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TEACHERS' FORUM

Reconceptualizing the Role of L1 in Second Language Pedagogy

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This reflective report aims to reimagine the role of the first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom by challenging the prevalent monolingual approach in second language pedagogy. Drawing from personal teaching experiences and recent developments in applied linguistics, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the L1's potential in the L2 classroom. Following a brief description of the historical context in which the monolingual approach gained prominence, I juxtapose the concepts of Common Underlying Proficiency and translanguaging with the artificial limitations imposed by adhering to a strict monolingual approach. By exploring how strategic L1 use can bridge cognitive-linguistic gaps and empower learners, I propose practical strategies for incorporating L1 into the L2 classroom. This report contributes to the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and advocates for a more inclusive approach that values learners' full linguistic repertoires.

A JOURNEY FROM MONOLINGUAL DEVOTEE TO TRANSLANGUAGING ADVOCATE

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." This oft-cited aphorism by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922/1961, p.149), underscoring the intrinsic relationship between language and cognitive boundaries, has taken on a new meaning for me over the years as I grappled with the role of L1 in my Arabic language classroom.

As I contemplate my journey in teaching Arabic language and culture, first in a large public institution and now in a highly selective private institution, I recall being a staunch believer in the monolingual approach. I prided myself in maintaining an "Arabic only" environment in my class. However, as I continued working with these incredibly bright and articulate students, I began to notice a troubling pattern: the cognitive-linguistic gap between what they could conceptualize (and articulate in their L1) and what they were limited to expressing in Arabic was palpable! I found myself frequently uttering phrases like, "Oh, we have not covered that yet!" or "We cannot address this topic because it requires vocabulary and grammar structures we don't know yet." Each time I uttered one of these phrases, I saw a little bit of my students' enthusiasm dim.

The realization that I was potentially stifling my students' intellectual growth and engagement with critical global issues in my class led me to begin questioning the foundations of my teaching philosophy. I vividly recall the day when Omar, one of my most brilliant students, raised his hand with a look of frustration that I had come to know too well. Omar, an Arabic language learner of Syrian descent, had just made his way over to my beginner class from his political science class where he had actively engaged in an intellectually stimulating discussion about the Syrian refugee crisis. "*Ustaadh*," he began, "but how are we supposed to

talk about issues that we are passionate about when we barely know how to describe our daily routine?" His question struck me like a lightning bolt: had I been inadvertently creating artificial boundaries that limit my students' abilities in the classroom?

This moment marked a turning point in my journey as a language instructor. As I stood there, trying to maintain a professional demeanor and search for an answer that would not further deflate my students' enthusiasm, I realized that my rigid adherence to a monolingual approach unintentionally circumscribed students' cognitive landscape, potentially erecting artificial boundaries between their cognitive and expressive abilities. This was also the moment when I began to question the long-held belief that exclusive use of the target language was the gold standard for L2 instruction. Was I truly serving my students by enforcing a strict language separation? Or was I inadvertently creating an artificial environment that did not reflect the complex, multilingual world they would be operating in?

For several decades now, a prevalent paradigm in the training of second language instructors has strongly emphasized the exclusive use of the target language as a benchmark for instructional efficacy. Consequently, many of us have been indoctrinated with the notion that minimizing (or even eliminating altogether) L1 in the L2 classroom is optimal instructional practice. This practice is stated as a policy on our course syllabi, reiterated in our classrooms, used to advertise our language courses, and often used as an assessment metric for both L2 learners and instructors.

However, recent shifts in applied linguistics have legitimized pedagogical concerns over the limitations of strict monolingualism and prompted us to critically examine the pedagogical and theoretical validity of this approach. This reflective report aims to discuss the related concepts of translanguaging and Common Underlying Proficiency, examining how these two concepts might offer a more nuanced and effective way to leverage our students' full linguistic repertoire in the L2 classroom.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE MONOLINGUAL APPROACH

To better understand the historical context in which the monolingual approach (also known as "the direct approach" or "target language only approach") was conceived, it is helpful to revisit the work of the nineteenth-century French language teacher and educational researcher François Gouin, who published *L'art d'enseigner et d'étudier les langues* [The Art of Teaching and Studying Languages] in the 1880s. Gouin's argument for adherence to a monolingual approach is based on his observations of the way in which children acquire their first language—that is, a direct association between language and experience, without the interference of L1.

Gouin's work represented a major break from the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), which prevailed from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century. Grounded in philology, GTM made extensive use of L1 through the translation of texts and systematic comparison of grammar rules between L1 and L2 (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). By the twentieth century this approach to language study and acquisition had increasingly fallen out of favor.

While Gouin's observations of first language acquisition were largely accurate, as modern research confirms that cognitive and linguistic skills develop in tandem among children (Bloom, 2000; Tomasello, 2003), he did not account for the significant differences between first and second language acquisition. Unlike children acquiring their first language, second language learners often face a substantial cognitive-linguistic gap (Bialystok, 2001;

Cummins, 1979), a disparity between their advanced cognitive abilities and their limited expressive skills in the target language.

Nonetheless, the tide of second language acquisition theory had made a decided turn. Maximilian Berlitz, the influential founder of Berlitz Language Schools and a prominent thinker associated with the Reform Movement in language teaching in the 1880s, joined Gouin in advocating for a monolingual approach to L2 acquisition. Rejecting translation as a primary teaching method, the Reform Movement championed a move away from the emphasis on written text associated with older philological approaches, stressing the primary significance of spoken language over written.

Although not a part of the Reform Movement, Halord E. Palmer, played a crucial role in its widespread academic acceptance in the early 20th century by consolidating and developing major tenants of the movement—particularly through his 1917 publication *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*. Though it should be noted that his approach was not strictly monolingual, Palmer further developed and formalized the monolingual method in academic contexts. His methodological principles, particularly the emphasis on situational presentation of new language items and carefully graded progression of materials, laid the groundwork for what would later become Situational Language Teaching (SLT).

Criticisms of the Reform Movement and Palmer's approach in the early 20th century didn't immediately lead to major changes in language teaching methodology. During this period, various language teaching methods such as Situational Language Teaching (SLT)[1] and the Audiolingual Method (ALM)[2] maintained aspects of the monolingual approach while attempting to address its shortcomings. However, these approaches are not without their own shortcomings. A lack of meaningful communication and learner autonomy, a focus on form at the expense of meaning (Savignon, 1987), and the limited ability to transfer language patterns to authentic communication outside of the classroom (Widdowson, 1978) were some of the critiques of the Audiolingual approach. These critiques were largely similar to those brought against the Situational Language Teaching approach, particularly as they relate to the overemphasis on form, lack of authentic communication (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979), and limited success in preparing students for real-life situations (Wilkins, 1976).

Despite its popularity, Palmer's approach faced challenges from cognitive theories of language acquisition that emerged in the 1960s (Chomsky 1965, 1966). In recent decades, researchers have further developed these critiques, highlighting its failure to fully exploit the potential benefits of L1 use (Cook, 2010) and questioning its assumptions about the need to separate languages in instruction (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Looking back at the Reform Movement itself, Kelly (1969) identified three key limitations of the movement: 1) its rejection of translation as a primary teaching method, 2) its prioritization of the use of the target language as the medium of instruction, and 3) its overemphasis on spoken language at the expense of written skills (Kelly, 1969).

DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

By the 1960s and 1970s, there was growing recognition that neither strictly monolingual approaches nor subsequent methods were adequately preparing students for real-world communication. This dissatisfaction, combined with developments in sociolinguistics and

[1] SLT is an instructional approach that focuses on practical control and competency by relying on real world situations to teach L2 vocabulary and grammar rules.
[2] ALM is an instructional method that focuses heavily on speaking and listening to establish high level audio linguistic skills.

pragmatics that emphasized the importance of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), set the stage for the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT attempted to preserve the monolingual approach's emphasis on target language usage while incorporating new insights about the nature of communication and language learning.

What constitutes the basis of our understanding of CLT is Noam Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence, as introduced in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965). This concept was later expanded by Dell Hymes, who coined the term "communicative competence." Hymes argues that communicative competence goes beyond knowledge of language structures, requiring awareness of the rules of use in various contexts (Hymes, 1972). By emphasizing interaction, simulating real-life situations, and prioritizing communicative competence over grammatical competence, CLT is believed to promote communicative proficiency in L2. It also firmly favored a monolingual environment, positing that employing anything but the target language in the classroom—what Krashen (1985) refers to as "comprehensible input"—hinders learners' ability to make progress in L2.

The current prevailing theory is that the process of language learning requires exposure in a monolingual environment to what Krashen (1985) describes as "comprehensible input." Thus, employing L1 in the classroom is believed to lessen exposure to the target language and hinder learners' ability to make progress in L2. This belief, which is central to CLT, marks a significant departure from earlier methods, particularly the Grammar-Translation Method.

Over half a century later, we can postulate that the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and related teaching techniques effectively reinforced the gradual abandonment—and subsequent vilification—of L1 in second language classrooms that began in the late nineteenth century. Although CLT rectified some of the challenges posed by SLT, ALM, and GTM, it generally overemphasized the target language at the expense of connections with the L1. Instead of leveraging these connections, CLT seems to operate under the assumption that the target language is learned in a vacuum.

COMMON UNDERLYING PROFICIENCY AND TRANSLANGUAGING

As I grappled with the limitations imposed by the monolingual approach in my classroom, I found myself increasingly drawn to the concepts of Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) and translanguaging. These concepts seem to offer a means of bridging the gap between my students' intellectual capabilities and their development of Arabic language skills. Just as CLT was initially conceived within the broader field of Applied Linguistics, it is this same field that now prompts us to rethink the monolingual aspect of CLT, thereby challenging traditional notions of language separation and instructional approaches.

Until recently, the argument against the exclusive use of L2 in our classes was largely predicated on James Cummins's work. Cummins posits that students' prior knowledge is encoded in their L1; thus they inevitably rely on L1 in L2 acquisition. He argues that bilingual instruction develops not only the target language but also common metalinguistic skills. It is precisely these common metalinguistic skills that enable the transfer of cognitive and literacy-related proficiency from one language to another. To substantiate this claim, Cummins cites empirical findings suggesting that L1 proficiency is a strong predictor of target language development (Cummins, 2008, 2009).

The debate arguably reached its apex with the resurgence of the term "translanguaging" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Originally referring to a pedagogical approach in Welsh *trawsiethu* [translation] wherein input and output were in different languages,

translanguaging has evolved to recognize the fluid and dynamic nature of language use. It conceptualizes the act of language use as a dynamic process in which learners draw from their entire linguistic repertoire to achieve their goals (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Conteh, 2018). In this paradigm, language is viewed as a verb rather than a noun, and what transpires within the confines of our L2 classes transcends mere languaging—it is translanguaging.

As a pedagogical practice, translanguaging entails a fluid transition between languages to teach L2 by leveraging learners' first languages. This process is more complex than the traditional views of bilingualism and code-switching, which treat languages as separate entities. Instead, translanguaging relies on metalinguistic skills and knowledge across languages, allowing students and instructors to draw from the full linguistic repertoire to communicate (Conteh, 2018). In doing so, translanguaging can promote critical thinking and engage learners through identity investment (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). Our students' background knowledge is an integral part of their identity; thus, acknowledging and honoring that knowledge validates learners' identity and legitimizes L1 as a cognitive tool to affirm students' identities (Cummins, 2009).

Li (2018) asserts that translanguaging is an empowering pedagogical practice because it breaks traditional boundaries between L1 and L2. By enabling learners to leverage their L1, the impact of translanguaging on the development of their cognitive and linguistic skills can be of great significance. Additionally, translanguaging is inherently conducive to a more equitable and inclusive learning environment, as it values and builds upon learners' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2020), thereby conferring agency to learners.

The concepts of Common Underlying Proficiency (Cummins, 1979) and translanguaging together provide a theoretical framework that challenges the assumptions underlying the monolingual teaching approach. While a monolingual approach operates on the premise that languages should be kept separate in the learning process, CUP suggests that language skills are transferable across languages and that translanguaging recognizes the fluid nature of language use. These concepts offer a critical lens through which we can examine the limitations and potential drawbacks of strict monolingual instruction.

CRITIQUES OF THE MONOLINGUAL APPROACH AND A CASE FOR INCORPORATING L1

As I began to experiment by incorporating more L1 use in my Arabic classroom, I found myself confronting deeply ingrained beliefs about best practices in language teaching. The monolingual approach, which I once championed, now seems increasingly problematic in light of my students' wants and needs.

A monolingual approach may inadvertently hamper students' ability to articulate complex thoughts, thereby restricting their expressive (and conceptual?) range within the confines of their L2 classroom. It also counteracts our efforts to empower our students and give them agency over the learning process: how can we expect to empower our students when we're denying them the ability to have equal footing with their instructor? A fascinating empirical study by Han, Park and Kyongson (2018) supports the hypothesis that L2 students exposed to a bilingual setting are more actively involved in class and interact more with the instructor. On the other hand, the authors found that students who are instructed in monolingual classrooms tend to have less talking time and less interaction with the instructor. This finding could be attributed to the fact that instructors in monolingual settings must rely

on repetition, paraphrasing, and rewording to convey even simple ideas, often by resorting to and overusing vocabulary items that learners are already familiar with.

Cook (2010) posits that the common practice of teaching vocabulary in a monolingual setting can create "a false sense of equivalency." This is particularly true in relation to abstract concepts which learners may not fully grasp if the use of L1 is not permitted. This dilemma is arguably to blame for the prioritization of vocabulary items that can be represented visually at the expense of more frequently used items (Augustyn, 2013).

To adhere to the target language in the L2 class, we must also adapt the content to the level of our students in the early stages of instruction. Frequent gamification of class activities and an inherent infantilization of language learners become the norm: if we cannot engage our beginner and intermediate students in thoughtful and articulate discussions, then perhaps we can at least entertain them by gamifying our teaching activities! In doing so, the development of critical thinking, which is at the core of every higher education curriculum, has become elusive. As language instructors, we are also contributing to the perpetuation of the notion that language instruction is "all fun and games" and thus does not require specialized training.

This realization hit home for me when one of my students shared her experience of interacting with a native speaker of Arabic outside of class. "He told me that I sound like a child," she confided, while her face flushed with embarrassment. While to some extent it is normal to produce "simpler language" in the early stages of language study, I began to question whether we should fully normalize this and, even worse, persuade our students that this is an integral part of learning a "new" language. If the purpose of learning a second language is to become bilingual or multilingual, forcing a separation between languages by enforcing a monolingual approach defeats this very purpose.

While arguments for incorporating L1 in the L2 classroom are compelling, it is important to acknowledge potential counterarguments. Opponents of using L1 in the L2 classroom argue that it may hinder learners' proficiency development as it limits their exposure to the target language. Additionally, there are concerns that reliance on L1 might encourage negative transfer or interference, where learners inappropriately apply L1 structures in their L2 production. While these counterarguments are valid, they tend to assume an "all or nothing" approach, whereas the translanguaging perspective advocates for a more nuanced, context-sensitive integration of L1 that complements, rather than replaces, L2 exposure and practice. Han (2017) challenges the Douglas Fir Group's perspective on translanguaging, emphasizing the importance of not overlooking the learner's central role in the learning process while prioritizing social trends (*i.e.,* overemphasizing cultural values and ideologies) (Han, 2017, p. 739).

Although this remains a contentious topic in SLA research, Conteh (2018) notes that the majority of translanguaging studies have concentrated so far on linguistic aspects rather than pedagogical implications. Only a limited number of studies (Duarte, 2018; Mertin, 2018) have demonstrated how translanguaging can be effectively implemented in classroom settings.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

"*Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own*."—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This observation about the interconnected nature of languages resonates with current debates about monolingual instruction and raises critical questions about our teaching practices: are we limiting the "world" of our L2 learners by enforcing a monolingual setting that hampers their ability to articulate complex thoughts and make connections between L1

and L2? Are we actually empowering students and acknowledging the vast linguistic repertoire that they bring to class? It could be argued that a student-centered and a monolingual approach are mutually exclusive, particularly in the early stages of language learning. How can we expect our students to feel empowered and to take agency over their own learning, when we are denying them access to their linguistic repertoire?

As I work to incorporate more L1 and translanguaging practices in my Arabic classroom, I list a few approaches that I have experimented with below:

1. Translation activities: These can help students make connections between their L1 and L2 and enhance their metalinguistic awareness. These activities can take several forms:
    a. Translation activities with a particular focus on vocabulary items that refer to abstract concepts whose meaning can be unclear in the target language unless clarified by means of L1.
    b. Audiovisual translation involving interlingual subtitling (L2 to L1) or reversed subtitling (L1 to L2)—this particular type of translation grounds language in context.
    c. Comparative analysis of idiomatic expressions in L1 and L2 in which we explore cultural nuances and figurative language.
2. Community engagement activities: These leverage students' L1 knowledge, while practicing L2.
    a. Bilingual interviews with community members who are native speakers of the target language. These interviews can be within a larger "oral history documenting" project. Questions are asked in L2, but clarifications in L1 can be made when/if needed.
    b. Creating bilingual resources, such as informational brochures, web pages, etc. A recent project that I worked on with my intermediate students involved designing a two-page guide for prospective Arab immigrants to the U.S.
3. Bilingual vocabulary building: Students create personalized bilingual glossaries or vocabulary maps and use L1 to explain nuances in L2 vocabulary that do not have direct translations.
4. Cross-linguistic awareness: Carrying out activities that allow students to explore cognates and false friends between L1 and L2.
5. Group work and peer teaching: allowing students to use L1 in group discussions to plan tasks or solve problems before presenting in L2.
6. Bilingual research projects: students conduct research using sources in both languages. They may also compare news articles on the same topic in L1 and L2 to discuss perspective and bias.

While no systematic surveys were conducted to measure the impact of these practices on students' learning, anecdotal evidence from student feedback and classroom observations suggests promising results. In particular, the translation activities focusing on abstract concepts and idiomatic expressions yielded notable benefits, as students reported feeling more confident in their ability to grasp and use complex vocabulary after being allowed to explore nuanced meanings through L1-L2 comparisons. Similarly, explicit L1-L2 comparisons of grammatical structures helped students better understand and internalize challenging concepts like the Arabic active and passive participles.

CHALLENGES

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the transition to incorporating L1 was not without its challenges. Some students, particularly those with previous language learning experience in strictly monolingual environments, initially expressed resistance to using L1 in the classroom. However, as they experienced the benefits of strategic L1 use, particularly in understanding complex grammatical concepts and subtle vocabulary distinctions, most came to appreciate this more balanced approach. This experience highlights the importance of clearly communicating the pedagogical rationale behind translanguaging practices to students and helping them understand that strategic L1 use can enhance rather than hinder their L2 development.

A significant hurdle that I encountered in implementing these practices is the deeply ingrained belief in the superiority of the monolingual approach among L2 instructors and program administrators. This belief often results in policies that mandate the exclusive use of the target language, which makes it difficult for instructors to experiment with translanguaging practices.

Another significant challenge lies in striking the right balance between L1 and L2 use. Over-reliance on L1 can potentially reduce exposure to the target language; thus, instructors must skillfully navigate this balance to strategically enhance their teaching without compromising L2 input/output and practice. Finally, moving away from a strict monolingual approach requires a shift in assessment practices. Developing assessment tools that can capture the full range of a learner's linguistic repertoire presents both a challenge and an opportunity for innovation in our classrooms.

While the practical approaches outlined above cannot resonate with every class and every proficiency level, they offer concrete ways to bridge theory and practice and foster a more holistic approach to L2 education that recognizes and leverages the interconnectedness of languages.

CONCLUSION

As I reflect on my journey as a language instructor, I continue to be astonished by the drastic evolution of my views on the role of L1 in L2 classrooms. From adhering strictly to a monolingual approach to now acknowledging the prominent role of L1 and embracing translanguaging, I've come to recognize the immense cognitive and affective benefits of the judicious incorporation of L1 in my teaching practice. It has become clear to me that strict adherence to monolingual instruction may be at odds with our growing understanding of (second) language acquisition and multilingual competence. The historical context of language teaching resembles a pendulum swinging from one approach to another, each with its own strengths and limitations. Informed by concepts such as Common Underlying Proficiency and translanguaging, we are better positioned to strike a balance between the L1 and L2.

As noted, this shift in perspective has come with its own challenges. Overcoming ingrained beliefs about "best practices" and navigating institutional policies that favor a monolingual approach takes persistence and willingness to continue learning, regardless of how many years of teaching experience you have under your belt. For me, the reward of seeing students engage more actively with the material, grow more confident as they draw from their entire linguistic repertoire, and make connections between languages has been immeasurable.

While this brief report highlights the potential benefits of incorporating L1 in the L2 classroom, there is still much to be explored in this area. Future research could focus on quantifying the impact of translanguaging practices on language acquisition across various proficiency levels and language pairs. Additionally, investigating how translanguaging practices can be effectively incorporated into standardized language assessments would address a significant challenge in implementing these approaches more broadly. Finally, there's a need to revisit teacher training programs and professional development to dispel the myth of the superiority of the monolingual approach and introduce translanguaging practices.

Reconceptualizing the role of L1 in our L2 classrooms is ultimately not about abandoning the communicative approach or diminishing the importance of target language use; rather, it is about creating a more inclusive, effective, and empowering environment in which our students can thrive. As language instructors and administrators, we have the opportunity—and I would argue, the responsibility—to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to challenge outdated norms while also drawing from our lived experiences in the classroom to nourish our professional growth.

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