

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

A research-into-practice series produced by a partnership between the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and the Ontario Association of Deans of Education

Research Monograph #51

How and why should we make use of students' first language(s) in the second language classroom?

Research Tells Us

Using the direct method is often associated with the success of French Immersion programs. However, restricting language use to the "target language" can also result in:

- lower expectations for teachers and students with respect to rigorous content
- neglect of students' prior knowledge – in particular with respect to learning strategies

New research suggests that students can use their first language and accompanying strategies as a means to improve their second language production.

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Calling Upon Other Language Skills to Enhance Second Language Learning

Talking Taboo about First Languages in a Second Language Classroom

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Developing students' language skills in a second language is a complex issue without a clearly defined set of best practices for teachers. Classroom exposure to the target language is essential for student success, and some teachers would argue that the greater the target language use, the higher student achievement in that language. The impact of other languages on students' target language proficiency and the degree to which they should be used in the second language classroom, however, remain topics of debate. This monograph explores why and how to make use of students' prior language knowledge in the second language class.

Use of the Target Language

The importance of exposure to the target language in the second language classroom is not questioned. In fact, traditionally, one of the factors influencing the success of French immersion programs was the use of the *direct method* – a method in which classes are conducted solely in the target language, supported by use of actions, realia (objects from real life used in classroom instruction such as brochures, restaurant menus), etc. Support for this method was grounded in the view that students' first language(s) had a negative impact on target language use. It is possible that the success of French immersion programs, with their use of the direct method, has stifled and limited teachers' discussions of other language use in the second language classroom. Such lack of discussion, however, limits opportunities for improving practice and,

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potentially, student achievement. Recent research looks beyond the direct method and provides guidance for conscious decision-making regarding if and when to use other languages in the second language classroom.

Debunking the Myth of the Need for Sole Target Language Use

Although target language use is often associated with higher proficiency, using the direct method can also result in the lowering of expectations for both teachers and students. A study of Grade 6 French immersion students' and teachers' use of verbs revealed that teachers limited their use of the target language (e.g., teachers used a limited set of conjugated verb tenses).¹ Consequently, students then misused the tenses themselves.² In addition, teachers at times incorrectly modified their language production with the view to enhancing comprehension. This sometimes produced the opposite effect, as was the case when present tense (instead of past tense) verbs were used while teaching a Grade 6 French immersion history lesson.² With regard to diminishing cognitive expectations, literacy teachers have been shown to reduce cognitively demanding tasks for second language learners³ by, for example, using reading material intended for lower grades or by providing written models for students to copy. Similarly, it has been noted that, rather than engaging second language learners with academic topics or rigorous content, some mainstream teachers lower their expectations for these learners.⁴

Sole use of the target language has also resulted in neglecting students' prior knowledge – in particular as it relates to strategy use. It has been hypothesized that poor second language reading is often a result of inconsistent use of first language reading strategies in the second language context; thus, it has been suggested that students' first language can be viewed as a teaching and learning resource rather than as an interference.⁵ Adolescent learners in their second year of second language study in the United Kingdom, for example, were exposed to learning-strategy instruction in their English classes and asked to make judgments about the efficacy of the strategies. They were asked whether the strategies were useful to learning only English, to learning the target language, to learning any language or were not useful at all. It was found that high-achieving students used more metacognitive strategies and made some transfer of strategies from their English class to their second language class, whereas low-achieving students were less likely to do so.⁶

Use of Students' First Language(s)

Other studies offer further evidence to suggest that, in an effort to provide cognitively appropriate learning opportunities, teachers can, and should, conscientiously choose to include students' first language(s) in the classroom. Consider, for example, the three Japanese English language learners in Kobayashi's (2003) study who chose to rehearse their presentation in Japanese before making the final presentation in class. It was found that "the amount of Japanese used decreased as group work progressed, which indicates that the L1 [first language] might have served as an important scaffold for their task accomplishment in English"⁷ (p. 356). Likewise, it was found that Grade 7 late French immersion students who were allowed to use their first language in preparation of a social studies presentation to be given in French were evaluated more highly than those who were reminded to prepare only in French.⁸ Similarly, observations of students engaged in collaborative French writing tasks revealed that, when afforded the opportunity to use their first language(s), students did so only 25 per cent of the preparation time; further, they used their first language(s) in order to improve their French use – both vocabulary and form.⁹

Talking taboo

"Beyond using students' first language(s) to reduce cognitive demands, research has shown that students can also transfer strategies from their first language(s) to benefit their learning of a second language."

Beyond using students' first language(s) to reduce cognitive demands, research has shown that students can also transfer strategies from their first language(s) to benefit their learning of a second language. Extensive research has shown that students can transfer reading comprehension strategies from one language to another.¹⁰ Further, it has been articulated that students would be more apt to make use of prior strategies if studying in settings that recognize the importance of these strategies' multi-competence or with teachers who explicitly draw students' attention to transferable strategies.¹¹

In summary, research suggests that students can use their first language and accompanying strategies as a means to improve their second language production.

Implications for Classroom Practice

We recognize the importance, in second language classes, of using the target language for the vast majority of the time. In fact, it has been suggested that use of other languages should be kept to a maximum of 15 per cent of class time in order to maximize students' second language achievement.¹² It is, therefore, within these limitations that we offer the following recommendations for practice.

Examine language use:

- Monitor the quality of your own target language use. Record or tape yourself and play back recordings to judge your language level. Does your language differ according to the level you are teaching? Is it overly simplified?
- Review these recordings and reflect upon your use of other languages in the classroom. How do you choose to use (or not use) other languages?
- Reflect upon the quantity of your target and first language use. How can you make choices about your language use that will enhance students' achievement?
- Engage in professional development opportunities that specifically address language use in second language contexts.

Implement strategies to help students use their languages:

- Learn about your students' first language by creating a class language survey and noting students' first, second, and additional languages. Engage students in purposeful discussions about their backgrounds so as to validate linguistic diversity.
- Provide students with opportunities to teach some of their language to the class so as to create an inclusive atmosphere that values multilingualism. For example, use a "language of the month" activity to allow students who speak that language to share some greetings or expressions that can be used by all students for the rest of the month.¹³
- Make use of students' language knowledge. Once you know your students' language backgrounds, research the languages in order to make connections between them and the target language. For example, identify and discuss cognates with the class. Or use a less labour-intensive approach and ask the students if the languages they know share commonalities with the target language.
- When desirable, with cognitively demanding tasks, provide students with opportunities to plan for production using their first language. Students can, for example, develop notes and first drafts for a writing task in their first language before switching to the target language.
- With appropriate permissions, audiotape or videotape your class. Reflect upon the amount of students' target language use. Do students produce extended amounts of target language? Are they afforded sufficient time to do so?

A word of caution ..

"... it has been suggested that use of other languages should be kept to a maximum of 15 per cent of class time in order to maximize students' second language achievement."

- Use these recordings to teach students to become conscientious about their language use. For example, invite students to listen to recordings of themselves using the target language and produce individual reflections on the quality of their language use.
- Collaborate with your colleagues to facilitate transfer of instructional strategies. If, for example, you are aware that the students focus on making inferences when reading in English, you can encourage students to use the same strategy in the second language classroom.
- Bring in guest speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to speak to your students about their experiences with second language learning.

Speak with colleagues and administrators about providing students with first language support outside of the second language or mainstream classrooms:

- Model self-talk about language in your examples. For instance, when modelling how to improve a written draft, talk out loud; pose questions to improve your target language use.
- Judge students' use of the target language based on the complexity and/or the abstractness of the concept.
- Provide opportunities for collaborative work where students are encouraged to talk about language. Students may, for example, benefit from hypothesizing about language choices when reading. In addition to talking about languages, guide them to talk and reflect about how they learn language.

In Sum

While we acknowledge the importance of the use of the target language in second language classes, there is a body of research that clearly demonstrates the benefits of also including students' first language(s) in these classes. By recognizing and drawing on students' first language knowledge, we can foster successful second language learning experiences.

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