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SOME DIFFICULTIES OF USING THE MOTHER TONGUE IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

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ANNOTATION: This article explores the main difficulties that arise when using the mother tongue in English language classrooms. While the L1 can facilitate comprehension, reduce anxiety, and scaffold learning, excessive or unstructured use often leads to reduced exposure to English, dependency on translation, fossilization of errors, and decreased communicative competence. Drawing on pedagogical theories and classroom research, the paper analyzes psychological, linguistic, and methodological factors behind these challenges and suggests balanced strategies for effective L1–L2 integration.

KEYWORDS: Mother tongue; L1; English classroom; language interference; communicative competence; code-switching; translation dependence; EFL teaching; bilingual instruction.

Introduction

In recent decades, the role of the mother tongue (L1) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has been widely discussed. Some scholars argue that the mother tongue is a valuable pedagogical tool, while others emphasize that too much reliance on L1 hinders language acquisition. The debate originates from differing teaching methodologies, from Grammar-Translation approaches to communicative and immersion-based methods. Despite the benefits of occasional and strategic use of L1, teachers and researchers continue to identify several difficulties associated with its use in English lessons. This article examines these challenges in depth and evaluates their implications for EFL teaching and learning practices.

1. Insufficient Exposure to English

One of the most significant issues is the reduction of English input in the classroom. According to many acquisition theories, the primary condition for learning a foreign language is extensive exposure to meaningful target language input. When the mother tongue dominates classroom interaction, students hear less English, which slows listening and speaking development. Krashen's Input Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input for natural language acquisition, which becomes limited in L1-heavy classrooms [S. Krashen]. Similarly, researchers note that consistent immersion pushes learners to internalize grammatical structures more effectively than translation-based learning [A. Brown]. Therefore, excessive L1





use deprives students of the linguistic environment needed to acquire pronunciation, intonation, lexical patterns, and authentic usage.

2. Developing Dependency on Translation

Another common difficulty is learners' tendency to depend on L1 translation rather than developing direct associations with English meanings. If students always translate new vocabulary or instructions into their mother tongue, they fail to build automaticity in English processing. Harmer suggests that translation-based reliance prevents students from thinking in the target language and creates mental "delays" in speaking [J. Harmer]. This dependency often results in:

slower speech production;

difficulty understanding English without translation;

errors caused by literal translation from L1;

reduced confidence when meaning cannot be quickly translated.

Consequently, learners struggle to develop communicative fluency.

3. Interference and Transfer Errors

Language interference is one of the most widely observed problems caused by frequent use of the mother tongue. When learners rely heavily on L1, they unintentionally transfer rules, structures, and pronunciation patterns into English.

Examples include: Word order interference: Students may reproduce the syntactic structure of L1 in English sentences.

False cognates: Words that seem similar in both languages but have different meanings cause confusion.

Phonological transfer: Learners apply the sound system of their mother tongue when pronouncing English words. Research shows that L1 interference increases when the mother tongue is used excessively in classroom explanations [R. Ellis]. This results in fossilized mistakes that become difficult to correct later.

4. Reduced Communicative Competence

A primary objective of modern EFL teaching is to develop students' communicative competence. However, when learners are encouraged—or allowed—to use their mother tongue frequently, the amount of active English communication decreases dramatically. Communicative activities such as pair work, role plays, and discussions lose effectiveness when students revert to L1. Teachers often report that students: switch to L1 when tasks become difficult; avoid formulating ideas in English; participate less in speaking tasks; rely on

teachers to translate instead of negotiating meaning. These behaviors slow the development of fluency, interactional skills, and pragmatic competence.

5. Classroom Management Challenges





Using the mother tongue in English classes also presents classroom management issues. When teachers begin to use L1, students may feel permitted to continue speaking exclusively in the mother tongue. This creates an environment where English is optional rather than required. Research indicates that once L1 starts dominating peer communication, it becomes difficult to restore an English-speaking atmosphere [D. Larsen-Freeman]. Teachers may struggle to motivate students to switch back to English or maintain discipline during group activities conducted in the mother tongue. In multilingual classrooms, the problem deepens: using one group's L1 can alienate students whose mother tongue is different.

6. Limiting Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary acquisition depends heavily on encountering words in various contexts. If teachers habitually resort to L1 translation when explaining new vocabulary, learners do not fully process the word's meaning, collocations, connotations, or usage contexts. Nation states that vocabulary knowledge requires rich exposure, which translation alone cannot provide [P. Nation]. L1-based explanation restricts: contextual understanding; associations with English synonyms/antonyms; acquisition of natural collocations; cultural nuances behind words. Thus, students tend to acquire "shallow" vocabulary knowledge.

7. Reduction of Cultural Awareness

Language and culture are inseparable. When English is taught through the mother tongue rather than through authentic English materials, learners miss out on cultural meanings, idiomatic expressions, and pragmatic norms. For instance, certain expressions cannot be translated word-for-word without losing their cultural essence. Overuse of L1 prevents students from developing intercultural competence, which is crucial for real-world communication [M. Byram].

8. Teachers' Overreliance on L1

Some teachers lack confidence in their own English proficiency or feel pressure to use L1 to save time. While this may temporarily simplify explanations, it ultimately reduces the quality of instruction and the linguistic environment. Teachers who frequently use L1 may unintentionally send the message that English is too difficult to understand without translation. This negatively affects students' motivation and willingness to engage with English-only instruction.

9. Psychological Challenges for Learners

Excessive use of L1 can create psychological barriers to using English. Students may:

- fear making mistakes;
- feel uncomfortable speaking English;
- prefer the safety of the mother tongue;





develop anxiety about English-only tasks.

Studies show that learners' willingness to communicate decreases when they perceive English as optional [Z. Dörnyei]. Thus, regular use of L1 may reduce students' confidence rather than support it.

10. Methodological Conflicts

Different teaching approaches handle the mother tongue differently. For example:

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) promotes minimal L1 usage.

Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) relies heavily on L1.

Task-Based Learning (TBL) requires English interaction.

Direct Method eliminates L1 entirely.

Teachers who mix methodologies inconsistently may create confusion, unclear expectations, or ineffective lesson structures.

11. Strategies to Minimize Difficulties

Although L1 presents challenges, it does not need to be eliminated entirely. Instead, using it strategically can optimize learning. Recommended strategies include:

1. Clear L1-use rules: Establish when and why L1 is acceptable.
2. Scaffolding: Use L1 only to clarify complex grammar or instructions.
3. Encourage English thinking: Begin lessons with English-only warm-ups.
4. Increase comprehensible input: Use visuals, gestures, and simplified English instead of translation.
5. Monitor group work: Ensure students stay on task in English.
6. Build teacher confidence: Provide professional development for English-only instruction.

A balanced approach helps overcome the difficulties outlined in this article.

Conclusion. Using the mother tongue in English classrooms remains a complex and multifaceted issue. While L1 can be a supportive tool for comprehension and comfort, its excessive or unstructured use creates several challenges: reduced exposure to English, translation dependency, interference errors, limited vocabulary development, decreased communicative competence, and various psychological and methodological problems. Teachers should therefore aim for balanced, purposeful, and minimal use of the mother tongue, ensuring that English remains the primary medium of communication and learning in the classroom.

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