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The use of L1 in English language teaching



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Introduction

For much of the 20th century, English language teachers working in Western countries were recommended to teach using only, or mainly, English. Other languages were discouraged or even banned from the classroom (Cook, 2010; Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). Even discussion of the topic was considered, until recently, an ‘elephant in the room’ of English language teaching (ELT) (Levine, 2011, p. 69). Yet since the start of the twenty-first century, there has been a noticeable and widespread shift in Western opinion towards the use of other languages in the classroom, so much so that some scholars are calling this a ‘multilingual turn’ in language teaching (e.g. May, 2014). In other parts of the world (e.g. East and South Asia), other languages played an important role in the English classroom throughout the 20th century, even if Western scholars looked negatively upon such practices (e.g. Grabe & Mahon, 1981).

This white paper will discuss the use of other languages in the English language classroom, looking at this topic from methodological and research-based perspectives, discussing the beliefs, needs’ and practices of both teachers and learners. It will also discuss practical classroom implications resulting from this analysis and present a number of techniques, tools and activity types that teachers can use to facilitate learning through the productive use of other languages.

In this paper, the term ‘**L1**’ will be used to refer to all and any named languages other than English. These languages are sometimes referred to as the ‘mother tongue’, ‘home language’ and ‘own language’ by authors. In many contexts where English is taught today, the L1 is shared by most, or all, of the learners in a class, even if it is not their home language (e.g. a community lingua franca). We will refer to these as ‘**shared-L1**’ contexts. In other contexts, no shared-L1

is present and English becomes the only available language for communication. We will refer to such contexts as ‘**mixed-L1**’ contexts or classrooms (also called ‘multilingual classrooms’ by some authors).

Historical background

The widespread belief that English is best taught through English alone, without the mediation of L1, can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century when there was a rapid expansion of private language schools (e.g. Berlitz Schools) in Western countries for adults who wanted to learn a language, usually for practical, rather than academic, reasons (Cook, 2010).¹ The marketing strategy of these schools has often focussed on the difference between their English-only approach and previous methods typically used in secondary education in the 18th and 19th centuries (Kerr, 2016). These earlier methods are often referred to jointly as the ‘Grammar-translation’ method/approach, although in reality they included a range of diverse approaches that included focuses on grammar (usually explained by the teacher in L1), the study of target language literature and the translation of sentences, both into and out of the target language (Kirk, 2018). The largely English-only approaches that followed these include the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method and even much communicative language teaching. As a result, the 20th century became an era of ‘intralingual’ pedagogy (Cook, 2010), at least in Western theory and academia. In reality, many teachers around the world were always teaching in ways that involved L1 (see e.g. Smith & Imura, 2004; West, 1960).

Times, however, have changed. Since the turn of the 21st century, numerous publications indicate a change in attitudes towards L1 use, among both academics and practitioners (e.g. Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Cook, 2010; Deller and Rinvoluceri, 2002; García, 2009; Kerr, 2014). Many of these argue that not only is a policy of English-only instruction unachievable in many contexts, but it is also undesirable. This is accompanied by growing research evidence indicating that the use of L1 may be beneficial in

¹ See Kerr (2016) for more information on the relationship between English-only policies and the influence of private language schools.

a number of ways (for overviews see Hall & Cook, 2012; Shin et al., 2020). This change in attitude is now reflected in revisions to teacher education curricula and materials, in revised specifications of teacher training qualifications, topics discussed at conferences, in webinars and on blog posts.

Reconceptualizing the goals of language education

In addition to the acknowledgement that the use of L1 in English language classrooms may facilitate, rather than impede, learning, there have been a number of other developments which have challenged the credibility of English-only approaches. Most significant among these are recent reconceptualizations of the aims and nature of language learning. There is a growing recognition that the objective for most language learners is not to become like a monolingual native-speaker, since (1) this is not necessary or helpful for what they need to do with English, and (2) they are unlikely to achieve it (MLA, 2007). Alternative objectives are proposed by the introduction of two key terms in language learning and use: **plurilingualism** and **translanguaging**.

First proposed in French, and then translated to English, the term 'plurilingualism' has been embraced by the Council of Europe as its vision of multilingual competence (Council of Europe, 2001, Coste et al., 2009). In this vision, a plurilingual and pluricultural competence is seen as 'a wholistic and multiple, rather than segmented vision, of language skills and of language, identity and culture' (Coste et al., 2009, p. v), one 'in which languages interrelate and interact' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4). This is reflected in the updated Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020), which includes a range of multilingual skills, particularly mediation, as key components in its framework for describing how languages are used. 'Can-do' statements now include competences like translating from one language to another, or explaining in one language information that is derived from a text in another.

First proposed in Welsh, and then translated to English, the term 'translanguaging' has been embraced particularly by scholars working in the field of bilingual education (e.g. Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; García & Li,

2014). Translanguaging emphasises the multilingual's competence as a single repertoire of resources (rather than separate languages), which multilinguals draw upon dynamically, depending on context, interlocutor and purpose (Anderson, 2024; García & Li, 2014). This may include the complex blending of resources from named languages in practices that are also referred to as 'code-switching' or 'code-mixing'. Research on translanguaging in the classroom (bilingual, foreign and second language) indicates that by embracing the fluid, dynamic practices of multilinguals, teachers can both facilitate learning and validate learners' identities, cultures and backgrounds (e.g. Anderson, 2022; García & Sylvan, 2011; Yuzlu & Dikilitas, 2022); although some scholars remain sceptical towards the validity of translanguaging as a concept (e.g. Treffers-Daller, 2024).

Many classrooms around the world contain learners with varied language backgrounds and learning needs. For example, the language(s) that a learner acquired as a baby may not be the same as the languages that they feel most comfortable with now, and may be different to the shared 'community language' of the classroom in which they are learning English. In such varied and complex language use ecosystems the flexible language use strategies advocated by translanguaging can be more appropriate and productive than monolingual pedagogies (e.g. Duarte & Günther van der Meij, 2018; García et al., 2016). Similarly, the rising global popularity of both English-medium Instruction (EMI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) also require educators and organisations to rethink their policies on language of instruction. The British Council, for example, recommends against the use of EMI in low- and middle-income countries at early stages in education (British Council, 2019), and alternative, pluralistic models for media of instruction are also emerging (e.g. Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023).

In the light of these changes, it is not surprising that English-only policies in English language classrooms are being critiqued and re-evaluated in many parts of the world. The remainder of this paper explores research on attitudes and practices with regard to L1 use among teachers and learners before discussing how L1 may be used, and even embraced, in contemporary English language classrooms, where appropriate.

L1 and the teacher

Teachers' attitudes

The attitudes of teachers towards the use of L1 seem to be shaped by a number of factors, including their own experience as language learners, their pre-service and in-service education, the policies of the systems and institutions in which they are working, and their experience as teachers. The picture that emerges from surveys into teachers' attitudes is mixed (e.g. Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021; Hall & Cook, 2013). Hall and Cook's (2013) global survey of English language teachers working in a wide variety of contexts found beliefs were complex and often contradictory; the majority of respondents indicated both that they 'try to exclude' L1 (61%), yet also 'allow [it] at certain points in the lesson' (74%) (p. 17). There is often a conflict between the professed desires of teachers regarding L1 use and their classroom realities (Copland & Neokleous, 2011). Researchers have found that teachers often talk about 'resorting to', rather than 'using', L1, and the choice of language reflects this tension between desired and actual practices. In this light, it is unsurprising that a substantial number of teachers (around 36% in Hall & Cook's (2013) survey) report feelings of guilt when they feel the need to use L1; what Anderson and Lightfoot (2021, p. 1225) call 'guilty translanguaging'. This is clearly a cause for concern: a sense of guilt is unlikely to be helpful to teachers who are striving to understand the issues and to develop professionally (Macaro, 2005).

Teachers' use of L1 in the classroom

While teachers working in mixed-L1 classes typically use only English in their teaching, a wide variation in the amount of L1 use has been found by observational studies conducted in shared-L1 classes, even among teachers in the same national context. For example, a study conducted in Mexican secondary classroom found from 27% to 69% of L1 use (Izquierdo et al., 2016),

one in Korean secondary classes found between 10% and 90% (Liu et al., 2004), and one in the classes of expert secondary teachers in India found 11% to 85% (Anderson, 2022)²; studies have also found wide variation even in an individual teacher's classes (e.g. Edstrom, 2006). It is important also to note that, in such studies, simply separating named languages can be challenging (Anderson, 2022), particularly in contexts where translanguaging practices involve what Canagarajah (2013) has called 'codemeshing' (e.g. using one or two L2 words in an L1 sentence), something that is common and normal practice in many contexts worldwide. Given this wide range of findings, it can be concluded that no simple recommendations on the quantity of teacher L1 use can be provided, even in a specific national context.

The optimum quantity of L1 use needs to be assessed on a context-by-context, class-by-class or even lesson-by-lesson basis. It is likely to be influenced by a number of factors, including:

- institutional or curricular regulations and guidelines (Is L1 use permitted? Are recommendations for its use provided?);
- learner proficiency in English (less proficient learners often require more L1 for explanations);
- learner age (younger learners may need more reassurance in L1);
- purpose of a class, course or program (e.g. a technical exam preparation class may require more L1 explanation than a conversation class);
- curricular load (teachers who are required to 'cover' more content may use more L1);
- the stage of a course of study (early lessons may require more L1);
- the length of a lesson (long lessons conducted exclusively in English may be cognitively demanding for both teacher and learners); and
- the previous learning experiences and expectations of the learners (some may reject either large or minimal quantities of L1 use).

As such, it can be concluded that it is not *how much*, but *how we use L1* that is important. So how do teachers make use of L1 in English classrooms?

² Also see Levine (2014) and Littlewood and Yu (2011).

Core functions	Framework functions
<p>Concerned with language teaching and learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explaining grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation • clarifying meanings • translating words or passages of language • correcting errors or misunderstandings • assessing knowledge and understanding • providing individual support or tuition • mediating texts • comparing languages • contextualising language, materials or activities (activating schemata) 	<p>Concerned with lesson organisation and interaction with learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • managing activities (e.g. giving instructions, organising groups) • building relationships with learners • managing learner behaviour • dealing with administrative and pastoral matters •

Figure 1: Core and framework functions for teacher spoken use of L1 in the classroom

Purposes for L1 use

A number of studies have investigated the different ways in which teachers either use or report using L1 in their own classroom talk (e.g. Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021; Hall & Cook, 2012; Kim & Elder, 2005; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Shin et al., 2020). These can be divided into two categories: ‘core functions’ and ‘framework functions’ (e.g. Kim & Elder, 2005³), as shown in Figure 1.

In their extensive survey, Hall and Cook (2013) found that it was the core functions that featured most prominently in teachers’ reported uses; clarifying meanings, and explaining grammar and vocabulary were most frequent. Of the framework functions often conducted in L1, building relationships and managing learner behaviour were the most commonly reported.⁴

Whether L1 is being used for core or framework functions, the teacher’s decision to use it is often motivated by a desire to speed things up (Macaro, 2005). The time that is saved by doing something in L1 can be used later for more productive activities (Harbord, 1992). More examples of the way in which L1 use may facilitate use of English will be found in the section ‘Practical classroom implications’ below.

Research into teacher translanguaging (e.g. Anderson, 2022; Probyn, 2019) indicates that teachers who share their learners’ L1 are often able to go beyond simply ‘using the L1’ to facilitate learning in more flexible ways through their language choice when interacting with learners. Such ‘translingual teachers’ are ‘able to understand, interpret, scaffold, and challenge their learners’ choice of linguistic resources appropriately’ (Anderson, 2018, p. 34), modelling appropriate communicative practices for their learners as they do.

Taken together, it is clear that the different purposes for classroom L1 use by the teacher can play an important role in facilitating language learning. Teachers will take into account both linguistic and non-linguistic factors when making decisions about whether or not to use L1.

Addressing arguments against the use of L1

The evidence presented above tells us that L1 use is widespread in English classes around the world, that teachers have rational reasons for using it, and that its use is supported both by theoretical arguments and research evidence. Despite this, some institutions

³ Kim and Elder (2005) use the terms ‘core goals’ and ‘framework goals’, adapted here.

⁴ Note that Hall and Cook’s 2013 study relies on self-reported practices, which can be unreliable. Their terminology is slightly different to that used here.

and even educational systems implement blanket bans on its use, even today. The policymakers involved may have a number of reasons for implementing such 'English-only' policies. Particularly in private institutions, this is often motivated by a desire to differentiate their teaching approach from that which learners have experienced elsewhere, especially in secondary schools and further education colleges. There is also a practical issue that is resolved simply in strict English-only approaches, which can appeal to popular opinion. Many people believe that the use of L1 should be limited in some way, especially to increase exposure to, and interaction in, English, even if they make extensive use of it themselves when learning languages. There is also a perception that if a little L1 is allowed, more will follow – even academic sources caution about the danger of opening the 'floodgates' (e.g. Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Hence, it may seem simpler for policy makers to ban it altogether. When they do so, they typically make reference to a number of pedagogical justifications. Here we critically examine the most frequently cited, as follows:⁵

1. Learners need to learn to think in English, and the use of L1 discourages them from doing so.
2. The use of L1, especially translation, will exacerbate the problems of first-language 'interference'.
3. The time that is spent using L1 is time that is not spent in using English, so L1 use deprives learners of valuable learning opportunities.
4. Translation is not a valuable skill to practise; learners should focus on the four main skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Argument 1. Learners need to learn to think in English

The argument that learners need to learn to think in English is premised, in part, on the idea that languages are compartmentalised separately in the brain. However, research indicates that the brain does not work like this (e.g. Hernandez et al., 2001; Kim et al., 1997; Paradis, 1985). Evidence suggests that, in multilinguals, resources from different languages,

particularly vocabulary, are distributed widely across the brain, and that even at advanced levels of L2 proficiency, L1 is active when we decode the meaning of L2 items (Elgort & Nation, 2011). As learners gain the ability to process ideas in an additional language this process is scaffolded (not hindered) by their L1 (e.g. Bhooth et al., 2014; Wu, 2018). It is only after they have reached an advanced level of proficiency in English (e.g. C1+) that most learners are able to think independently in English (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). As such, many learners do not need, nor achieve a level of proficiency that facilitates 'thinking' only in English. What most learners do need to achieve, however, is a level of proficiency where they can process English without always mentally translating from their L1. Yet the exclusion of L1 from English lessons is not likely to accelerate the development of this fluency.

Argument 2. The use of L1 will exacerbate the problems of first language 'interference'

Some teachers and policy makers believe that allowing the use of L1 will increase the occurrence of negative 'first language transfer' (historically called 'interference'), in part because it might encourage the false belief that there is a simple, word-for-word equivalence between vocabulary items in different languages. However, it is important to remember that transfer can be both positive and negative. Unfortunately, many teachers tend to notice it more when it leads to errors, and less when it leads to accurate language use. A commercially successful self-study language course (the Michel Thomas Method) makes extensive use of positive transfer to teach large numbers of words through the use of 'cognates' – words that are similar in spelling or pronunciation in the two languages (e.g. 'information' or 'decision' in many Latin languages and English). Language transfer is a normal, widespread feature of multilingual language use (not just learning), and may occur in a range of situations (e.g. when writing a document or mentally planning to say something). As such, it is not possible that it is 'caused' by using L1 in the classroom.

⁵ The best-known arguments for excluding L1 were put forward over a century ago by Maximilian Berlitz (1916). More recent arguments in the academic literature are rare (e.g. Newson, 1988), but typically reiterate and expand on the reasons given by Berlitz.

A common feature of language transfer is difficulty with 'false friends'. For example, despite sounding like 'sympathetic', neither 'simpático' in Spanish nor 'симпатичный' [simpatichtniy] in Russian mean 'sympathetic' in English. To clarify the difference between such cognates, it is necessary to compare examples of usage in different languages, rather than ignoring the similarity and expecting learners will avoid confusing them (Cook, 2010). Research evidence in this area also supports the use of translation. In their review of the evidence, Shin et al. (2020) found that five out of six studies on vocabulary learning favoured the use of L1 translations over L2 glosses. There is also evidence that word-for-word translation tasks may be an effective way to help learners to notice the differences between English and L1 (Laufer & Girsai, 2008). Thus, the evidence here is strongly in favour of the use of L1 translation to enhance the positive effects of transfer and reduce its potential negative impact.

Argument 3. Time spent using L1 is time that would be better spent using English

Different courses of language instruction have different aims. For example, some may aim to develop speaking and listening skills and others to improve learner exam performance on a written test of language knowledge. While in the first of these cases, learners are likely to benefit from the teacher

making use of English for classroom interaction and communication, in the second of these cases, it is not only likely to be less effective, but also opposed by the learners (see, e.g. Sung, 2014). Even in the first of these cases, it does not follow that all classroom exchanges should be in English; as discussed above, different individuals and groups of learners will benefit from different quantities of L1 use, even in day-to-day classroom talk. Indeed, some classroom activities will be more productive when learners are allowed to translanguage, drawing flexibly upon both English and L1 as required. These include the development of self-motivation, metacognitive awareness-raising, self-assessment tasks and training in learning strategies. As noted above (see 'Teachers' use of L1 in the classroom'), teachers often use L1 for reasons of time economy or efficiency and its use may make more time available for English. Specific examples are discussed in the section 'Practical classroom implications' below. In the context of classroom communicative speaking activities, further discussion and examples can be found in the Cambridge Paper in ELT, 'How much time should we give to speaking practice?' (Kerr, 2017).

Argument 4. Translation is not a valuable skill to practise

The argument that translation is not a useful skill typically relies on a very narrow understanding of



the term 'translation'. While the skill of translating literary extracts into and out of English may be of limited use to many learners today, translation, in its varied forms (from words, to phrases, sentences, ideas and metaphors), is an essential part of multilingual practice in any workplaces that necessitate the use of two or more languages alongside one another (see Anderson, 2018; Cook, 2010). Indeed, if translation is viewed more broadly as 'mediation' (see Council of Europe, 2020) between languages, its value is undeniable. In addition to its importance in a globalised and multilingual world, it has rich educational potential as a learning, diagnostic and testing tool. Concrete examples follow in the latter sections of this paper. We should not forget, either, that many learners find translation enjoyable and stimulating.

The pedagogical and theoretical arguments that are advanced for excluding L1 from English language classes may be said to be, at best, unproven (Macaro, 2000), and, at worst, myths (Cook, 2010). Not only is there now a clear consensus among many educational linguists that the use of L1 can support additional language learning, there is also growing evidence that the exclusion of the L1 can have negative impacts, including on classroom interaction,

learner participation, and wellbeing of teachers and learners (Shin et al., 2020). There is also evidence that exclusive use of English can lead to cognitive overload and disengagement (Macaro & Lee, 2013), both of which can impact directly on learning.

Nonetheless, the above discussion does not mean that an English-only policy is always inappropriate. The main message from the research is clear – context matters, so practical and policy considerations always need to be weighed up against research findings. Even if teachers themselves are required, or choose, not to use L1 in their own classroom communication, they may still make skillful use of it. For example, they may draw upon their knowledge of it when considering their learners' needs while planning lessons; they may permit or encourage their learners to use it, either in class or afterwards (e.g. to record meanings of vocabulary or to watch a video with subtitles); and they may even elicit it from their learners in class to assess understanding without speaking it themselves. As Anderson (2018) has argued, all other things being equal, a 'translingual teacher' who shares their learners' language and culture is more capable of teaching that group of learners than a monolingual English speaker who does not.



L1 and the learner

Learners' attitudes

Surveys of learners' attitudes towards the use of L1 in their classes reveal varying findings, particularly between different contexts. Most show that a majority of learners approve of some, but not too much,⁶ L1 use (Macaro & Lee, 2013; Shin et al., 2020). This is true of both adults (e.g. Rolin-lanziti & Varshney, 2008) and young learners (e.g. Lee, 2012), and is particularly the case with lower-proficiency learners (e.g. Chiou, 2014). Adult learners seem to be more likely than young learners to be comfortable with English-only instruction, likely due to their greater experience in language learning (Macaro & Lee, 2013).

This learner preference for the inclusion of some L1 in their learning is also reflected in their self-study practices, including preferences for bilingual dictionaries over monolingual ones (Nesi, 2014), their use of dual or L1 subtitles when watching videos outside the classroom (Pattimore et al., 2024) and also in the approaches of popular language learning apps, many of which make extensive use of translation activities, bilingual flashcards, L1 instructions and feedback (e.g. Duolingo).

Learners' use of L1

Large-scale reviews of research tend to focus primarily on teacher use of L1. As a result they offer fewer insights into learner L1-use practices (e.g. Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Shin et al., 2020). Fortunately, Hall and Cook's large-scale study (2013) did investigate learner L1 use. Although it relied on the reports of respondents, which can vary in their reliability, rather than classroom observation, it found that the most frequently reported uses for L1 across 111 countries were for consulting or studying bilingual word lists or dictionaries, comparing English grammar to the grammar of their own language,

and for watching English language videos with L1 subtitles. The next most frequent use of L1 was to prepare for tasks and activities before carrying out the task in English. Hall and Cook (2013) also noted some use of both spoken and written translation activities although these were rarer. Shin et al. (2020) investigated four studies on the impact of translation activities, reporting high levels of learner attention, participation and satisfaction during their use.

Research evidence also indicates that learner L1 use is natural and common through translanguaging during pairwork and groupwork discussions. Studies have found L1 use to facilitate task completion and learning during collaborative writing tasks (Anderson, 2022; DiCamilla & Anton, 2012), when preparing for L2 tasks and presentations (Moore, 2013), when engaging in critical discussion activities (Fallas Escobar, 2019) and as a means to understand idiomatic language (Lin & Leung, 2023).

To date there is little research on learners' use of L1 in the classroom for 'off-task' reasons, such as chatting about topics unrelated to the lesson. Such behaviour is often particularly prevalent among learners in lower grades of secondary education when teenagers feel the strongest need to explore their emerging identities by 'talk[ing] the right talk' (Tarone & Swain, 1995, p. 169). Avoidance of the target language, English, may limit the possibilities of embarrassment or negative peer evaluation. In such situations, effective behaviour management of secondary learners typically entails some acceptance of such off-task L1-use behaviour as natural and necessary (Anderson, 2021). Acceptance of L1 may be necessary for the creation of safe speaking environments in which learners feel able to explore the limits of their English language competence.⁷

⁶ Unsurprisingly, how much is deemed 'too much' varies between contexts.

⁷ A more detailed discussion of safe speaking environments can be found in Kubanyiova (2018).

Practical classroom implications

Tools for exploring attitudes and beliefs

It is useful for both teachers and learners to share and discuss their attitudes towards L1 use. This section offers two questionnaires for this purpose. Before acting on the findings, it is important to check any policy guidelines on L1 use (national, curricular or institutional) and also the attitudes of other relevant stakeholders, such as parents or sponsors of private education.

Teachers often benefit from discussing their practices and the beliefs underpinning them. By comparing what they do and why, they can become aware of differences between their principles and practices that may help them to understand challenges and possible solutions. This is particularly true about topics that have often been considered 'taboo', such as L1 use. Figure 2 shows a questionnaire that can help to facilitate such discussions. Through its use, colleagues may be able to contribute to the development of a flexible institutional policy; one that is realistic towards the challenges and realities, acknowledging the need both for L1 use to facilitate learning and for sufficient opportunities for English use.

Likewise, as the needs, experiences and beliefs of learners vary between different contexts and classes, teachers can often benefit from finding out the opinions of their learners concerning the use of L1. The questionnaire provided in figure 3 can be used or adapted for this purpose. In classes where learners are deemed to be using their L1 too often, the questionnaire can be a useful starting-point for a discussion leading to an agreed class policy on L1 use. As a reflective task, it may also lead learners to greater self-awareness and re-evaluation of their learning preferences and strategies. This, in turn, may

lead to increased learning and wellbeing in the classroom.

Teaching techniques

This white paper has discussed both evidence and theoretical arguments to support the view that L1, when used appropriately, can contribute to effective learning and enhanced wellbeing in the classroom. In this section of the paper, we introduce some of the techniques that have been suggested as appropriate uses of L1 in the English (and other foreign language) classroom.

1. Sandwiching

Sandwiching was initially proposed by Dodson (1972) as part of his 'Bilingual Method', an approach that, at the time, went very much against the grain of language teaching orthodoxy (see Introduction). It is also recommended by Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) and Kerr (2014) as one of the most important techniques in the multilingual teacher's toolkit.

Particularly within communicative approaches to language teaching, target language 'teacher talk' is recognised as an important opportunity for learners to practise listening comprehension (Freeman et al., 2015). Yet there will always be things that a teacher needs to say that the learners may not know and that cannot easily or quickly be clarified either through L2 or other means (mime, gesture, etc.). Here is where sandwiching becomes useful. In this technique, the teacher speaks L2, but when they come to a term or idea that may be problematic for some or all of the learners, they say it first in English, then say the equivalent in L1, and finally repeat it in English. For example, with a group of French speaking learners the teacher might say the following:

Work in pairs, avec quelqu'un d'autre, work in pairs, and compare your answers.

Using the L1 in the English class: Discussing our practices

Tick one box in each row to indicate your current practice. Then compare with other teachers who work in the same or similar contexts. Discuss both similarities and differences, exploring why you do this and how it may help or hinder learning and wellbeing in the classroom.

	always	sometimes	occasionally	never
I use L1 when I am giving instructions.				
I use L1 for classroom language (e.g. "Work in pairs." "Sit down." etc.).				
I use L1 to translate the meaning of new vocabulary to my learners.				
I allow my learners to use L1 during English speaking practice activities.				
I think about differences between L1 and English when I am preparing my lessons.				
I use L1 when I am presenting my aims / intentions / objectives to my learners.				
I use L1 to check what my learners have understood (formative assessment).				
I use L1 to explain grammar to my learners.				
I allow my learners to use L1 when they are doing a grammar exercise in pairs.				
I use translation activities.				
Other uses: _____				

Figure 2: Teacher L1 use questionnaire

Note the underlined French 'filling' is sandwiched by the English equivalent, both before and after it, so that learners get a chance to hear the English after they've understood its meaning from the use of the French. After a word or expression has been sandwiched a few times, it should be possible for the teacher to assume that it will be understood without sandwiching next time. The technique can be used both for important language (e.g. instructions, praise, target vocabulary or grammar) and for less important items that need to be understood. Over time, large amounts of language can be acquired by learners in this way. Note that the key to sandwiching is ensuring that the English is repeated around the L1, so that learners have two chances to notice it.

2. Translingual instructions

Another common and useful bilingual technique when giving instructions is for the teacher to explain

an activity in English and then ask a volunteer or nominate a learner to repeat the instruction using L1, either partly or wholly. The teacher can check with others if they agree on the translation.

3. Bilingual wall displays

It is also a good idea for learners to have a live record of new language introduced during a unit or course of study. One way of doing this is to have a wall display where the phrases that have been presented are shown alongside their L1 equivalents (see figure 4). The display is most valuable and versatile if the phrases are on individual pieces of paper or card. In this way, items can be removed and new ones added when needed. Items can also be jumbled and, as a filler activity, learners can be asked to rearrange the cards (see figure 5).

Questionnaire: using your own language in the classroom

✓ Tick the boxes.

		always	sometimes	occasionally	never
1	Do you prefer your teacher to use your own language when ...				
	... giving instructions and managing the class?				
	... explaining grammar and vocabulary?				
	... correcting errors?				
	... chatting with the class?				
	... helping individual students?				
2	Do you prefer your teacher to allow you to use your own language when ...				
	... you want to check something with another student?				
	... you want to look something up (e.g. in a bilingual dictionary)?				
	... you don't understand something?				
	... you are feeling tired?				

Figure 3: Learner questionnaire on using L1 in the classroom

4. Own-language moments

High levels of both concentration and motivation are required for learners to study in a language that they are learning. Exactly how long they can concentrate effectively will depend on their proficiency, mood, motivation and even time of the day. While adults are often estimated to have attention spans of approximately 20 minutes, for primary-age learners it may be less than half this time.

Bearing this in mind, it is a good idea to provide opportunities for learners to have a break from English, particularly in longer lessons. 'Own-language moments' are one way of doing this. In own-language moments, the learners are allowed to use other languages for a few minutes in an English-mainly class (including in EMI and CLIL contexts). If preferred, they can be invited to translanguage, bringing L1 and English together to reduce the cognitive load. Examples of when this may be useful include:

- **Before a communication activity:** Learners typically need time to brainstorm ideas and prepare what they are going to say before they are asked to say it. If L1 is allowed, or even encouraged,

for some of this preparation, it is likely that learners will come up with more ideas, and that the speaking which follows will be more complex and extended.

- **During a communication activity:** When learners are having difficulty producing language during a speaking or writing task, opportunities to use L1 can provide useful ideas and content that can then be mentally translated into English. One way of doing this is to stop the activity and allow a few minutes for learners to talk with their partners translingually or consult bilingual resources (e.g. translators or dictionaries). A second possibility is to ask the learners to repeat the activity in L1. After they have done this, they restart the activity in English with a new partner.
- **Discussing a text:** Particularly if a written or audio text is challenging for learners (e.g. a poem, song or short story), they may find brief own language moments useful to check understanding before feedback to comprehension tasks. They may also be able to offer deeper insights into the text that enable the teacher to check their comprehension more carefully than would otherwise be possible in only English.

Get into pairs.	Bildet Paare.
Work on your own.	Jeder arbeitet für sich.
Check your answers.	Überprüft eure Antworten.
Compare your answers.	Vergleicht eure Antworten.
in the correct order	in der richtigen Reihenfolge
in bold	fettgedruckt
in italics	kursiv
Match the words to the pictures.	Findet die den Bildern entsprechenden Worte.

Figure 4: English/German bilingual instructions, Kerr (2014)

- **Talking about learning:** Research has shown that opportunities to reflect on the learning process and to self-evaluate progress can lead to gains not only in language proficiency, but also in motivation and self-confidence.⁸ These opportunities may be quite short (at the end of a speaking task, for example) or more extended and formalised. For learners at proficiency levels up to and including B1, allowing the use of L1 for such activities will likely facilitate deeper and more efficient reflection. It is also likely to speed up the process, allowing more lesson time for other activities.

The majority of the above teaching techniques are not available to teachers working with mixed-L1 classes, although own language moments may be possible through use of personal resources (apps, dictionaries, etc.) and in contexts where there is some sharing of common languages (e.g. an English

Get into pairs.	Überprüft eure Antworten.
Work on your own.	Findet die den Bildern entsprechenden Worte.
Check your answers.	kursiv
Compare your answers.	fettgedruckt
in the correct order	Jeder arbeitet für sich.
in bold	Bildet Paare.
in italics	in der richtigen Reihenfolge
Match the words to the pictures.	Vergleicht eure Antworten.

Figure 5: English/German bilingual instructions jumbled up, Kerr (2014)

lesson in Hyderabad, India where there are several speakers each of Telegu, Urdu, Hindi and Tamil – these languages could be used in such groups⁹).

Learner Tools

In order to help them become autonomous in their learning, learners will benefit from knowing how, when and why to use the many language learning tools that are available to them, both for the classroom and in their self-study. Unsurprisingly, given the many advantages of using the L1, many of these language-learning tools are bilingual. With increasing numbers of English language learners studying online and independently, for part or all of their course, knowledge of, and skill in, using these tools becomes even more important.

⁸ Goh & Burns (2012) discuss the importance of raising metacognitive awareness in the context of speaking activities in Chapter 11 of their book, *Teaching Speaking*.

⁹ See Mahapatra and Anderson's (2023) *Languages for Learning* framework for more on such complex classroom language ecologies.

Does the dictionary ...

	YES ✓	NO ✓
... give meanings that are easy to understand?		
... give the different meanings for a word in order of importance?		
... help you to select which meaning you need?		
... help you to avoid common mistakes or confusions with your own language?		
... show differences between different varieties of English (e.g. British and American)?		
... show how formal or informal the word is?		
... give examples of the word in a phrase or a sentence?		
... give examples of other words that go together with this word (collocations)?		
... give examples of useful or common phrases which include this word?		

Figure 6: Student checklist for selecting dictionaries

1. Online and app-based translation

Most language learners who have access to a computer or a smart phone know about online translation tools, and most will have used them. Learners need to know which tools are available and their relative advantages and disadvantages. At the time of writing (2024) the most well-known and widely used is Google Translate but there are many others with widespread use, including Microsoft Translator and DeepL.¹⁰ However, things are changing rapidly. As the machine learning that is powering generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) becomes more and more advanced, translation is rapidly improving in quality, and becoming embedded in browsers, document readers and even the software powering our phones and devices, so that in the near future, at least for some languages, it will not always be apparent if we are reading a text or even watching a video in its original language, or in translation. Likewise, when

combined with voice recognition software, these translators are able to interpret spoken conversations, with varying but improving quality, between two different languages.

In the classroom, learners can be given texts that have been translated using translation tools from English into their own language (or in reverse at higher levels) and asked to identify and categorise the errors that they find. The activity is useful in providing training in critical use of machine translation and can also be used to compare different services as well as to highlight differences and similarities between the languages.

2. Bilingual and bilingualised dictionaries

It has become common for learners to use online translation tools as dictionaries. However, while they are improving learners should be made aware that they are less accurate at translating single words or short phrases. At the time of writing, Google Translate is able to offer alternative translations, identify the typical parts of speech of items, but not to provide examples of usage (e.g. through example sentences). Dictionaries are still important in this regard, and can

¹⁰ Google Translate is available at <https://translate.google.com/>.
DeepL is available at <https://www.deepl.com/home>

include printed, app-based and online versions. While many learners choose bilingual rather than monolingual dictionaries, recent years have seen the emergence of bilingualised dictionaries, which combine the best features of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries (e.g. they can explain an English word in English and also suggest appropriate translations and explanations in L1).¹¹ Note that bilingualised dictionaries are not yet available for some languages that are less widely spoken.

As with online translation tools, learners need to know about the options that are available to them and to make a selection that is appropriate to their needs. For this, they will usually need guidance from a teacher. One way of doing this is to give learners a short text with a small number of lexical items highlighted and access to a dictionary. Learners explore the dictionary by looking up the highlighted words and filling in a checklist, as shown in Figure 6.

3. Bilingual flashcards

Learning vocabulary is arguably the primary challenge of learning another language (Lewis, 1993). Research has confirmed that the deliberate study or memorisation of new words, collocations and expressions can speed up this process (e.g. Elgort & Nation, 2011). This is especially the case with high frequency items for learners at lower levels of English proficiency. Research also suggests that flashcards (digital or paper), with a target item in English on one side and its meaning in L1 on the other, are one of the most useful tools to approach this deliberate study (Nation, 2008). Bilingual flashcards can be effective at any levels of learner proficiency, including for beginners, who would have difficulty understanding English-only definitions, because the latter often contain words that are harder to understand than the target item.

Digital flashcard systems are also available, including on Quizlet, Memrise and Anki¹²; such platforms typically include free, albeit limited, versions. They vary in terms of the kinds of learning tasks (e.g. games) that are used to practise the language and the kinds of motivational techniques that are employed (e.g. levels and leader boards). Some systems allow teachers or learners to input their own sets of learning items.

Others can only be used with vocabulary sets that have already been prepared. To encourage the use of these systems, teachers can either try them out with learners in the classroom, or set them mini learning projects as homework (or flipped learning tasks). One interesting experiment is to compare several such platforms by asking different learners to try out different ones to learn vocabulary in a specific area (e.g. clothes, food or emotions) and then use a quiz to see who does best. If all your learners' languages are available on the app being used, their use is also possible in mixed-L1 classes.

4. Other bilingual resources

With internet access, there is a huge range of other bilingual resources that can promote English language learning. This includes thousands of websites and apps that are dedicated to learning, many of which adopt a bilingual approach. They may offer everything from explanatory grammar videos and interactive games for all ages to GenAI conversation partners. The quality is often variable, but this is a rapidly evolving area of software development. In addition to these, English language learners are especially fortunate because of the wealth of sites offering subtitled movies, dual language books and comics or translated song lyrics. It is worth spending some classroom time making learners aware of these resources or encouraging them to share what they have discovered for themselves through presentations or mini projects.

Activities

It is only in recent years that classroom activities which make use of L1 have begun to appear in 'global coursebooks' (i.e., those marketed primarily to the private sector with generic, proficiency-based syllabi). Such activities include short translation tasks which focus on grammar and vocabulary, and contrastive analysis activities that encourage learners to notice the similarities and differences between English and their own language. In contrast to this recent appearance, supplementary bilingual learning material has long been popular in specific national contexts (e.g. India, China) and, in some countries,

¹¹ See Chan (2010) and Laufer and Kimmel (1997).

¹² These flashcard systems can be found at <https://quizlet.com/>, <https://www.memrise.com/> and <https://apps.ankiweb.net/>.

'Course Companions' designed to accompany global coursebooks, are available. Both these types of book usually contain bilingual word lists and grammatical explanations designed for learners with a particular L1; some also contain more extensive translation and comparison activities. Bilingual reference and practice books for grammar are also popular.¹³

A number of resource books containing ideas for classroom activities are available. Within the 'L1-use literature' these include Translation and Own-language Activities (Kerr, 2014), The Bilingual Reform (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009), Using the Mother Tongue (Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002) and Translation (Duff, 1989). Activities include:

- contrastive analysis activities (comparing the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of English and L1)
- brainstorming activities
- reverse (or back) translation activities
- bilingual roleplays
- bilingual writing
- using bilingual resources to prepare learners for English texts
- responding in L1 to English texts (reading and listening) – e.g. bilingual note-taking and summarizing
- word trails
- bilingual glossaries for use with reading texts
- activities for use with dubbed and subtitled videos

The expanding literature on translanguaging offers further resource books, not only for activities, but also techniques, tools and wider considerations of curriculum design, classroom procedures and assessment. For example, *The Translanguaging Classroom* (García et al., 2016), *Pedagogical Translanguaging* (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021) and *Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB Guide for Educators* (Celice & Seltzer, 2013). All these titles involve practices and activities that draw upon learners' bilingual or multilingual repertoires to facilitate learning. While these titles are written primarily for bilingual education contexts, many of the activities described can also be used in English language classrooms in both second language and foreign language contexts and can be adapted for use by English language teachers working in mainstream education. Activities include:

- multilingual collaboration projects
- multilingual writing and reading activities
- multilingual research projects
- multilingual scaffolding activities
- ways to build on prior (L1) knowledge
- creating a multilingual ecology
- text comparison activities
- cognate charts
- multilingual graphic organisers
- language reflection activities
- self- and peer-assessment activities
- ways to involve family and community members in learning

¹³ For example, the *English Grammar in Use* series from Cambridge University Press offers bilingual versions of *Essential Grammar in Use* (Murphy, 2015) in a number of languages including Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish.

Conclusion

Arguably the most important resource that any learner has for learning is language (Halliday, 1993), particularly the language that the learner knows best – their so-called ‘L1’. This resource is just as essential in the English language classroom as any other place of learning. Yet for much of the 20th century, the teaching approaches promoted in Western countries at best ignored, and, at worst, banned L1 from the classroom. Such practices may have seemed logical and even ‘progressive’ in the well resourced, multilingual classes typically found in those countries. Yet, through their actions, the methodologists in question essentially silenced the many translingual teachers of English around the world from using this most powerful of resources, causing them to feel guilty or backward for continuing to do so.

The 21st century has seen a clear sea change in attitude – a multilingual turn (May, 2014) – as the Anglophone community begins to come around to realising what so many teachers around the world knew all along – that it is no more possible to ban the L1 from the classroom than it is to ban the learners themselves. For the L1 is part of them, part of their cognition and their identity. Today, we are seeing a boom in research on L1 use and translanguaging practices. L1 is being discussed in revised editions of popular teacher training guides (e.g. Harmer, 2015).

Conferences and symposia for English teachers include numerous talks on translanguaging and plurilingualism. Even the syllabi for international teacher training qualifications that were once bastions of monolingual pedagogy (e.g. the Cambridge CELTA¹⁴) include focuses on multilingualism and the role of other languages in ELT.

An increasing number of resource books that recognise, draw upon and validate use of L1 in language education are now being published. In addition to books by Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009), Kerr (2014) and Deller and Rinvoluceri (2002) on using L1, guides on translanguaging (e.g. Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; García et al., 2016) and translation (e.g. Duff, 1989; González Davies, 2004; Laviosa, 2014) are also increasing in popularity. And while some authors and scholars caution against the dangers of overuse of L1 in the classroom (e.g. Kerr, 2014; Littlewood & Yu, 2011), there is a sense that, as the multilingual and ‘decolonial’ (Canagarajah, 2024) turns in language teaching take hold, it is no longer appropriate for such authors (including the authors of this publication) to tell the millions of English language teachers around the world when or how they should use this most powerful of resources – the teachers themselves will decide. It is hoped that this white paper will help them to make informed decisions when doing so.

¹⁴ Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages:
See <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/teaching-english/teaching-qualifications/celta/>

Recommendations for further reading

The most extensive overviews of research that have been carried out into the use of L1 in language classrooms are those by Hall & Cook (2012) and Shin et al. (2020). Hall and Cook's extensive survey of teachers (2013) provides detailed insights into the status and role of L1 in English language classrooms around the world. A shorter article that also covers the topic concisely is Kerr (2016). For readers interested in translanguaging, García and Li's (2014) book provides a detailed theoretical background, Cenoz and Gorter (2021) an accessible overview and Anderson's articles (2018, 2024) offer perspectives on translanguaging in English language teaching. Guides on translanguaging include those by García et al. (2016), and several produced by the City University of New York, which are freely available online in English and Spanish.¹⁵ Anderson and Dixit's (2026)

Translanguaging in the English language classroom: A guide for teachers is the first full-length practical guide for teachers of English. It provides extensive practical guidance, activities and also explanation of theory that is clear and accessible for teachers.

For practical classroom ideas, Kerr's (2014) collection offers a wide selection of generic activity types that can be adapted to most classroom contexts. Deller and Rinvulcri's (2002) compendium of classroom activities was ahead of its time when it was published. Some of the 115 activities focus on particular language areas, but most are generic task types that can be adapted to different contexts. For teachers interested in using translation González Davies (2004) and Duff (1989) will be especially valuable; both contain many practical ideas that can be used by all language teachers.



¹⁵ <https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/translanguaging-resources/translanguaging-guides/>

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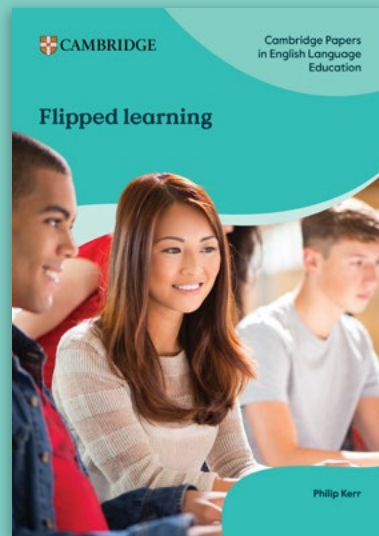
Jason Anderson is an author, teacher educator and researcher based at the University of Warwick, UK. He researches and writes on teaching methodology, teacher education, teacher expertise, multilingualism and translanguaging across a wide range of national contexts and educational levels. He has written resource books for language teachers (e.g. *Role Plays for Today*, *Teamwork*, *Activities for Cooperative Learning*, *Speaking Games*), training guides for language teachers and publications for organisations such as UNICEF and the British Council. His most recent book, *Translanguaging in the English language classroom: A guide for teachers*, co-authored with Suyog Dixit, is published by Cambridge University Press.

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