

Using L1 to Learn L2 Enhances Language Acquisition at University

Ziqing Zhou

School of education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract: This paper investigates how strategically learners' first language [L1] should be used in higher education to improve second language [L2] learning. The paper emphasizes the need of the first language in improving comprehension, retention, and cultural awareness using concepts including Cummings' Common Underlying Proficiency and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. It also takes counterarguments into account, including too reliance on L1, thereby supporting a mixed approach. The paper shows how, when correctly incorporated, L1 can improve language and conceptual development in L2 acquisition by use of research and personal pedagogical experience.

Keywords: First Language [L1] Mediation; SLA; Bilingual Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

This critical essay argues that using L1 in the acquisition of L2 as a university language learner indeed improved my language learning experience. By means of three basic points of view, I will show how the inclusion of L1 into L2 acquisition has favorably affected my language acquisition path. According to Vygotsky's ZPD theory, students can reach high degrees of knowledge with suitable help; this idea fits my own experience of using L1 to improve L2 comprehension and retention. Cummins's [2000] CUP model offers a strong theoretical framework to help to grasp the transfer of cognitive and scholastic skills from the L1 to the L2, therefore enhancing conceptual understanding [5]. Furthermore underlined in research by Mahboob [2014] and Creese, Blackledge, and Tahi [2014] are the importance of authenticity and validity in language instruction [4, 11]. These research reveal how effectively L1 use balances contextual and cultural variations. Emphasizing its contribution to increase language proficiency and general linguistic competency, this essay will examine the numerous advantages of employing L1 in L2 education at the university level based on personal experience and relevant research.

2. The Role of L1 in Facilitating L2 Acquisition

2.1. Cognitive Scaffolding and Comprehension

Using L1 as a cognitive scaffold will greatly help retention and understanding of L2. Vygotsky's Theory of ZPD holds that learners can acquire better degrees of comprehension given suitable guidance. By breaking down these concepts in L1, teachers can help to clarify challenging grammar rules, vocabulary, and linguistic structures. This scaffolding helps students build a strong basis in their L2, therefore enhancing long-term memory and more deep cognitive processes.

Vygotsky's ZPD theory holds that learners may carry out tasks above their current skill level when they get suitable direction and aid from others with more knowledge and experience [Vygotsky, 1978] [15]. Regarding language development, L1 can offer quite helpful support and guidance. When teachers employ L1 as a cognitive scaffold for learning L2, they are effectively closing the distance between the

present knowledge of the students and their learning objectives. This approach not only makes the learning process more logical but also helps learners to remember and grasp freshly learned facts. My background makes a clear example of this issue. Many of the students in a specialized institution in China found it difficult to grasp the grammatical structure of conditional phrases when I taught English to them. To help to solve this, I thoroughly explained it and showed relevant Mandarin[L1] examples. The objective of the class was to achieve proficiency in the grammar of hypothetical false statements unrealistic conditional phrases. I first precisely described a conditional sentence and then spoke about the many forms of conditional phrases utilized in Mandarin. Subsequently, I proceeded to clarify the precise sentence structure in Chinese by illustrating it using an English model and exemplified it with the phrase "If I had the money, I would travel around the world" to stress the right usage of verb tenses in "if" clauses to depict fictitious situations. I found the students had grown to have a considerably deeper and more deep awareness of the content as the lesson came to finish. This approach helped students grasp grammar principles and lessened their anxiety and raised their confidence in their English language ability. By means of L1 as a cognitive scaffold, I was able to effectively promote improved cognitive processing and memory of grammatical concepts, so augmenting the general language capacity.

Studies by Swain and Lapkin [2000] indicate L1's role as a cognitive scaffold in L2 learning [12]. Students who allowed to use their L1 during group projects showed better performance in L2 activities than those who were limited to using solely L2, according their study. The researchers found that using L1 enabled learners to engage in more complex cognitive tasks, such developing hypotheses and solving problems, therefore increasing their L2 learning. Having studied in Australia, I have personally seen and completely accepted the benefits of using L1 during the language learning process. Over the TESOL course, I encountered a broad spectrum of instructional terminologies, such "repertoire" and "homoglossia," etc. These terms perplexed me even though I had studied for the course already. My poor English listening skills made it more difficult for me to understand the meanings during class when the tutor covered them. Still, my companions provided succinct Chinese explanations that

helped me to quickly understand the subjects even as we worked together, in group discussions. This happened often and was absolutely important for my learning process. Using L1 in these contexts not only clarified complex vocabulary but also helped me to relax and boost my confidence in handling the course contents.

Moreover, L1 can improve metalinguistic awareness—that is, the ability to consider and evaluate language as an abstract framework. Understanding the structural variances and parallels between L1 and L2 depends on this awareness, which will help to enable more efficient language acquisition. Bialystok [2001] found that bilingual people often show higher degrees of metalinguistic awareness than monolingual individuals [2]. Using L1 in L2 instruction helps one to facilitate the constant process of comparing and contrasting between two language systems. Teachers can encourage students to increase their metalinguistic awareness and general language competency using L1 by pushing them to study and compare linguistic structures in L2. This approach gives learners cognitive abilities to assess and comprehend recently acquired language knowledge on their own as well as helping them to grasp L2 right away.

2.2. Enhancing Conceptual Understanding

Using L1 can enhance students' conceptual understanding of complex academic content in L2. In university settings, students often encounter specialized terminology and abstract concepts that can be difficult to grasp in a new language. By providing explanations and examples in L1, educators can ensure that students fully understand these concepts, which can then be more easily transferred to L2.

The CUP model, proposed by Cummins in 2000, provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the transfer of cognitive and academic skills from L1 to L2 [5]. The model posits the existence of a common cognitive and academic competence that underlies both L1 and L2, thereby suggesting that skills and information acquired in one language can facilitate the learning process in another. By employing L1 to elucidate complex concepts, educators can facilitate the development of a robust conceptual framework that supports L2 learning.

During my undergraduate studies, I enrolled in a philosophy course instructed in English. The curriculum encompassed sophisticated theoretical concepts such as 'existentialism' and 'phenomenology', which, despite being translated into Chinese, remained opaque to me. The instructor, cognizant of the linguistic obstacles confronting non-native English speakers, periodically resorted to our native language to elucidate these intricate notions. In the course of his study of existentialism, the professor provided a comprehensive explanation in Chinese, analysing the philosophical ideas of thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and using relevant illustrations and simple words to clarify the existentialist concepts of freedom and responsibility. The application of L1 aided understanding and allowed for a comprehensive conceptual framework. Consequently, the knowledge gained from this study was applicable to the English language, thereby enhancing the student's ability to engage with and assimilate the course material in a second language. This approach not only improved comprehension but also the overall academic experience in the Philosophy programme.

Nevertheless, several scholars contend that an overreliance on L1 can impede the learning of the L2 by diminishing the

level of exposure to L2 [Krashen, 1985] [8]. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, the process of acquiring a language takes place when learners are exposed to understandable input in the language they are trying to acquire. Consequently, regular use of L1 may restrict students' chances to receive and comprehend L2 input, which could hinder their language acquisition. During my initial experience studying in Australia, I often sought out students who were fluent in my mother language and mainly relied on translation software to connect with English speakers and complete tasks. Due to my frequent usage of my native language, I had low exposure to English, which caused a decline in my language proficiency during the first semester instead of the expected improvement. This phenomenon underscores Krashen's assertion that attaining optimal second language learning necessitates a substantial degree of exposure to comprehensible input in the language being acquired [8].

Although there are some reservations regarding the possible negative effects of L1 on L2 education, it is noteworthy that L1 use does not inevitably lower L2 exposure. Rather, it means purposefully using L1 to help to acquire complex L2 ideas, therefore guaranteeing enough exposure to and practice with the L2. Using a balanced approach including both L1 and L2 can be more successful than depending just on the L2, claims Turnbull and Arnett's [2002] studies [13].

García and Wei [2014] advocate L1's use to improve conceptual clarity in L2 education [6]. In academic tasks, bilingual children who received teaching in both L1 and L2 did better than those who got instruction just in L2, according to study. The researchers observed that using L1 helped students create a better conceptual basis, which improved their L2 learning. This result fits Cummins's CUP theory, which holds that academic and cognitive abilities acquired in L1 can be used to L2. Furthermore, allowing French immersion children in Canada to use their L1 for challenging cognitive activities including hypothesis testing and problem-solving, Swain and Lapkin [2000] discovered that this improved L2 performance and deeper understanding [12]. Emphasizing that L1 is a useful cognitive tool, Turnbull [2001] has found that the deliberate use of L1 in L2 courses improves students's grasp of difficult ideas and general academic results [14]. Macaro [2005] further corroborates this, demonstrating that code-switching between L1 and L2 can be a successful teaching tool, especially in the clarification of complex concepts and the provision of explanations [10].

2.3. Bridging Cultural and Contextual Gaps

It is evident that by closing cultural and contextual gaps, L1 can function as a cognitive scaffold, thereby significantly enhancing the comprehension and retention of L2. The necessity of authenticity and validity in language education has been underscored by Mahboob [2014] and Creese, Blackledge, and Takhi [2014] [4, 11]. According to Mahboob [2014], the study of a language facilitates the comprehension of its cultural and contextual underpinnings, in addition to facilitating the acquisition of linguistic proficiency [11]. Teachers can help students understand the cultural setting in which L2 is applied by using L1 to clarify these subtleties, therefore augmenting the whole and significance of their learning process. Creese, Blackledge, and Takhi [2014] underline the part translanguaging plays in establishing real learning settings, hence augmenting this [4]. Translanguaging,

which involves the fluid use of multiple languages, allows students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to make sense of new concepts and contexts. This method not only confirms students' L1 but also guides them over the cultural and contextual complexity of L2.

Still, some contend that using L2 exclusively in language classrooms might result in more real knowledge of the target culture and a greater cultural immersion. This approach claims that constant L2 exposure free from L1 will help to increase cultural competency and integration. Michael Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competency [ICC] method emphasizes direct connection with the target language and culture. According to Byram [2020], students submerged in the L2 cultural environment show more effective development of cultural competency. Exclusive use of L2 helps learners to negotiate cultural peculiarities and social conventions directly, therefore fostering a more true grasp of the target culture [3]. James Lantolf and Steven Thorne [2006] similarly stress in their work on Sociocultural Theory the role social interaction performs in language acquisition [9]. They argue that most efficient cultural learning depends on meaningful interactions in the target language. Exclusive use of L2 in social and educational settings helps to promote deeper cultural immersion by allowing learners to more really accept cultural norms and behaviors.

From where I stand, this point of view minimizes the main benefits of bringing L1 into the learning process. Kramsch [1993] looks at the relationship between language and culture stressing the significance of recognizing the cultural background in which the language is used. According to Kramsch, cultural sensitivity is fundamental for linguistic competence [7]. By using L1 to clarify cultural intricacies, teachers can help students develop a better knowledge of L2 therefore improving the authenticity of their educational process. Baker [2011] also considers how bilingual education could promote understanding and cultural competency [1]. The study finds that L1 bilingual education can improve students' cultural understanding and competency. By use of L1, contextual and cultural aspects of L2 become clearer, thereby enabling teachers to make language acquisition more relevant and important. García and Wei [2014] investigate translanguaging in connection to language acquisition [6]. Using many languages, or translanguaging, the researchers discovered can produce more real and significant learning opportunities. Teachers can use L1 to clarify cultural and contextual complexities, therefore helping students handle the complexity of L2.

Working part-time at an Australian coffee shop presented several cultural and contextual difficulties that first confused my English [L2] comprehension. Especially difficult was learning the idioms and cultural references coworkers and clients utilized. In casual talks, for example, consumers often used phrases like "brekkie," [breakfast], "arvo," [afternoon], and "choccy," [chocolate]. These words startled me when I first heard them of their familiarity and strangeness. Following advice from my supervisor, who clarified their Chinese meanings, I was able to appreciate their relevance and develop a closer knowledge of Australian culture. Australian society is often laid-back and informal, hence the use of slang or acronyms represents this informal attitude to communication. With time, this knowledge helped me not only to effectively finish simple everyday contacts with clients but also to gradually enter the cultural milieu, therefore

strengthening my cultural identity.

While Byram [2020] contends that students become more culturally competent when they are submerged in the L2 cultural setting, my experience indicates that first explanations in L1 can be rather important for this immersion [3]. Likewise, although James Lantolf and Steven Thorne stress the need of social engagement in language acquisition [9], my own experience shows that utilizing L1 to negotiate first cultural and environmental obstacles can support more significant interactions in L2. Including L1 in language education can thus improve cultural competency and integration, hence increasing the relevance and meaning of the learning process. My experience validates Mahboob's [2014] claim that thorough language learning depends on an awareness of cultural and contextual underpinnings and corresponds with Kramsch's [1993] thesis that cultural competency is a necessary component of linguistic competency [7, 11]. Moreover, applying translanguaging in my professional contacts helped me to use my whole linguistic repertoire to grasp new ideas, therefore enabling me to have a more real and significant learning experience as García and Wei [2014] emphasize [6]. For instance, I was able to completely understand the subtleties of polite and effective communication in English by using my home tongue when understanding the coffee shop menu and responding to client demands, so considerably enhancing my service abilities and quality of integration with the residents.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has demonstrated that the use of L1 as a tool for the learning of an L2 in a university setting can be efficacious in the enhancement of language acquisition. By means of L1 as a cognitive scaffold, the improvement of conceptual understanding, and the bridging of cultural and contextual barriers, the benefits of including L1 in the language acquisition process have been personally observed. The effective integration of L1 into L2 education has been shown to facilitate a more complete and significant language learning experience for students. The utilisation of L1 in L2 learning is, therefore, indubitably conducive to the enhancement of language acquisition and the enrichment of the language learning experience.

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