

An Analysis of the Availability of L1 in English Teaching in Primary Schools in Mainland China

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the availability of L1 (Chinese) in Chinese primary English (L2) classrooms. The paper analyzes this issue at three levels: theory of pedagogy, the current situation of L1 use in Chinese primary English teaching, and the analysis of a specific textbook, concluding that L1 can be appropriately applied in Chinese primary English classrooms. In terms of pedagogy, the communicative language teaching method, audiolingual method and direct method do not support the use of L1, however in the practical application of the pedagogies, the use of L1 shows some advantages; L1 is commonly used in Chinese primary English classrooms as it is in line with the students' learning backgrounds and characteristics, and there is also a positive transfer of the students' L1 to L2 acquisition; in the analysis of practical teaching materials, it is found that, although the skills such as reading and listening can be learned in teacher-student L2 communication, some grammar, vocabulary and phonology explanations still require L1 intervention. It is therefore suggested that the appropriate use of L1 in the Chinese primary classroom can facilitate students' L2 acquisition.

Keywords: L1, L2 acquisition, pedagogy, primary school in mainland China

1. Introduction

Scholars hold different views on whether the mother tongue (L1) should be used in second language (L2) acquisition (Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Atkinson, 1987). The resolution of this issue could have important implications for the teaching process and student learning outcomes in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms. The aim of the study is to explore the applicability of L1 in the English primary school teaching in China. The study will elaborate on the use of L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) from the theoretical perspective of pedagogy and the practical perspective of English teaching in Chinese primary schools, and then take the example of Jiangsu English textbooks to explore the availability of L1 in the primary school English classroom.

2. The Use of L1 in Some Pedagogies in ELT Classrooms

2.1 Use of L1 in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method

CLT, which is an learner-centered approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), aims to 'make communicative competence the goal of language teaching' (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011: 152). The theories of CLT mainly involve communicative competence theory and functional grammar theory. As is stated by Hymes (1971), there are four aspects to consider of communicative theory, which are whether something is formally possible, feasible, appropriate in relation to a context, and whether it is actually performed. In other words, the languages which are used should both be appropriate in terms of linguistic theory and fit in different contexts to achieve the goals of communication. In terms of CLT theory, the development of students' communicative competence cannot be achieved without the input and output of L2, so it would seem that the use of L1 in the CLT classroom is inappropriate. L1 use may have a negative impact on L2 acquisition (Ahmad & Rao, 2012). It is stated by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) that although L1 is allowed to be used reasonably, L2 should be used in both teacher-student communication and giving instructions as far as possible. In the CLT classroom, students can gradually acquire the ability of L2 output in the process of continuous L2 input. Even when they sometimes fail to understand the meaning of some L2 vocabulary or sentences, they can use their acquired L2 knowledge to guess and confirm the meaning, which can improve their ability to use L2 in different situations and empower them with the skills to use L2 in real contexts. The occurrence of L1 may destroy the whole process of interaction and discourage students to achieve the goal of communication and make them even rely on their L1. And in real cases, they cannot resort to their L1 to help the conversation proceed.

While in actual teaching, considering the reality of student learning L1 seems to have its own role. It is also important to consider whether L1 should be used from the point of view of students' learning receptivity and attitudes towards L1. Cheng (2015) studied the attitudes of Taiwanese high school students towards L1 use in CLT classrooms. It was found that all students considered L1 helpful when the teacher was talking about more difficult points, and most students expected more L1 explanations in the CLT classroom, especially for students with lower English proficiency. Wu (2018) also noted that avoiding L1 in the CLT classroom is misguided. Atkinson (1987: 243-244) makes a number of points about the role of L1, like giving instructions (early levels), discussions of classroom methodology (early levels),

presentation and reinforcement of language (mainly early levels), eliciting language (all levels), etc. It appears that L1 can be used as an aid to teaching and is a positive contributor to language learning. Although L1 may not be used in L2 communication in authentic situations, the use of L1 in the classroom may increase the efficiency of students' L2 acquisition, with L1 use also being favoured by them. Therefore, although L2 has an important role in promoting students' communication skills from the perspective of CLT theory, L1 may also contribute to their foreign language learning in actual teaching.

2.2 Use of L1 in Audiolingual Method

New vocabulary and grammatical structures are drilled in the form of dialogues, with students' correct performance reinforced, and no explicit grammatical rules are available in this process (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The theory behind this method is audiolingualism. According to Skinner (2014: 115), 'a stimulus, a response, and a reinforcement' are the three steps to be considered in terms of verbal behavior under stimulus control. This method does not require students to use L2 in context, and as Frey (1968) points out that the limitation of pattern drill is that the sentences are not practised in authentic communication. Being a traditional non-communicative classroom activity, audiolingual drill, was favoured by the students in the study of Rao (2002). Therefore, what the students need to do in this process is to keep rehearsing without thinking much about how to communicate and it seems that the assistance of L1 is not needed. Students may bring language habits from their L1 into L2 acquisition, which may not be applicable to L2 and could interfere with L2 learning (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Thus, the use of L1 may disrupt students' English language acquisition process, which may lead to poor language habits.

However, there are scholars who put forward different views. Mei (2018) points out that L1 can be used appropriately in audiolingual method to explain challenging sentences and analyse grammar. Without the help of L1 in the course, although it is possible for the students to increase their communication skills in dialogues based on drills, there is also a probability that some of them cannot comprehend the exact meaning of the dialogues. In addition, by the contrastive analysis of the differences between L1 and L2, students can get a better command of L2 and reduce occurrence of errors (Mei, 2018). L1 may be an excellent resource for learning a foreign language and there will be a positive transfer effect if the knowledge of L1 language is used well. It is stated by Butzkamm (2003) that L1 is a child's strongest ally, which can be used as the master key to exploring foreign language learning and a stepping stone for students' L2 initiation and development. Therefore, L1 might be used appropriately in audiolingual method to better help students learn a foreign language.

2.3 Use of L1 in Direct Method

Direct method promotes extensive input of L2. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), there should be no translation in class and the whole things taught are in L2. Also, the teaching model of direct method is designed according to real-life contexts, which means that the students can practise to use L2 in an authentic environment (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Grammar rules are not informed directly by the teacher but are found through inductive teaching (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). L1 is not accessible in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The disadvantage of using L1 here will be that it will go against the principle's of teaching method and spoil the relatively authentic atmosphere created for English learning.

However, the prolonged immersion in L2 class may make students tired and distracted, especially for students with low English proficiency, who may be confused because they do not understand everything in L2. The appropriate use of L1 may solve this problem. According to Carless (2008: 333), L1 interventions can help students stay focused in the classroom and maintain a sustained interest in what they are learning, and allow them to be brave and free to express their meaningful ideas and present themselves.

2.4 Summary of the Use of L1 in Pedagogies

From the theoretical point of view, the use of L2 throughout seems to be in line with the original intention of the pedagogy, which enables the students to be immersed in the L2 environment. However, in the case of teaching, the use of L1 may be necessary, taking into account the students' learning bases and their learning acceptance abilities.

3. Use of L1 in ELT Classrooms of Chinese Primary Schools

Having discussed the applicability of L1 from a pedagogical perspective above, the following is to explore the application of L1 in the context of Chinese primary schools. Teachers' use of L1 in Chinese primary English classrooms seems to be prevalent. For example, Li (2014) investigated the use of L1 by 88 primary English teachers and found that all of them had used L1 to varying degrees, and students showed greater willingness than their teachers in the use of L1 by teachers in English language teaching. Furthermore, primary school teachers participating in the study of Yang (2016) preferred to instruct their students using more Chinese than English, taking into account differences in the students' listening levels.

3.1 Reasons for the Use of L1 in Chinese Primary Schools

3.1.1 Students' Learning Background

English class in Chinese primary school is examination-oriented and examination results are valued by stakeholders. Scores are seen as a reflection of the teacher's teaching ability, a proof of the student's learning ability, and are highly valued by parents. Summative examination usually consists of reading, grammar, vocabulary, writing, listening, but rarely speaking tests. What will be assessed in the summative assessment will have an impact on the teaching process in the classroom. Therefore, considering the requirements of the

examination on students' English proficiency, teachers may use L1 to enable students to better grasp the knowledge required by the assessment. Although teachers may use L2 instead of their L1 in these situations, it may create more cognitive and comprehension load for the students and make teaching less efficient in a 40-50 minute classroom. Therefore, using L1 as an instructional aid when students share the same native language is an efficient method. In addition, many textbooks are compiled to provide instruction on reading, grammar and writing with less coverage of listening and speaking (Rao, 2013), so a full English lesson can be difficult for students to understand the material.

The large classroom size discourages teachers to totally use L2. Most of the time there are 40-60 students in a class in China, so it is difficult for the teacher to pay attention to each student's performance. Teachers could not accurately capture each student's acceptance of knowledge in class because they are unable to interact with each student in the classroom due to time constraints. Therefore, if L2 is used exclusively, there may be some students who do not follow the teacher's thoughts without being noticed. So teachers have to use Chinese as an aid to explain key points in order to ensure that every student is involved (Li, 2014). In classrooms of large sizes, teaching all in L2 may put psychological pressure on the students. They may worry of not understanding the teacher's words and may be hesitant to ask for help because of the lack of knowledge of asking questions in English. When questioned by the teacher, students will likely be anxious due to the language barrier and in a situation where the whole class is staring at them. In such cases, the use of L1 as a prompt keeps the teacher-student conversation to proceed and allows students to say whatever they like (Butzkamm, 2003), which can relieve the stress of students. The use of entirely L2 may not be conducive to classroom management. Students may be distracted when they do not understand what the teacher is saying, and there may be chaos during activities when the teacher's instructions are not understood by the students.

3.1.2 Characteristics of the Students

The knowledge base and receptivity of primary school students are still at a low level. They are at the beginning stage of English learning and do not have the ability to understand and communicate in a whole English environment. Due to their low vocabulary, it would be a challenge for the students if teachers use L2 to explain knowledge points such as grammar rules and lexical meanings. The class will be less effective and fails to meet the objectives of the lesson plan when teachers use specialist terms that students do not understand (Zhang, 2016). Students may also lose confidence because of the difficulty of acquisition or being lagging behind when learning knowledge that requires a high level of accuracy, like grammar (Zhang, 2016). Moreover, when students develop their L1, they have enough input from their surroundings, can use their L1 to make connections with things around them and think in their L1. However, when learning L2, most of the students' L2 input occurs in the classroom, and they rarely use L2 in real-life situations after school. Therefore, when learning L2, an all L2 teaching situation may seem to provide students with an environment that is similar to the development of their L1, but students' L2 competence is not sufficient to support them in adapting to it, whereas the L1 use can serve as a cue and inspiration for students' L2 learning.

3.1.3 Positive Transfer of L1 to L2

Students' linguistic base in their L1 may benefit L2 acquisition. Gui (1985) states that L1 is the starting point for learning L2. Teachers may make use of the positive transfer of L1 to L2 in their teaching by comparing the two languages. In terms of grammar and vocabulary, teachers may inspire students' learning and understanding of L2 by using relevant L1 examples. For example, in grammar, the sentence structure of both Chinese and English is subject-verb-object (Wang & Xiang, 2016); in vocabulary, some loanwords such as sofa, coffee, and pizza are pronounced similarly in Chinese and English, and some compound words such as weekend (in Chinese *zhou mo*) and afternoon (in Chinese *xia wu*) have similar lexical structures to those in Chinese (Wang & Xiang, 2016). Teachers can guide students to discover the similarities between their L1 and L2, activate the L1 information base in their minds, and then instruct them to apply their L1 experience to L2 acquisition.

3.2 Potential Challenges of Using L1 in the Chinese Primary English Classroom

It is possible that teachers do not have a good command of the extent to which they use L1. L1 is not supposed to be used excessively, and teachers are expected to use L2 as much as possible, because the teacher's L2 output in the classroom represents an important L2 input for the students (Cook, 2005). L1 is a supportive rather than a primary mode of L2 acquisition. Students may also rely on the L1 used by the teacher in the L2 classroom. The processing flow of listening to and understanding the meaning of L2 is more complex and involves more mental activity for students compared to L1, so students may selectively listen to instructions in L1 rather than trying to understand L2, which may result in less L2 input for students. Also, students' ability to communicate in L2 in authentic situations may be diminished. Classrooms with L1 assistance do not create realistic contexts for students to communicate with L2. Although L1 can be used as a support for communication in the classroom, it is excluded in authentic interaction as it may not be understood by other people.

4. Use of L1 in the Case of Jiangsu Province Teaching Materials

Unit 5 of the Jiangsu teaching material for grade four English (He et al., 2013) will be used as an example to analyse the use of L1 in the classroom.

4.1 Choices of Pedagogies and Techniques

CLT and audiolingual method will be used in the teaching of this unit. CLT is used to promote oral English ability of students as well as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary used during communication. The techniques to be used are dialogue and role play. Audiolingual

method is used to reinforce students' grasp of vocabulary and grammar, which will be tested in the summative assessment. The technique to be used is drill.

4.2 Choices of Using L1

4.2.1 Situations where L1 is not used

CLT can be applied to the teaching of all skills involving reading, writing, listening and speaking, and the audiolingual method can be used as a supplement of it. Three pages of the chosen textbook (He et al., 2013) are reading and vocabulary sessions (pages 32, 33, 35). Through the conversation between the teacher and the students, key sentence patterns and vocabulary are practiced and emphasized. The teacher can also ask the students to do role-play in which students are free to talk about anything relevant based on the text. Considering the large number of students in a class, it is impossible to assess each student's learning outcome. Therefore, to ensure that each student have a good mastery of knowledge, the teacher can use drills on vocabulary or key sentences before the dialogue and role-play to give students a demonstration, or drills after them as a consolidation of knowledge. For the teaching of this part, the class mainly focuses on improving the comprehension and communication skills of students, which pay less attention on accuracy. Here L1 may have the following disadvantages: First, students may imitate the teacher to use L1 in the communication process. What the teacher does in class may greatly affects the students' behavior, especially in the second language class, where the behavior of the teacher is the role model for students. Second, the intervention of L1 may dampen students' interest in learning. When they are fully immersed in class, they may find the difficult expressions challenging and interesting, having the confidence to overcome them. However, if the teacher uses L1, students may be reluctant to engage in thinking and lose interest in learning (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008).

4.2.2 Situations Where L1 Is Used

Some students may not have a precise grasp of grammar and pronunciation when they are taught in English only. For example, in the grammar teaching of the sentence 'Where's my...? Where are my...?' on page 34 of the chosen textbook (He et al., 2013), students may have difficulty in using singular and plural. The teacher may correct them by demonstrating in English. For example, if the student says 'Where are my pencil?', the teacher will repeat 'Oh, you said 'Where are your pencils?''', with emphasis on the final 's'. However, this is only the feedback for a certain student and the other students may not pay much attention to it. Thus, a summary statement of emphasizing the grammatical structure in L1 is needed to give the students a deeper impression instead of in L2 which will involve difficult terms such as 'singular' and 'plural'. Furthermore, the structure of English in interrogative sentences is very different from that of Chinese, in which the expression may be 'wo de qianbi zai na (my pencils are where)'. If there is no explanation in Chinese at this point, some students will be very confused. The use of L1 here reduces the cognitive load on students (Bruen & Kelly, 2014). L1 is also needed when teaching phonetics, such as the pronunciation of /k/ on page 36 of the chosen textbook (He et al., 2013). Chinese is needed here to explain more clearly about where and how the sound is pronounced because the description of terms of vocal organs in English will result in misunderstanding of students (Gong, 2005). According to Butzkamm (1998: 95), L1 is 'not a last resort but a natural shortcut', which means that the use of L1 is not a last option for students who do not understand what is being taught in L2, but rather it follows the patterns of students' language acquisition and empowers them to utilize their mastery of L1 to facilitate their learning of L2.

5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, L1 can be used appropriately in English language teaching. Although the use of L1 is not in line with certain pedagogical theories, considering the current situation of English language teaching in Chinese primary schools, the intervention of L1 is compatible with the characteristics of the students and the rules of language acquisition, and the use of L1 is applicable to the practical in-class teaching and the educational materials. This study examines how the use of L1 in the classroom contributes to students' L2 acquisition, but the long-term contribution of L1 to L2 acquisition remains unclear. Future research could focus more on the long-term effects of L1 use in L2 acquisition on student learning outcomes.

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