'L1, or no L1: that is the question.' How do we reconcile the ethical implications of this issue in the context of the adult ELICOS classroom?

by Sorina Grasso

Abstract

Significant evidence from research studies in several countries over the last twenty years has pointed to the considerable second language acquisition (SLA) advantages students gain when they consistently use the target language, are immersed in it and need to apply it in new situations. However, students sometimes use their first language (L1) in class. This article focuses on an L1 use survey of 83 advanced adult learners in a Direct Entry Program (University Bridging) course and argues that while teachers should continue to maximise students' use of the target language in the adult ELICOS classroom, there are important ethical considerations they need to keep in mind before they mandate an 'English only' approach in their lessons. Drawing on a number of research studies, this paper also suggests that learners' use of their L1 can be of benefit to them in learning L2 for a number of important reasons, therefore a more flexible approach to classroom talk may be desirable.

Introduction

A recent review of literature published in the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* found that 'there is near consensus that teachers and students should aim to make maximum use of the TL [target language]' (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). A number of other recent research studies also support this contention (Cook, 2001; Turnbull, 2001; Levine, 2003; Scott & de la Fuente, 2008; Littlewood & Yu, 2009). In concert with these findings, ELICOS teachers at Monash University English Language Centre have been unequivocally committed to an 'English only' approach in their classes to the extent that it became a 'rule' which students usually observed, albeit with constant reinforcement. However, over the last two years deliberate resistance by some students to this policy has become apparent and a number of teachers found themselves applying ever more stringent approaches. Not all teachers felt comfortable about this as they noticed that it was starting to affect the atmosphere in the classroom. It led to an ethical dilemma for the author of this paper also as I attempted to reconcile a number of conflicting issues. These included notions of cultural imperialism, the importance of affect in

effective learning, and the fact that the students pay a significant amount of money for the courses offered and that teachers have a moral obligation to provide good value in return. There was also the additional consideration that in the ELICOS context students are adults who are responsible for their own decisions and are free to make them as they see fit.

Survey on student use of L1 in the classroom

In order to find out what the Direct Entry Program students did and how they felt in the classroom in regard to L1 use, I devised a questionnaire which consisted of 17 questions, 15 using a Likert scale of 1-5 (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) and two short answer questions (see Appendix). The survey was anonymous and voluntary, but respondents were asked to specify what their first language was. In total, 83 responses from a possible 129 were received (64% response rate) and among the respondents there were 71 speakers of Chinese (Mandarin) and 12 speakers of other languages including Japanese, Arabic, Persian, Spanish, Portuguese and Thai.

Survey results

Firstly, the high percentages in the graph below (Figure 1) showed that students were aware of and appreciated the importance of maximising their use of the target language in class, although they were slightly less enthusiastic about using only English when working on a task or when reminded to do so by their teacher.
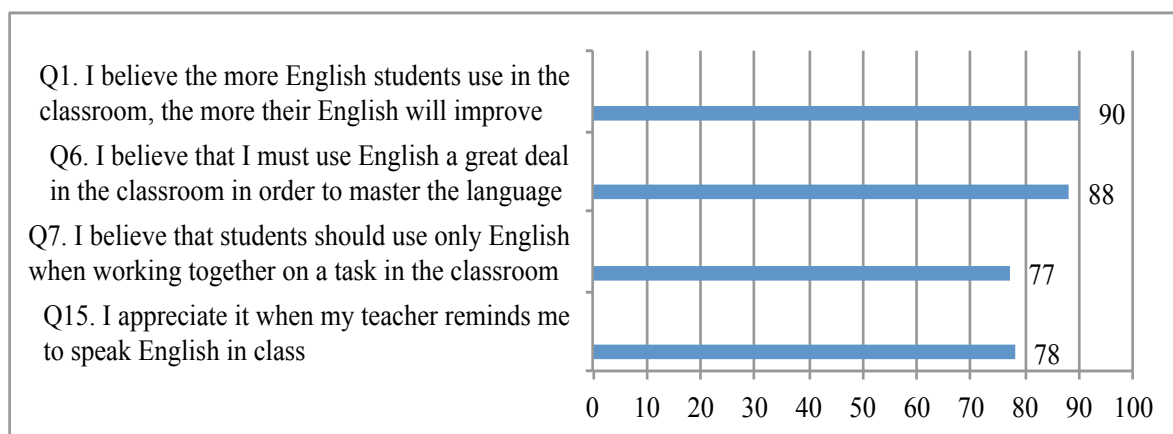

Figure 1 – Student beliefs and attitudes (% Agree + Strongly agree)

As regards actual use of their L1 in class, the figures in the following graph (Figure 2) show that the majority of respondents occasionally used their L1 in class and over a quarter regularly used it, with only a small proportion of students saying they never used it, so clearly it is something that happens in our classrooms, despite a strong appreciation by the students of the benefits of using the target language.
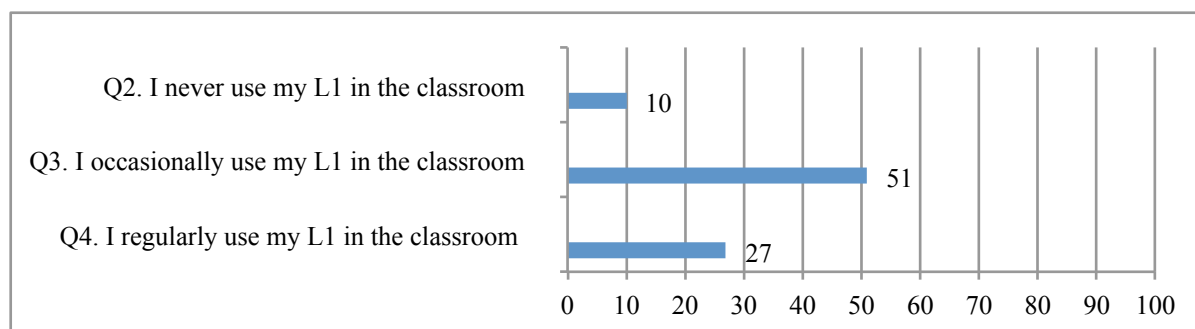
Figure 2 – Actual student use of L1 (% Agree + Strongly agree)

Chart data:
- Q2. I never use my L1 in the classroom: 10
- Q3. I occasionally use my L1 in the classroom: 51
- Q4. I regularly use my L1 in the classroom: 27

As far as their reasons for using the L1 in class, the following graph (Figure 3) shows that by far the highest percentage of respondents nominated seeking help with difficult vocabulary followed closely by clarification of a confusing grammar point and to a lesser extent clarifying instructions as reasons for using L1.
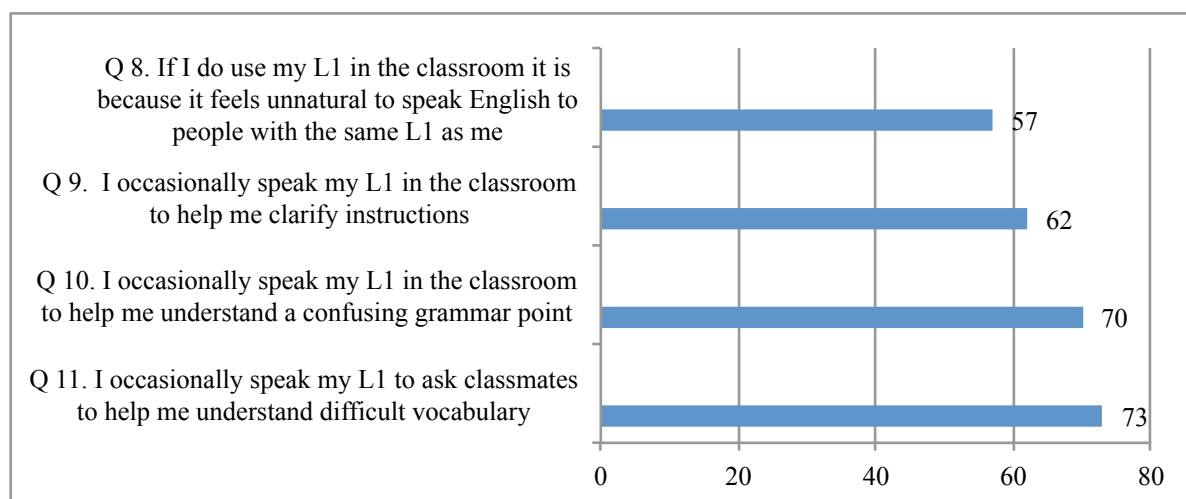
Figure 3 – Reasons for using L1 (% Agree + Strongly agree)

Chart data:
- Q 8. If I do use my L1 in the classroom it is because it feels unnatural to speak English to people with the same L1 as me: 57
- Q 9. I occasionally speak my L1 in the classroom to help me clarify instructions: 62
- Q 10. I occasionally speak my L1 in the classroom to help me understand a confusing grammar point: 70
- Q 11. I occasionally speak my L1 to ask classmates to help me understand difficult vocabulary: 73

Additionally, only a small number of respondents (22%) agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes spoke their L1 in class when they did not want the teacher to understand what they were saying and a similar number of respondents (20%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt happier and more motivated when they used their L1 in class.

In answer to the open-ended question 'How does using your L1 in the classroom help you?' representative responses from the students were as follows:

> I feel more confidence when I am talking with my classmate. I can express my opinions better.

> To understand some words and vocabularies which are hard to explain in English.

Generally, when I can't understand some difficult words or some grammar point, I will speak with my classmate in L1.

It is easy to make a joke in first language.

Sometimes when I cannot understand the difficult word.

To explain something to others.

Help me to understand some grammar difficulties.

Explain the word which I want to say, but can't remember.

Grammar question is hard to understand by explaining in English. Also, the explanation of some vocabs.

To relax.

Sometimes you cannot describe what you want to say, which makes you really nervous. Particularly, you cannot understand what the meaning about teacher said when you first time came here. However, someone who come from the same country as you can help you without language problems.

Sometimes, maybe need the first language to understand easily and quickly.

Sometimes we can explain things which were complex for my classmates in L1. It's because some of them have weak language.

When I want to explain something to my classmates while I cannot find the right English words, I will try to use my L1 to help make it clearly.

For a complex definition such as philosophy, politics, etc.

When miss some points, can catch up teachers quickly.

To understand complex grammatical rules.

Discussion of survey findings
L1 as learning resource?

While this survey of 83 students is too small to be conclusive, it does shed some light on why, despite clearly knowing the importance of maximising their use of the target language, University Bridging students sometimes find it helpful to use their L1 in the classroom, even at advanced levels of English proficiency. Use of L1 can offer them greater efficiency when clarifying vocabulary, grammar or instructions as they can check their understanding quickly, it can help them catch up with the other students if they fall behind and it can help relieve pressure when they feel nervous or frustrated. For more than half of the students surveyed, it felt 'unnatural' to speak English to students who spoke the same L1. Some also said that using their L1 was a way of being sociable and friendly towards their classmates. By helping them using L1 they saw that they were strengthening social bonds. Of course, this only applies to those students who speak the same L1 and in most cases the courses are taught to

mixed language groups. Nevertheless, the ethical considerations and the potential provided by the use of L1 may still be relevant, especially given the often large cohorts of Chinese speakers in classes.

The study findings indicate that, while it is important to continue to encourage students to maximise their use of English, success in the ELICOS classroom does not necessarily mean banning or stigmatising students' L1, or being punitive about its use, but perhaps regarding it as a type of student-generated scaffold or potential learning resource. It may also mean accepting that, after all, even when they are in the classroom using English, adult ELICOS students always bring with them proficiency in their L1 and so our classrooms are in fact always already bilingual spaces.

A number of research studies conducted in the Australian ESL context as well as in French immersion programs in Canada have concluded that L1 can be a learning resource for students when they are learning a second language. In a 2007 research study, Elizabeth Ellis noted the significance of L1 for 'the whole person' and for learning L2. She warned against teachers using pejorative or dismissive terms when discussing students' use of L1, reminding us that the adult learner's sense of self is inextricably intertwined with their native tongue, that their L1 forms a part of their social identity and that the L1 can make a cognitive and linguistic contribution to the task of learning L2 (Ellis, 2007; see also Norton Peirce, 1995; Forman, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 2005).

Another study investigating the use of L1 by tertiary learners engaged in performing complex tasks in an Australian ESL context found that the students made minimal use of their L1 and that, when they did use it, it was mainly for task management and task clarification, such as making decisions about who would do the writing, who would make the final copy, etc., in group work activities, that is, essentially for the purpose of organiaing a division of labour (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). The research found that students also used L1 to clarify meaning and difficult vocabulary, to explain confusing grammatical structures when they did not have the metalanguage to do so in English, and that they sometimes used their L1 to argue a point. The study drew on other recent empirical research into L2 learning processes within a sociolcultural framework which examined L1 interactions used by learners as they participate in cognitively demanding L2 activities. They concluded by suggesting that some use of the L1 in an L2 setting could be beneficial as it 'may assist learners to gain control of the task' and 'work with the task at a higher cognitive level than might have been possible had they been working individually' (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003: 768; see also Brooks & Donato, 1994: 271). In other words, the use of L1 may offer learners the additional cognitive support they need to analyse language and work at a higher level than would be possible if they were restricted solely to use of the target language. These studies suggest that teachers should not ban the use of some L1 in group and pair work, and acknowledge that using L1 may be a normal psychological process that allows learners

to maintain interest in a task and to initiate and sustain verbal interaction. However, the findings did not demonstrate that the L1 was more useful than the L2 for these tasks.

A further action research study in an Australian adult migrant ESOL classroom supports the conclusions of these studies. Through the use of audio-recordings of learners' actual L1 use in classroom interactions. the researcher, being a speaker of Chinese herself, analysed the speech data and concluded that the L1 played an important role in contributing to the learning of new L2 items through comprehension checks, clarification, negotiation of meanings and keeping the communication channels open (Chau, 2007). However, as this research was conducted with an elementary class, these findings might not be valid for the more advanced students undertaking university Direct Entry Programs involved in the current study.

Socio-cognitive functions of L1 in the L2 classroom

Research findings in the Canadian French immersion context and in American Spanish immersion programs take the argument for L1 usage in the language classroom further still, suggesting that the collaborative dialogue students engage in when they are involved in problem-solving tasks, whether in L1 or L2, can in fact mediate L2 learning (Tarone & Swain, 1995; Anton & DiCamilla, 1999; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). These researchers adopt a theoretical perspective in which language is seen as a mediating tool in all forms of higher order mental processing and draw on their own data as well as previous studies showing that language derives its mediating cognitive functions from social activities. Speaking is thus viewed as a cognitive tool; through collaborative dialogue, whether in L1 or L2, students engage in co-constructing their L2 and building knowledge about it. In this way they are able to create a social and cognitive space in which they help each other throughout the task (Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

Use of L1 studied in the context of collaborative group task interactions of adult learners of Spanish in America who are native English speakers similarly found that the use of L1 can be beneficial for L2 language learning (Anton & DiCamilla, 2009). The study data showed that L1 can act as an essential psychological tool enabling learners to construct effective dialogues as they complete meaning-based language tasks in three main ways. Firstly, students constructed a kind of collective scaffolding process through their L1 where none of them knew the correct answer, but each was able to contribute partially to assist them to formulate the correct vocabulary items together as a group. Secondly, L1 was used not only to generate content, but to build a social and cognitive space wherein the learners constructed a shared perspective on the task and how to approach it and, thirdly, it was used as a kind of externalised form of students' own inner speech whereby students were guiding themselves through the tasks. In other words, L1 was used as a cognitive tool for problem resolution.

It is important to stress again here, that the argument being made is not that ELICOS students should use L1 instead of L2. The suggestion is rather that while teachers continue to encourage students to use English primarily in the classroom, if they sometimes use their L1 it might not be as much of a problem as previously thought. Indeed, as the studies show, it may even support their L2 acquisition.

While a more flexible approach to L1 use may be beneficial, unfamiliarity with a topic, lack of planning time or cognitive complexity may also trigger L1 use by students, so it is teachers' responsibility to provide clear and explicit scaffolding to facilitate students' optimal use of English in learning activities, and to continue to encourage the use of English in class (Carless, 2008). However, we might need to reconsider saying things like 'Every time you use your first language you are going backwards' or being punitive about students' use of L1 in any way.

The role of L1 in L2 reading

While the impetus for the current study was the moral dilemma I mentioned earlier, in attempting to reconcile the ethical implications of the issue research was also undertaken into the role L1 plays in L2 reading as this is such a major component of academic work in English. So, when I posed the question 'L1, or no L1?' it quickly became clear that the proposition of 'no L1' might not be realistic when it comes to academic reading.

This presentiment was confirmed by an American study of think-aloud protocols and retrospective interviews with 20 native speakers of Chinese and Japanese at three levels of language proficiency ('Intermediate', 'Advanced' and 'Post-ESL'). While the researchers acknowledged the difficulty of observing the comprehension process, they did come up with a creative way to find out what L2 learners were doing while reading, by recording on tape the students' think-aloud protocols. The researchers concluded that many of the students used their L1 for more than just mental translation, although that was part of it. Readers appeared also to tap into their L1 to help them confirm understanding, to reflect on meaning and to monitor their own reading, for example, in comparing the text to other sources and deciding to reread material in one section because it was not yet understood (Upton & Lee-Thompson, 2001). In their study the researchers also referred to previous research showing that these three types of cognitive activities do not happen in a linear sequence, but are interconnected and related to one another (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995: 34). In many cases, concluded the researchers, 'the readers appeared to be basically restating in their minds in the L1 what they already understood in the L2 to help them keep track of the overall meaning' (Upton & Lee-Thompson, 2001: 487).

Affect in SLA

The next issue in my ethical dilemma was the classroom affect. As mentioned earlier, resistance encountered to the English-only 'rules' and a reluctance of students to split into bilingual groups was beginning to have a negative effect on the atmosphere in the classroom. As a result, I decided to exercise a little more flexibility with certain individuals, while still encouraging all students to continue to use English only, or predominantly. Reflecting on the affective changes in my classroom and deciding that I did not want these to become more of an issue thus went some way towards resolving my ethical misgivings.

From a social-cognitive perspective, SLA research over the last decade has increasingly come to recognise the important role played by emotions in language learning. The differences between the engaged and unengaged learner are viewed as lying in the emotions students experience during language learning; further, attitudes alone are seen as not sufficient to support learner motivation (MacIntyre, 2002; Bown & White, 2010). So, while we are first and foremost English language teachers, we also have to be diplomats in our multilingual, multicultural classrooms and ensure that we always maintain positive relationships within this environment. We need to keep in mind the fact that students' emotions are affected by the learning environment and the quality of relationships available to them in that environment and that, in turn, students' emotions also affect the success of their learning.

Indeed, it may be unrealistic to expect learners to restrict themselves to the target language when they can express themselves more fully in a different language which others can understand (Crandall, 1999). Writing about cooperative language learning and affective factors in particular, Crandall argues that it is also important to find ways to continue to encourage use of the target language. She recommends we acknowledge the reasonableness of using the students' L1 occasionally for greater depth of expression and explains that over-concern with the use of the first language may be unwarranted. To illustrate, she draws on a study of an elementary Spanish-English bilingual classroom where the researcher found that use of either first or second language in task-related talk in cooperative activities was positively correlated with second language learning (Cohen, 1994; Crandall, 1999). Crandall also points to Jim Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis, in which use of L1 and the accumulated conceptual knowledge stored through that language can lead to transfer of that knowledge to the developing L2.

Still, as always, ELICOS teachers need to keep trying to find a balance. Both the survey described in this report and two other more recent student attitude surveys show that students have conflicting views on L1 use and how it relates to their emotions. Many learners perceive it as both advantageous

and disadvantageous for dealing with affective problems related to learning in the classroom environment. Both my survey results and those from a study of French language learners at the University of Queensland showed that while students see positives in using L1 terms of building social relationships and relieving pressure, in the majority of cases it is not a motivational factor. On the contrary, higher motivation and confidence are attributed to use of the target language (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). These observations reflect the views of the respondents in a Canadian study who saw the use of the target language as a rewarding experience, contending that the more they used it, the less anxious they were about it (Levine, 2003).

Further ethical considerations

Julie Belz, writing similarly from a sociolinguistic perspective, reminds us that in line with a significant body of scholarship in sociolinguistics, the use of a particular linguistic code can represent a particular identity. In other words, the use of more than one language may function as the representation of multiple speaker identities. If we accept this premise, it could be argued that 'the denial of the use of a certain language could be regarded as a truncation of one's linguistic identity' (Derrida, 1998; Belz, 2003).

Another point to bear in mind is that at higher levels of learner proficiency, alternating between two languages within a single conversation or utterance is a characteristic feature of bilinguals' speech, not a deficiency in one language or the other (Li, 2000: 17; Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2004). In their study of this type of 'code-switching' behaviour, the researchers concluded that to a certain extent, and especially at advanced levels, 'learners were able to conceptualise the classroom as a bilingual space' (Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2004: 501). Drawing on an earlier study, Belz likewise asks us to consider whether we would characterise L1 use in the classroom differently if we understood our learners as multicompetent rather than deficient, in acknowledgement of the fact that they are already competent in their L1 (Cook, 2001; Belz, 2003).

Conclusion

In summary, while we have a moral responsibility to encourage students to maximise their use of English in our ELICOS classrooms, as that is what gives them the best chance to increase their levels of language proficiency, we also need to become more flexible in our approach to classroom talk rather than insisting students use 'English only' at all times. We need to remember that these students are adult learners who have their own identities and that their L1 is part of that identity. Also, if they sometimes resist our methods, we should also keep in mind the potential benefits for L2 acquisition attaching to students' use of L1. Thus, while we should keep encouraging the use of English in our

classrooms, it should not be an imposition but a good-humoured approach which respects the value of students' L1 and their status and rights as multicompetent adults.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Questionnaire on student use of L1 in the classroom

This questionnaire is VOLUNTARY and ANONYMOUS. It will only take 5-10 minutes of your time and your results will be used to inform teaching research and teaching.

What is your First Language (L1)?_____

Circle the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements using the following number scale: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree

1. I believe the more English students use in the classroom, the more their English will improve.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I never use my L1 in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I occasionally use my L1 in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I regularly use my L1 in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
5.I believe there are no situations in which students should use their L1 in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
6.I believe that I must use English a great deal in the classroom in order to master the language.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I believe that students should use only English when working together on a task in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
8. If I do use my L1 in the classroom it is because it feels unnatural to speak English to people with the same L1 as me.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I occasionally speak in my L1 in the classroom to help me clarify instructions.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I occasionally speak in my L1 in the classroom to help me understand a confusing grammar point.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I sometimes speak in my L1 to ask classmates to help me understand difficult vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I sometimes speak in my L1 when I don't want the teacher to understand what I am saying.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I feel happier and more motivated if I sometimes use my L1 with classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I mostly use a monolingual English dictionary.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I appreciate it when my teacher reminds me to speak English in class.	1	2	3	4	5

16. How does using your L1 in the classroom help you?

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17. What do you think are the main reasons to avoid L1 in the classroom?

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