

## Benefits of Mother Tongue in the Adult ESL Classroom

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### Abstract

*Traditional views on second language acquisition (SLA) have failed to explain the convoluted nature of adult language acquisition. Unlike children, adults' ability to learn a subsequent language is influenced by socio cultural and affective factors such as their ethnicity, first language (L1) and their feelings and emotions. As mature adults enter the second language learning process equipped with a sophisticated language system already in place, they both consciously and unconsciously draw from it when learning a new language. As L1 is a vital element of an individual's identity, denying it in the second language (L2) classroom, can have detrimental effects on his/her L2 learning success. Thus, the literature reviewed in this article explores the influence of an adult's L1 on L2 learning success. The findings indicate that the use of L1 enables the incorporation of students' prior experience into classroom pedagogy; reframes the relationship between language learners and target language speakers; reduces classroom anxiety and preserves the linguistic and cultural identities of the language learner. These themes were interpreted within the framework of humanistic approach to language teaching. According to the findings, an individual's L1 exerts a positive influence on his/her L2 learning success due to its ability to create a learner-centred, anxiety free, low-risk classroom environment. In light of this, it is recommended that the learner's L1 should be treated as a resource rather than a hindrance in the language classroom. Hence, learners should be given the opportunity to use it as a tool where necessary in the L2 classroom.*

### 1. Introduction

Mori [18] perceives language classrooms to be "complex sites where not only language and culture are learnt but language practices are contested and resisted" [p.167]. It is incorrect to assume that a bilingual is two monolinguals in one with each language system linked to a corresponding culture [5]. Rather, they are individuals with complex language and cultural behavior. Complexity in the L2 classroom arises as a result of this complexity. This complexity underlies the need to look at the language classroom using a different lens than the ones used to look at other classrooms. This needs become crucial where adult language learners (ALLs) are concerned as they carry with them their own philosophies of language, and have definite

ideas about how they wish to use it and what it looks like, as well as how they wish to learn it in a classroom [18]. Thus, L2 acquisition in ALLs can be identified as an area which warrants special attention.

Smith and Strong [25] identify the ALL as having complex characteristics in their dynamic lives. They further claim that ALLs have the ability to communicate L1 with confidence and may tend to switch between the languages in their language repertoires often. They may also have their own interpretations of their culture and belief systems and possess the capacity to reflect and build on their cross-cultural experiences. Most of them are aware of the fact that it is not possible for them to reach native speaker standards in their L2 [25].

It should also be noted that it is unwise to compare adult language acquisition with child language acquisition due to a number of reasons. For instance, compared to young language learners, ALLs have much higher capabilities and cognitive skills [26, 30]. They also have superior problem solving skills, a lifetime of experiences and the ability to analyze their environment. All these evidence underscores the fact that there are unique characteristics inherent in the ALL, and that those have to be taken into consideration where adult language acquisition is concerned.

Traditional views on SLA have failed to explain the intricacies and complexities associated with adult language acquisition [8]. For instance, Language learning theories based on western mainstream pedagogies assume learning to be a detached cognitive activity. Hence, learner emotions, intuitions and imagination have no place in mainstream pedagogical practices [6]. Thus, they fail to explain why ALLs are successful in certain communicative situations while faltering in others [24]. Norton [21] notes that some language learners are sometimes motivated, extroverted and confident, and at other times unmotivated, introverted and anxious. Socially constructed binaries such as extroverted and introverted, inhibited and uninhibited do not justly and adequately describe the ALL as social cultural factors such as learner's ethnicity and L1 may influence learner success. They are also influenced by a variety of affective factors such as anxiety, self-confidence and stress [12]. Norton [21] claims that SLA studies do not adequately address this significant issue. She asserts that this is due to the fact that SLA theorists have not focused adequate

attention on the intersection between SLA and learner identity. Thus, it is crucial to look at adult language acquisition adopting a more modern point of view than the ones that are currently being used.

As a person's L1 is intricately intertwined with his/her identity, it is imperative that the ALL's socio-cultural identity is validated in the L2 learning process. One way of achieving this is by allowing them to draw on the resources of their L1 in the ESL classroom. However, it should be noted that the debate regarding the use of students' L1 in the L2 classroom has always been a controversial issue, which has generated a multitude of research in different linguistic contexts. One school of thought promotes L2 exclusivity while the other believes in the potential of L1 as a pedagogical tool in the SLA process. The proponents of L1 inclusivity in the classroom put forth a variety of views justifying why it should be allowed in the classroom. For instance, they believe that it acts as a cognitive tool that scaffolds L2 intake [2, 28]. It also makes the L2 input more salient [29]. Thus, according to them, banning L1 would be parallel to banning realia [19] and may retard the growth of concept development in language learners.

Despite the debate, the use of L1 has been a widely occurring phenomenon in the L2 classroom as it is inevitable that learners draw on their L1 when learning a L2 even in contexts where the L1 use is not explicitly promoted [31]. Research suggests that monolingual instructional orientation in the L2 classroom may be counter-productive and inconsistent with the reality of interdependence across languages. Macaro [16] too claims "no study so far, has been able to demonstrate a causal relationship between exclusion of the L1 and improved learning" (p. 544). In a similar vein, Auerbach [4] states that the inclusion of L1 has a sound theoretical base whereas its exclusion has been based mostly on intuition. Other research too pinpoints that monolingual instruction in the L2 classroom has not been empirically supported. Due to these reasons, the facilitative role of L1 in the adult L2 classroom is worth a deeper investigation.

## 2. Purpose

This paper presents a literature review discussing how the use of ALL's L1 could facilitate SLA by creating a less tensed, nonthreatening, learner friendly classroom environment which validates learner's linguistic and cultural identities. The aim of this is to evaluate the efficacy of L1 in the ESL classroom as a tool that facilitates L2 acquisition.

## 3. Theoretical framework

A humanistic approach to teaching is used to analyze the findings of the current study. This

approach to learning and teaching considers the whole person as an entity with physical, emotional and social features as well as cognitive features [25, 27].

Humanistic approach to teaching focuses on the hidden internal experiences of learners, and emphasises that the role of feelings and emotions must be incorporated into the learning experience. In congruence with this, Lei [15] claims that this approach to teaching is characterized by learner-centeredness in which the goal of education goes beyond developing the cognitive and linguistic capabilities of the learners. On the other hand, learner-centred education focuses the learners' emotions and feelings in addition to content and skill development in any discipline.

It also maintains that learners need to be empowered so that they have more control over the learning process. Additionally, this approach emphasises the importance of building up confidence and self-esteem of ALLs [32] and a learner friendly, relaxed classroom atmosphere that reduces learner anxiety [25].

## 4. Methods

A variety of literature including journal articles and books relating to identity and language learning and humanistic approach to language teaching were analysed in order to explore the influence of L1 on the ALL's SLA process.

## 5. Results and Discussion

A significant number of identity related benefits of L1 in the L2 classroom emerged in the literature. They can be categorized under the following broad themes:

- According to literature, L1 in the L2 classroom
  - i. enables the incorporation of student lived/ prior experience into classroom pedagogy.
  - ii. reframes the relationship between language learners and the native speakers and expert users of the target language.
  - iii. reduces classroom anxiety by giving learners a voice
  - iv. preserves the linguistic identity of the L2 learner.

In the following sections, research findings on each of these four themes within the framework of humanistic approach to language teaching are discussed in detail.

### 5.1. The use of L1 enables the incorporation of students' lived/ prior experience into classroom pedagogy

All ALLs come to the language learning process equipped with prior knowledge and experiences [25].

As the recent focus on learner-centeredness in the classroom underscores the need to incorporate the learner's lived experiences into the classroom pedagogy, it is vital that teachers think of strategies to achieve this.

One way of achieving this is by allowing ALLs to use their L1 where necessary. Auerbach [4] too justifies the use of L1 by pinpointing it as a strategy that validates the learner's lived experiences. As it is not possible to learn new information without associating it to what the learner already knows [9], learner's prior knowledge should be utilized appropriately to build up new knowledge.

Adult L2 acquisition cannot be compared to child language acquisition as adults have a lifetime investment in their prior experiences and communicative practice. Hence, they approach the enterprise of L2 learning fully equipped with powerful tools such as their L1 and their cultural capital. Arabski [3] draws on the seminal work of Lado (1957) suggests that individuals are inclined to transfer the forms and meanings of their L1 and culture when attempting to receive and produce a second or a foreign language. This is mainly due to the fact that one's knowledge of L1 and culture are intricately intertwined with one's identity [21, 23]. Thus, it is inconsiderate to ignore this knowledge, as it is one resource these learners can depend on when learning an L2. Since previous knowledge plays a pivotal role in learning, it is vital that strategies are devised to incorporate previous experiences to L2 pedagogy. Also, an individual's L1 is a part of his/her essence and is connected with his/her emotions, aspirations, world concepts, and group identity [14] and a significant part of his/her (multiple) identities [20]. Therefore, ignoring or not acknowledging an individual's linguistic and cultural background is disrespectful and may even have a negative influence on the learning process.

Thus, by allowing the L1 in the L2 classroom, teachers acknowledge the learners' prior experience, and thereby their identities. In congruence with this, Baynham and Brooks-Lewis both [5, 6] propose that recognizing the learner's prior knowledge is equal to recognizing the person. Furthermore, in the classroom, students' L1 becomes one of the most potent tools that enable cultural expression. It also facilitates the discussion of cross-cultural issues [27]. Thus, by eliminating it, teachers unknowingly disregard the importance of the learners' cultural identity and their prior experiences. This can have a negative impact on their language learning process.

On a more recent note, translanguaging [8] refers to the use of L1 as a pedagogical practice that is beneficial to learners instead of viewing it as a bad practice that needs to be avoided. According to Celic and Seltzer [8], bilinguals manipulate their languages to optimize communication and understanding. It is like a norm for them, and they never cease

translanguaging. According to its proponents of translanguaging, it is the most significant practice of all bilinguals.

Learner-centeredness, is a key characteristic of humanistic approach to teaching [15] due to its ability to create a low-risk, non-threatening classroom environment. According to above research findings, it is clear that the incorporation of L1 in the L2 classroom has the capacity to create these conditions in the classroom.

## **5.2. The use of L1 reframes the relationship between language learners and the native speakers and expert users of the target language**

Even highly motivated learners are found to underperform in classrooms that are racist, sexist, elitist or homophobic, [21]. For instance, if an adult learner feels that his/her culture is being devalued in the classroom, he/she may feel disempowered. Due to this his/her motivation to learn will greatly diminish. This power imbalance is a very common occurrence in the traditional ESL classroom, where the teacher either deliberately or unknowingly neglects to include the learner's L1 in classroom activities. This can create a power imbalance between the 'more knowledgeable teacher' representing the target language and culture and the 'learner, who has no or partial knowledge of the target language and target culture. Both Auerbach [4] and Mori [18] believe language learning to be a political process which has "ideological origins and consequences for relations of power both inside and outside the classroom" [4, p.19]. Under this circumstance, Learners can feel powerless especially when learning powerful L2s such as English. Thus, it is evident that the ESL learner's inability to communicate due to his/her lack of competence can make them powerless in the ESL classroom despite their experiences, L1 knowledge and other skills they possess. As L2 learners are affected by unequal power relations in the classroom [24, 21], banning the L1 can be disempowering to them. When the L1 is suppressed, L2 learners are deprived of their typical means of communication, and hence their ability to function fully as human beings [1, 5, 13, 12]. However, by allowing the L1, learners are granted the ability to claim "more powerful identities from which to speak, read or write" [6, p.3].

ALLs, as stated above are individuals with sophisticated L1s and well-developed cognitive abilities. They are similar to monolinguals in many aspects, but differ from them in that they are learning a L2. Due to this similarity, Cook [10] questions the legitimacy of looking at their activities as "pale imitations of the true lives and occupations of monolinguals" [p.44]. As such perceptions may reinforce inequalities among ALLs [21] and act as

deterrent to language learning, it is crucial that teachers reflect and re-reflect on what they do inside the classroom.

Humanistic approach to teaching does not consider teacher as the sole authority of power and knowledge in the classroom. Instead, it empowers the learner by recognizing him/her as an entity with emotions, feelings and valuable prior experiences. Thus, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom may delegate a fair amount of power from the teacher to the learner.

### **5.3. The use of L1 reduces classroom anxiety by giving them a voice**

Students in general often feel anxious in the presence of an unfamiliar L2 in the classroom. Language anxiety is defined as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” [22, p. 218]. Brooks-Lewis too [6] states that entering a new classroom can be stressful to ALLs as they are no longer in control of the directions of their actions. Instead, they are expected to obey and follow the instructions of the teacher. Thus, it is clear that ALLs need a classroom environment, which is safe, empathetic towards their plight, and acknowledge their multiple personalities [25].

Under these circumstances, if the L1 is banned in the classroom, ALLs have no option, but to conform to it even if they have no competence in the new language. This could create anxiety in the minds of the ALL. If the teacher expects them to use the L2, which they are not competent in, they may face a number of difficulties such as losing face. In order to protect them from humiliation, they may even resort to silence [11]. Norton [21] asserts that practices which silence students should be investigated and addressed, as they are detrimental to language acquisition. Both Brooks-Lewis and Auerbach [6, 4], in response to this, propose that the inclusion of L1 can reduce the anxiety caused by L2 only policy in the classroom. Furthermore, research suggests that students can identify better with a teacher who speaks to them using their L1.

A key characteristic of the humanistic approach to teaching is its ability to create an anxiety free, non-threatening classroom environment. According to the above research findings, the use of L1 has the ability to create such an environment in the classroom.

### **5.4. The Use of L1 helps preserve the linguistic identity of the L2 learner**

Findings also indicate that as adults’ sense of identity is intertwined with their L1. An individual’s L1 is directly linked to his/her identity, as it is a significant channel that categorizes them into ethnic

groups. Hence, expecting them to ignore it could result in their sense of identity being threatened [23]. Adults have an ‘emotional loyalty’ to their L1. As a result of this loyalty, they may resist learning a L2 [17, 25, 26]. Specially, adults who are forced to learn a L2 may resist the entire process for fear of losing their cultural and linguistic identities. Hence, by allowing their L1 in the ESL classroom, fears of their identities being forgotten or replaced can be minimized to a great extent [4]. Also, The learning of English appears as a “less of a threat” to the students’ vernaculars [27].

Discussing this further, Canagarajah [7] seeks to find out how language learners are able to maintain membership of their speech communities and cultures while learning a L2. He proposes that L2 learners sometimes encounter issues and may adopt various literacy practices such as code switching in order to create “pedagogical safe houses” in the L2 classroom [7, p. 120]. These practices are learners’ ways of resisting “unfavourable identities imposed on the learners” [21]. Also, practices such as translanguaging underscore the value of multilingualism, and allow students the opportunity to protect their home languages [8]. This type of practices can minimize students’ fear of losing their cultural values.

It is imperative that teachers do not view practices adopted by L2 learners as detrimental to language learning. Instead, they should see how those could be utilized to let students know that their L1s are valued and respected [27]. As stated above, resistance to L2 acquisition due to negative emotions and feelings learners attached to it can be minimized to a great extent by allowing the L1 in the classroom.

## **6. Conclusion**

All the findings are in line with the key characteristics of humanistic approach to teaching and learning. As they indicate the ALL’s ability to learn is affected by issues pertaining to their identity, it is vital that their identities are recognized and acknowledged in the L2 classroom. Under these circumstances, the learner’s L1 should be considered a resource than an impediment although it was banned in the traditional L2 classroom for many years.

It should also be noted that the use of L1, at least in low levels is important in the L2 classroom due to the politico-social-cultural implications of teaching languages such as English. In congruence with this, Canagarajah [6] proposes “At a time when periphery communities still associate English with colonialism and oppression, it is important to show local students that their vernacular is valued by actively using it in the ESL classroom”[p.128]. As the success of pedagogical tasks depends on the degree of success of para pedagogical tasks, it is important to explore

the factors that contribute to a classroom environment conducive to L2 acquisition. Along with these assumptions, new trends in SLA studies too underscore the importance of creating opportunities for learners to utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to enhance L2 acquisition. Thus, in conclusion, it can be stated that there is a need to move away from traditional teaching methods and adopt more humane, culturally sensitive approaches to language teaching to optimize learning outcomes.

## 7. References

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