

*The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, 2013–2, 65-71*

## Fostering Multilingual Spaces in Second and Foreign Language Classes: Practical Suggestions

Alison Crump\*

---

### Abstract

In this globalized world, second and foreign language classrooms are becoming increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse. Despite the numerous benefits of including learners' L1(s) in language teaching, common approaches to language teaching (e.g., CLT) are based on the idea that languages need to be kept separate in order to be learned. This article begins with an overview of the benefits of using the L1 in second and foreign language learning, including encouraging cross-linguistic transfer of skills and motivating and engaging learners. It then provides practical teaching suggestions for fostering multilingual spaces that teachers can use with groups of students who do or do not share the same L1.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, L2/FL pedagogy, translation, identity texts, dual language books, language awareness

© Association of Gazi Foreign Language Teaching. All rights reserved

---

### 1. Introduction

In this globalized world, second and foreign language classrooms are becoming increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse. Although research has repeatedly shown that use of the L1 (or L1s) supports second or foreign language (e.g., Butzkamm, 2003; Cummins, 2007; Hornberger & Link, 2012; Meiring & Norman, 2002), common approaches to language teaching, such as communicative language teaching (CLT), are nevertheless based on the idea that using the L1 in class is a detriment to second or foreign language learning (Cook, 2001). However, this strict separation of languages does not mirror how multilinguals use their languages outside of class, where flexible languaging is an entirely normal and productive way of communicating (Canagarajah, 2004; Coste & Simon, 2009; Garcia, 2009; Lamarre et al., 2002; Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010).

In the field of language teaching and learning, there has been plenty of debate about the merits of the L1 in language learning. This article follows Sampson (2012) in arguing that the debate should no longer be *whether* to use the L1 in second and foreign language teaching, but *how much* and *how*. To this end, this article suggests several practical pedagogical approaches that can foster multilingual spaces in language

---

\* Mc Gill University, Canada. Email: [alison.crump@mcgill.ca](mailto:alison.crump@mcgill.ca)

classrooms. The article begins with a brief overview language teaching approaches in light of their position on the use of the L1 in class.

## 2. Approaches to Language Teaching and Positions on L1

In stark contrast to the actual linguistic and cultural diversity of learners in ESL/ EFL classrooms, common language pedagogies, such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based approaches, are founded on the idea that learners' first language(s) should be ignored and that languages need to be kept strictly separate in order to be learned (Butzkamm, 2003; Cummins, 2007; Meiring & Norman, 2002). This monolingual ideology can be traced back to the Direct Method, which itself was a reaction to Grammar Translation and the use the L1 to analyze decontextualized chunks of the L2. The Direct Method, on the contrary, emphasizes teaching an L2 exclusively through the L2 (Meiring & Norman, 2002). This feature became a central aspect of CLT, one that has been exacerbated by the language education publishing industry, which produces monolingual textbooks (Butzkamm, 2003). In fact, in CLT, "the only times the L1 is mentioned is when advice is given on how to minimize its use" (Cook, 2001, p. 404). The idea underpinning an 'L1 ban' (Sampson, 2012) is that learning can only occur without the interference of the L1; however, this assumption is in exact opposition to understandings of how languages are learned and of the important role of cross-linguistic transfer of knowledge and skills (Cummins, 2007). Banning the L1 from language classes often results in learners being punished if they use their L1s in the class, for example, with a point system that amounts to losing certain classroom privileges (Breton-Carbonneau, 2011; Sampson, 2012; Sarkar, 2005). It is hard to see how a punitive system can be conducive to learning.

Even when language teaching curricula, school administrators, or language teachers do not allow the L1 into language classes, the L1 often creeps in anyway, as "where bilingual children are present in classrooms, so are their languages, and those languages are put to use in their learning" (Bourne, 2001, p. 103). García (2011) likewise found that despite administrative and pedagogical efforts to keep languages strictly separate in Spanish-English dual language classes in New York, what actually happens is a lot of bilingual languaging. As discussed in the next section, this has numerous benefits for language learning. Language teachers need to work *with* learners to build on the resources for learning that they bring with them to class.

## 3. Benefits of L1 in L2 Learning

The benefits of using the L1 have been well-documented in language learning scholarship: We know that there is a common underlying proficiency that allows for a transfer of skills from one language (Cummins, 1981); that use of the L1 activates prior knowledge that has been encoded in the L1 (Cummins, 2007); that translation can increase meta-linguistic awareness and can scaffold L2 learning (Butzkamm, 2003); and that code-switching can be used for repetition, vocabulary labels, clarifying meaning, and socializing with peers, leading to more confident, motivated, and engaged learners (Cummins, 2007; Sampson, 2012).

Indeed, as Sampson (2012) rightly argued, a complete L1 ban can actually *reduce* opportunities for learning skills, such as translation, which are crucial in many foreign language contexts. The L1 can be used to scaffold learning, mediate understanding, move the lesson forward, engage learners, and foster positive multilingual identities (Cummins, 2007; García, 2009).

Despite these many benefits of using the L1, unfortunately language teachers, especially those who are non-native speakers of the target language, are made to feel like incompetent teachers if they use the L1 (Butzkamm, 2003; Martin, 2005). To complicate matters further, there does not seem to be one right

answer to the question of *how much* of the L1 is useful for learning. Certainly, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. Both Carless (2007) and Lucas and Katz (1994) argued that we do not need to approach the role of the L1 in L2 learning as an all or nothing issue. Cook (2001) argued for judicious and systematic use of the L1, as long as there is still plenty of the L2 being used. The fear, as Turnbull (2001) pointed out, is that teachers who are given the green light to use the L1 can easily rely too heavily on the L1, to the detriment of the target language. This need not be the case, however. In a Turkish ESL class, Üstünel and Seedhouse (2005) found that L1 was “orderly and related to the evolution of pedagogical focus and sequence” (p. 302). Use of the L1 can be done in a way that is responsive to the local context of the classroom and that supports, rather than deters from, second or foreign language learning. The next section provides suggestions of practices that teachers can integrate into their pedagogy that draw on learners’ L1s as resources for learning.

#### **4. Practices that Foster Multilingual Spaces**

This section suggests practices that second or foreign language teachers can integrate into their teaching, even if they do not know all their learners’ languages.

##### *4.1 Translation as a Tool for Learning*

Many learners make use of translation skills in their everyday lives outside of class, for example, as language brokers for their family members (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner & Meza, 2003) or business settings, especially in foreign language contexts (Sampson, 2012). Therefore, these are important skills for learners to develop as they not only reflect what learners may need outside of classroom but they also encourage a cross-linguistic transfer of knowledge and skills that will benefit their second or foreign language learning.

With respect to reading, learners can translate parts of texts from the L2 into their L1, annotate target language texts with words in the L1(s), or create their own bilingual word lists, using bilingual, rather than monolingual dictionaries, or peers (Cummins, 2007; Lucas & Katz, 1994). By using the L1 to translate passages of texts that would otherwise be too difficult for learners, learners can be exposed to authentic, rather than modified texts, such as those that are found in ESL textbooks, for example (Butzkamm, 2003). However, as Erkaya (2011) pointed out in her study of EFL learners in Turkey, using texts that are written for native English speakers is not always ideal for EFL learners. Instead, she argued that teachers should use translations of stories originally written in the learners’ L1 because this ensures that the reading material is culturally relevant for learners, which engages them more. In addition, this allows teachers to build on vocabulary that is already familiar in the L1 (Erkaya, 2011). To build on that, teachers could have learners work on translating short sections of familiar stories and then share their work with peers.

When it comes to writing, there are many pre-writing activities, such as brainstorming, clustering ideas, or free writing (see Byrd, 2011), all of which can be partially done in the L1. Learners can, for example, brainstorm ideas in their L1 and either use bilingual dictionaries or work with peers to translate the ideas into the target language. The use of the L1 in pre-writing tasks can have a scaffolding effect on the learners’ final written output. The same has been found for oral activities, such as role-plays, for which ideas can be developed using the L2 (Cummins, 2007).

One type of writing task that has drawn much attention for English Language Learners (ELLs) in multilingual classrooms in Canada and the United States is self-authored identity texts (Feuerverger, 1994). These are texts that are written in the home language and the target language. To create identity texts, learners write texts about themselves in their home language(s) and with the help of bilingual dictionaries, peers, family, or community members, they translate the texts into the target language. These

bilingual or multilingual books can be illustrated with drawings or photographs and shared with classmates. Research has shown that the creation of identity texts can lead to transformations in ELLs' self-confidence, self-esteem, and affect for reading because the texts represent their lived realities and affirm their identities (Chow & Cummins, 2003; Cummins, 2007; Giampapa, 2010).

Using translation as a tool for language learning provides opportunities for learners to engage in contrastive analysis, which increases their metalinguistic knowledge (Cummins, 2007; Meiring & Norman, 2002). Teachers need to judge the local environment of the classroom and decide how much L1 they think would be beneficial to the learners. If it seems that learners are becoming too reliant on their L1, to the detriment of the L2, then the teacher can adjust their instructions for subsequent activities. The teacher can, for example, specify certain activities or parts of activities (usually those closer to the end product) that need to be completed in the L2 only.

#### 4.2 Dual language books

Related to the creation of bilingual or multilingual identity texts is the use of dual language books. These are not books that are created by students; rather, they are published books that are written in two languages. As with identity texts, dual language books have been used to scaffold language learning, by connecting home and school linguistic and cultural knowledge and allowing for transfer of literacy skills across languages (Cummins, 2007; Sneddon, 2008). Use of dual language books has been shown to increase comprehension and engagement with reading in a second or foreign language (Gregory, 2008). Dual language books usually keep languages either on opposite sides of a page or with one language on top and the other on the bottom. Although this separation of languages could reflect a monolingual ideology of languages as distinct entities that should not be mixed together (Hélot, 2011), research with family members reading dual language books together has shown that the languages were used flexibly to negotiate interpretations of the books (Sneddon, 2008). One drawback to using dual language books is that teachers who have learners with many different linguistic backgrounds might not have the resources to provide such books to all students<sup>1</sup>. In this situation, learners could be asked to create dual language books, using the same resources they would use to create identity texts: bilingual dictionaries, same-language peers, or family and community members.

#### 4.3 Language Awareness

Language Awareness activities and projects are aimed at opening up spaces in the classroom for expanding teachers' and learners' understandings and appreciations of linguistic diversity. Language Awareness encourages a home-school connection, fosters positive attitudes towards multilingualism, and acknowledges how learners use their languages in their daily lives outside of class. There is no one approach to Language Awareness, but there are common methodological themes, such as: description (not prescription) of language; exploration of local linguistic landscapes; understanding how languages are used; engaging learners; and inviting learners to reflect on their learning (Svalberg, 2007). Although the goal is to increase *learners'* appreciation for the languages in their linguistic landscapes, teachers also experience this benefit of Language Awareness activities.

Language Awareness was first developed in the UK in the 1980s (Hawkins, 1984) and was later expanded on in France (Candelier, 2003) under the names *Éveil aux Langues* and EOLE, or *Éducation et*

---

<sup>1</sup> Some resources for dual language books are: <http://www.youarespecial.com/servlet/StoreFront> and <http://www.languagelizard.com/Browse-Search-by-Language-s/1660.htm>. It should be noted, however, that these sites sell books that are English plus one other language.

Ouverture aux Langues à l'École (Perregaux et al., 2003). Based on the positive results of Candelier's (2003) *Éveil aux Langues* project in elementary schools in several European countries, some European schools now integrate the activities, such having learners observe and discuss how bilinguals use their languages in their daily lives, into their regular pedagogical practices and teacher training (Svalberg, 2007). Language Awareness has also been used in Canada, where activities included learners being introduced to greetings in the different languages of their classmates and communities and exploring language contact in their daily lives (Dagenais et al., 2007). The researchers found that students showed an increased appreciation for the languages in their communities and schools.

Language Awareness has been shown to foster more positive attitudes towards cultural as well as linguistic diversity. Hélot and Young (2006) reported on a 3-year *Éveil aux Langues* project in a multicultural and multilingual primary school in Alsace, where, as in many institutions, foreign languages were treated as valuable, but learners' minority languages were viewed as a problem. During the project, the researchers worked with teachers to facilitate regular Saturday sessions where parents and students were exposed to the languages and cultures of the community and school. For example, parents, who came from different cultural backgrounds read traditional tales in dual language books, shared traditional foods, sang songs, talked about the writing system of their home language, taught basic introductions and vocabulary, and talked about lifestyles in their home countries. As with other Language Awareness projects, the researchers found an increase in positive attitudes towards the linguistic diversity in the community. Significantly, they also found that this led to a greater tolerance and appreciation for cultural diversity of the school, which led to fewer incidents of discrimination towards speakers of minority languages in the school.

There are many Language Awareness materials and resources available internationally, which teachers can use or modify for their classes<sup>2</sup>. Though Language Awareness projects have focused on elementary school learners, the idea of discovering and learning to appreciate the local linguistic landscape is certainly valuable for learners of all ages.

## 5. Conclusion

By creating multilingual spaces in language classrooms, teachers and learners can navigate the complex terrain of linguistic diversity together. The practices suggested in this article offer ways to open up multilingual spaces in second and foreign language classrooms, which may mirror the linguistic practices of learners outside of class. None of this can happen, however, if teachers are not aware of these tools and practices. This points to the critical need to support in-service and pre-service teachers to work with languages they do not speak. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to language teaching. The above practices are suggested in the hopes of inspiring teachers to reflect on their own teaching practices and to create multilingual spaces in their classrooms that allow learners draw on all of their linguistic resources in their learning.

## References

- Bourne, J. (2001). Discourses and identities in a multilingual primary classroom. *Oxford Review of Education*, 27(1), 103-114.
- Breton-Carbonneau, G. (2011). "Bienvenue au Québec!" The integration of newly arrived immigrant students in Québec *classes d'accueil*. Unpublished Master's thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, Québec.

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, [http://www.edilic.org/gb/gb\\_index.php](http://www.edilic.org/gb/gb_index.php), an online resource from France; <http://www.elodil.com/>, from Québec, Canada; or [http://www.unige.ch/fapse/SSE/teachers/perregau/rech\\_socrates.html](http://www.unige.ch/fapse/SSE/teachers/perregau/rech_socrates.html), for EVLANG activities used in Switzerland (in French).

- Butzkamm, W. (2003). We only learn language once. The role of the mother tongue in FL classrooms: death of a dogma. *Language Learning Journal*, 28(1), 29-39.
- Byrd, D. R. (2011). Putting the writing process into action in the L2 classroom: Pre-writing techniques that work. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 64-77.
- Canagarajah, S. (2004). The plurilingual tradition and the English language in South Asia. *AILA Review*, 22, 5-22.
- Candelier, M. (2003). *L'éveil aux langues à l'école primaire. Evlang: Bilan d'une innovation européenne*. Bruxelles: De Boeck & Larcier.
- Carless, D. (2007). Student use of the mother tongue in the task-based classroom. *ELT Journal*, 62(4), 331-338.
- Chow, P., & Cummins, J. (2003). Valuing multilingual and multicultural approaches to learning. In S. R. Schecter & J. Cummins (Eds.), *Multilingual education in practice: Using diversity as a resource* (pp. 32-55). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57, 402-423.
- Coste, D., & Simon, D.-L. (2009). The plurilingual social actor. Language, citizenship and education. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 6(2), 168-185. doi:10.1080/14790710902846723
- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 3-49). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center California State University.
- Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 221-241.
- Dagenais, D., Armand, F., Walsh, N., & Maraillet, E. (2007). L'éveil aux langues et la co-construction de connaissances sur la diversité linguistique. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 197-219.
- Erkaya, O. R. (2011). Advantages of using translated stories from students' native language to teach EFL. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 1(2), 57-66.
- Feuerverger, G. (1994). A multicultural literacy intervention for minority language students. *Language and Education*, 8(3), 123-146.
- García, O. (2009). Education, multilingualism and translanguaging in the 21st century. In A. Mohanty, M. Panda, R. Phillipson, & T. Skutnabb-Kangas (Eds.), *Multilingual education for social justice: Globalising the local* (pp. 140-158). New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- García, O. (2011). The translanguaging of Latino kindergartners. In J. Rothman and K. Potowski (Eds.), *Bilingual youth: Spanish in English speaking societies* (pp. 33-55). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Giampapa, F. (2010). Multiliteracies, pedagogy and identities: Teacher and student voices from a Toronto elementary school. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 33(2), 407-431.
- Gregory, E. (2008). *Learning to read in a new language*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Hawkins, E. (1984). *Awareness of language: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hélot, C. (2011, March). *Translating vs. translanguaging: The ideology of bi- and multilingualism in children's literature*. Paper presented in Colloquium on Translanguaging as Pedagogy: Between Ideology and Possibility at the American Association of Applied Linguistics Conference, Chicago, IL.
- Hélot, C., & Young, A. (2006). Imagining multilingual education in France: A language and cultural awareness project at primary level. In O. Garcia, T. Skutnabb-Kangas, & M. E. Torres-Guzman (Eds.), *Imagining multilingual schools: Languages in education and globalization* (pp. 69-90). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Hornberger, N. H., & Link, H. (2012). Translanguaging and transnational literacies in multilingual classrooms: A biliteracy lens a biliteracy lens. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 15(3), 37-41.
- Lamarre, P., Paquette, J., Kahn, E., & Ambrosi, S. (2002). Multilingual Montreal: Listening in on the language practices of young Montrealers. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 24(3), 47-75.
- Lucas, T. & Katz, A. (1994). Reframing the debate: The roles of native languages in English-only programs for language minority students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28, 537-562.
- Martin, P. (2005). "Safe" language practices in two rural schools in Malaysia: Tensions between policy and practice. In A. M. Lin & P. W. Martin (Eds.), *Decolonisation, globalisation: Language-in-education policy and practice* (pp. 74-97). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Meiring, L. & Norman, N. (2002). Back on target: Repositioning the status of target language in MFL teaching. *Language Teaching Journal*, 26(1), 27-35.

- Orellana, M. F., Reynolds, J. Dorner, L., & Meza, M. (2003). In other words: Translating or “para-phrasing” as a family literacy practice in immigrant households. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38, 12–34.
- Otsuji, E. & Pennycook, A. (2010). Metrolingualism: Fixity, fluidity and language in flux. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 7(3), 240-254.
- Perregaux, C., de Goumoens, C., Jeannot, D., & de Pietro, J-F. (Eds.). (2003). *Education et ouverture aux langues à l'école* (Vol. 1 et 2). Neuchâtel: CIIP.
- Sampson, A. (2012). Learner code-switching versus English only. *ELT Journal*, 66(3), 293-303.
- Sarkar, M. (2005). “À l'école on parle français”: Second language acquisition and the creation of community in a multiethnic Montreal kindergarten. In R. Hoosain & F. Salili (Eds.), *Language in Multicultural Society* (pp. 311-342). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Sneddon, R. (2008). Magda and Albana: Learning to read with dual language books. *Language and Education*, 22(2), 137-154.
- Svalberg, A. M.-L. (2007). Language awareness and language learning. *Language Teaching*, 40(04), 287-308.
- Turnbull, M. (2001). There is a role for the L1 in second and foreign language teaching, but... *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57, 531–540.
- Üstünel, E. & Seedhouse, P. (2005). Why that, in that language, right now? Code-switching and pedagogical focus. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(3), 302-325.