Disrupting the English-only status quo: Using home language as a vital resource in the classroom

By Kate Paterson, Western University, Canada

Abstract

An extensive and growing body of research affirms the value of using students' home language (L1) in both second language (L2) and content learning in the classroom. In spite of this, instructional policy and practice continue to operate as though English-only approaches are axiomatic and essentially common sense. This article appeals for action at the classroom and program levels to close the gap between research and practice in relation to the use of home language in learning. This shift aligns with a move toward rejecting deficit narratives that focus on what students are lacking rather than what they bring to the classroom. If we recognize that our students possess rich cultural and experiential funds of knowledge, we must also begin to value the language(s) in which that knowledge is encoded. If we acknowledge the importance of making connections between classroom learning and students' homes and communities, we must also start to connect the language practices they engage in outside of the classroom with those taking place inside of it. This article gives a brief history of the role of L1 in language pedagogy to provide a better understanding of why monolingual classrooms have become the norm, uses current research to critically examine three central assumptions underlying monolingual language teaching, and considers implications for instructional practice.

Introduction

As language teachers, we strive to orchestrate culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, often in settings of broad diversity. To teach effectively, we must respond to variations in competency across the four skill areas at the individual level, as well as variations in proficiency across a given student group. We play an integral part in motivating students and helping them gain confidence in their emerging language skills. A crucial component of our work as educators is reflection on practice. A commitment to life-long learning means that we have a responsibility to keep our teaching practices aligned with the most current evidence-based understandings about how students learn and process languages.

This article addresses a troubling research to practice gap between (a) a large and growing base of research indicating that monolingual (English-only) teaching is counterintuitive to the realities of how we learn and process languages, and (b) the normalized practice of excluding students' home language (L1) from the classroom. Avoidance of the L1 is generally taken for granted as a basic tenet of sound instructional practice in English language teaching and learning and, as such, has been largely absent from professional discourse. However, it is important that we begin to problematize English-only policies and practice because what we know based on the most current research and theory contradicts a persistent belief that the L1 is an impediment to English language development and content learning rather than a valuable resource. As Cummins (2007) points out: "L1 is not the enemy in promoting high levels of L2 proficiency; rather, when students' L1 is invoked as a cognitive and linguistic resource through bilingual instructional strategies, it can function as a stepping stone to scaffold more accomplished performance in the L2" (p. 238).

Re-conceptualizing the role of L1 in the classroom from a "regrettable fact of life that has to be endured" (Cook, 2001, p. 410) into a powerful resource for learning has the potential to be transformational in the field of language pedagogy. This requires a fundamental shift in how teachers view and respond to students' L1. "Classroom communication often appears to be viewed as a straight zero-sum game, in which more L1 use means less L2 use. From this perspective, any pedagogy that advocates for the use of the L1 as a sanctioned, explicit part of classroom communication would be dismissed by teachers, and possibly by many students" (Levine, 2013, p. 423). Is this perception based in reality? Should we continue to let it guide our teaching? In order to enact effective, evidence-based instruction, we need to be informed by history, debunk false assumptions with the help of reliable research, and then reflect on what it all means for instructional practice. I address these three components below and end with some thoughts on moving forward.

A Brief History on L1 in Language Pedagogy

The exclusion of L1 from teaching and learning is reflective of the fact that several central assumptions arising out of the direct method, a movement in language teaching which gained popularity over a century

ago, are still held, in one form or another, by many in the teaching profession today (Cook, 2001; Howatt, 1984; Levine, 2013; Yu, 2001). The direct method emerged when the grammar translation method that dominated much of early language pedagogy began to be criticized for its over-reliance on grammatical accuracy, translation, and reading. The direct method was a reaction to the lack of attention on developing communicative ability among learners. Accordingly, the role of grammar was de-emphasized, translation was discouraged, and the focus shifted to developing oral competency for the purposes of meaningful communication. This approach focused on maximizing L2 input which, it was believed, necessitated an avoidance of the L1 whenever possible.

Based on behaviourist theory, the audiolingual method emerged during the 1960s and 70s. It was characterized by memorization and drill-type exercises with a focus on habit formation. Language learning most commonly took place in language labs where students would hear and repeat words and phrases in the target language until they were able to produce them spontaneously. Like the direct method, spoken language was the focus, instruction took place exclusively in the target language, and L1 use was avoided. Students were viewed as *tabula rasas* or *blank slates* and, as such, their prior experiences and knowledge (including knowledge of other languages) were disregarded.

Current communicative and task-based approaches reject the imitation and rote learning of the audiolingual method and prioritize developing communicative ability to accomplish real-life tasks. The treatment of students' L1 is aptly described by Cook (2001) below:

> 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...the only times 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...Most descriptions of methods portray the ideal classroom as having as little of the L1 as possible, essentially by omitting reference to it (p. 404).

The practice of banishing the L1 from the language classroom is a common thread that has persisted through the rise and fall of different movements in language pedagogy since the early 19th century. To this day, the influence of the direct method remains strong and L1 use remains stigmatized in language classrooms (Cook, 2001; Yu, 2001).

Deconstructing Assumptions

"There is more to L1 use than the static and traditional impression that the term *grammar translation* portrays, an image which has served to stereotype and marginalise non-monolingual teaching practices

around the world" (Hall & Cook, 2012, p. 276). Unfortunately, the negative perception of L1 has prevented ESL/EAP educators as well as mainstream K-12 teachers from critically reflecting on normalized English-only policies. The consequence is that students' L1 is rarely recognized for its potential as a crucial resource for L2 and content learning. For many of us, there is a latent fear that if we permit students explicit access to their L1, we risk losing control and creating an environment where students idly substitute L1 any time they find it too challenging to use English. It is important to distinguish the positive potential for the L1 to activate connections in the target language versus L1 being used as an avoidance strategy when using English requires too much effort. The task at hand is, first, to recognize students' L1 as a legitimate resource for learning, and, second, to incorporate L1 alongside extensive communicative interaction in English.

Out of the historical movements in language teaching evolved some core assumptions that form the basis of a monolingual approach. "Though these assumptions have affected many generations of students and teachers, they are rarely discussed or presented …but are taken for granted as the foundation of language teaching" (Cook, 2001, pp. 403-404). Next, I outline three interrelated assumptions posited by Cummins (2007) and compare them with current research. Implications for practice are discussed throughout.

The Direct Method Assumption

An aim of the direct method is to imitate first language acquisition, emphasizing L2 use as the exclusive medium of instruction, avoiding translation, and focusing on listening comprehension and speaking ability (Yu, 2001). However, Cook (2001) points out that this is a "doubtful analogy" as there are obvious and significant differences between children learning their L1 and older students learning an additional language—among them, cognitive ability, time restrictions, and amount of exposure. Older L2 learners have more mature minds, greater social development, and a larger short-term memory capacity (Cook & Singleton, 2014; Singleton, 1989). Additionally, the absence of an L1 is one situation that could never be replicated in a language classroom. "Whether we like it or not, the new language is learnt on the basis of a previous language" (Stern, 1992, p. 282). The direct method assumption ignores this basic principle thereby eliminating any possibility for using L1 as a cognitive tool in the classroom.

Bilingual Dictionaries

How do you teach new vocabulary? Do you allow students to use bilingual dictionaries? Why or why not?

Cummins (2007) notes that any strong version of the direct method assumption is discredited by numerous studies that support the use of bilingual dictionaries for vocabulary learning as more effective than either monolingual dictionary use or learning from context alone (see for examples Ahmad & Hafeez, 2011; Bruton, 2007; Laufer & Kimmel, 1997; Luppescu and Day, 1993; Mandalios, 2013; Nation, 1997, 2003; Prince, 1996). In a climate where monolingual teaching is taken for granted as best practice, a ban on bilingual dictionaries logically follows. This contradicts neuroscience, which affirms that the initial acquisition of new

words in a foreign language depends on the association of these items with corresponding first language items in the learner's memory (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011).

What do you do when you want to use a word in a foreign language and you don't know how to say it? What do you do when your students are in the same position?

The questions above were part of a study by Mandalios (2013) that explored native-speaker English language teachers' beliefs and practices regarding bilingual dictionaries. Results found a significant disconnect between what teacher respondents preferred as language learners themselves and what they practiced as language teachers. Although teachers felt the use of bilingual dictionaries to be indispensable in their own L2 learning, they restricted their students' use of them in the classroom, predominantly because they felt bilingual dictionary use is negatively perceived in the English language teaching (ELT) community. Some teachers reported that these negative perceptions forced them to sometimes employ practices in the classroom that went against their own personal beliefs and intuitions.

"A student's use of a [bilingual] dictionary is often considered tantamount to cheating; students are usually expected to tolerate partial understanding and to deduce meaning from context" (Kerr, 2014, p. 93). Numerous studies confirm that the insertion of a single word from the L1 is an effective way of introducing new vocabulary (for examples, see: Bruton 2007; Laufer & Girsai 2008; Nation 1997, 2003; Prince 1996). Allowing students to use translation for vocabulary learning is vastly more efficient than trying to figure out meaning from context alone or insisting they use English-only dictionaries which often requires them to use considerable time looking up unknown words that constitute part of the definition. Such approaches require a lot of time-consuming effort with no guarantee that students will gain a solid grasp of the vocabulary. This is arguably time that could be better spent on L2 activities that more effectively promote learning. It is not to say that deducing meaning from context or learning how to use new English vocabulary in pragmatic ways is not important. Bilingual dictionaries can be used alongside these other valuable strategies.

The No Translation Assumption

As Cummins (2007) points out, the no translation assumption in L2 classrooms is a logical extension of the direct method assumption. A classroom that bans L1 completely necessarily precludes any activities that would involve translating between the L1 and L2. The backlash against the grammar translation method is still felt today, and translation continues to be a "bad word" in the majority of ESL classrooms.

The «T» Word

Our negative perceptions of translation may be a byproduct of our teacher training, prevailing attitudes in communities of practice, or based on our own personal experiences in the classroom. Most of us have had the

displeasure of reading work from students who have attempted to directly translate from their L1 to English—often using an online tool like Google Translate or Babelfish. Despite advances in online translation tools, the results are still generally error-riddled for more advanced writing that contains nuances and idiomatic languages or alternatively, clearly beyond the written proficiency levels of a beginner/low intermediate level student. It is important, therefore, to clarify that the kind of translation being advocated for here is not word-for-word translation of texts. In fact, carefully planned translation activities (like delayed reverse translations mentioned below) explicitly draw students' attention to the pitfalls of attempting to translate without regard for communicative meaning. Just as allowing L1 back into the classroom does not necessitate an environment of chaos in which L2 learning is sacrificed, translation does not have to be an all-or-nothing proposition in which all other learning objectives are negated in favour of developing written translation skills. The point here is to encourage you to consider that there may be a role for judicious use of translation in the classroom—whether it be for the sake of learning efficiency (e.g. use of bilingual dictionaries for vocabulary acquisition) or a recognition of translation as a valuable skill in its own right.

Translation as a Learning Tool: How & Why?

Translation can be used positively in several ways; its role in vocabulary learning is just one potential application. Metalinguistic awareness (the ability to consciously reflect on language and its use) is another benefit of targeted translation tasks. Contrastive analysis (explicitly comparing and contrasting two languages), which often happens in the course of translation activities, can positively support metalinguistic awareness for everyone in the classroom. Students who engage in explicit comparison of the languages within their repertoire may be better able to pinpoint the source of common language problems. A belief that the main problems in L2 learning come from the L1 has been a central rationale behind attempts to eliminate it as much as possible from the classroom (Cook, 2001). However, as Cummins (2007) points out: "Learning efficiencies can be achieved if teachers explicitly draw students' attention to similarities and differences between their languages and reinforce effective learning strategies in a coordinated way across languages" (p. 233). Rather than trying to 'eliminate' the L1 (a futile exercise anyway), a translation activity like delayed reverse translations where students translate from English to their L1, then back again in a later class, comparing their translations with the original, take advantage of the interconnectedness of languages in the mind by explicitly making comparisons between them. Students experience enhanced metalinguistic awareness and benefit from having access to their L1 as a valuable cognitive tool. Furthermore, translation activities can reinforce the idea that word-for-word translation often does not work and instead translation should be a communicative exercise where the focus is on accurately conveying meaning.

In addition to increasing metalinguistic awareness, translation has a number of other benefits for learning:

- Empirical evidence is consistent with claims that translation promotes acquisition, bi-literacy development, and identities of competence (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2007).

- Elorza (2008), House (2009) and Stiefel (2009) suggest that in addition to a focus on linguistic accuracy, in-class translation activities can bring to learners' attention cross-cultural differences in the ways speakers communicate.

- Manyak (2008) points to classroom studies documenting the vibrant nature of instruction that recognizes bilingualism "as an emblem of academic competence and fosters students' biliteracy development" (p. 451). He cites such classrooms as examples of the power and value in engaging in acts of translation during literacy activities; the result being opportunities for students to showcase their unique linguistic potential while simultaneously developing bi-literacy skills in both the L1 and English. (For examples, see Manyak, 2004; Moll & Dworin, 1996; Moll et al., 1993).

- Claypole (2010) and Malmkjær (1998) go so far as to designate translation as a fifth skill, vital in negotiating between two languages. They argue that since translation depends on and includes the other four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), any activity involving translation necessarily exercises the other skills as well.

The Two Solitudes Assumption

The central flaw of the two solitudes assumption, which asserts that languages should be kept firmly separate in language teaching and learning, is the fact that languages are not separate entities in a bilingual person's mind, but rather are inextricably interwoven in vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and pragmatics (Cook, 2001). As Baker (2011) points out in a discussion of Spanish-English bilingual students: "When school lessons are through the medium of Spanish, they do not solely feed a Spanish part of the brain. Or when other lessons are in English, they do not only feed the English part of the brain. Rather concepts learnt in one language can readily transfer into the other language" (p. 165). The problematic conception of L1 and L2 as separate, bounded entities whereby bi-/ multilingualism is defined as the mastery of two (or more) autonomous, bounded language systems rather than as a single unified linguistic repertoire within which languages readily flow and interact has damaging implications for policy and pedagogical practice. Subtractive notions of bilingualism that conceptualize L2 learning as taking place at the expense of students' L1 and culture are at the base of English-only practices. When we tell students to leave their L1 at the classroom door, a large part of who they are is left there as well. English-only policies implicitly devalue students' identities and disregard crucial connections between classroom learning and students' homes, communities, and cultures.

Moving Forward

Our students do not come to us as blank slates. Even those with limited or interrupted formal education bring to the classroom a wealth of culturally-based knowledge and experience. People use what they know to construct new understanding, so using students' prior knowledge (including their L1) is a crucial starting point for teachers and an essential part of promoting more effective and meaningful learning. If we open up our classrooms to students' L1 and all the valuable cultural and experiential knowledge encoded within, the variety of teaching strategies we can utilize and hence students' opportunities for learning grow exponentially. In the process, we affirm students' identities as competent and talented language users—emerging bi/ multilinguals who are achieving things that are out of reach of monolinguals. As Ladson-Billings (1994) points out: "When students are treated as competent, they are likely to demonstrate competence" (p. 123). The monolingual teaching of English has acted as a barrier to the development of bilingual and bicultural identities and skills that are critically needed by most learners. The task that lies ahead is to overcome the disconnect between research and practice so that what we know (an extensive research base that attests to the value of students' L1 in L2 and content learning) can start to inform what we do.

Making space for L1 in your classroom does not necessitate a complete overhaul of lesson plans and instructional strategies, nor does it relegate your classroom to chaos. Adding L1 in situations where it is advantageous for learning can enhance activities already in your teaching repertoire. It means you can engage your students in more cognitively appropriate learning rather than having their English proficiency be the central determinant to the complexity of classroom tasks. Incorporating L1 develops metalinguistic awareness for everyone in class, increases engagement in learning, and scaffolds more proficient performance in English. As recognition of the interdependent nature of languages in the mind grows and as L2 learners start to be perceived as successful multicompetent language users in their own right, it is hoped that practice and policy will begin to more accurately reflect both the empirical evidence and the realities of the interconnected, plurilingual world we live in.

References

Ahmad, A., & Hafeez, M. R. (2011, December). Learning English through translation--a case for bilingual dictionaries. *Language in India*, *11*(12), 83.

Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Bruton, A. (2007). Vocabulary learning from dictionary referencing and language feedback in EFL translational writing. *Language Teaching Research, 11*(4), 413–431.

Claypole, M. (2010). *Controversies in ELT*. Norderstedt, Germany: LinguaBooks.

Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 57*(3), 402–423.

Cook, V., & Singleton, D. (2014). *Key topics in second language acquisition* (Vol. 10). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique appliquée*, *10*(2), 221–240.

Elorza, I. (2008). Promoting intercultural competence in the FL/SL classroom: Translations as sources of data. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 8* (4) 261–277.

Hall, G., & Cook, G. (2012). Own-language use in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching, 45*, 271–308.

House, J. (2009). *Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Howatt, A. P. (1984). *A history of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kerr, P. (2014). *Translation and own-language activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994) *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Laufer, B., & Kimmel, M. (1997). Bilingualised dictionaries: How learners really use them. *System, 25*(3), 361-369.

Levine, G. S. (2013). The case for a multilingual approach to language classroom communication. *Language and Linguistics Compass, 7*(8), 423–436.

Luppescu, S., & Day, R. R. (1993). Reading, dictionaries, and vocabulary learning. *Language Learning, 43*(2), 263–279.

Malmkjær, K. (1998). *Translation & language teaching: Language teaching & translation*. Manchester, U.K: St. Jerome Pub.

Mandalios, J. (2013), Power and pedagogy in ELT: Native-speaker teachers and the case of bilingual dictionaries and L1. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 23*, 202–225.

Manyak, P. C. (2004). «What did she say?» Translation in a primary-grade English immersion class. *Multicultural Perspectives, 6*, 12–18.

Manyak, P. C. (2008). What's your news? Portraits of a rich language and literacy activity for English-language learners. *The Reading Teacher, 61*(6), 450–458.

Moll, L. C., & Dworin, J. E. (1996). Biliteracy development in classrooms: Social dynamics and cultural possibilities. *Discourse, learning, and schooling,* 221–246.

Moll, L. C., Tapia, J., & Whitmore, K. F. (1993). Living knowledge: The social distribution of cultural resources for thinking. *Distributed Cognitions: Psychological and Educational Considerations,* 139–163.

Nation, P. (1997). L1 and L2 use in the classroom: A systematic approach. *TESL Reporter, 30*(2), 19–27.

Nation, P. (2003). The role of the first language in foreign language learning. *Asian EFL Journal, 1*, 35–39.

Prince, P. (1996). Second language vocabulary learning: The role of context versus translations as a function of proficiency. *The Modern Language Journal, 80*(4), 478–493.

Singleton, J. L. (1989). *Restructuring of language from impoverished input: Evidence for linguistic compensation* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

Sousa, D. A., & Tomlinson, C. A. (2011). *Differentiation and the brain: How neuroscience supports the learner-friendly classroom.* Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.

Stern, H. (1992). *Issues and options in language teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stiefel, L. (2009). Translation as a means to intercultural communicative competence. In A. Witte, T. Harden & A. Ramos de Oliveira Harden (Eds.), *Translation in second language learning and teaching.* Bern: Peter Lang.

Yu, L. (2001). Communicative language teaching in China: Progress and resistance. *TESOL Quarterly, 35*(1), 194–198.

Author Bio

Kate Paterson is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at Western University in London, ON where she also obtained her BEd and MA. She received her BA from Dalhousie University in Halifax. Her research interests include the role of home language in ESL/EAP and mainstream K-12 classrooms, language and literacy learning among refugee youth in Canadian schools, social justice in language education, and teacher education with a focus on preparing future educators to effectively teach in linguistically diverse classrooms. Kate has been teaching ESL/EAP for over ten years. Her book, U*sing Home Language as a Resource in the Classroom: A Guide for Teachers of English Learners* published by TESOL Press will be out in late 2020.