State of art article: The role of L2 learners’ first language in second language acquisition: Facilitative or deterrent?

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The issue of employing second language (L2) learners’ first language (L1) in second language acquisition (SLA) has been an ongoing debate. There is a renewed interest with regard to the role of L2 learners’ L1 in SLA. Recently this issue is receiving a great amount of attention in SLA research. In contrast with communicative approaches to foreign language teaching which underline L2 use and solely exposure to it, findings of recent SLA studies examining the effect of employing learners’ first language (L1) lend support to the facilitative effect of having recourse to learners’ L1 in ESL/EFL classrooms (e.g., de la Campa and Nassaji, 2009; DiCamilla and Anton, 2012; Turnbull et al., 2011; Leeming, 2011; Levine, 2003; Liao, 2006; Liebscher and Daily-O’cain, 2005; Macaro, 2001). Based on SLA research to date, the present article investigates the role of L2 learners’ L1 in SLA. Furthermore, it inquires into the recent SLA research findings with regard to falling back on L1 in ESL/EFL contexts. Moreover the theories in this field are discussed. In this way, this study aims to make a significant contribution to the existing SLA literature on this issue. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Second language acquisition; first language use; Code-switching; Sociocultural theory; Cognitive processing theory; Revised hierarchical model

INTRODUCTION

First language (L1) use in second language acquisition (SLA) is at issue. In the last decades it was generally accepted that we, as language teachers, should use only target language in L2 classes and avoid L1 under any circumstances. As Horst, White, and Bell (2010) point out keeping away from learners’ L1 in L2 classrooms has been a ‘longstanding orthodoxy’ for L2 teachers trained in the communicative tradition. But renewed interest in the role of L1 in SLA has questioned long-held anti L1 approaches that have exercised control over ESL/EFL classes (Scott and De La Fuente, 2008). Findings of SLA research in this field have cast doubt on anti L1 use perceptions and yielded positive impact of L1 use in L2 classrooms (e.g., de la Campa and Nassaji, 2009; Horst et al., 2010; Kang, 2008; Leeming, 2011; Levine, 2003; Liao, 2006; Liebscher and Daily-O’cain, 2005; Macaro, 2001; Scott and de la Fuente, 2008). Cook (2010) remarked that “even in the most hard-line monolingual classrooms, teachers who have been trained and contracted to teach without translation nevertheless occasionally resort to it when all else fails, which may be quite often.” (p.3)

On the one hand, proponents of L2 use argue that target language use results in more language exposure which leads to enhancement of oral interaction. The main reason for advocating maximal use of L2 is that for most L2 learners classroom is the only opportunity they enjoy for being exposed to L2 (Littlewood and Yu, 2011). Furthermore, teaching exclusively in L2 makes the classroom real-life (Macaro, 2001). On the other hand, some SLA researchers (e.g., Crawford, 2004; Swain and Lapkin, 2000) claim that we should not turn a blind eye to learners’ L1 and as a matter of fact we would consider it as an invaluable asset, not as a deterrent. As Scott and De la Fuente (2008) rightly asserted, use of L1 is a natural and spontaneous cognitive strategy and it might be unproductive to abandon use of L1 in SLA. Arnfast and Jorgensen (2003) argued that code-switching,
systematic resorting to first language within a conversation or utterance is a competence, even an advanced one, which enables the bilingual speakers to negotiate more fluently.

In recent years, L2 researchers have inquired into applying L2 learners’ L1 and have come up with positive effects of L1 use in SLA (e.g., Crawford, 2004; Hummel, 2010; Ramachandran and Rahim, 2004). Swain and Lapkin (2000) argue that the development and maintenance of the L1 supports SLA.

Functions of L2 learners’ L1 in SLA

Anton and DiCamilla (1998, as cited in Storch and Aldosari, 2010) concluded that L1 might be employed effectively in L2 activities to provide assistance, initiate and maintain interrelationships, and externalize and vocalize L2 learners’ thought. Also, L1 can serve social and cognitive functions, in particular scaffolding assistance and paving the way for language learning to take place (Carless, 2008).

According to Littlewood and Yu (2011) language teachers fall back on learners’ L1 for establishing constructive social relationships, communicating complex meanings to ensure understanding, saving time, and classroom management. Explaining and analyzing grammar, cross-cultural discussions, explaining errors, giving feedback, checking for comprehension, reducing anxiety of learners are other functions of L1 in SLA (Inbar-Lourie, 2010). In other words, L1 can be employed for task management, discussing and generating ideas, and grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics deliberations (Storch and Aldosari, 2010).

de la Campa and Nassaj (2009) examined the amount, purpose, and reasons for employing learners’ L1 in German (L2) classrooms. They video- and audio recorded samples of two experienced and novice teachers’ L2 classes during a 12-week semester, interviewed the teachers, and carried out stimulated recall sessions. They found that these two teachers used a considerable amount of L1 (11.3 %). Unexpectedly, there was no difference between the two teachers in the overall amount of L1 use. In spite of the novice teachers who took advantage of L1 mainly for translating, the experienced teacher employed learners’ L1 for bringing comfort by making personal comments and jokes in learners’ L1.

Levine (2003, as cited in Inbar-Lourie, 2010) concluded three tenets for L1 and L2 use, that is to say the optimal use tenet, which endorses the effective role of L1 in foreign language classes; the marked L1 tenet, which accepts the pedagogical functions of L1 use as a marked code in comparison with target language; and the collaborative language use tenet, which focuses on the active role of L2 learners in using both their L1 and L2 in the multilingual classroom contexts.

Atkinson (1987) put forward that L2 teachers might have recourse to learner’s L1 for eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving instructions, co-operation between learners, discussing classroom methodology, presenting and reinforcing language, checking for sense, testing, and development of useful learning strategies.

In a similar view, Piasecka (1988, as cited in Auerbach, 1993) summarized the possible avenues for using L1, in particular negotiating the syllabus and the lesson, classroom management, scene setting, language analysis, discussion of cross-cultural issues, and instructions or prompts.

The theoretical perspectives

There are some theories which give reasons for the positive effect of applying L1 in SLA. In the first place, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) (1981, 1986, as cited in Storch and Aldosari, 2010) draws attention to the inner voice and private speech and claims that they are often performed in learners’ L1. SCT argues that the L1 can be employed effectively to help L2 learners understand and accomplish L2 tasks and improve their collaboration in L2 (Swain and Lapkin, 2007). As Storch and Aldosari (2010) argued, L2 learners working in pair-work resort to L1 and take advantage of it for enhancing communication in L2.

Secondly, code switching supports the facilitative role of the L1 in learning a second language (Macaro, 2009). Eldridge (1996) claimed that code-switching is a natural and purposeful phenomenon which enhances communication and learning. Willis (2011), based on SLA research, argued that greater bilingual competency leads to an increase in the amount of code-switching rather than a decrease and instead of considering code-switching as a sign of deficiency of L2 learners, L2 teachers should acknowledge bilingual competencies and the strategies bilingual learners use.

Thirdly, cognitive processing theory argues that the L1 and L2 are not kept in separate conceptual stores and lexical items of the L1 and L2 are activated when a bilingual speaker is making an attempt to process the target language. Lastly, the word association model which points out L2 lexical items are mediated via direct connection to their L1 equivalents (Kroll et al., 2002). In the same line, the revised hierarchical model (Kroll and Stewart, 1994, as cited in Guasch et al., 2008) claimed that at the early stages of L2 learning access to corresponding semantic/conceptual representations from L2 is mediated via L1. Kroll and Tokowicz (2001) put an emphasis on this fact that L1 can be employed as a temporary scaffold for L2 learners in the beginning of SLA.
Empirical L2 research findings

Findings of a great amount of SLA research conducted to date examining the effect of L1 use in L2 learning underscore the facilitative effect of L1 in SLA. Ramachandran and Rahim (2004) investigated the effect of the translation method on elementary level learners’ vocabulary learning. Their study demonstrated the positive influence of translation method in fostering L2 vocabulary learning. The findings of the research carried out by Storch and Aldosari (2010) revealed that the use of L1 seems to act as important cognitive, social, and pedagogical functions. Upton and Lee-Thompson (2001) studied the role of L1 in L2 reading. They found that L1 is activated by L2 readers as they make an effort to make sense of an L2 text.

Scott and De la Fuente (2008) observed L2 learners’ first language use during consciousness-raising form-focused tasks. The findings demonstrated that L2 learners fall back on their mother tongue even when they seem to be operating exclusively in L2. The stimulated recall sessions showed that the learners when they were to use the target language during the collaborative consciousness-raising form-focused task took advantage of inner speech in L1 to translate the text, recall grammar rules, review the task, and plan what to express in L2. They claimed that the sole use of L2 during collaborative consciousness-raising, form-focused tasks might impede cognitive demands on L2 learners which can exert a negative impact on L2 production. Moreover, exclusive use of target language may impede collaborative interaction, inhibit the use of metatalk, and stop resorting to natural learning strategies.

Laufer and Girsaï (2008) studied the effect of contrastive analysis and translation on vocabulary learning in form-focused instruction. The contrastive analysis and translation group outscored the meaning focused instruction and non-contrastive form-focused instruction groups on all the tests. Their findings lend support to the positive effect of employing contrastive analysis and translation on L2 vocabulary learning.

Yau (2011) inquired into the role of mental translation in L1 and L2 reading and found that the mental translation, as a processing strategy, appears to have positive associations with reading comprehension and the ability to translate seems to foster reading comprehension. The findings of the study conducted by Liao (2006) confirmed the positive effect of resorting to L1 and translation in SLA.

Brooks-Lewis (2009) investigated the adult learners’ perceptions regarding L1 use in foreign language learning and teaching. The findings of his study showed the facilitative impact of employing L1. The results depicted that L1 use is effective in reducing anxiety, facilitating incorporation of learners’ life experiences, raising awareness, and allowing the learner-centered curriculum development.

On the whole, the findings of SLA research conducted to date examining the possible role of L1 use in SLA reveal the positive effect of employing L2 learners’ L1 in foreign language classrooms. Swain and Lapkin (2007) claim that in task-based language learning, avoiding L1 may result in L2 learners’ failure in accomplishing the tasks.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

The present article was sought to shed more light on the role of L1 in SLA. In this paper the recent SLA literature on L1 use and the conceptual frameworks which support employing it was reviewed. Although recent studies report the positive effect of falling back on L1 in L2 learning, the most notable issue is how to strike a balance in language classes regarding the amount of L1 use. The points which should be considered with respect to employing L1 in ESL/EFL classrooms are associated with when, how, where, and with whom we can apply L1.

In future research it will be of interest to study the patterns of L1 use of L2 teachers and learners. It would also be desirable to study the L2 teachers’ and learners’ attitude with respect to L1 use in their classes and explore whether the L2 learners’ and teachers’ attitudes are in line with each other or not. Furthermore, future SLA research would inquire into the parents’ perceptions regarding L1 use in early bilingual education. Additionally, one further research goal that can be pursued in future SLA studies is to examine the possible relationship between different tasks and L1 use. Another potential area for future SLA research could focus on the possible effect of L1 use in decreasing the cognitive load of tasks. Further studies might examine the mediating effect of L2 learners’ proficiency in taking advantage of L1. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate the effect of task repetition on L1 use.

REFERENCES


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