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L_1 and L_2 Use in the Classroom: A Systematic Approach

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Introduction

Speaking activities, such as ranking, information gap and problem-solving tasks, can meet several language-learning goals. They can be used to learn vocabulary and grammatical structures, to develop the skill of speaking, and to develop fluency in listening and speaking. But most of these goals will not be reached if the learners spend a large part of the time during an activity speaking their first language to each other. In countries where English is a foreign language and where learners share the same first language, teachers are often reluctant to use small group speaking activities because the learners do the ranking, bridge the information gap, or find an answer using their first language. This article looks at this problem and suggests a range of solutions.

At a more general level, the article suggests two principles that should be considered whenever teachers face a problem in their teaching. The first principle is that, as a matter of professional pride, teachers should try to solve classroom problems through the application of pedagogical skills rather than through administrative or disciplinary procedures. The second principle is that most problems have a variety of causes which to some degree reflect the variety of individuals in a class. There is thus likely to be a variety of solutions, and so a teacher may need to put together a package of complementary solutions rather than just try one possible solution.

Let us look at ways of encouraging the use of the L2 by considering causes of L1 use under the major categories of learner proficiency and task difficulty, circumstances of the task, and learner attitude. In this section of the paper we will assume that L2 use should be maximised. At the end of the paper we will look at a role for the use of the L1.

Matching the Demands of the Task and the Learners' Proficiency

Learners may feel they are forced to use their L1 during a speaking activity because their L2 language proficiency is not sufficient. They may also feel that the task alone is difficult enough without the added difficulty of having to do it in a foreign language. There are several ways of systematically bridging the gap between the demands of a task and the learners' proficiency (Nation, 1990). Because we are considering non-guided

group work tasks, we will only look at ways of making tasks involve knowledge and skills that are largely within the learners' previous experience.

One way of bringing a task within the learners' experience is to give the learners a chance to learn what they need before they begin to do the task. If the teacher does this, it is best to focus on a few language items, for example no more than five or six words, and practise them thoroughly. But the teacher is not the only source of language input in the classroom. The expert group/family group procedure is another kind of pre-teaching where learners learn from each other in tasks where information is divided up among the group members. For example, in a ranking activity, each learner in a group can be given responsibility for knowing a lot about a different set of the items to rank. In the expert group stage, all the learners with the same set of items or the same piece of information get together in a group or groups to help each other become expert with the material. The members of the expert group help each other understand the items and prepare the words and sentences they need to discuss them. The teacher could give each expert group a guide sheet to help them. After the learners have worked in their expert groups, they then split up to form family groups made up of one person from each of the different expert groups. Some expert group work could usefully be done in the learners' first language.

Pre-teaching can focus on skills as well as language items. The teacher can give the learners models and practice in negotiating with each other. Another useful way to focus on skill preparation is to get the learners to observe a pair of learners negotiating with each other and to note the phrases used in the negotiation and the strengths and weaknesses in the negotiation. This can be done by dividing the class into groups of three, with two learners working on a split information task and one as an observer.

The teacher can also choose tasks that are easy for the learners to do, and gradually from lesson to lesson increase the difficulty of the task. In a ranking task, for example, the learners could be given just a few items to rank and could be given model sentences to use in the discussion.

Changing the Circumstances of the Task

Learners may be using their first language when completing the task because they are doing things which are normally done in the first language, for example, negotiating a procedure for doing a job, or clarifying misunderstandings. The teacher needs to change the circumstances of the task so that it seems just as natural to use the second language.

For example, one might have learners pretend to be someone else during a task, making the use of English seem more natural. This may mean introducing a role-play element to a task. In a ranking activity learners can do the ranking from the viewpoint of

a particular role. The content of tasks may also be chosen so that they represent situations where English is more likely to be used than the first language. Being a tourist, making an international phone call, showing a foreign friend around make the use of English more natural.

Some activities make English an unavoidable part of the task. The strip story actually requires learners to repeat sentences in English that need to be put in order. The discussion of the order may be in L1 but at the least the learners need to say their English sentences aloud so that the others can think about them and discuss them. Similarly, in a ranking task, the learners are likely to say the items in the list in English. This can be made even more likely by splitting the list among the learners in the group so that they have to tell their part of the list to the others.

And finally, to encourage learners to use English in a communication task it is useful for them to be well practised or well prepared for tasks. Taking part in a communication activity involves a lot of different kinds of knowledge. In a ranking task for example, learners have to understand the content of the task, they have to know the language needed to do the task, they have to be able to use this language in appropriate ways during the task, and they have to know how to do a ranking task. By having repeated opportunities to do ranking tasks, learners can become very skillful with the procedure for doing such tasks and thus be able to give more of their attention to the content and language of the task.

Changing Learners' Attitudes to Using English

Learners may be reluctant to use English because they feel shy, because the task does not engage or motivate them, or because they see no point in it. They may wish simply to get the job done as quickly as possible even using the first language. In general the ways of dealing with the lack of a positive attitude towards the use of English involve getting learners to see the benefits of using English during the tasks. The discussion and presentation of information which can be used to help learners change their attitude towards the use of English can be done using the L1 if necessary.

Inform learners of the learning goals of each task

Arthur Lydiard, the coach of many Olympic track champions, considered that the greatest motivation to encourage someone to do a particular kind of training was to know why they were doing it. Tasks can be classified into the categories of "blind" and "informed." In a "blind" task, learners do the activity but they do not know why they are doing it. In an "informed" task the learners are informed and aware of the learning goal. It is useful to make a distinction between the goal of a task and the outcome of a task. The goal is what may be learned or begin to be learned as a result of doing the task. Typical

goals involve learning particular vocabulary items, gaining some control over a grammatical construction, becoming skillful in the use of a discourse strategy and so on. The outcome of a task is the decision or material that learners make to complete the task. For example, in a problem-solving task the outcome may be a solution or a list of solutions. In a ranking activity the outcome is a ranked list of items. In a split information task it may be a successfully combined set of sentences. In an informed task, learners need to be aware of the learning goals of the task as well as the expected outcome.

Being aware of the goals of the task may not be sufficient. It may also be necessary to inform learners how to reach these goals. This is beyond the scope of this present article, but is an important step in helping learners become autonomous language learners (Crabbe, 1993; Cotterall, 1995).

Discuss the value of using English

Using the first language if necessary, the teacher should also explain to the learners the benefits of using English in activities. This explanation can be more convincing if the teacher is able to show examples of how using English in a task helps learners. The examples could include instances of effective negotiation of the meaning of words taken from previous uses of the task, before and after examples of individual learners' improvement in speaking as a result of using English, and for older learners some of the experimental evidence. Learners may also be encouraged to contribute to the discussion by suggesting benefits that may occur.

Discuss the problem and seek a collaborative solution

The problem facing the class is that the learners generally do not speak English when doing language learning tasks. The teacher can outline this problem to the class and then get them to come up with causes and solutions. The discussion could be organized using a pyramid procedure. For example, individually or in pairs the learners make a list of causes and solutions. Then they get together in groups of four to come up with one list per group. They may rank the solutions according to their likely effectiveness or according to their desirability. Then the whole class tries to come up with a common list for the class. The teacher may stay out of the discussion or participate in one of the groups. The discussion has three aims: (1) to make the learners aware of the problem and the need for change, (2) to come up with practical suggestions for change, and (3) to get the learners to become actively involved in bringing about change. It might happen that achieving the first aim of informed awareness makes the second aim, a list of suggestions, unnecessary. The teacher's goal may be to place the responsibility for solving and dealing with the problem in the hands of the learners.

Set up a monitoring system

Learners may be willing enough to speak English during activities but they forget and fall back on the first language. In some tasks it may be possible to have a member of each group whose job it is to keep reminding the others to speak English and to point out when English is not being spoken. This monitoring may be accompanied by a penalty-and-reward system. This may be something like the systems that family members or colleagues set up to reduce swearing. Whenever a person swears they have to put a certain amount of money in the pot. Token systems have often been used in schools and they have their supporters and opponents.

Use non-threatening tasks

Learners may be reluctant to use English because they feel that the task is threatening or embarrassing. There are several ways to deal with this. One way is by letting learners choose the groups that they will work in, so that they feel comfortable with the members of the group. Another way is for the teacher to stay out of the groups as the teacher may be the cause of the embarrassment. Yet another way is to give careful attention to the choice of the topic of the activity as learners may be reluctant to talk about some issues. Allowing the learners to prepare for the task may be another way of reducing the threat of the task. If the learners come to the task well prepared they may feel much more confident and positive about it.

Approaching the Problem Systematically

The range of solutions suggested here have covered language proficiency, the nature of the task, and learners' attitudes. They should not be seen as alternatives but mainly as complementary ways of dealing with the problem. That is, it may be more effective to try an integrated set of various ways of dealing with the problems. The problem can be approached by a combination of proficiency, attitude and circumstances-based solutions. Acton (1984) gives a very useful description of such an integrated approach for dealing with pronunciation improvement.

Another quite different approach is to consider whether L1 use really is a problem or if it is always a problem, and to gain the benefits where possible by treating it as an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

Using the First Language Can Help Learning

Auerbach (1993) discusses the role of English in ESL classrooms, warning that an English only policy in classrooms "is rooted in a particular ideological perspective, rests on unexamined assumptions, and serves to reinforce inequities in the broader social order"

(p. 9). While her focus is mainly on ESL classrooms where English is the dominant language outside the classroom, as in much of the United States, several points she raises are important in EFL classrooms in countries like Indonesia and Japan where little English is spoken outside the classroom. Auerbach argues for the reasoned, appropriate use of the learners' L1 in the L2 classroom wherever this will have positive effects on the learners and learning. Examples include using the L1 to explain the procedure for a task where confusion would result if it was done through the L2, using the L1 to prepare for tasks that would be too difficult without this preparation, using the L1 to allow learners to say what matters to them, and to give them a role in managing and directing the classroom, using the L1 to explain some vocabulary and grammar points, and using the L1 to show it is a valued resource in the classroom. For further consideration of the role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms, see Duff and Polio (1990).

Research and observation indicate that some learning goals can be achieved and even enhanced if learners use the first language during some parts of an activity. Lameta-Tufuga (1994) compared limited English proficiency Samoan students doing academic tasks through the medium of English and through the medium of their first language, Samoan. The learners were tested in English on vocabulary learned during the task, their knowledge of the topic, and the quantity and quality of the information contained in a short account they wrote in English based on the task. Lameta-Tufuga found that on all three measures the learners who did the task in their first language, Samoan, outperformed the learners who did the task in their second language, English. Both groups were tested in the same way, in their second language, English. A study of transcripts of learners doing the tasks showed that the learners speaking in their first language were more focused on the demands of the task and were involved in higher quality discussion.

An interesting aspect of the discussion in the group using Samoan was the use of English words and phrases in the discussion. Here are some examples.

> . . . um e pei o mea ei lalo e malo i le **pressure** ao mea ei luga e **semi-fluid**.
> (It's like the things below are rigid due to pressure and those above are semi-fluid)
> **Because** o le **membrane**, magakua le **membrane** le **cell membrane** lea e **allowiga** le vai e alu mai leisi iku lea e kele ai le vai i le mea lea e kau leai se vai.
> (Because of the membrane, remember the membrane, the cell membrane that allows water to move from one side with higher water concentration to where there is less water)

This discussion gets attention to both the form and meaning aspects of important words in the text and places the English words in a rich, meaningful context.

Friedlander (1990) found that if writing in English about a Chinese topic, Chinese speakers would benefit if they produced a plan in Chinese and then used the plan to generate their English text. Similarly if writing in English about an English topic, their writing would benefit if they produced their plan in English (p. 123).

Observation of learners performing speaking activities (Knight, 1996) shows that foreign language vocabulary learning can occur when learners negotiate in L1 the meaning of L2 words in the written input to the activity.

When learners use the L1 in speaking activities, the teacher should observe this carefully to see what opportunities for learning are occurring. Are the learners usefully negotiating and clarifying the procedure that they will follow to complete the activity? Are they explaining unknown L2 items to each other? Are they gaining a good understanding of the idea content of the activity so that they can then do it with full understanding? Looking for answers to questions like these may lead a teacher to consider encouraging learners to complete a part of the activity in their L1.

Systematic Approaches to Dealing with Classroom Issues

A secondary goal of this article has been to find ways of dealing with classroom issues in a systematic way. In this article, this has been done by approaching the problem of getting learners to speak English from four directions, from a proficiency viewpoint (Does the learner know enough?), from a circumstances viewpoint (Is the situation helping to create the problem?), from an attitude viewpoint (Does the learner need to feel differently about the problem?), and finally by seeing it not always as a problem and turning the seeming disadvantage to an advantage.

There are other ways of systematically approaching classroom issues. One way is to see problems as a symptom of the need for change and innovation. Generally, innovation theory classifies solutions into three major categories (Chin and Benne, 1969):

1 **Power-coercive** In this approach to change, change is brought about by the use of rules, rewards and punishments. For the problem of using English focused on in this article, this would include the use of rewards and penalties, staged tasks, making English an unavoidable part of the task, and the use of repeated tasks.

2 **Rational-empirical** Change is brought about through learners understanding and appreciating the benefits of change. This approach sees learners as reasonable rational beings who will change when they understand why it is good to make the change. This would include the use of informed tasks, reminding and monitoring, and teaching learners how to negotiate.

3 **Normative-reeducative** In this approach, change is brought about by getting those involved in the change working together with the common agreed goal of bringing about external change and change in themselves. This includes discussing the problem with the learners to reach agreement on solutions. This approach sees the learners as capable of determining and implementing their own solutions.

This article has focused on a variety of ways of bringing about change in the classroom particularly with regard to classroom language use, and has outlined two frameworks for doing this. The use of an organised framework ensures that important sets of solutions are not overlooked. One framework was used to look at a range of complementary options to encourage the use of the L2 in classroom activities. A well-designed approach would make use of several options.

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