

Role of L1 in Foreign Language Learning Classrooms: A Case Study of Learners of French

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Introduction

Research into the role of using learners' first language (L1) in a foreign language (FL) classroom has been a subject of much debate. On the one hand, there are researchers such as Prodromou (2000), who claim that a learner's mother tongue is a 'skeleton in the closet'; on the other hand, there are others such as Gabrielatos (2001), who find L1 to be a 'bone of contention' in the second language (L2) or FL learning. But in a country such as India, which has an unavoidably multilingual and multicultural societal set-up, use of the learners' L1 in an FL classroom can help the teacher preserve learner identity, and simultaneously promote language learning. This is especially relevant given the strong support in favour of multilingualism by several researchers (Jessner, 2008; Agnihotri, 2009) in the last decade, and the emphasis on using learners' L1 in L2 and FL classrooms in the national educational documents such as the National Curriculum Framework 2005 and its Position Papers on language (NCERT). Hence, although multilingualism has been accepted as an advantage, it is not yet a part of common FL teaching practice in India.

At the university level, most students often learn foreign languages as their third (L3) or fourth language (L4). It has been proven that effective learning entails proceeding from familiar to new items. Hence, FL teachers could utilize the students' knowledge of their L1 to familiarize

them with the linguistic or extra linguistic features of the FL. But not many teachers are convinced about this, therefore the L1 awareness of learners remains unused or underused.

In the light of the above discussion, this paper reports the findings of a study which aimed at improving the writing skills of French (as a FL) language learners by using their L1 systematically and judiciously.

Use of L1 in the FL classroom

Proponents of exclusive use of the target language (TL) (Ellis, 1986; Krashen, 1981) in FL classroom consider learners' L1 as a source of interference in FL acquisition. But as rightly pointed out by Macaro (2005), till date no study has been able to prove conclusively that exclusive use of TL leads to improved learning. On the contrary, there are studies and theories which confirm that L1 can be used as an effective pedagogical tool in the FL classroom. The proponents of multilingual theory claim that a multilingual class is expected to promote not only healthy interaction, but also greater tolerance of unfamiliar cultures and languages. In addition, *multicompetence* (Cook, 1991) has been proved as a facilitator of cognitive flexibility (Agnihotri, 2007) and positive transfer of competence among languages (Kecskes, 1999). Since multilingualism is a widespread reality in the Indian linguistic map, use of the learners' L1 in an FL classroom can be no less than a boon, as their previous experiences as language learners can be utilized in the target language classroom.

Cook (2005), talks about two languages in the same mind, and emphasizes the systematic and deliberate use of L1 to promote L2 learning through incorporation of methods which allow the use of both languages. Similarly, Butzkamm (2003), asserts that selective use of L1 helps in maintaining a relaxed atmosphere, and reducing affective filters such as stress and frustration.

The present study is also grounded in the sociocultural theory which postulates that L1 works as a mediating tool, enabling learners to have access to things which they cannot achieve through exclusive TL use in a collaborative task (de la Colina & Garcia Mayo, 2009). Therefore, when a task is challenging and complex in the target language, learners turn to their L1 to perform the tasks (Swain & Lapkin, 2005).

Hypothesis and research questions

This study is based on the assumption that tactical use of learners' L1 awareness facilitates successful learning of writing skills in French. It attempts to answer the following questions:

- Can learners' L1 awareness be used to develop their writing skills in French?
- How effective is the above approach?

Methodology

Participants: A case study approach was followed for developing the design of the study. The sample for the study consists of a homogeneous group of six learners pursuing a Bachelor's degree in French (II year) at EFL University, Hyderabad. They belonged to the age group 19-22 years, and shared the same L1—Hindi. These learners studied English as L2, and were studying French as L3.

Tools for data collection:

- Classroom observation schedule
- Pre- and post- tests
- Semi-structured interview schedule.

Procedure for data collection: Data collection began with the observation of five classes in French writing. These were followed by pre-tests in Hindi and French, and then by an intervention and a post-test in French writing skills. A detailed descriptive account of learners' responses to the intervention was maintained. Finally, the learners were asked to share their experiences of the intervention in a group interview.

Results and discussion

Classroom observation: The researcher observed that the teacher used Hindi for translating new words and expressions, and learners used it for answering questions and participating in group work. Furthermore, the main focus of the writing course was not only teaching writing skills, but also improving the comprehension of written texts. Learners were allowed to use their L1. The class followed a free writing approach rather than a guided one.

Pre-tests in Hindi and French: Pre-tests both in Hindi and French were administered in order to determine the ability of the learners to perform writing tasks in L1 and L3. The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) B1 level assessment grid for writing was used to score the answer scripts. To maintain objectivity, the scripts were evaluated by the researcher as well as a French teacher.

For the pre-test in Hindi, questions were taken from a CBSE intermediate board examination, and the scripts were assessed by the researcher as well as a Hindi teacher using a CEFR B1 level writing assessment grid. Due to space constraint, the citations from the participant's scripts could not be included in this paper.

By minutely analyzing the Hindi pre-test scripts, it was ascertained that the learners did not face any problems in writing an essay; the average score was around 85 per cent. However,

analysis of the French essay revealed that the learners faced difficulties not only in following the morphosyntactic and grammatical rules, but also in structuring and organizing the essay. Hence, this study focuses only on the structure, organization and revision of writing for a beginner level, as suggested by Brown & Abeywickrama (2010).

Intervention: During the five day intervention, a process-genre approach was used to teach writing as it is considered as the golden mean of three approaches, namely process, product and genre. The content of the intervention and the type of tasks used were based on the analyses of the pre-test and classroom observations, and the socio-cultural background of the learners.

The objective of the intervention was to use L1 to teach writing skills in French as a FL, wherever necessary. The use of L1 during the intervention was not pre-determined as there is no theory or research that touches upon about the exact situations for using L1. However, the learners' pre-test scripts gave an indication of where they needed help.

In this study, the learners' L1 awareness was used during the intervention for:

- Structuring and organizing the essay
- Brainstorming
- Learning connectors
- Revision
- Giving instructions.

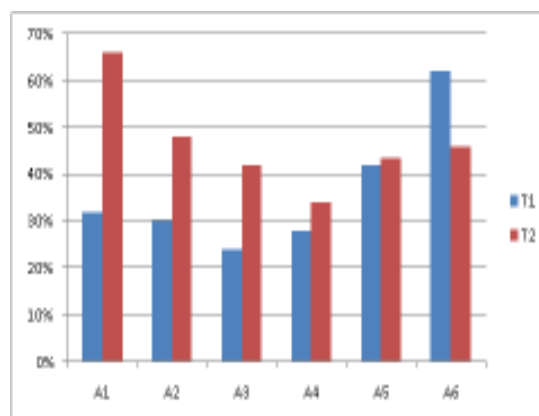
Comparative analysis of the pre- and post-tests in French

After the intervention, a post-test was conducted in French, and analyzed to measure the impact of the intervention. This analysis was done in two stages:

- *Stage 1:* A comparative intra-paragraph analysis of the students' writings was done

to determine whether each paragraph consisted of a main idea and supporting details; and that ideas were linked.

- *Stage 2:* A comparative inter-paragraph analysis of the students' writings was done to determine whether there was an introductory paragraph, a main body and a conclusion; and that paragraphs were linked.



The regression in the performance of A6 can be attributed to physical or psychological factors such as fatigue, anxiety, illness, etc. (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010).

Conclusion

The findings of the study confirm that L1 is an effective pedagogical tool that can be consciously exploited by making explicit references to the learners' L1 knowledge, in order to accelerate the learning process in an FL classroom. Also, the interview with the learners confirmed that their language of thought is Hindi (L1), and that it facilitates the understanding of new things. Similarly, L1 awareness should also be used to reduce the cognitive burden, which in turn may give rise to a high affective filter. In other words, it is a constructive way of making the most of what FL learners already know in terms of ideas, concepts, and linguistic and extra linguistic knowledge. Utilization of L1 may lead to

successful learning as it enables us “to learn a new language without at the same time returning to infancy and learning to categorize the world all over again” (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009, p.72).

Future studies can perhaps focus on the use of L1 in relation to different aspects of writing in detail. Also, studies may be taken up with experimental and controlled groups so that the findings can be generalized for a larger population.

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