support needed from the mother tongue' (see also Ellis, 1985).

### **SOME SUGGESTIONS ON THE ROLE OF LEARNER L1 IN THE L2 CLASSROOM FROM THE STANDPOINT OF A NON-NATIVE-SPEAKER L2-INSTRUCTOR (NNSI)**

On the surface, one is tempted to say that the status of NNSIs in the learning-teaching symbiosis (Widdowson, 1992) makes them apt to adopting somewhat authoritative stances on a number of classroom-related issues, amongst which is the one grappled with throughout this paper. In passing, perhaps one wants to recall Brown's (1987) elaboration on the principle of *intuition*. He presents it as an effective tool for both NSIs and NNSIs in their pursuit of the 'ideal' approach towards learning/teaching a foreign/second language. Furthermore, Brown appreciates intuition as a resultant concoction of knowledge and experience: 'Intuitions are formed at the crossroads of knowledge and experience' (1987, p. 250). Accordingly, being caught in the middle of such 'crossroads', and assuming that one can also claim one's rightful share in the discussion both as an educator and as a learner, this final section of the paper will draw a great deal upon teacher/learner 'hunches'.

The moot point over the role of learner first language in a foreign/second-language classroom context is clearly established between language-oriented researchers and educators as well as amongst the members of each of these two groups themselves. However, irrespective of the theorists and other professionals in the field, it seems that, in the end, one has to hold on to one's own beliefs and intuitions insofar as they are formed by

classroom experience as well as by reflection. Thus, one might like the idea of resorting to the students' mother tongue in the L2 learning/teaching context. In this perspective, it seems learner L1 is a tool that neither the teacher nor the learner can afford to dispense with. Nevertheless, some cautious steps should be taken as to the amount of use, when and by whom it should be used; otherwise, the recourse to L1 might be counter-productive.

With beginning groups, when approaching vocabulary, for instance, one can use props such as flashcards, cutout figures and *realia* for words representing concrete items; as for the representation of abstract items, drawing on L1 equivalents might solve the problem whenever contextualisation, mimicry, and other techniques fail to gloss them convincingly. Moreover, at times L1 can be used in L2 classrooms as a mnemonic strategy – e.g. association of meanings in the two languages. By and large, at this level the L1 can be used for almost every *move* in the classroom, both teacher-initiated or student-initiated, such as organisation of the class and tasks, maintenance of discipline and clarification as regards testing material (for a comprehensive elaboration on teacher/student initiated talk, see, for instance, Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Chaudron, 1988; Nunan, 1991; and Thornbury, 1996). It is important to point out, though, that L2 learners should be encouraged to using the target language from this very first level lest they become overwhelmed by complacency; this practice may be achieved by involving students in activities such as language-building tasks (Nunan, 1999). However, even in a task-based L2-learning context, learners can avail themselves of the L1 in problem-solving activities for the pivotal role it appears to play in the cognitive and metacognitive processes, as Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez's (2004) experiment on *private verbal thinking*<sup>3</sup> seems to indicate. Perhaps resorting to

L1 in this kind of private speech is a major factor in the cognitive control of tasks demonstrated by the L2 learners investigated by DiCamilla and Antón (2004).

Furthermore, at beginning levels, L1 can be used as the 'blueprint', so to speak, of any text produced in the target language. Thus, for instance, in a monolingual classroom the first draft of a scripted conversation would be written in the L1, whereas the final version would be written in the L2. In the concoction of the conversation, both the teacher and the classmates as well as dictionaries should be instrumental. In other words, learner L1 can be used as a starting point in the production of oral/written L2 texts in the classroom. Needless to say, this technique represents a swing backwards of the pendulum of methods and approaches, since it is deeply rooted in the Community Language Learning approach (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

Of course, a different *modus operandi* seems to be more productive as learners become more proficient (intermediate upwards): from a quasi-target-language-only, to a target-language-only approach. While this is true for the overt classroom environment, it might be a good idea, from the perspective of the learner, to use the L1 as an overt strategy in self-study sessions, and as a covert strategy on 'stand-by' in the classroom. In other words, on the one hand, more proficient students (especially advanced students) could freely resort to their L1 when reflecting and working on their own on the target language (e.g. activities such as doing homework, writing essays, consulting grammar books, and trying to understand involved language and metalanguage). On the other, they should focus almost exclusively on the target language for interaction in the classroom. The relevance of this exercise is seen especially in terms of aural/oral fluency. One has to say, though, that even at this level the use of L1 in the classroom is subordinate to the ultimate aim of the L2 course. English for Specific Purposes, for instance, might demand capitalisation on both L1 and L2.

<sup>3</sup> Private verbal thinking is defined by these authors as 'a particular type of private speech characterized as being the externalization of the process of reasoning during a problem-solving activity' (Centeno-Cortés & Jiménez, 2004, p. 31).

## CONCLUSION

While useful insight is provided by the controversy over whether or not the learner's mother tongue has any role in the context of second language learning, one might be inclined to follow one's own beliefs and intuitions when challenged by it. By the same token, perhaps it is by dint of these very same 'gut feelings', to put it in Brown's (1987) terms, that Butzkamm sanctions the ubiquity of learner L1 in the developmental process of the L2 learning-teaching symbiosis, to wit:

Teachers can banish the native language from the classroom, but cannot banish it from the students' minds. It would even be counterproductive since it would mean trying to stop them thinking altogether.

(Butzkamm, W. *The Bilingual Method - An Overview*)

In the end, the classroom praxis of L2 teachers should always allow for their pupils' idiosyncrasies and needs ultimately to determine the approach towards their mother tongue, since its use may lend itself to be essential for them to achieve their specific goals in the target language.

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