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## The Current State of the Art in ELT with Special Reference to the Use of the First Language in EFL Classes in Vietnam

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the importance of the L1 use in EFL classrooms and seeks answers to the question of when and how to use the mother tongue in EFL classrooms in Vietnam and all over the world. The paper begins with a glimpse in the historical sequence of the six most-recognized ELT approaches and methods, which will highlight periodic changes in the role of L1 in the L2 teaching. The article then looks at some interesting current trends in English language teaching methodology with reference to the context of Vietnam. Finally, the paper clarifies some benefits as well as disadvantages of using the L1 in the L2 classroom before coming up with the conclusion and recommendations in terms of how and when to use (or to allow the use of) the students' native language in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: L1, first language, mother tongue, native language, EFL, Vietnam

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## **Introduction**

All ESL/EFL learners, whatever their situations, come to the classroom with at least another language, the mother tongue (L1). They may use their L1 in the classroom to communicate with one another or with the teacher whether the teacher wants them to or not, or they may be translating what they are learning in their heads (Harbord, 1992). Indeed, the latter process is a natural part of any language learner's behavior. Many EFL teachers also often use the first language in class especially with low-level students (Dajani, 2002). According to Harmer (2007b), there is a strong body of opinion which says that the classroom should be an English-only environment. Nevertheless, this opinion has been seriously questioned by a great number of methodologists and educators (Dajani, 2002; Deller, 2003; Naimushin, 2002; Nation, 1997; Ton, 2006). Unquestionably, a view on when and how to use the L1 in the ESL/EFL classroom has become the major issue for consideration.

This study's purpose is not to overstate the L1 role or advocate greater use of L1 in the EFL classroom, but to discuss and clarify some conceptions such as whether the ESL/EFL teachers should use the mother tongue in class or when there is a need for it or whether the often-mentioned principle of no native language in the ESL/EFL classroom is justifiable. The paper also aims to report on the "State of the art" of the use of L1 in ELT with special reference to the Vietnamese context.

## **Brief Historical Background on the Use of the First Language in ELT**

### **Grammar-Translation**

Many of the seeds growing into present-day ELT methodologies were sown in debates between more and less formal attitudes towards the place of the learners' first language in the classroom. According to Harmer (2007b), before the nineteenth century, most people thought that to learn a foreign language was mainly to consult lists of foreign words in dictionaries. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century, moves were made to bring foreign language learning into school curriculums, and so something more was needed.

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This gave rise to the Grammar-Translation method. Typically, the Grammar-Translation method (which was first named as such in Germany in the 1780s) did exactly what it said. Learners were first given explanations of individual points of grammar, and then sentences that exemplified these points. These sentences had to be translated from the target language back to the students' L1 and vice versa. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), a key feature of Grammar-Translation was that the students' native language was employed as the standard medium of instruction which was used to explain new items and to draw comparisons between the foreign language and the student's first language. Obviously, the language used in class is mostly the students' mother tongue and the meaning of the target language is made clear by an equivalent translation in the students' native language.

According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), the Grammar-Translation was the dominant method until the end of the nineteenth century and was still of widespread use until 1930s. At one time, this method was called Classical Method because it was first used in the teaching of the classical languages, Latin and Greek. It was hoped that, through the study of the grammar of the L2, learners would become more familiar with the grammar of their L1, and this familiarity would help them speak and write in their L1 better. Although it was recognized that many learners would probably never use the target language, the mental exercise of learning it would be beneficial, anyhow.

The Grammar-Translation method still has its relevance today, although it is not practiced as a method in the same way. Most language learners still do the translation in their head at various stages somehow, and they can learn a lot about a foreign language by comparing parts of it with parts of their own mother tongue. However, Harmer (2007b) stated that a number of features of the grammar-translation method were worth commenting on. Firstly, language was treated at the level of sentences only, with little study, certainly at the early stages, of longer texts. Secondly, there was little consideration of the spoken language. Thirdly, accuracy was considered a necessity. Harmer (2007a) also commented that a total concentration on grammar-translation stopped learners from getting the kind of natural language input, which would help them acquire language (because they are always looking at L1 equivalents). The full attention to grammar-translation also failed to give students opportunities to activate their schemata. If they are always translating the

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language, they are not using the L2 communicatively. In other words, this method teaches people about the target language but does not really help them communicate naturally with it.

Klapper (2006) also summarized the problems with the Grammar-Translation as follows. Firstly, the language knowledge taught was often very complicated and was not conducive to the fluent and natural use of the FL. Secondly, the creative use of the FL was subordinated to the L1 – There was only a medium discussion of the FL system and there was no role for learning through doing.

In short, the ability to communicate properly and naturally in the target language must be a crucial goal of foreign language instruction, which is much more important than the ability to translate each language into the other. The researchers do not think that students can be considered successful language learners just because they can translate from one language into another. Sometimes, it is apparently impossible to find L1 equivalents for some L2 words.

### **Direct Method**

At the end of the nineteenth century, a reform movement with diverse European roots brought great changes to language learning and teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The Direct Method (DM) was a product of this movement which was reacting to the restrictions of Grammar-Translation method. DM has one basic rule that is the students' L1 should be avoided at all costs and students should learn to think in the L2 as soon as possible. Actually, DM receives its name from the fact that meaning is to be connected directly with the target language without going through the process of translating into the students' L1. The teacher should demonstrate, not explain or translate and it is desirable that students make a direct association between the target language and meaning (Davies, 2000).

According to Klapper (2006), DM was most famously associated with Maximilian Berlitz whose language schools enjoyed noticeable popularity during the twentieth century. DM was based on the precept that language knowledge was acquired through experience.

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It, therefore, insisted that FL learning should imitate the process of L1 acquisition, and that L1 needed to be placed in the FL classroom. Similarly, just as infant learners do not use the written language to learn their mother tongue, the written words should be withheld from FL learners for as long as possible. In addition, neither formal grammar nor translation was believed to play any significant role in the FL learning process, as both of them involved the use of L1.

Nevertheless, Klapper (2006) also indicated the shortcomings of DM. Its fundamental problem is that FL learners come to the learning task with a ready-made system of knowledge, which is firmly tied to the real world of objects and ideas. Consequently, they can only understand the FL meaning of things via reference to the L1 system, in contrast to the slow and gradual process of sound-object identification of the infant L1 learners. Moreover, DM's dogmatic use of the FL can also cause teachers to waste time avoiding L1.

In short, the Direct Method may have been a reaction against incessant translation. However, allied to the inexperienced teachers who have just started to discover the world of FL teaching, it creates a powerful prejudice against the presence of the L1 in language lessons.

### **Audio-Lingual Method**

According to Davies (2000), the Audio-Lingual Method grew indirectly out of a program developed by American linguists and psychologists for the US army during the Second World War. However, it really took shape when American Structural Linguistics and Behaviorist Psychology were adopted as the twin foundations of a "scientific" approach to FLT in the late 1950s.

This method capitalized on the suggestion that if the teacher described the grammatical patterns of English, he/she could get the students to repeat and learn them. Audio-Lingualism (and Behaviorism) then lost its popularity because commentators argued that language learning was far more subtle than just the formation of habits (Harmer, 2007a).

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According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), some of the Audio-Lingual principles are similar to those of the Direct Method. For instance, they believed that the first language and the target language had separate linguistic systems; hence, the two languages should be kept apart. The learners' habits of L1 were thought to interfere with their attempts to master the target language. Therefore, only the L2 was used in the classroom, not the students' mother tongue. Students had to over-learn the FL in order to use it automatically without stopping to think. Students could achieve this by forming new habits in the FL and overcoming the old habits of their L1. The teacher should do a contrastive analysis between the FL and the learners' L1 in order to anticipate the places where the students might have troubles.

One of the major challenges of foreign language teaching is getting learners to overcome the habits of their L1. Although the researchers are not in favor of the Behaviorist principle of learning through repeating grammatical patterns, their interpretation definitely comes in line with the Audio-Lingual principle that a comparison between the native and the target language will reveal where the teacher should expect the most interference as well as will tell the teacher in what areas her/his students will probably experience difficulty.

### **Community Language Learning**

According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), the Community Language Learning was developed by Charles Curran in the USA from the mid-1970s. It advised teachers to consider their learners as "whole people". This means that teachers should consider not only their students' feelings and intellect, but also the relationship among the students' physical reactions, their instinctive protective reactions and their desire to learn.

The following extract is an observation of a Community Language Learning lesson:

The learners sit in a circle, with the teacher standing outside it. Any learner can volunteer to ask a question or make a statement (in the L1 at beginner level). The

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teacher repeats this question or statement in the L2 as many times as the learner wishes to hear it. Then the learner says it, recording it onto a cassette. Another learner responds to the question or statement (again in the L1 at beginner level), listens to the teacher repeating the response in the L2, and records it onto the cassette. In this way, a conversation in the L2 among the learners is slowly built up on the cassette. The teacher then replays the whole recording and the learners listen to their 'conversation'. (Davies, 2000, p. 192)

The above description illustrates a remarkable feature of the Community Language Learning method – the learners, not the teacher and not the institution, create the syllabus according to their own interests and concerns. In this method, the learners' native language was used to make the meaning clear. According to Nguyen (2005), instructions in Community Language Learning class and sessions during which the learners expressed their feelings were conducted in their L1. It was also believed that students would feel more secure when they understood everything, and this security was initially enhanced by using their first language. Therefore, literal L1 equivalents were given to the target language words where possible. This allowed learners to combine the target language words in different ways to produce new sentences. In later stages, of course, more and more of the target language could be used. For instance, conversations in the target language could replace native language conversations.

Studying the Community Language Learning method, the researchers completely agree with Charles Curran that by understanding the students' fears and being sensitive to them, the teacher can help his/her students overcome their negative feelings and turn these feelings into positive energy to further their learning. However, it is wondered if in a class where the students speak a variety of native languages, what language will be chosen to make the conversations that should take place right from the start of the lesson? Probably, the target language must be now used as a common tool and here the principle of using the L1 to help the learners feel more secure cannot be carried out.

### **Natural Approach**

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, several scholars criticized the Grammar-Translation method and proposed their own alternatives for foreign language instruction. These alternative approaches paid much greater attention to the avoidance of the learners' native language use in TEFL. For example, proponents of the "Natural Approach", developed by Tracy Terrell in the USA from the late 1970s, later in collaboration with Stephen Krashen, argued that a foreign language could be taught without translation or the use of the learner's mother tongue if meaning was conveyed directly through demonstration and action (Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

In 1984, Franke (cited in Nunan, & Lamb, 1996, p. 99), a German scholar, wrote on the psychological principles of direct association between forms and meanings in the target language and provided a theoretical justification for a monolingual approach to foreign language teaching. In support of Franke's principles, Richards and Rodgers (1986) said that a language could be taught best by using it naturally and actively in the classroom rather than by using analytical procedures that focus on translation of grammar rules. Teachers had to encourage direct and spontaneous use of the foreign language in the classroom and learners would then be able to induce rules of grammar. Known words could be used to teach new vocabulary, using mime, demonstration, and pictures.

However, it is not true that the learners' L1 was completely avoided in a Natural Approach lesson. In Krashen and Terrell's *The Natural Approach* (cited in Nunan & Lamb, 1996, pp. 98-101), the students listen to the teacher using the L2 communicatively from the beginning of instruction, and communicative activities prevail throughout the course. The teacher helps her students to understand her by using pictures and occasional words in the students' native language. In many ways, the Natural Approach is similar to the Direct Method. The only difference is that in the Natural Approach learners are permitted to use their L1 along with the target language as they respond to their teacher.

### **Communicative Language Teaching**

According to Davies (2000), the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) grew out of new theories of language learning that developed in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, the

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USA, and elsewhere, as well as new classroom procedures. In this method, language is not just patterns of grammar with vocabulary items but it also involves functions such as apologizing, inviting, requesting, etc. The learners also get enough exposure to the target language and opportunities for this language use (Harmer, 2007a).

Larsen-Freeman (1986) states that the students' native language has no particular role in the Communicative Approach. The target language should be used not only during communicative activities, but also, for example, in explaining the activities to the students or in assigning homework. The students learn from these classroom management exchanges, too, and realize that the target language is a vehicle for communication, not just an object to be studied.

CLT has a beneficial effect because it reminds teachers that people learn foreign languages not so that they will know about them, but so that they can communicate with them. Nevertheless, it seems that CLT lays too much emphasis on the role of the target language. In accordance with Sato and Kleinsasser's ideas (1999), the researchers believe that the thorough focus on the L2 role results from the mistaken identity of L1 in the L2 learning and the dogmatic use of the target language can further lead to a build-up of affective factors such as stress, frustration and embarrassment.

### **Developments and the Current State of the Art with Reference to the Context of Vietnam**

According to Richards (2002), the ELT world has witnessed an era of improvements and innovation in ELT methodology since the 1970s. The Communicative Language Teaching Method came to replace the Direct Method and Audio-Lingual Approach that reinforce the importance of avoiding the use of the first language in ESL/EFL classrooms. At present, while the CLT is still alive, many of the "novel" methods of the 1970s, such as The Silent Way and Counseling Learning, have largely disappeared. Noticeably, certain variants of Communicative Language Teaching and "Natural" approaches have also acknowledged the significant role of the first language (Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

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Richards and Lockhart (1994) say that we are now in what has been called the “Post Methods” era, which has led to an emphasis on the processes of learning and teaching rather than ascribing a central role to methods as the key to successful ELT. Language teaching, obviously, has shifted from a search for the perfect method to the understanding of language and how language learning takes place through Reflective Teaching and Action Research. Recently, there has been an increasing attention to the merits of using L1 in the ESL/EFL classroom among the ELT profession. Several studies related to the role of L1 in the L2 teaching have been conducted across the world in order to develop post-communicative methods which consider L1 as a classroom resource. The Functional-Translation Method by Robert Weschler, which combines the best of traditional Grammar-Translation and the best of modern Direct, Communicative Methods, can be taken as an example (Weschler, 1997).

As a teacher of English at the tertiary level in Vietnam, Ton (2006) often found writing by her fourth-year students that was full of grammatical errors, or even a graduation paper full of poorly written sentences. She also stated that a large number of her fresh university graduates were not employed by foreign enterprises because of their poor English listening and speaking skills. Many investigations carried out with the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning English in Vietnam show that “traditional pedagogy, emphasizing the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative competence” (Pham, 2005b, p. 337) is one of the causes of the problem. Therefore, since the early 1990s Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has quickly become popular in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2005; Pham, 2005a, 2005b; Phan, 2004). At present, most Vietnamese teachers of English, especially those who have experienced Western-training programs, are convinced that the Communicative Language Teaching enhances the learning process, and they feel inspired to adopt CLT in their classroom (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Le, 2001; Lewis & McCook, 2002; Nguyen, 2005; Sullivan, 2000). Perhaps, the popularity of CLT in Vietnam derives from the fact that this approach can be interpreted in different ways and used to support many classroom procedures. This is because the CLT refers to a various set of rather general and uncontroversial principles such as “calling for learner involvement, allowing learners choice, changing teachers’ and

students' roles, and breaking down hierarchic barriers in the classroom” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 66).

In accordance with the popularity of CLT in Vietnamese classrooms, it seems that the only use of English in ELT is widely supported. Nevertheless, the use of mother tongue in the process of English language teaching is still common in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2006). Many Vietnamese teachers have employed the L1 in explaining grammatical issues, making comparisons for translation, improving the learners' pronunciation, giving instructions, or at least giving feedback, so that their students might feel more at ease in learning English and the learners' language acquisition might be quickened. (Ton, 2006)

### **Benefits of Using the L1 in the L2 Classroom**

There have been many experiments' findings that were supportive of the use of L1 in the ESL/EFL classroom. In their studies, Tang (2002) and Miles (2004) generally found that the proper use of the mother tongue in English language classes did not hinder the L2 learning, in stead; it could assist both teaching and learning process and facilitate the development of the L2 competence. Vaezi and Mirzaei (2007) also concluded that the mother tongue, if used purposefully and systematically, could have a constructive role in teaching other languages. At least the L1 use can keep the rapport and social atmosphere of the class in good repair thanks to jokes and small talks about aspects of lives.

### **Particular Benefits to Students**

Atkinson (1987), in his discussion about general advantages of the native language use, claims that to let learners use their L1 is “a humanistic approach” which allows them to “say what they really want to say sometimes” (p. 242).

In his article entitled “Using L1 in the L2 classroom”, Schweers (1999) argues that a second language can be learned through raising awareness to the similarities and differences between the L1 and the L2. Talking about the same issue, Deller (2003) also

believes that it is useful for learners to notice differences between their L1 and the L2 because this will help them understand certain classes of errors.

In terms of learner autonomy and evaluation, Ellis (2003) proposes that L1 allows students to give ongoing feedback about the course and their experiences of learning much more fluently than they will if they are only using English. “In the process of discovery and creation”, “the effect of the mother tongue on learning L2” is also “facilitatory” (p. 94).

Duong (2006), in her “Community values and classroom dynamics in Vietnam”, states that when students use their first language between themselves and with the teacher, it has a positive effect on group dynamics.

### **Particular Benefits to Teachers**

It is evident that non-native speakers account for the vast majority of teachers of English all over the world. These teachers’ English is usually not good enough to carry out the English-only teaching in the classroom. For this reason, the insistence on the monolingual approach may result in their reduced ability to communicate and consequently their reduced teaching performance (Miles, 2004).

According to Nunan and Lamb (1996), in most foreign language contexts, using the students’ first language to give brief explanations of grammar and lexis, as well as for explaining procedures and routines, can greatly facilitate the management of learning.

Nguyen (1999) and Zacharias (2003), reporting on the use of L1 in L2 teaching, pointed out the possible uses of L1 in the process of teaching L2 including explaining the meaning of new words or grammatical points, giving instructions, checking learners’ understanding and giving feedback to individual learners.

If the teacher wants to make a “learning contract” with his/her students, or to ask them what they need (a needs analysis), the teacher will get more from lower-level students if he/she does it in the students’ L1 rather than struggling through with English. In discussing

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matters personally with students, then again, the teacher will have more success at lower levels if he/she can use the students' L1.

### **Disadvantages of Using the L1 in the L2 classroom**

According to Harmer (2007b), a serious objection to the use (especially the over-use) of the students' L1 is that it restricts the learners' exposure to the target language. It is possible, for example, to make good situation for the use of their mother tongue when we give instructions, but this will reduce their exposure to a type of English which is 'an ideal source of language for student acquisition' (Harbord, 1992, p. 353). Indeed if the teacher is a principal source of useful comprehensible input, then the more time we spend speaking English, the better.

There is one typical situation where the use of the L1 seems counter-productive. This is when the teacher encourages the learners to use English in communicative speaking tasks, whose purpose, after all, is to give the learners opportunities to communicate in English. The teacher may understand the students' natural inclination to communicate in the best way they can (i.e. in their native language), but it will be meaningless for the purpose of the activity that the teacher asks them to engage in (Harmer, 2007b).

Agreeing with Harbord (1992)'s idea that English is 'an ideal source of language for student acquisition' (p. 353), Cook (2001) believes that learners of English should be exposed to an English using environment as much as possible. Krashen, a pivotal advocate of the only-L2 use in the language classroom, continues this idea by stating that "comprehensible input is the only causative variable in second language acquisition" (1986, as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 280). He means, "Success in a foreign language can be attributed to input alone" (Brown, 2000, p. 280).

The supporters of the monolingual approach also indicate that the major impediment to the L2 learning is the interference from L1 knowledge (Cook, 2001). Krashen (1981), in his *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, suggests that the mother tongue knowledge is a source of errors in learners' L2 performance. He also reports, "A

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high amount of first language influence is found in situations ... where translation exercises are frequent” (p. 66).

In general, the ESL/EFL teacher's principal job is to help his/her learners develop their proficiency in English. For this reason, a balanced approach is needed, which not only sees the positive role of the native language but also recognizes the importance of maximizing the target language use in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

According to Stern (1992), the use of L1 in the L2 teaching is “one of the most long-standing controversies in the history of language pedagogy” (p. 279). With this paper, the researchers have clarified the fact that the use of the first language has a small but significantly important role to play in the ELT methodology literature.

In conclusion, second language use in the foreign language classroom needs to be maximized wherever possible, by encouraging its use and by using it for classroom management. It is advisable for ESL/EFL teachers to use English, as often as possible, and not to spend a long time talking in the students’ L1. Moreover, teachers should progressively eliminate the use of the L1 from the classroom at higher levels because there should be an English environment in the English-language classroom, anyway.

Nevertheless, research shows that some kind of a ban on the use of the learners’ L1, or the monolingual approach, seems impractical because it seems highly probable that ESL/EFL students’ identity is formed to some extent by the first language they learn as children and their natural inclination to communicate in their mother tongue is non-negotiable. Whether teachers like it or not, students are still thinking both in their L1 and in the target language that they are studying. This kind of code switching between L1 and L2 is naturally developmental (Nguyen, 2006), and not some example of misguided behavior.

## **Recommendations**

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In the light of Harmer's ideas (2007b) and what have been discussed previously in this paper, the researchers would like to make some following suggestions in relation to how and when to use (or to allow the use of) the students' L1 in the EFL classroom:

First, the teacher should acknowledge the position of the first language in learning a second language because it makes no sense to deny the importance of the students' L1 in their L2 learning. Second, the teacher should use appropriate L1, L2 activities that maximize the benefits of using the students' L1, for example translation exercises, tasks contrasting the two languages in areas of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation or discourse. Third, the teacher should give clear guidelines and instructions because students need to know when their mother-tongue use is productive and when it is not. Last, the teacher should ask the students for their opinions on the L1 use too, so that we can make some kind of a "classroom contract". Students will have then agreed about when the L1 use is appropriate and when, on the contrary, it is counter-productive.

According to Davies (2000), good teachers have always tried to find more effective ways of carrying out their work, usually adopting some kind of approach or method. As a language teacher you must make decisions all of the time. Some of your decisions are relatively minor ones but other decisions may have more profound implications. "It is you, after all, who have to make the connection to your own teaching situation and to make the informed choice" (Larsen-Freeman, 1983, p. 36).

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