

## ***SVETIMŲJŲ KALBŲ STUDIJS/ STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES***

### **On the Use of L1 in Communicative Adult EFL Classroom**

**Aušra Janulienė**

**Abstract.** The issue of using only the target language in a foreign language classroom has arisen with the spread of the communicative approach to teaching language. The use of L1 has advantages and disadvantages, which are discussed in the article. Though it is currently believed that the 'English only' environment facilitates students' learning of natural English and helps them to train their skills to communicate in English in real life situations, adult students can be critical of teaching methods applied by their teachers and not feel safe when only the target language is used. The article presents the results of the survey which was aimed at assessing the usefulness of L1 in a communicative classroom from the point of view of adult learners. The results lead to the conclusion that the adult students support the idea of strictly limiting the use of L1 in a communicative classroom. Research also shows that those students who expect L1 to be used in class would prefer their teachers to translate instructions, vocabulary, explain grammar, difficult concepts, and check their understanding. In these cases the teacher can employ different techniques to minimize the use of L1, yet create safe and student-friendly learning atmosphere.

**Key words:** *foreign language teaching; adult education; communicative approach; use of L1.*

#### **Introduction**

The issue of using only the target language in a foreign language classroom has arisen with the spread of the communicative approach to teaching languages. Different researchers, teachers and students of English share different attitudes towards the issue of the use of L1 in the classroom and many of them assume that it should not be used in class because in this case students do not make full use of the target language. Quoting David Atkinson, "every second spent using L1 is a second not spent using English" (1993: p12). Supporters of the communicative method claim that the 'English only' environment facilitates students' learning of natural English and helps them to train their skills to communicate in English in real life situations. The mother tongue in EFL classroom has been treated as a 'skeleton in the cupboard', a 'taboo' subject, a source of embarrassment, a recognition of the teachers' failure to teach properly, i.e. using only English (Prodromou 2002: p6). This attitude has also been strengthened by many native speakers joining TEFL profession as well. Besides, L1 helps adult learners feel safer in class, once they know they can refer to their mother tongue when needed and thus avoid confusion.

In contrast, critics express an opinion that translation and explanations in students' native language increase their understanding of the relations between English and their own language, enabling learners to acquire English more easily and communicate in it more consciously rather than use memorised language chunks automatically. However, no matter which of the above approaches teachers are in favour of, one of the characteristics of adult learners is that they

"can be critical of teaching methods applied by their teachers and their previous learning experiences may have predisposed them to one particular methodological style which makes them uncomfortable with unfamiliar teaching patterns" (Hammer 2007: p84).

Thus the object of the research being the use of L1 in adult communicative classroom, its aim is to reveal adult students' attitude to L1 being used in the English language classroom. The methods applied include administering a survey to respondents and analysis of the data obtained.

#### **Uses and abuses of the mother tongue**

One of the main advantages of using only the target language is putting a student into a real life situation where she/he will have to survive with that particular level of linguistic and communicative competence that has been acquired so far. Very often, however, learners who are successful in class where the use of their mother tongue is tolerated are not able to get by in real life where only the target language can be used.

Students get lost as they are not ready to negotiate the meaning and are not tolerant to ambiguity, as they are used to being helped by offering translation, become too teacher or dictionary dependent. Conversely, the process of learning becomes more challenging and exciting when only the target language is used. Learners are trained to guess the meaning of unknown language from the context, take risks with using it, thus facilitating their progress and developing learner confidence. They are filled with a sense of achievement and proud of being able to function in the English speaking class.

Adult learners come from different learning backgrounds. If they were used to being backed with translation in their previous language studies, they will also expect it again. Moreover, many of them may have had unsuccessful learning experience, having failed to learn the language some time ago, suffer from lack of confidence and do not feel safe in 'English only' classroom where they often do not fully understand the language used and cannot fully participate. In this case the mother tongue becomes a *drug, which has therapeutic potential* (Podromou 2002: p6) to reduce the learner anxiety and stress, however, *may become addictive and damage your health*, i.e. such learners may want more and more explanations and translation into their mother tongue until it becomes an obstacle to teaching and learning the target language. Furthermore, adult learners often have their own learning styles and some of them may believe that translation and explanations in L1 are beneficial for their progress.

Among the reasons why teachers resort to L1, lack of professionalism should be mentioned as well: if teachers fail to convey the meaning providing a context, situation, examples, using realia, etc, they will find translation at hand. If students fail to understand classroom instructions, the teacher will repeat them in L1, which also may become addictive and the learners stop listening to the English version as they know it will be soon repeated in L1, thus creating a vicious circle. Another excuse to use L1 in a lesson is a belief that learners may not understand the metalanguage that is used to explain grammar. Difficult explanations can be avoided by using inductive or guided discovery approach to teaching grammar. It must be said that it takes a lot more preparation for the teacher using only the target language in a lesson, he/she has to grade the classroom language at lower levels, do careful planning of instructions, ways of checking students' understanding. On the other hand, giving a L1 version of a word or phrase may be quick and effective, though not always possible as the case with idioms.

### Students' attitude

Our interest in students' attitude to L1 was drawn by a number of publications, directly or indirectly related to the English language learning. For instance, Kavaliauskiene et al (2007) present a research of classroom activities in an English language classroom at university level and state that usefulness of various activities in English classes poses debates among interested parties. According to D. Nunan (1988), there is "*the considerable extent of the mismatch between teacher and learner perceptions of the usefulness of different activities*". Learners rated grammar exercises, pronunciation, and error correction more highly than their teachers did, who were more likely to feel comfortable with pair/ group work and communication tasks". Interestingly, a study (Spratt 1999) was conducted to compare learners' preferred activities with teachers' perceptions of what those preferences were, and only a roughly 50% correlation was found. According to another researcher, "*listening to tapes and course book dialogues was particularly disliked*" (McDonough 2002: p407). Moreover, the data show that many activities that are currently unpopular in the broadly communicative ethos of

ELT – grammar exercises, reading aloud, translation, and so on – are in fact perceived by learners to be conducive to learning (McDonough 2002: p409).

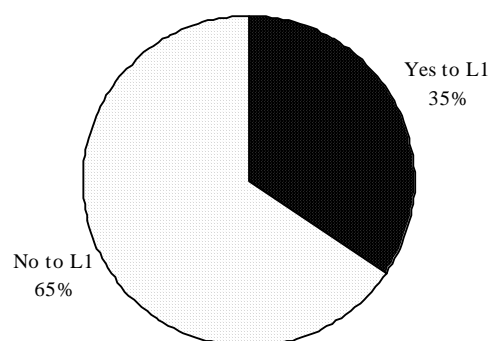
Namely the 50 % correlation between the teachers' and the students' attitudes encouraged the author of the present article to assess the usefulness of L1 in a communicative classroom from the point of view of the students. At this point the author would like to thank Reda Lingyte for her profound assistance in the empiric research.

In order to find out students' of English attitudes toward the use of L1 in a communicative classroom a survey has been carried out in the form of questionnaires. Students at one of the foreign language teaching centres in Vilnius have been asked to fill in questionnaires and their answers have been analysed and summed up. The results of the research are discussed below.

113 students from beginner to advanced level groups of the above-mentioned foreign language training centre took part in the survey. The students were taught by 12 different teachers, 5 of them being native speakers who do not know Lithuanian, while local teachers would revert to the L1 to a lesser or greater extent though claiming to be in favour of using only the target language,

The majority of the students belong to the age group from 26 to 45, the whole range of the respondents' age extending from 15 to 64.

The students surveyed study General English at a language school where the communicative approach to teaching is applied, which implies that L1 should be avoided in the classroom. Thus 65 per cent of the students marked in the questionnaire that they think Lithuanian should not be used in class, while 35 per cent would prefer their mother tongue also to be used.



**Figure 1.** Students' attitude to the use of L1

53 per cent of the respondents would prefer their teacher to use a little L1, 16 per cent think L1 should be used sometimes, while 31 per cent of the students do not think there should be any L1 at all.

It should be mentioned that the data of the questionnaires proves the teachers' opinion that young adult learners support the elimination of the mother tongue in foreign language lessons much more than older students. The results of the survey also show that the teachers correctly

assume that the most demanding for translation are the learners who are over the age of 45. Table 1 below reflects

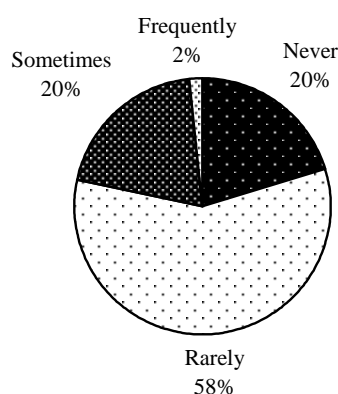
the respondents' answers from different age groups to the question whether L1 should be used in the classroom.

**Table 1.** Different age groups' tolerance of the use of L1

| Should Lithuanian be used in the classroom? | Age group |    |       |    |       |    |       |    |       |     |
|---|-----------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|-----|
|   | 15-25     |    | 26-35 |    | 36-45 |    | 46-55 |    | 56-64 |     |
|   | N         | %  | N     | %  | N     | %  | N     | %  | N     | %   |
| <b>Yes</b>                                  | 4         | 15 | 16    | 39 | 10    | 33 | 9     | 60 | 0     | 0   |
| <b>No</b>                                   | 22        | 85 | 25    | 61 | 20    | 67 | 6     | 40 | 1     | 100 |

### Students' attitude to the frequency of L1

The majority of those who tolerate L1 in the classroom (35 per cent) think that sometimes translation or Lithuanian explanation is more efficient than English speculations, 15 per cent find using translation feel more comfortable, and the same number of students state that the use of L1 helps them feel less tense in class.

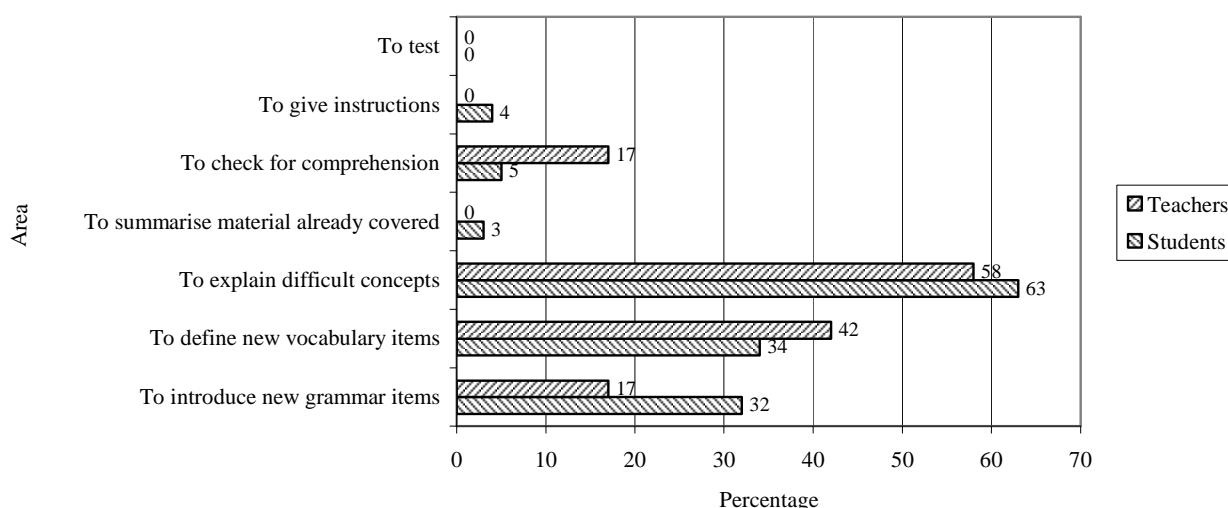


**Figure 2.** Frequency of using L1

However, the students do not welcome frequent use of Lithuanian in class. As Figure 2 shows, 58 per cent of the students think that L1 should be used in class rarely, while only 2 per cent prefer frequent use of L1, 20 per cent think that L1 may be used sometimes, and the same number of the respondents, i. e. 20 per cent, support the idea of 'only English' environment.

As to the cases when L1 is acceptable in class, 63 per cent of the respondents think that explanation of difficult concepts is the case, 34 per cent would like new vocabulary to be translated into their native language and 32 per cent of the students would like new grammar items introduced in Lithuanian, 5 per cent of the students would prefer their teacher to use L1 to check their comprehension, 3 per cent think teachers could summarise the material studied in L1 and 4 per cent of the respondents express a wish to receive instructions in Lithuanian.

The results of the survey lead to the conclusion that students support the idea of greatly limiting the use of L1 in a communicative classroom. Therefore, teachers of English need to find useful techniques for minimising the use of L1 and increasing the use of the target language in the classroom.



**Figure 3.** Areas where L1 is considered to be appropriate

### Recommendations for teachers to minimize the use of L1

The survey revealed that learners expect the teachers to use L1 in the following cases:

**Giving instructions:** The best way to make instructions understood is, firstly, get the learners' attention and to briefly demonstrate the activity with a student. It is important to check students' understanding after giving

them, as very often when asked to discuss, some learners may start writing or vice versa, so it always helps if the teacher checks understanding of the instructions, e.g. by asking “Are you going to write? – No. Speak? – Yes!” Though students usually can understand more than they can actually produce, the procedural language should be graded according to the level. At lower levels it is useful to back instructions by gestures, body language.

**Checking comprehension** in the target language is usually done by asking concept questions, e.g. if a teacher is not sure if the students have understood the third conditional *If I had known it was your birthday, I would have phoned you*. The concept questions should be brief and easily answerable *Yes/No* questions: *Did you know it was his birthday?* No. *Did you phone him?* No. *Are you happy you didn't?* No. Both questions and the answers should be planned by the teacher in advance.

**Explaining difficult concepts, presenting new vocabulary:** Depending on the level, L1 can be avoided by using context, examples, synonyms, antonyms, pictures, picture dictionaries, realia, definitions, miming, definitions, encouraging students to use monolingual dictionaries. Sometimes, especially in the case of abstract notions, translation may be the easiest and most economical way of conveying the meaning, yet it is better to elicit it from the students rather than translate yourself and then just nod in approval as to prevent students from expecting and getting addicted to further translations coming from the teacher.

**Introducing new grammar items:** Though some students prefer to concentrate on details and rules (field independent learners) rather than getting across the general meaning (field dependent learners) (Lindsay, Knight 2006: p8), the former often insisting on explanations in L1, there are some ways in which L1 can be avoided. Many course books suggest inductive approach in teaching grammar, where students are given examples and are encouraged to work out the rules themselves, in this way complicated explanations are avoided. The meaning of new grammar structures becomes clear if they are presented in a situation, in a reading or listening text. Contrastive analysis in order to reveal the meaning and use can be done with the structures of the target language not referring to L1, e.g. Present Progressive tense vs Present Simple, Present Perfect vs Past Simple. Using time lines is very useful for clarifying the meaning of English tenses.

However, at times, especially at lower levels, a situation may arise when a student wants to ask or say something in L1 to the teacher more often than reasonable. If that happens too frequently, it may cause a chain reaction and ruin the classroom “only target language” policy. The teacher should make the rules clear about how often L1 is allowed. For those students who want explanations in L1 more often, “Lithuanian Embassy” could be established –

a separate place/ corner in the classroom where a student can go and expect the teacher to come and deal with a problem in L1. This kind of humorous learner training usually reduces students’ demand of translation as they understand that it is not realistic to expect that much L1 help in real life.

## Conclusions

A communicative English language classroom aims at creating conditions to facilitate realistic communication where learners are exposed to the target language and are encouraged to use it. Though translation is believed to reduce learner anxiety and stress and serve as a bridge between the languages, the results of the research showed that adult students are in favour of strictly limited use of L1 in a communicative English language classroom.

Older adults tend to be more inclined to insist on using L1 in classroom, while younger adults seem to be more flexible and can do without translation. This could be explained by different learning background, previous learning experience: younger adults are more likely to have had communicative language teaching experience and overall are less critical to new teaching methods applied.

Research shows that those students who expect L1 to be used in class would like their teachers to translate instructions, vocabulary, explain grammar, difficult concepts, and check their understanding. In these cases the teacher can employ different techniques to minimize the use of L1, yet create safe and student-friendly learning atmosphere.

Adult learners have different leaning experience, learning styles, varied attitudes and expectations, so it is advisable for teachers to be flexible and employ different teaching methods. An important element of learner training should be present in every course, so that students could understand and discuss the rationale behind what, how and why is done in class. As soon as they understand advantages and disadvantages of using L1, they will be involved in taking informed decisions about their own learning.

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### **Suaugusiųjų mokymas: gimtosios kalbos vartojimas anglų kalbos pamokose**

#### **Santrauka**

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas besimokančiųjų požiūris į gimtosios kalbos vartojimą anglų kalbos pamokose. Šis klausimas tapo ypač aktualus išsilaikę komunikacinio kalbų mokymo metodui ir į anglų kalbos mokymo procesą įsitraukus daugybei mokytojų, kuriems ši kalba yra gimtoji. Komunikacinio kalbų metodo šalininkai teigia, jog patekę į aplinką, kurioje bendraujama tik studijuojamąja kalba, besimokantieji įgyja igūdžių, reikalingų bendrauti visuomeniniame gyvenime. Autorė apžvelgia gimtosios kalbos vartojimo anglų kalbos pamokose priežastis, privalumus ir pavojus. Nors 65 % apklaustųjų nepasigestę gimtosios kalbos anglų kalbos pamokose, likusieji 35 % norėtų, kad dėstytojas lietuviškai paaiškintų užduotis, gramatikos taisykles, sąvokas, išverstų sudėtingesnius žodžius, nes prie tokio mokymo jie buvo įpratę savo ankstesnėse studijose ir todėl jaustųsi saugiau. Kadangi tyrimas vis dėlto parodė, kad dauguma studentų, ypač jaunesnių, norėtų, kad dėstytojai, o ir jie patys kuo mažiau būtų priklausomi nuo gimtosios kalbos vartojimo pamokoje, straipsnyje pateikiama būdų, kaip to pasiekti.

Straipsnis įteiktas 2008 08

Parengtas spaudai 2008 10

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DOI: 10.5755/j01.sal.1.13.43325