

## Using L1 in the classroom

**Do your students speak too much of their first language in class or too little? Since Berlitz and the Direct Method, use of the mother tongue in language classrooms has been frowned upon, but there are many useful ways of incorporating the students' first language in class to help them learn a second language.**

**Every language teacher has, at some point, felt guilty, puzzled and frustrated about their students' overuse of their mother tongue in the classroom. In a monolingual context – that is to say, where all students speak the same mother tongue this can become quite a problem.**



The closest most get to dealing with the issue is to nag their students to use English and fine them for lapsing into their mother tongue. There is nothing wrong with this strategy as far as it goes but it rarely allows the teacher or the students a chance to understand why L1 was being used in the first place. In 'L1 practical ideas kit', you'll find some alternative suggestions for limiting L1 use.

A more complete strategy, however, is to be *proactive*! This means that, as the teacher, you should actively control and influence how and when the mother tongue is used. Don't waste time trying to eliminate use of the mother tongue

completely from the classroom, when this is likely to be futile. Instead, concentrate on ways of harnessing, exploiting and playing with L1. Decide when it might be beneficial to use L1. This might include reading as well as speaking L1 as we will see on the following pages. Encourage and approve of mother-tongue use at chosen moments and in designated activities. Explain your choices to your students if you think that would be helpful. If you can do this, your classroom is likely to be more authentic in the sense that it reflects the natural interplay of L1 and L2, which is inherent in second-language acquisition. Not only is it more authentic but it's also more fun and more relaxing for you and your students. Still not convinced? Try some of the following ideas. Most of them reflect ways students are likely to use English outside the classroom.

### L1 practical ideas kit

The ideas in this kit are all designed to be used with minimum preparation on the part of the teacher. The recommended level of the students for each particular activity is written in brackets.

#### Conversation starters (pre-intermediate +)

Use mother-tongue newspapers for conversation practice. Choose or get students to choose an article from the current day's newspaper and have them explain what it is about in English. Depending on the difficulty of the text, this may generate vocabulary work as students try communicating key points of the text. This is similar to, but usually more effective than, just using pictures. Using L1 texts, like using pictures, is a fast way of stimulating ideas for conversation.

#### Dubbing (intermediate +)

Show students a clip of a popular L1 TV programme (for example, a soap opera) and tell them they have been commissioned to dub it into English for the BBC. With larger classes, get students to work in teams. The best version gets the contract! Students can work on translating the script and taking on the roles of the actors and dubbing with the TV sound off.

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### Shadow and a doubt (all levels)

Have students rehearse a communicative activity (shadow) in L1 before attempting it in English, and then compare the two versions afterwards. This can be a very effective way of challenging advanced learners, as it helps to raise specific awareness of the difference between their ability to express themselves in English and in their mother tongue (doubt).

### Planting words (pre-intermediate +)

Find the lyrics of an English song or poem that you and your students like. Go through the lyrics and change some of the English words into words in the students' language. They have to hunt down the translated words and put them back into English. You could do this the other way round too, taking a text in the students' mother tongue and 'planting' translated words in English into it.

### Restaurant role-play (all levels)

Use a menu in L1 so that the dishes have to be explained to English-speaking guests. This is, after all, a more likely scenario than the 'Olde Englishe Restaurante' favoured by older teaching materials.



### Testing, testing (all levels)

Ask students to take ten phrases in English from their coursebook. For each phrase, they write three translations – two incorrect and one correct. Ask them to make the translations similar. Students then exchange papers and do each other's tests.

### Sight translation (intermediate +)

Prepare a series of about ten interesting quotations on a piece of paper. (You can easily find collections of quotations online.) Show the quotations one at a time to the class as a whole (using an overhead projector would work nicely, or you can write them on the board). Give the students 30 seconds to read each quotation and then take it away. Students must write what they understood but in their own language. Compare translations afterwards.

**Variation:** Take quotes from the news and ask the students to imagine who said it.

### Reverse translations (intermediate +)

Group A are given a short text in their mother tongue to translate into English. Group B are given a different short text in English to translate into their mother tongue. Groups then give their translations to each other to be translated back into the original. Finally, groups compare the originals with the translated versions.

**Variation:** Prepare some literal and inaccurate translations for your students to correct. Ready-made examples can often be found in your local tourist office!

### Interpreters (all levels)

This can be adapted to any oral pair-work situation. It works best with interviews. Students work in groups of at least three. One person is the interviewer, who speaks only in English. The interviewee speaks only in L1. The interpreter works as a go-between, translating the interviewer's questions into L1 and the interviewee's answers back into English.

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**Variation:** Arrange a press conference, with several interviewers. The interviewee plays the role of a famous film star, politician, etc. Teenagers especially like this activity and recognize the scenario from TV interviews with pop stars and sports personalities.

### Translating pop songs (intermediate +)

Students translate the lyrics (or small sections of the lyrics) of their favourite songs into L1. Teenage magazines sometimes include songs with L1 translations, so you can use these to do it the other way round, as well.



### Broken telephone (all levels)

Devise a sentence that might cause translation problems into your students' L1. Whisper it to the first student in English. The first student translates it into L1 and whispers it to the second student who translates it back into English and whispers it to the third. Continue round the class in this way. At the end, compare the final English version with the original.

### Code switching (all levels)

Code switching is using more than one language in an utterance ('I'll have a *café con leche*'). Bilingual kids do this all the time, so why shouldn't learners? On occasion, encourage learners to use

L1 words or phrases in a communication activity to maintain fluency and build confidence. You can have a listener note down mother-tongue use for later work if you want but that's not necessarily the point.

### Funny names (all levels)

Translate the following into the students' L1, using a literal translation. So, for example, George Bush becomes Jorge Arbusto in Spanish and Georges Buisson in French.

George Bush / Johnny Walker / Wall Street / Nicolas Cage / Tom Cruise / Scarlett Johansson / Louis Armstrong / The Doors / Justin Timberlake / Bond, James Bond / Lady Gaga / BlackBerry / 7UP / Big Ben

Tell the students they are going to hear a dictation of names of famous people, things and places. They will hear these names in their own language but must write down what they are in English (in other words, they must get the names right). Give the dictation. How many names could the students get?

### Alternatives to the carrot and the stick

#### Encouraging the use of L2 in class

Of course, the ideas on the previous pages do not necessarily mean that it's OK to use L1 in class all the time, nor do they address the frustrated question of the English teacher: 'How do I get them to speak more English?!' Here are some suggestions to provide an alternative to pleading and nagging your students to *speak English*.

- Grade speaking tasks, and make aims and instructions clear. This may sound obvious, but often students' use of their mother tongue is due to the fact that they don't know what they are supposed to be doing or that they don't have sufficient English or sufficient communication strategies to do it in English.
- Use a talking stick for class discussions. The person who holds the stick holds the floor but they must speak in English.

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- Correct students' use of L2 in a correction slot. When your students are speaking, note down all instances of mother-tongue use you hear, and write them on the board for students to render in English. This is a more constructive approach than nagging and fining.
- Take advantage of L1 use by your students, especially when it is directed at you. If a student speaks to you in their mother tongue, acknowledge the *content* of their request, question or statement couched in L1 (in other words, acknowledge the desire to communicate) but follow up with 'How do you say that in English?' and make this a question the class as a whole can address. In this sense, you are not punishing but you are being constructive. Refer back to this when someone wants to use the same language in the future ('Do you remember how we say / ask this in English?').
- Designate English time as distinct from L1 time. Use a symbol like a flag pinned up on the board. This will help reinforce when you want English spoken and when you are prepared to hear either English or L1.
- Finally, you can always nag, threaten and penalize L2 use outside designated times. Well ... why not?

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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