Using L1 in the EFL classroom

There is a widely held belief that the best way to learn a foreign language is to go and immerse yourself in that language, to study with a native speaker teacher, live with a host family which doesn’t know your language and learn to survive in that linguistic environment.

But millions of English language students around the world study the language in local schools, in large classes, taught by teachers who are not native speakers of English.

In The non-native teacher, Peter Medgyes introduced us to the acronym NEST for native English speaker teachers, and non-NESTs for people, like himself, who are non-native English speaker teachers.

Immersion Methodology

Immersion methodology started as a reaction to the Grammar Translation Method, at a time when we were beginning to understand more about the process of mother tongue acquisition, through extensive exposure to the language, gradual understanding and the first attempts at production.

Immersion Methodology became very popular. When the late John Haycraft started International House, their four-week training courses for teachers became the model for teacher training and led to CELTA. The i.h. training course allowed many young native speakers to leave Britain and discover the world as English language teachers. In the post-colonial, post industrial world, the English language became an important export for Britain.

Immersion Methodology became the standard for all EFL teachers, both native speaker teachers, NESTs, and non-native speaker teachers, non-NESTs.

Classrooms in state schools all over the world were converted into English speaking communities, so that for 50 minutes, three times a week, students could be immersed in the English Language.

In these English classrooms, the mother tongue is not welcome, the mother tongue is banned.

For students, the English language classroom is an unnatural space. They are asked to attempt to communicate with their classmates in English, even though they can communicate very effectively in their mother tongue. For them, the English language classroom is not real life, it is a theatre, in which they are asked to pretend that they do not know L1.
L1 in the students’ brains

Teachers try to prevent their students from using L1 in the classroom, but they cannot prevent students from using L1 in their brains. The students’ brain space is filled with their mother tongue. It has formed the neural networks of their brains. Their knowledge is in L1. They comprehend and process their thoughts in L1.

Immersion methodology and non-NEST teachers

How does immersion methodology affect non-NEST teachers? They are prevented from using their great asset - their shared language and culture. The non-NEST teacher has learnt English as a foreign language, has travelled the route which the students are attempting. The non-NEST teacher started the journey from the same starting point as the students, so the teacher knows all the dangers, complications and potential misunderstandings. But the teacher also knows all the shortcuts and knows the similarities between English and the L1. But immersion methodology does not allow teachers to use these advantages.

What do students already know?

In some countries, students will have a formal knowledge of their L1 grammar, but all students will have an unconscious, operational knowledge of how their language functions. They know about singularity and plurality, they know that some words are nouns, some are adjectives, others are verbs. They know that some things are countable and others are uncountable (and therefore do not have a plural form). They know the difference between polite and impolite language.

As Rod Bolitho has said, “the students’ knowledge of their mother tongue is the greatest asset which they bring to the English language classroom.”

Every journey starts from home

The linguistic journey into the foreign language also starts from home. Linguistic home, for the students, is their mother tongue. But immersion methodology does not ‘start from the students’ home’. Immersion methodology starts at their destination and ignores the ‘home’ from which students have started.

L1 shortcuts to concepts of English Grammar

Rather than trying to teach English grammatical concepts from no context, teachers can encourage students to compare how L1 and English convey similar concepts. The teacher can draw attention to similarities and explain differences with reference to L1 grammar.
**False friends and true friends**

Teachers get very anxious about false friends and may suggest that students should not use their knowledge of L1 vocabulary to make intelligent guesses about the meaning of English words. But, certainly in European languages, most friends will be true friends. When a rare, false friend is discovered, students can learn to deal with that difficulty. Translations are often used to overcome potential misunderstandings which can delay the progress of a lesson, but we should beware of giving instant translations which mean that students do not need to think. It is better to offer three translation options, send the students back to the context and allow them to choose the correct translation. Students learn English by using their brains to make sense of language. We should be careful not to allow the use of L1 to deny students the chance for this mental activity.

**Using L1 in classroom tasks**

If we limit classroom language use to English, we cannot ask complex comprehension questions because the learners will not have the language required to respond. If L1 is a permitted option, we can begin to discuss nuances of style and attitude when students are only at elementary level in English. Exploit activities which require the use of both languages, such as:

- Watch a movie in L1. Retell the story in English.
- Watch a sports event in L1. Write a report in English.
- Read about a historic site in L1, write a simple guide in English.
- Read a menu in L1, explain the food to an American tourist.
- Read a text in English. Then listen to the teacher reading an adapted translation in L1. Identify the differences between the two versions.

Using L1 in the English language classroom should not be used to make the students think less. The use of L1 should encourage students to think more about L1 and English and how the two languages operate and describe the real world. If students are working on an English project, why do we ask students to do all the research, discussion and decision-making in English? The OUTCOME of the project will be in English, but does all the preparation also need to be in English? When the Brazilian tourist board discuss an advertising campaign to attract more American tourists to visit the Iguaçu waterfall, their discussions will probably be in Portuguese. The campaign may be drafted in Portuguese, but the eventual outcome will be in English. The real world, in which our students will earn their income, is a world dominated by their mother tongue. Most of our students will never live in an English speaking country. They will stay in their home country. They don’t need to be monolingual in English. They need to be able to use L1 and English effectively and switch between languages with little hesitation. They will earn 99% of their income with their mother tongue. English might create a 10% BONUS on top of their L1 income. Immersion methodology does not teach students to be bilingual or to switch between languages.
Heroes and Role Models

The heroes and role models for the students should be their co-nationals who are effective communicators in English. Invite co-national friends who you know are regular users of English to your classroom. Ask them to talk to the students (in L1 or in English) about how they use English in their lives. The most important role model is you, the teacher. Tell the students about how you use English in your life outside the classroom.

- Exploit both L1 and English in a realistic way.
- Don’t let students become lazy with L1 use.
- Use L1 to do more challenging work and achieve higher standards.
- Start the journey into English from the students’ linguistic home – their L1.
- Don’t try to ban L1 from your classroom. No matter how hard you try, you cannot prevent students from using L1 in their brains.
- Use your own bilingualism to teach your students to be bilingual!

Immersion methodology, which is very effective in mixed language classes with native speaker teachers, places artificial restrictions on the teachers who share a language and culture with their classes. These teachers should not feel obliged to avoid exploiting L1 themselves, nor should they feel obliged to prevent their students from using L1. Use of L1 unlocks the potential for deeper study of language and can ease the process of learning English.

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