# The Use of L1 in Teaching English to Young Learners

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**Abstract**

Language teaching methods and approaches differ in the significance they have given to the L2 learners' mother tongue during the teaching and learning process. Teachers' attitudes towards L1 also vary according to the task and the subject which is being taught. Another issue closely related to the role of L1 in second language acquisition, is the way children acquire language in general and the comparison between first and second language acquisition, which is still controversial among researchers. Regardless of the innate ability to learn and process or the ability to imitate, the way that children learn the language affects their learning process and productivity later on. Nevertheless, due to privation from previous education, children with little English need support so they can meet their classmates' progress and the teacher's overall expectations.

This paper reviews the use of L1 in teaching English to young learners focusing on the role and importance that the major language teaching approaches and methods have attached to it. It also addresses the issue from the three major first and second language acquisition theories' perspective.

**Keywords**: L1, language teaching methods, young learners, second language acquisition

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## 1. Introduction

The development of teaching methods plays an important role for both the language teachers and language learners. Different methods have been developed to facilitate learning. Thanks to these methods, teachers can organize and plan the variety of methods more easily with the help of the existing methods. The teachers know what their goals are and how they should process and present the learning material. Not just the teachers, but also learners benefit from the emergence and use of different methods. Above all, the lessons are much more interesting and they can step the teachers and the learners away from routine. In addition, learning has become more effective and faster because the students' motivation has risen and boredom has been removed.

A teaching method reflects the interrelation between teaching and learning. It consists of forms of teaching, performance, working out the tasks, as well as appropriate learning actions together with linguistic and mental activities such as listening, reading, speaking, writing, comparing, analyzing and so on. An important feature that differs from one method to the other is the use of the mother tongue while learning a second language.

To start with, teachers have a methodology which is applied while teaching a foreign language. There are several factors affecting the way they teach; for instance, they may teach in the same way they have learned English; different courses or studies abroad may have given them another perspective of language learning and teaching; access they may have to different English books approved by international voices may also affect their teaching methodology and practices (Kelly, 1969). There may be other reasons and factors which influence the way someone teaches a foreign language but everyone chooses a specific method to teach a foreign language. Even though teachers follow a particular method, they may also use a wide range of techniques to make the lesson different and entertaining (Harmer, 1991).

### 2.1. The use of L1 in Grammar Translation Method

It was not until the 16th century that systematic efforts were made to acquire the thought about the language of a neighboring country, because foreign language skills were already critical for cultural and commercial relationships (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p. 151). Greek and Latin were

the most important and commonly learned languages. The Grammar-Translation Method developed at the beginning of the 19th century.

The main goal of the grammar translation method is to know grammatical rules. According to this method, you only master a language when you master the grammar or you can form the correct sentence if you are based on the grammatical rules (Celce-Murcia, 1979). The learner's mother tongue also plays an important role because it is used in the classroom, especially when the rules are explained. In addition, the translation from the target language into the mother tongue is practiced, because it is believed that you can master a language only when you translate it correctly (Fotos, 2005). Grammar Translation method gives priority to writing and reading over speaking and listening. That means that the development and promotion of writing and reading skills are identified as more important. In this way, the goal is not the oral mastery of language, but mastery of the vocabulary of the language which must be learned through the cognition of grammatical rules (Fotos, 2005).

Classes are teacher-centered. The teacher is in the foreground and he has absolute authority in the classroom. The learner is passive and does not have the freedom to tackle a problem or to work out independently. He should be able to understand the content and forms of a text in order to capture and translate it correctly (Dogget, 1986, p. 3). In addition, gaps, question answer exercises, essays and dictations are characteristic exercises of this method. A certain grammatical phenomenon is practiced on the basis of the missing text usually given and explained beforehand in the mother tongue. The sentences in these exercises are mostly unrelated and are very different in terms of content. The overarching goal is correctness of linguistic expression; therefore no mistakes are allowed (Chang, 2011).

### 2.2    The use of L1 in Direct Method

In the 19th century, when the criticism of the grammar translation method increased and when people wanted to get rid of grammar and translation classes, the direct method was developed. Direct method was introduced as a shift from the Grammar Translation method while Germany and France were the first two countries which applied this method shortly after it was formalized as a new method of language teaching (Fotos, 2005). Natural method is the original name because the main idea is to learn the language as children learn their mother tongue. Direct method was

against the usage of L1 in the classroom because it affects the naturalness of language acquisition. The focus was the second language use and the surroundings were adjusted according to the culture of this second language. The supporters of Direct Method thought that it is not necessary to translate into the native language while learning a new language. Soon textbooks were replaced with speaking tasks (Widdowson, 1999).

The general idea of the sentence was more important than each separate word. The information was introduced by the teacher so that the children can guess the meaning. However, there are some actions or situations that the teacher cannot perform in a classroom, most of the time due to the lack of visual aids and materials, but everything related to learning was based on doing (Patel & Jain, 2008, p. 80). The strongest advantage of direct method is pronunciation as the child is learning English while he or she is learning the mother tongue. Using only English in the classroom enables the children to speak English without having the fear of expressing themselves. Direct Method requires a lot of activities which transform the class into an entertaining environment.

In this way, there was no interference of L1 in Direct Method because the focus was the use of the target language. Children were required to think and explain themselves in the target language. The role of L1 in learning foreign languages was considered to be insignificant and moreover, it was seen as unnecessary and preventing the children from learning the foreign language as they learned their mother tongue.

### 2.3.The use of L1 in Total Physical Response Method

Total Physical Response came out as a new method of language learning by using a lot of activities to make the learning process fun, easier and less stressful. Asher (1969), the founder of this method, combined linguistics and psychological theories together. He put emphasis on listening comprehension, acting the topic out followed by humorous instruction, initial level of teaching skills and understanding the main idea rather than memorization (Dogget, 1986, p. 6). Asher created the idea of students who are relaxed and able to listen and perform the tasks together with the teacher, thus, the learning process would be easier and valuable  (Asher, 1969). Vocabulary and grammatical structures are given in imperative form while spoken activities have priority over the writing tasks.

Regarding the roles in the classroom, the teacher is the one who gives the instruction and then students can follow. The students have a double function in the classroom: they are the listeners and when ready to perform, they get the main role. Since the lesson involves games and activities, the teacher interacts with a student or a group of students most of the time. It is extremely important when and how the teacher gives the materials. Total Physical Response takes students' feelings into consideration. The main reason is to make language learning less stressful so as not to force students to speak before they are ready to do so. Moreover, regarding our concern in this method, the native language is only used at the beginning when explaining the purpose but not during the lesson or the performed tasks due to the possible negative effect on the foreign language learning effectiveness  (Asher, 1969).

### 2.4.The use of L1 in Communicative Teaching Approach

Communicative Teaching approach (CTL) is "supposed to mirror the real world and relate to alive communication"  (Richards, 2006, p. 1). Emerged in the late 60s, CTL emphasized communicative competence rather than linguistic competence. The aim was to make communication the goal of teaching. It focused on "forming grammatical, lexical, and phonetic communication skills that help students to use a target language in communication" (Pavlovych & Ivanova, 2016, p. 86), while some of the class activities may be dialogues, discussions, games or brainstorming. The teacher is a counselor rather than the source of information. Decisions are made both by students and the teacher while the students may act independently of the counselor throughout the stages of learning. Since almost every activity in the classroom is based on communication and the aim is to make students familiar with the target language, mother tongue is not preferred because it will interfere with the learning routine.

Grammar in CTL is learned through shared ideas and discussions and the rules are taught communicatively. In this way, the students have the opportunity to improve their speaking skills while trying to learn and discuss the rules of grammar and their application. As Newby reports: "…different parts of grammatical structures have to be presented and taught as a communicative event and the learners should perceive grammatical structures as parts of natural language" (Newby, 2015, p. 14).

On the other hand, CTL has its own disadvantages. Since everything is based on communication and discussions, the teachers do not possess books, which somehow gives them insecurity in their lesson planning routine. In order to be applied, CTL requires a professional teacher with a rich vocabulary and knowledge on the target language culture. Nevertheless, Communicative Teaching Approach is known for its naturalness and the great opportunity it provides to students who want to learn a new language and adapt to foreign culture.

### 3. First language acquisition theories

We all have the inherent ability to learn languages, but nobody was born with a certain language. Among all-natural learning processes, language acquisition is by far the longest. Although much is known about this process, the principles guiding it are just as unclear and debatable as the nature of the human language itself. There are an estimated 6900 languages in the world and about 195 states (Anderson, 2010). On average, 35 languages are spoken per state, probably more, because many languages are not restricted in only one state. This leads to the idea that multilingual societies are the norm. Nevertheless, it is acceptable to say that a person is usually learning several languages. The conditions under which this happens can be different.

Language acquisition can take place in a variety of situations and several scientific disciplines are in charge of studying this phenomenon. The term "language acquisition" is used in the chapter as a general term tied to every form of acquisition of a language. Depending on the chronological order of the language acquired we can speak of a first language (L1) and a second language (L2). Under the first language is understood the mother tongue, i.e. the language as first developed by the child and after that, the acquisition of a new second language follows. It can literally be the second learned language as the language that is acquired in a context in which it serves for communication and is part of the surrounding culture, as well as a foreign language. Moreover, this language has no direct application in the area.

Another variable in language acquisition is the age of the learner. This section addresses the theories of language acquisition, first and second language acquisition and the role of the age involved in this learning process. It is important to mention that people can experience second

language acquisition in different ages: some learn a new language since they are children, others learn it at school and some others may learn it later on because of immigration, work and study requirements as well as a lot of other reasons. Nevertheless, there is the discussion if language skills are acquired the same or if there are significant differences while experiencing a second language acquisition in early ages or as an adult.

### 3.1. First language acquisition theories

The process of first language acquisition is fascinating because the child is always able to build such a rich conceptual system, to construct the grammar of a natural language, and to understand words and later sentences of a given language. The unborn child at the sixth month of pregnancy is able to respond to sounds. A typically developing baby will make the first sounds around the third month (Timmons, 2018). On his first birthday, he will formulate his first words and at 18 months he will produce 2-word combinations. Many of us may have experienced observations with 3 year-old children who can spell "b" instead of "p" or 'w' instead of "r" but they are not able to correct themselves. Most probably, we will not correct their spelling too, because we think that they will understand it through time. In the following paragraphs, we explain briefly the three basic theories of first language acquisition, how language is acquired, the errors made by the child and the child and his parents' role.

### 3.1.1.     Behaviorist Theory

Behaviorism is a learning theory based on the idea that every behavior is acquired through conditioning. It occurs through environmental interaction. Behaviorists think our responses to environmental stimuli are shaping our actions. The Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) conducted early work in the behavior area. Pavlov studied a type of learning behavior called a conditioned reflex, in which an animal or person generated a (unconscious) response to a stimulus

and was conditioned through order to develop the answer to a specific stimulus related to the original stimulus by the experimenter (David, 2007).

This theory was later followed by B. Skinner, an American psychologist. Behaviorism includes the basic elements of learning such as stimulus followed by response and reinforcement. The main idea of the behaviorist theory is that children learn language through the three above mentioned elements of learning based on imitation. To illustrate the hypothesis of the behaviorist we can take the example of how a child learns the word "Sun". The first step is to find an object which has the same shape as the Sun and this is the stimuli. Then, the parent or the caregiver would repeat the word Sun so that the child can imitate it. In this way, they are reinforcing the child's response. Nevertheless, the behaviorist theory could not explain the utterances which happen during communication (Klein, 1986, pp. 46-47).

### 3.1.2        Chomsky's Theory and the Universal Grammar

Noam Chomsky (1957) strongly disagrees with the ability of behaviorist theory to explain the child's language development. In this way, Chomsky raised a new idea against behaviorism, which is referred to as the innatist theory. He was a linguist and unlike Skinner, who applied psychological theories to verbal behavior, he observed syntax and grammatical rules. His hypothesis consists of the idea that children come to this world with an innate "template of grammar" or as he calls it "universal grammar" which allows them to learn the grammatical rules of their mother tongue and other languages (Klein, 1986, p. 47). This "template" is also called LAD: language acquisition device and the children do not firstly learn by imitation but they already possess this innate ability to construct the rules of a language (Klein, 1986, p. 47).

According to Chomsky, children learn the rules by raising hypothesis and generalization (Crain S., 2001, p. 155). For instance, they may think that the plural is formed by adding the suffix "s" because a lot of words do so. In this way, they will say "two foots" and not "two feet" because they generalize the rule for all the possible cases. Later on, they will learn that some specific words in English do not form their plural by adding "s" at the end, but they change form instead. Unlike the behaviorist idea of children repeating only what they hear from their parents/caregivers, they

base their sentences on their own rules. In this way, parents and caregivers have a less significant role on the child's first language acquisition compared to the behaviorism perspective. Nevertheless, there are psychologists that disagree with the role of parents in children language acquisition. They especially emphasize the role of the mother helping her child to acquire the very first words (Ericsson, K. A., Charness, N., 1994) .

### 3.1.3 Interactionist Theory

If behaviorists took into consideration nurture and innatism took nature, the inter-actionists considered both of them. This new theory gives importance to the way how caregivers or parents help, praise, suggest and guide their children while acquiring a new language. Sharply different given role of the caregivers from the innatist theory, the inter-actionists study the language used by adults in order to help their children. Mothers may use different ways of helping their children express and enriching their vocabulary. For instance, one way is to use extended interrogative sentences and repetition in order to see if this is what their child wants to say and to provide him or her with more new words. However, the way parents interact with their children into a conversation may be different in other cultures. Still, the focus must be on the vocabulary enrichment and understanding the new concepts (Cook, 1982, pp. 93-95).

Around the age of three, children start to ask a lot of questions because they want to know how things are created, when and why. In this way, the conversation between parent-child should not just be in order to give the answer and make them stop asking "why". This may happen because children keep asking questions whose answers imply a complicated explanation but they cannot understand. Some caregivers prefer to give a short answer, sometimes a lie, just to finish the conversation. However, the importance of "why" conversations are far more important than the parents can think. While giving explanations to the child, we can provide him/her with new words and we should be clear and try to keep it simple so they can understand the concept, which may usually be unfamiliar to them (Halliday, 1994, p. 79).

If we make a short comparison between these three theories, we see that the behaviorists' focus is on the child verbal behavior and the new words are learned through imitation and practice. On the

other hand, the innatists put emphasis on the child's syntax while using testing and generalization through the system of LAD and the interactionists give importance to the language and the manners that caregivers use while talking to the children while learning is broadened through communication. The child is the key factor in innatist lenses while behaviorists put the child in a second role just as an imitator. Since the learning is based on communication, the interactionists give the child a balanced importance while it is the raising period when the child learns more linguistic competences. Nevertheless, the innatists do not agree with the influence of social environment because according to them, everything is based on the innate ability of children to possess universal grammar. On the other hand, the two other perspectives assign an important role of the social environment. Nonetheless, the debate between these theories has been ongoing for a lot of decades.

### 3.2. Second language acquisition theories

Comparing second language to the mother tongue, there are numerous differences, the most important of which is: The mother tongue is acquired unconsciously (language acquisition), while the second language must be learned (language learning). The language stage that the learner has is called interlanguage (Chellapan, 1982). This interlanguage owns characteristics of both the mother tongue and the target language (Huebner, 1983, p. 33). Theories of language acquisition try to explain the complex process of language acquisition (Strand, 1997). We will discuss the attitude of the above-mentioned theories towards second language acquisition.

### 3.2.1. SLA through behaviorist lenses

After the first language acquisition, the researchers raised the questions if we can use the same strategies while learning another language. They had to observe if these strategies were useful and if not, what instructions should be given in the classroom in order to acquire a new language whose grammar may be completely different from the grammar of mother tongue. Behaviorists took

behavioral response into consideration and they did not have a track of grammar and syntax development. Chomsky's hard work on syntax provided the language acquisition research with important data on how the syntax and grammatical rules develop during the child's language acquisition. The behaviorists had to go back and examine their cases, based on Chomsky's novel findings.

### 3.2.2.SLA through innatist lenses

On the other hand, several researches influenced by Chomsky's theory came up with a new theory as we call it Creative Construction Theory. The main idea of this theory, similar to Noam Chomsky's approach, is that foreign language learners construct mental representations of that language and develop processing strategies for linguistic input. The data was gathered by observing Spanish and Chinese speaking children who were learning English at school. The survey consisted of cartoon characters and pictures. Dulay and Burt (1974) examined the errors that children made while describing the pictures. They wanted to figure out if these errors were the same as English-native speakers or if they were influenced by the children's native language and culture. The result showed that the errors that these children made were similar to the errors of an English native speaker child. In this way, both researchers arrived at the conclusion that second language acquisition follows the same steps as first language acquisition. Following Dulay and Burt, Stephan Krashen (1982) composed five hypotheses related to SLA:

### The acquisition - learning hypothesis

According to Krashen, language acquisition is an unconscious process. Just as children learn their mother tongue solely by listening and interacting, but without systematic instruction, they acquire a second language the same way. In contrast, language learning is defined by Krashen as a conscious acquisition of knowledge. This distinction between acquisition and learning is Krashen's theory of second language appropriation (Krashen, 1982, pp. 10-11).

**The natural order hypothesis**

Krashen points out that there is a natural order of appropriation for linguistic phenomena, regardless of whether it will mediate in that order: "We acquire the rules of language in a predictable order, some rules tending to come early and others late. The order does not appear to be determined solely by formal simplicity and there is evidence that it is independent of the order in which rules are taught in language classes" (Krashen, 1985, p. 79). Some linguistic structures are appropriated earlier, others later. As Krashen calls the example "the s" ending in the 3rd person singular, which was later called the plural-s.

**The monitor hypothesis**

According to Krashen, active speaking is primarily due to the unconscious process of trained and promoted language acquisition. He sees our language knowledge in the role of a monitor, that is, an authority that ensures that grammatically incorrect comments are corrected. We correct our own utterances with regard to grammatical correctness: "Our ability to produce utterances in another language comes from acquired competence, from our subconscious knowledge. Learning, conscious knowledge, serves only as an editor, or monitor." (Krashen, 1985, pp. 79-80).

**The input hypothesis**

 "The Input Hypothesis claims that humans acquire language only in one way - by understanding messages, or by receiving 'comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1985, p. 80). Krashen adds two important statements or correlations to his input hypothesis: Firstly, speaking arises from language acquisition. Speaking cannot be taught, but arises automatically when understanding linguistic

messages: "Speaking is a result of acquisition and not its cause. Speech cannot be taught directly but 'emerges' on its own as a result of building competence via comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1985, p. 80). Secondly, if the linguistic messages are understood in the second language, and there is a large amount of speech input, grammatical knowledge about the second language develops automatically. Second language learners need, similarly to children when acquiring their mother tongue, a "silent period", i.e. a silent phase in which you hear, understand and process but do not speak yet. It is also important to note that only if the second language purchaser understands the linguistic messages, do language acquisition processes become possible. Krashen further points out that language acquisition speech input is optimal when vocabulary and grammar structures are something above the language level of the purchaser (Liu, 2015).

**The Affective Filter Hypothesis**

The affective filter hypothesis can be freely translated as a hypothesis of the emotional willingness to learn. All target language contacts are of no use in terms of language acquisition, if there is no emotional willingness to learn on the part of the listener and language learner. This is important for teaching practice. Krashen underlines that teaching a second language should avoid any learning pressure as much as possible because if it is negative, it can affect the willingness to learn. The willingness to learn is especially given when for the sake of his personal engagement in communication the language learner, forgets that the conversation is conducted in foreign language: "I have suggested (…) that the filter is lowest when the acquirer is so involved in the message that he temporarily 'forgets' he is hearing or reading another language" (Krashen, 1985, p. 82). Krashen finally summarizes his five hypotheses in one sentence: "We can summarize our five hypotheses with a single claim: people acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their filters are low enough to allow the input in" (Krashen, 1985, p. 82).

### 3.2.3.SLA through Interactionist lenses

Lastly, interactionists focus on the interaction between the English native speaker and the non-English native speaker. They emphasize the way the native speaker uses the language to achieve the communication goals. If the input is understood by the non-native English speaker, then, this learner gains more confidence in speaking as he is able to understand the meaning of what is being spoken. This is also known as negotiation of meaning (Klein, 1986, p. 56). In case the learner does not understand the meaning, he asks for repetition or makes the question once again and so on. The speaking process occurs naturally and the errors are understood when the meaning is negotiated.

### 4.      Conclusion

The use (or not) of students' L1 in the classroom remain a controversial issue among researchers. Grammar-Translation Method is mainly based on the usage of L1 while everything is translated into the native language or/and vice versa. The supporters of this method give importance to native language patterns as they see them as an important tool in order to create and develop patterns of the target language. However, other teaching methods such as Direct Method and Total Physical response blame L1 as it interrupts pronunciation, new patterns and habits of target language. Students' native language is not used in these classrooms while the new concepts are taught through visual aids, pantomime, body and facial gestures and students' collaboration. Furthermore, Communicative Teaching Approach uses L1 only at the beginning. The time students master on the language, L1 fades away.

Secondly, the way children acquire language remains a debate among linguists whether children have the innate ability to acquire or they may be affected by the surroundings. When talking about first language acquisition, behaviorists, the supporters of the learning theory based on the idea that every behavior is acquired through conditioning, argue that children learn language through imitations. They use a simple example to explain their theory: when a word is given to the child, the parents find an object that looks alike so the child will repeat the word and understand the new concept. In this way, they are reinforcing the child's response. On the other hand, unlike

behaviorists, Noam Chomsky disagrees with language learning by imitation. He suggests that human beings own a language acquisition device and the children do not firstly learn by imitation but they already possess this innate ability to construct the rules of a language. Finally, interactionists introduced the idea that children learn language through the innate "templates" of language acquisition and through external factors by imitating what they see or hear.

On the other hand, if first language is acquired unconsciously, second language is learned. Behaviorists had the idea that repetition may help children to overcome first language habits. They would learn by imitation and soon be familiar with the target language. Chomsky's hard work on syntax provided the language acquisition research with important data on how the syntax and grammatical rules develop during a child's language acquisition. Influenced by Chomsky's theory, many scholars came up with a new theory called Creative Construction Theory. The main idea of this theory is that foreign language learners develop visual models of that language and implement skills for linguistic input processing. Stephan Krashen composed five language acquisition hypotheses. He emphasizes that there is a natural order of appropriation for linguistic phenomena, regardless of whether it will mediate in that order. According to Krashen, our language knowledge is in the role of a monitor, that is, an authority that ensures that grammatically incorrect comments are corrected. Next, the input hypothesis suggests that language acquisition is an unconscious process, which automatically takes place when language messages are received. Moreover, all target language contacts are of no use in terms of language acquisition, if there is no emotional willingness to learn on the part of the listener and language learner. Lastly, interactionists concentrate on the relationship between native English speaker and non-native English speaker. They emphasize the idea that the native speaker uses the language to achieve the goals of communication. When the non-native English speaker understands the feedback, this learner gains more faith in communicating because he can understand the sense of what is being spoken.

Many teachers now hold the belief that there is no single right way to teach. It's definitely true that no comparative study has clearly stated the dominance of one method over another. However, the teaching methods do offer specific roles to the native language: sometimes it is considered as beneficial and sometimes as a barrier which interferes with second language acquisition. However, native language remains a bridge to understanding and meanings.

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