

# Thou shalt not speak English at home

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will explore various reasons why English may be endorsed to be spoken at home by English language learners. There is a strong consensus by second language teachers that learners of a second language (L2) should focus on developing their first language (L1) in a more academic means, adding that solidifying their foundation in their first language, would also support second language learning. Furthermore, language skills are interchangeable from one language (L1) to another (L2). However, the point of this article is to entertain and even to support a continuation of learning the L2 at the student's home for reasons explained in further detail. In addition, the notion is not to weaken the argument that speaks of the continual development of the L1, which facilitates L2 learning, but rather to help teachers understand why there may be a need for a student and their family to express themselves by means of the L2 at home.

*Keywords: ALPHA, more knowledgeable other (MKO), English as a Second Language (ESL), English Language Learner (ELL)*

English language learners (ELLs) or simply English learners (ELs) are oftentimes encouraged to continue to develop their first language (L1) at home by speaking their own language, in addition to reading and writing (Coelho, 2016; Cummins, 2000). English learners or English language learners are those students who speak a language other than English and are now learning English as a second language. In this article, I will



call English as second language learners simply as English learners or EL. It is also important to note that students whose mother-tongue is English, are also developing their skills in their L1 (English). However, this article is not to reflect on them as English learners but rather on those who are learning English as a second language. The idea is precise, to the point, and it carries much validity and reasoning. If you were to ask ESL teachers about this matter, the consensus would lead towards the developing of the L1 at home, given that this would have a positive impact when learning an L2. This is quite accurate and agreeable by several language intellectuals such as Elizabeth Coelho and Dr. Jim Cummins. Hence, continuing to work on the L1 will facilitate language learning in the L2. Cummins (2000) suggests that the skills learned in L1 are readily interchangeable in the L2, pointing that when a student learns a new language (L2), the concepts learned in the L2 will also be readily applicable for the L1 and vis-à-vis. Therefore, continuing to develop an L1 would only reap favourable outcomes towards learning an L2. This is mainly the reason why second language teachers encourage parents to speak the L1 at home. The idea is rational, it makes much sense and it weighs a convincing argument. I too am in favour of students developing their L1 while still learning English as a second language. However, the idea of this article is not necessarily to point the obvious, but rather to explore an alternative notion that differs from what we just discussed. In fact, I will be focusing on a response to a distinct message that often comes from a (homeroom or ESL) teacher, “thou shalt not speak English at home,” and this is mainly due to the fact that the parent and/or the child does not speak English well enough or even with a heavy accent. Although the development of the L1 is recommended as literacy skills are transferred from one language to another, there are substantial reasons why a parent may want to speak English, or even allow English in their household. Here are a few reasons that will be discussed in further detail:

1. Students may learn a new academic-based concept/specific expectation in English (L2)
2. The parent’s level of L1 may be low or only available in an oral capacity
3. The parent’s academic English level may be higher than their social language (CALP higher than BICS), or a parent is eager to learn English and/or is attending adult ESL class
4. The Graeco-Latin influence and other cognates in English and a specific L1

As a second language educator, but more so as an immigrant and English learner (having come to Canada at the age of eleven), I can relate well with the arguments above. However, my opinions are not merely a reflection of my own experience, but rather an addition to an exploration that I have also been able to carry through. My personal experience further ascertains what other immigrant families have shared with me. For this reason, I find it important (as a second language educator and also as second language and culture learner) to express the reasons why English may be allowed and/or spoken (L2) at an immigrant’s home, and why teachers should not frown upon it if such is the situation, and rather



encourage it. It is crucial for me to indicate that when a newcomer learns English as an L2, they also learn the culture. In other words, the language is not learned exclusively/separately from the L2. For this reason, we (as teachers) need to remember that the differences that may exist in culture and become more culturally responsive when teaching English as an L2 and remember of the cultural curve that the learner navigates. In my years of teaching in the education sector, I have heard several times an educator dissuade a family from using English at home. Furthermore, sending a clear message that English shall not be spoken in the absence of the teacher and the classroom, but instead for the parent to continue developing the L1. “Leave English to the experts at school and focus on speaking your own language”; or “please allow the literacy development of your L1 to take place at home, while we (teachers) focus on mastering your child(ren)’s English skills”; or even “so that your child does not learn the wrong way, please let us focus on their English skills”. However, there is a level of negativity attached to the messages above, and an expansion of learning English at home may be neglected as a result. As previously stated, I too agree that the implementation of the first language to further develop the literacy skills of the learner needs to be crucial in the newcomer’s family. Nevertheless, we may not object to the parents’ intentions and goals. That is, parents may also mention that their purpose as an immigrant family is to learn English as fast as possible. Therefore, shifting the intended focus of a teacher for the family. There is no denying this, and in fact, a teacher may need to take a parent’s request and/or objective in mind, rather than *put it on trial*.

English learners are acquiring English (L2) in a variety of contexts. They are learning a new language as they navigate the diverse academic curricula (Cummins, 2000). As their learning takes a major leap, there are going to be new ideas that may not have been already learned in their own cultural context. Take photosynthesis or ecosystems for example. An ELL in grade 7 may start learning about these concepts without having any prior knowledge or having not learned them in his L1/cultural context. He may be learning about how ecosystems work and the different types there are. Furthermore, he may be using technical terms that may also exist in his L1, but has not had the opportunity to learn them in the L1. During the new classroom setting, the student may be learning and may be able to explain with some detail, while also incorporating academic language to this new concept. However, it may complicate the learning process if the parent or even the teacher would want the student to explain the newly learned concept by exclusively utilizing the L1, especially if the student does not have the necessary language skills (L1) to be able to perform such a task. It may become difficult and even impossible if the parent, the more knowledgeable other of the L1, does not hold the skills to guide the student with the appropriate vocabulary when explaining this new concept (Vygotsky refers to the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) as the adult who helps and guides the learner through the learning process to achieve a learning goal.). We could also apply this example to a more complex and/or current topic, such as social justice, bullying, or digital citizenship. For digital citizenship, a student may



have learned new lexicon pertaining to technology, ethical code, and behavior. A child may learn about the norms of appropriate and responsible conduct when using social media or online platforms via their phone, computer, or any other device. Simply put, the vast language could be novel to the child, and not having knowledge of how to interpret this newly learned material in their first language, may become troublesome, and even break the lines of communication when speaking with a parent.

In many cases, the parent may not be able to help the child, and this could be because the parent may not know about this new concept. Perhaps the parent does not know the appropriate technical terms for the topic because they did not have the opportunity to learn this. It may be a novel topic and/or this is not their field of expertise. For this reason, as a teacher, one must use caution when expressing to the parent and the child that the L1 should only be spoken exclusively at home, without the interference of English as an L2. This could create a lack of information being shared at home with the parents from the child. At the end of the day, one must remember that the main point of language is to communicate ideas, to exchange thoughts, and even to share feelings. However, if we must hold on to a rigid thought that no English be spoken at home, we may lose on the opportunity for the student to share and to digest the newly learned concepts in the L2.

For the past four years, I have been working with ELLs and their parents. After establishing a welcoming, positive, and inclusive setting, I have been able to ask questions to better know the students and their family, and understand their goals and needs. These questions are:

1. Has the student been able to consistently go to school (has there been a pause in their education)?
2. Can the student speak, read, and write (up to the grade level) in their mother tongue?
3. Can you (the parent) speak, read, and write in your mother tongue (same as the student)?
4. Do you speak another language other than your child's first language? Or do the parents (if there are 2) have the same mother tongue?

After tabulating the results, I discovered very common and expected results; nevertheless, there was specific information that I was not anticipating. The results were that nearly all of the parents spoke the same mother tongue of their child. However, there were two specific cases where the parent did not speak the same L1 as the child; the first case because both parents met in a neutral country, and each, coming from a different background (mother from India and father from Thailand) spoke a different language (L1), and therefore learned English (limited in language skills) as a second language (L2), which in turn became the child's L1. Undoubtedly, the student's level of English was consistent with the parents' skills, which generated a challenge to the student with regards to the L1. In fact, this student, I would have considered an English language learner (English—1<sup>st</sup> language) without necessarily being an ESL student. In the second



case, there were two parents who were bilingual and both decided to choose their L2 (English) as the L1 for the child.

Furthermore, the majority (a very high percentage) of students had acquired the grade level skills in their L1 before learning the L2. In rare cases, I found out that the student (due to political turmoil, war, or living in a refugee camp) could only speak their L1 but had very limited skills for reading and writing in their L1. In this case, such information helped the ESL/ELD department to allocate or at least to provide the appropriate ELD support. Finally, the majority of the parents had a proficient to superior grasp in their L1. However, there were cases where the parent did not read or write in their L1 though they were able to communicate orally. This could have been for reasons such as no opportunities to study, fleeing political turmoil and/or the need to work, even from an early age. There were a few cases where the parent could not read and/or write in their L1 and therefore, could not help their child acquire the necessary skills to communicate in the L1 apart from an oral aspect. These parents wanted their child to excel in Canada, focusing much attention on academics, though not necessarily being able to support them with their learning, or at least feeling insecure along with a lack of recourse to support a proper acquisition of the L2 along a fine development of the L1.

While teaching an ELD ALPHA (Accelerated Language Program in Hamilton Area) program to students in Grades 6 to 8, I encountered several families that wanted to provide an opportunity for their children to excel and surpass them (the parents) academically. Although busy due to work, these parents were involved and tried to make time to come to the school and meet with me to talk about their child's learning. They showed their appreciation towards the teachers and the academic institution by making sure that their child would continue their learning at home, providing them with the necessary resources to do so, and even by coming to the school and bringing food for our cultural celebration, which ended up happening every month (this was at the student's request). Their lack of knowledge in both L1 and L2 posed a challenge to help the child at home; however, it did not become an obstacle by which becoming defeated. It was very interesting that the parents would communicate with their child by implementing both the L1 and L2. It would have been very difficult and troublesome to ask these parents to exclusively communicate by means of their L1 at home with their child, and not use English whatsoever. Maybe, we could have sent a wrong message or even broken the lines of support and communication between the school and the home. In addition, how about the parents that spoke a different L1 (i.e. the mother speaks Spanish and the father speaks Portuguese) and made their L2 (English) the common language at home?

While supporting ELLs from an affluent area in town, I came across parents whose level of academic English (reading and writing) was higher than their oral skills. These parents were able to comprehend a



message whether aural and/or in a written form, better than they could articulate oral sentences. Hence, their receptive language skills were more developed than their expressive skills in the L2. Although this was not the norm for all immigrant parents, they had a higher level of education. That is, because of their professional designations, since some of them were doctors and/or had worked in the medical field, while others were medical students finishing off a degree (post-graduate) in our city. These parents certainly had a higher degree of English (L2) and their native language (L1), though their accent could have caused a level of misunderstanding from the part of the teacher. Their children on the other hand were mastering their L1 but were also new learners of English (L2). Sending a message home to these kinds of parents was no issue, as they were able to receive it and respond back to the queries of the teacher. Certainly, believing that all ELL parents cannot speak, read, and write English (or a combination of it) may not be necessarily true, and as teachers, we need to be cognizant of this and therefore, show respect and acceptance to the parent by allowing them to communicate in English. Furthermore, the parent may show enthusiasm to speak English at home due to the fact that they are living in an English-speaking country, or that they are now working in an English setting or even that they are eager to put into practice the new language skills (in L2) that they have acquired during their own ESL classes.

Stephen Krashen, linguist and educator, speaks directly about the notion of “comprehensible input” and its importance when learning an L2. This concept allows the L2 learner to acquire language in a communicative and social way. Keeping Krashen’s thought alive, as an educator, I try to support my students’ understanding by using cognates as comprehensible input. For this reason, I find it interesting to hear an interpreter speak to a client utilizing the L1, but what I find more intriguing is when I hear or recognize certain terms in English that have been given a specific accent. Languages tend to borrow certain lexicon from other languages and would often times make it their own. There are many *borrowed terms* even in the English dictionary that come from the Spanish language. For example: mosquito, patio, burro, mustang, canyon, and sierra.

All of these words have found themselves incorporated in the English vocabulary, and likewise, there are many *borrowed terms* that happen between two languages. These words are borrowed from the Spanish language. Furthermore, this also tends to happen between any two languages such as English-French, Latin-English, Latin-Greek, Arabic-English, etc. Utilizing cognates or same root words would only help the ELL find out that there are many terms in their L1 readily available (with the same meaning) in the L2 (English). When I teach Spanish or Italian at Redeemer University, I always finish my first day of my introductory class by letting my students know that they already hold a good percentage of lexicon in the L2 (Spanish or Italian). Sometimes the student understands what I mean. I explain that the cognates that are visible in both languages have either the same root (such as Graeco-Roman) and/or is a term that has



been borrowed from a different language (these are terms that are added from one language to another). I mention this to support L2 (Spanish/Italian) learning with my students. Similarly, I also mention the same message to my ELs by using a list of words from their L1 found in the English language. To facilitate language learning through vocabulary building, I try using cognates intentionally. For example, with my Arabic speaking students I will try to support them linguistically by using Arabic rooted terms in English. These are (and certainly not limited to): cotton, guitar, coffee, candy, arsenal, safari, and pants.

The above list only mentions a few words from an Arabic origin that can facilitate understanding.

When learning a second language, there are many methods and/or strategies that promote faster learning and or the best way to learn, or even both. In this article, I wanted to show the reasons for why English could be (and in certain cases should be) allowed with ELs and their parents. At times, we may think as educators we could be doing a disservice to the English learner when we promote the L2 at home. However, I wanted to show why the L2 may be of importance at home, too. Finally, as an educator we want to send a positive and inclusive message to all parents. When we tell parents to not speak English at home, the parent may receive the message as: “Since you do not speak English well, please leave the teaching to us”; or simply “you are not allowed to speak English to your child because you do not speak it like me” or even “your accent is too thick, and your child is learning English the way you speak it.” All of these messages will not allow for an open communication with the parent and may also sound negative and ill-mannered to an immigrant. For these reasons, I find it crucial to allow the parent and the child to speak English (L2) at home and not to substitute the L1 but rather to help the family feel included in the learning/teaching of the L2.

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### Author Bio

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