

# Using L1 in the English Classroom

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HERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CONTRADICTING VIEWS ABOUT WHETHER TO use the mother tongue of the students in the foreign language classroom. The monolingual approach suggests that the target language ought to be the sole medium of communication, implying the prohibition of the native language would maximize the effectiveness of learning the target language.

## Background

A proponent of the monolingual approach, Krashen has argued that people learning foreign languages follow basically the same route as they acquire their mother tongue, hence the use of the mother tongue in the learning process should be minimized (1981).

Authors of some introductory books on teaching EFL, such as Haycraft (1978), Hubbard et al. (1983), and Harmer (1997), do not address this issue or pay very little attention to it. This suggests either the mother tongue does not play an important role in foreign language teaching or the issue of native language use does not exist in the classrooms of these authors, since most of them are native speakers of English accustomed to working with multilingual groups of students (Dörnyei, personal communication).

During the past 15 years, however, monolingual orthodoxy has lost its appeal. Medgyes considers this orthodoxy “untenable on any grounds, be they psychological, linguistic or pedagogical” (1994:66). It has been argued that exclusion of the mother tongue is a criticism of the mother tongue and renders it a second-class language. This degradation of the mother tongue has harmful psychological effects on learners (Nation 1990).

Professionals in second language acquisition have become increasingly aware of the role the mother tongue plays in the EFL classroom. Nunan and Lamb (1996), for example, contend that EFL teachers working with monolingual students at lower levels of English proficiency find prohibition of the mother tongue to be practically impossible. Dörnyei and Kormos (1998) find that the L1 is used by L2 learners as a communication strategy to compensate for deficiencies in the target language. Auerbuch (1993) not only acknowledges the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom, but also identifies the following uses for it: classroom management, language analysis, presenting rules that govern grammar, discussing cross-cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors, and checking for comprehension.

My personal experience as a learner and teacher of English as a foreign language has shown me that moderate and judicious use of the mother tongue can aid and facilitate the learning and teaching of the target language, a

view shared by many colleagues of mine. However, the value of using the mother tongue is a neglected topic in the TEFL methodology literature. This omission, together with the widely advocated principle that the native language should not be used in the foreign language classroom, makes most teachers, experienced or not, feel uneasy about using L1 or permitting its use in the classroom, even when there is a need to do so.

Should the students' L1 be used in the EFL classroom? Though its use has been defended by some language teaching specialists, little empirical research has been done to find out if it is an effective teaching and learning tool.

How do students and teachers look at this issue? Schweers (1999) conducted a study with EFL students and their teachers in a Spanish context to investigate their attitudes toward using L1 in the L2 classroom. His results indicate that the majority of students and teachers agreed that Spanish should be used in the EFL classroom (Schweers 1999).

Inspired by his research and driven by my own interest, I decided to carry out a similar study on the use of the native language in the Chinese context. However, differences exist between Schweer's study and mine. Firstly, in Schweer's study English was the official second language of his participants, while in mine English was a foreign language to the participants. Secondly, the participants in my research were all first-year English major students and the classes observed were first-year reading classes. Thirdly, I used a variety of research methods, including classroom observations, interviews, and a questionnaire.

## Research design

### Questions

This study aimed to answer the following questions: (1) Is Chinese as the L1 used in tertiary-level English classrooms in China? If so, how frequently is it used and for what purposes? (2) What are the attitudes of the students and teachers toward using Chinese in the EFL classroom?

### Participants

The participants of this study were 100 first-year English major students attending a university in Beijing. Their English was at the intermediate level. The 20 teacher participants

Occasion	Occasions on which Chinese was used				Total
	Giving instructions	Explaining meanings of words	Explaining complex ideas	Explaining complex grammar rules	
Teacher 1	1	8	1	0	10
Teacher 2	0	3	3	1	7
Teacher 3	9	2	0	1	12
Total	10	13	4	2	29

Table 1. Classroom observation results

were all faculty members at the same university, with their teaching experience ranging from one year to 30 years.

#### *Methods and Procedures*

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used, including classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires.

#### *Classroom Observations*

Three randomly-selected first-year reading classes (of about 50 minutes in length) conducted by three teachers were observed and recorded to find out how frequently and on what occasions Chinese was used. To obtain more authentic classroom data, the teachers and students were not informed of the observation purpose beforehand.

#### *Interviews*

The three teachers whose classes were observed and recorded were interviewed and asked why they sometimes preferred using Chinese to English in their classes. The interviews were recorded and summarized.

#### *Questionnaires*

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was distributed to 100 students, and another questionnaire (see Appendix 2) to 20 teachers to discover their attitudes toward using Chinese in the English classroom. The questionnaire items focused on the subjects' opinions toward the use of L1, the various occasions when they think L1 can be used, and the perceived effectiveness of L1 in their EFL classroom.

### **Results**

#### *Classroom observations*

Table 1 shows the number of times and

occasions that Chinese was used in the three 50-minute reading classes.

The table shows that Chinese was used by the three teachers in the tertiary-level English reading classes to give instructions and to explain the meaning of words, complex ideas, and complex grammar points. The greatest use of Chinese, 13 times, was to explain the meaning of words. Teacher 1 used Chinese to explain the words *steep*, *strain*, *scatter*, *fine*, *spout*, *terrain*, *melt*, and *beneficiary* after her English explanations, which proved to be quite effective judging from the students' responses. Teacher 2 used Chinese to explain the meanings of the words *surge*, *high*, and *spell* following her English explanations. In explaining the word *high* in the phrase *a search for a 'high' that normal life does not supply*, she came up with an appropriate and culturally-specific Chinese translation, and the students seemed to understand it quickly. One could conclude that the teachers use Chinese only when they explain abstract or culturally-specific words. All three teachers first attempted to explain the words, grammar points, and meanings of complex ideas in English, but resorted to Chinese when they thought the students did not or could not understand their English explanations.

Teacher 3 used Chinese most frequently to give instructions. In the first five instances, the teacher used Chinese only after first giving instructions in English, apparently to ensure that every student was clear about what was said. Because it was quite noisy outside the classroom at the time, the teacher used Chinese instructions alone on four occasions to

hold the students' attention and make them follow him.

These three class observations indicate that Chinese is used on occasions when English explanations fail to work, hence the L1 plays a supportive and facilitating role in the classroom.

### *Interviews*

After the classroom observations, the three teachers whose classes had been observed were interviewed about their occasional use of Chinese in the classroom and how they viewed the common criticism that using Chinese reduces the students' exposure to English. Their answers are summarized as follows:

- **Teacher 1:** Firstly, I think using some Chinese is more effective and less time-consuming. Occasionally, when you spend quite some time or use several English sentences to explain one word or idea, and the students still look confused, using one simple Chinese word or idiom might solve the problem. Class time is limited; if using Chinese is helpful, why not do it? Secondly, criticizing the use of Chinese on the grounds that the students' exposure to English will be reduced does not reflect the fact that students read the English text and still communicate in English with the teacher and other students in the classroom. The use of some Chinese in the class actually provides more time for students to practice their English and get exposure to English. Lastly, the amount of English used depends on the students' language proficiency level. If their English is at an advanced level, I feel no need to use Chinese. All in all, I think that using some Chinese in the classroom is necessary and the advantages of doing so outweigh any disadvantages.
- **Teacher 2:** The main reason I use Chinese in the classroom is that sometimes students—because of their low proficiency level in English—fail to follow me when I only use English to explain the meaning of the text or to give instructions. Also, when I happen to know a very vivid and appropriate Chinese translation of an English sentence, I will give it to students so they can immediately comprehend the meaning of the English sentence. This also helps them compare the word choices in the two languages.

- **Teacher 3:** I use Chinese to discuss the meaning of some difficult, abstract words and to explain the grammar and ideas expressed in long and complicated sentences. Sometimes when students look puzzled after my English explanation of certain points, I will use Chinese to reinterpret them. Furthermore, when the classroom is noisy, using Chinese to keep order is more effective than using English.

### *Questionnaires*

As noted earlier, questionnaires were distributed to students and teachers. Of the 100 given to students, 98 were returned. Of the 20 given to teachers, 18 were returned. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that a high percentage of the students (70 percent) and the teachers (72 percent) who participated in the study think that Chinese should be used in the classroom. The vast majority of students (97 percent) like it when their teachers use some Chinese. According to students, Chinese was most necessary to explain complex grammar points (72 percent) and to help define some new vocabulary items (69 percent). For teachers, Chinese was most necessary to practice the use of some phrases and expressions (56 percent) and to explain difficult concepts or ideas (44 percent). Only two teachers indicated that Chinese could be used to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively. In choosing the open-ended "Other" option about when it is necessary to use Chinese in the EFL classroom, a few students indicated that the L1 could be used to translate well-written paragraphs and to compare the two languages.

In explaining why they think the use of Chinese is necessary in EFL classes, the majority of student participants (69 percent) indicate that it helps them to understand difficult concepts better. Fewer than half of the students (42 percent) answered that Chinese was necessary to understand new vocabulary items better. Only six percent of the students responded that they felt less lost. This figure is significantly smaller than the corresponding student responses in Schweer's study, in which 68.3 percent of the students preferred the use of the L1 in order to feel less lost (1999:8). A possible explanation for this difference is that the students' English language proficiency level in my study was higher than in Schweer's.

<b>1. Should Chinese be used in the classroom?</b>			
Students:	yes 70%	no 30%	
Teachers:	yes 72%	no 28%	
<b>2. Do you like your teacher to use Chinese in the class? (students only)</b>			
not at all	3%	a little	45%
sometimes	50%	a lot	2%
<b>3. When do you think it is necessary to use Chinese in the English classroom?</b>			
	Students	Teachers	
a. to explain complex grammar points	72%	39%	
b. to help define some new vocabulary items	69%	39%	
c. to explain difficult concepts or ideas	48%	44%	
d. to practice the use of some phrases and expressions	45%	56%	
e. to give instructions	6%	6%	
f. to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively	4%	11%	
<b>4. If you think the use of Chinese is necessary in the classroom, why?</b>			
<b>Students</b>			
a. It helps me to understand the difficult concepts better.			69%
b. It helps me to understand the new vocabulary items better.			42%
c. It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed.			8%
d. I feel less lost.			6%
<b>Teachers</b>			
a. It aids comprehension greatly.			39%
b. It is more effective.			44%
c. It is less time-consuming.			28%
<b>5. Do you think the use of Chinese in the classroom helps you learn this language? (students only)</b>			
no	3%	a little	69%
fairly much	22%	a lot	6%
<b>6. How often do you think Chinese should be used in the classroom? (students only)</b>			
never	0%	very rarely	38%
sometimes	60%	fairly frequently	2%
<b>7. What percentage of time do you think Chinese should be used in the class? (students only)</b>			
Time	Response		
5%	38%		
10%	25%		
20%	20%		
30%	10%	(No students answered higher than 30%.)	

Table 2. Results of the questionnaires on the use of Chinese in the English classroom.  
*Note: Where participants could choose more than one answer to a question (items 3 and 4), totals add up to more than 100 percent.*

The few students who chose the open-ended “Other” option for why it is necessary to use the L1 indicated that Chinese could be used to understand jargon and to improve their translation ability.

Concerning why the use of Chinese was necessary, teachers answered because “it is more effective” (44 percent) and “it aids comprehension greatly” (39 percent). One teacher suggested that the use of L1 helps students become more aware of the differences and similarities between different cultures.

More than half of the students (60 percent) think Chinese should be used in the classroom “sometimes.” Concerning how much time Chinese should be used in the English class, 63 percent of the students answered the amount of Chinese used should range from 5 to 10 percent of class time, and 30 percent of the students answered it should be from 20 to 30 percent of class time.

The questionnaire results show that in the reading classes of first-year English majors, the use of Chinese is justified. It is especially useful for language tasks such as defining vocabulary items, practicing the use of phrases and expressions, and explaining grammar rules and some important ideas. This is in agreement with the classroom observation results (see Table 1). Students prefer the use of Chinese because it enhances their comprehension of new concepts and new vocabulary items; teachers think using Chinese is more effective and can aid comprehension.

## Discussion

The results of the present study on the use of the mother tongue in a Chinese EFL context bear many similarities to Schweer’s study in a Spanish context. Both studies indicate that the mother tongue was used by the majority of teachers investigated, and both students and teachers responded positively toward its use. Minor discrepancies exist concerning the occasions when the L1 should be used. Some of these differences can be accounted for by the participants’ different levels of L2 language proficiency.

The teachers participating in this study indicated that the translation of some words, complex ideas, or even whole passages is a good way to learn a foreign language. My observation of the three classes suggests that without

translation, learners would be likely to make unguided and often incorrect translations.

This study also reveals that in the EFL classes observed Chinese plays only a supportive and facilitating role. The chief medium of communication in the class is still English. As with any other classroom technique, the use of the mother tongue is only a means to the end of improving foreign language proficiency. I agree with the majority of student participants (about 63 percent combined) that no more than 10 percent of class time should be spent using Chinese. In my experience, this percentage decreases as the students’ English proficiency increases. Of course, a translation course would be an exception.

Unlike Schweer’s student participants, the students in the present study are highly motivated to learn English. As English majors in the university, their English language proficiency is regarded as a symbol of their identity and a route to future academic and employment opportunities. Few of them feel that English is imposed on them or regard the use of English as a threat to their identity. Instead, they generally prefer greater or exclusive use of English in the classroom. In their view, Chinese should be used only when necessary to help them learn English better.

## Conclusion

The research seems to show that limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classroom does not reduce students’ exposure to English, but rather can assist in the teaching and learning processes. This is not to overstate the role of the L1 or advocate greater use of L1 in the EFL classroom, but rather to clarify some misconceptions that have troubled foreign language teachers for years, such as whether they should use the mother tongue when there is a need for it and whether the often-mentioned principle of no native language in the classroom is justifiable. It is hoped that these findings will help make more people acknowledge the role of the native language in the foreign language classroom and stimulate further study in this area.

## References

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APPENDIX 1—STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE USE OF CHINESE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

**This questionnaire aims to find out your attitude toward using Chinese in the English classroom. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation!**

**1. Should Chinese be used in the classroom?**

Yes No

**2. Do you like your teacher to use Chinese in the class?**

not at all a little sometimes a lot

**3. When do you think it is necessary to use Chinese in the English classroom?**

- a. to help define some new vocabulary items (e.g., some abstract words)
- b. to practice the use of some phrases and expressions (e.g., doing translation exercises)
- c. to explain complex grammar points
- d. to explain difficult concepts or ideas
- e. to give instructions
- f. to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively
- g. other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**4. If you think the use of Chinese is necessary in the classroom, why?**

- a. It helps me to understand difficult concepts better.
- b. It helps me to understand new vocabulary items better.
- c. It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed.
- d. I feel less lost.
- e. other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Do you think the use of Chinese in the classroom helps you learn this language?**

no a little fairly much a lot

**6. How often do you think Chinese should be used in the classroom?**

never very rarely sometimes fairly frequently

**7. What percentage of the time do you think Chinese should be used in the class? Choose one.**

5% 10% 20% 30% 40%  
50% 60% 70% 80% 90%

This questionnaire aims to find out your attitude toward using Chinese in the classroom. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation!

**1. Should Chinese be used in the classroom?**

Yes    No

**2. When do you think it is necessary to use Chinese in the classroom?**

- a. to help define some new vocabulary items (e.g., some abstract words)
- b. to practice the use of some phrases and expressions (e.g., doing translation exercises)
- c. to explain complex grammar points
- d. to explain difficult concepts or ideas
- e. to give instructions
- f. to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively
- g. other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**3. If you think the use of Chinese is necessary in the classroom, why?**

- a. It aids comprehension greatly.
- b. It is more effective.
- c. It is less time-consuming.
- d. other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

ANSWERS TO THE LIGHTER SIDE

Answer to the logic puzzle on inside back cover:  
 What was your order?

Reggie had the cola, cheeseburger with pickles, and French fries. The numbers in parentheses beside each person's name indicate which facts applies for figuring out who ordered what.

**Jane (6 & 10)**  
 Diet cola, grilled chicken sandwich, and French fries

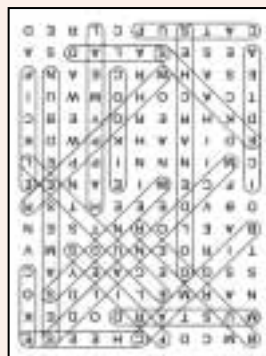
**Jack (4, 7 & 11)**  
 Vanilla milkshake and two hot dogs

**Jim (4, 5 & 11)**  
 Cola and taco salad

**Archie (6, 7 & 8)**  
 Cola, plain hamburger, and French fries

**Betty (5, 7 & 8)**  
 Diet cola, fish sandwich, and onion rings

**Reggie (5, 7, 8 & 9)**  
 Cola, cheeseburger with pickles, and French fries



"Where's the Beet?"