



The role of the first language in meaning-focused and form-focused second language learning

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Abstract

Some second language teachers feel guilty when they let students use their first language (L1) in classrooms; other teachers may acknowledge that allowing students to use the L1 may be beneficial to L2 learning, but they are unclear how beneficial it is. The present article is an attempt to clarify how L1 use may facilitate L2 learning from a sociocultural perspective. It discusses the role of the L1 in L2 teaching in relation to meaning-focused and form-focused tasks. In both types of tasks, L1 use is found to function as an effective medium for learners to provide scaffolded help in managing, completing tasks and facilitating interpersonal relationships. It is also found to be a useful tool for learners to regulate their thinking in cognitively demanding tasks. It is suggested that L2 teachers should try to explore how to make use of L1 in L2 learning instead of prohibiting L1 use by all means.

Keywords: L1 use, L2 learning, form-focused task, meaning-focused task

Introduction

According to Macaro (2001), there are three positions regarding the use of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) learning. The first position known as the Virtual Position suggests that there is no pedagogical value in L1 use; and it should be completely excluded from L2 classrooms. The second position, which is named as the Maximal Position, suggests that the L2 should be maximized in L2 classrooms. Contrary to the two previous views, the third position, namely the Optimal Position, maintains that “some aspects of learning might be enhanced by the use of L1; therefore, there should be a constant exploration of pedagogical principles regarding whether and in what ways L1 use is justified” (Macaro, 2001, p.535).



The present article is an attempt to justify how L1 use can foster L2 learning. In this article, the role of L1 in L2 learning will be discussed with regards to two L2 pedagogical theories, namely meaning-focused teaching and form-focused teaching. “Form-focused teaching” is used to refer to “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form” (Ellis, 2001, p.2). A meaning-focused teaching approach, by contrast, is referred to as an approach that excludes attention to forms (Doughty and Williams, 1998). Different L2 teaching methods differ in their degree of focus on form and meaning (Doughty, 2004); therefore, a better understanding of the role of L1 in meaning-focused and form-focused language teaching will provide insights into L2 pedagogy.

In order to draw a detailed picture of the role of L1 produced by learners in the two mentioned pedagogical theories, this article analyzes research findings primarily from Anton and DiCamilla (1999) and Scott and De La Fuente (2008). The key difference between Anton and DiCamilla (1999) and Scott and De La Fuente (2008) is that the two studies involve different L2 teaching approaches. Anton and DiCamilla (1999) deal with a meaning-focused L2 teaching approach, which emphasizes authentic language use for a “real” communicative purpose in meaningful contexts. By contrast, the learning tasks investigated in Scott and De La Fuente (2008) align with the form-focused approach, which have L2 forms as the content of the tasks.

The major similarity is that both Anton and DiCamilla (1999) and Scott and De La Fuente (2008) examine collaborative interaction in L2 classrooms from the Sociocultural framework proposed by Vygostky. According to Vygotsky (1981), the basic process by which learning occurs is mediation between individuals and their culture; and this mediation appears on two planes: it appears first between individuals on an interpsychological plane, and then within the individual on an intrapsychological plane. Drawing on the Sociocultural framework, both Anton and DiCamilla (1999) and Scott and De La Fuente (2008) point out that L1 may function as a tool of mediation between



learners and within individual learners. The role of L1 as a tool of mediation between learners is known as “the interpsychological role”, and the role of L1 as a tool of mediation within each individual is referred to as “the intrapsychological role” (Anton and DiCamillar, 1999). The following two sections discuss both the interpsychological and intrapsychological roles of L1 use.

The interpsychological role of L1 use

Interpsychological role of L1 in meaning-focused teaching

The interpsychological role of L1 manifests through “collaborative dialogue”, which is understood as “interaction that involves the Vygotskyan notion of scaffolded help” (Scott and De La Fuente, 2008, p.110). The present section analyses how the interpsychological role of L1 is manifested in the meaning-focused writing tasks discussed in Anton and DiCamilla (1999).

L1 use and task completion

L1 is found to be a powerful tool for learners to provide each other with necessary help for the completion of their tasks. Specifically, through the use of L1 the learners helped each other to access the target L2 form, understand the meaning of the form and produce metatalk, which is understood as the talk to reflect on language use.

The following excerpt illustrates how L1 functions as a tool for learners to access the target L2 form to convey their message through their scaffolded help. In this excerpt, the two learners were doing a collaborative writing task about making plans for a trip to Mexico. They were trying to find the Spanish (L2) equivalent of “to arrive”. Neither of them knew this word, so R suggests using “después”, which means “to leave” in line 7, but decided it was not suitable, then T remembered a newly learnt word which means “to go” (line 12) but he did not know its Spanish form. R made an attempt, but he provided an incorrect word (line 13). T then suggested that the word should start with an “s” (line 14) and eventually R was able to give the correct Spanish word (line 15). T and R both contributed to the collective production of the target L2 form. In other words, by using L1, they helped each other so that they were able to access the L2 form to convey their idea.



1. *R: Do we just start writing? We write exact the same thing? All right ... imagine we are going on a trip to Mexico. Tell me what you plan to do on this trip... all right ... start it off ... I'm horrible at starting things off.*
2. *T: Let's say, how do you say, um we're gonna, we will arrive there?*
3. *R: Um arriver, I don't know, uh, why don't we say...*
4. *T: 'Cause we could say we're gonna, we're gonna get there at, and we can put it in, you know, the date and the time, and ...*
5. *R: All right, all right.... To arrive is, I think, it's like arriver?*
6. *T: Oh, how about leave, leave?*
7. *R: That's después, leave... is, um.*
8. *T: Why do we have the recorder on?*
9. *R: 'Cause she wants to record everything we say, so watch it.*
10. *T: Okay.*
11. *R: So we could say, why don't we say like, uh, T...*
12. *T: We just learned the word to go, um.*
13. *R: Vamos?*
14. *T: No, the "s" word*
15. *R: Um, salgo... salir... Year!*
16. *T: To go ... Okay*
17. *R: Okay, you're right, um....*

(Anton and DiCamilla, 1999, p.238)

In addition to its role for accessing L2 forms, L1 is also found to function as a useful tool to understand the meaning of L2 forms: in the extract below, the learners were completing a collaborative writing task about eating habits in the US. S produced an L2 sentence in line 1. D showed that he did not understand the L2 sentence by asking what S was trying to say in line 2. Then S broke down the sentences into smaller phrases in lines 7, 9 and 11 and D translated these phrases into the L1 in lines 8, 10 and 12. The translation strategy used by D is necessary for him to understand the utterance produced by S.

1. *S: Para... un... postre... es... popular... comer... helado.*



2. *D: Now, what are you trying to say?*
3. *S: Um... for desert it's popular to eat ice cream.*
4. *D: Is that what you said?*
5. *S: No...*
6. *D: That's right, you're right.*
7. *S: Para un postre.*
8. *D: For dessert*
9. *S: Ummm hmmm... Es popular...*
10. *D: It's popular.*
11. *S: Comer helado*
12. *D: To eat ice cream*
13. *S: Mmmm hmmm*
14. *D: Now read it again?*
15. *S: Para un postre es popular comer helado*
16. *D: Okay, is that it?*

(Anton and DiCamilla, 1999, p.239-240)

The use of L1 is also found to facilitate metatalk. This metatalk helped the learners to work out the correct linguistic form that is necessary to convey their message for the completion of their task. The following excerpt explicates how learners' metatalk is useful for producing a complex linguistic form. In this example, a pair of learners needed to find the Spanish equivalent for "we eat lunch". At first T provided the lexical item for "to eat" in line 2. R and T were trying to supply the correct verb form in agreement with the subject in lines 5, 6 and 7. R talked about the rule of changing verb form in line 9, then he provided another form of the verb in line 13, but it was still incorrect as indicated by T in line 12. Then R provided the correct form in line 13 and explained the use of the form to T in line 15. Thus, the learners' metatalk helped them finally work out the correct verb form of "to eat".

1. *R: Um... How do you say "lunch"?*



2. *T: Almuer... almuer... zamos... we eat lunch.*
3. *R: Oh... commemos... oh*
4. *T: What do you want to say?*
5. *R: Almuerzos*
6. *T: We eat lunch... almuer... zamos.*
7. *R: It's not... it's a-l-m-u-r?*
8. *T: Yeah*
9. *R: Now you don't change the "zamos" to "er" though?*
10. *T: Right... It's almuer... almuerzar.*
11. *R: How do you say "almuerzo"? A-l-m-u-e-r-z-o?*
12. *T: Yeah... That's "I eat lunch".*
13. *R: How do you say we... almor... it's "almorzamos"*
14. *T: Oh*
15. *R: It's "o" to "ue" remember? So we keep it to the "o". Make sense?*
16. *T: Ok. You're so smart.*

(Anton and DiCamilla, 1998, p.239)

L1 use and task management

L1 is found to be a helpful tool for task management. The learners succeeded in managing their tasks by narrowing down the topic as well as limiting the scope and the content of their writing. The following excerpt is an obvious illustration of how the learners took advantage of their L1 to make their task manageable by limiting their topic.

1. *S: Does that mean we have to be in the Mexico City? Can it be any place in Mexico? It just says Mexico.*
2. *D: Yeah, you're just going to Mexico. Do you want to go to the city of Mexico?*
3. *S: Yeah. Let's ... let's... That's good enough... okay.*
4. *D: Okay.*
5. *S: (Laugh)...That's too easy.*
6. *D: Cheater.*
7. *S: Okay.*



(Anton and DiCamilla, 1998, p.241)

Here the two learners were considering narrowing down their writing topic to just Mexico City. S consulted his partner about the scope of the task in line 1. D made a suggestion by posing a question in line 2. S quickly agreed upon D's suggestion (line 3), and reasoned that this solution made it easier for them to manage the task (line 5). Within a few simple exchanges in L1, S and D were able to reach an agreement upon limiting the topic of their writing task, and thus making the task manageable.

L1 use and interpersonal relationship establishment

In the excerpt below, the learners succeeded in establishing and maintaining their interpersonal relationship by avoiding the assertion of their personal ideas and inviting their partner's participation. For example, in line 1, S explicitly said that she did not want to impose her idea on D. In line 3, S used a polite form "*could*" to give her idea. The use of "*could*" indicates that it is a suggestion rather than an assertion. Likewise, in line 11, S began her utterance with "*so*" as an indication of a decision being made; however, she put it in a polite question "*would you say...?*" as a polite invitation for D's opinion. S's question showed that she did not want to assert her own thinking and that she was open to D's idea. By being polite and respecting her partner's opinion, S was successful in creating and maintaining a positive interpersonal relationship with her partner.

1. S: *I don't want to tell you what to say. I just thought. (laugh)*
2. D: *No... I just don't know what else to say there's more I want to say, I just can't, we haven't learnt it... la ciudad de Mexico... es or ésta? Es...*
3. S: *You could say "hay" there're a lot of people...*
4. D: *I am going to say es muy grande...*
5. S: *That's, that's great...*
6. D: *Yhay... muchos personas... here, how about this? Hay... hay más personas, wait, no, en la cuidad de Mexico, están más personas que Indianapolis... is that right?*
7. S: *I don't... say it again...*



8. D: *Uh, en la ciudad de Mexico están más personas, uh que... Indianapolis.*
9. S: *You want to say there are a lot of people from Indianapolis?*
10. D: *There are more people in Mexico City than Indianapolis...*
11. S: *So, would you say... hay más personas... en la ciudad de Mexico que Indianapolis?*
12. D: *That's what I thought.*

(Anton and DiCamilla, 1998, p.243)

In summary, in the meaning-focused collaborative tasks, L1 is shown to be a useful tool for task completion, task management and interpersonal relationship establishment. The role of L1 for task completion is realized through its functions as a tool for L2 learners to understand meaning of L2 forms, access L2 forms and carry out metatalk, which is fruitful in producing complex L2 forms.

Interpsychological role of L1 in form-focused teaching

L1 use and task completion

The learners' use of L1 in completing the form-focused consciousness task is shown to have quite similar functions as in the meaning-focused tasks discussed above. It is helpful for learners to understand the meaning of the target forms and produce metatalk about the forms.

The following excerpt illustrates the function of L1 use in working out the meaning of an L2 form for the completion of a consciousness-raising form-focused task. The learners in this excerpt quickly agreed upon the meaning of "que" (line 2); however, they were not sure about the meaning of "dont", so they worked collaboratively in testing hypothesis (line 3, 4, and 5). By the end of their dialogue they finally reached a mutual agreement about the meaning of "dont" in line 6 and 7.

1. S1: *'Que' is like 'that.'*
2. S2: *Something like that. 'That' or 'which.'*
3. S1: *I translated 'dont' kinda like 'which.'*



4. S2: *I translated 'dont' like 'whose.'*
 5. S1: *'Whose'? But isn't 'qui' 'who'?*
 6. S2: *(Reads sentences in the passage with dont aloud.) It's kinda the same thing . . . 'whose' and 'which.' It seems kind of possessive, but I don't know . . .*
 7. S1: *I thought of the word 'donc.'*
- (Scott and De La Fuente, 2008, p.107)*

Another important finding in Scott and De La Fuente (2008) is that the prohibition of L1 task hindered metatalk in the form-focused task. The learners in Group 1 (where L1 use is allowed) are reported to be frequently engaged and relatively confident in talking about the target structures. References to grammatical terms, such as *subject pronoun, possessive, preposition, proposition, main clause, and conjunction* recurred regularly in their discussions and seemed to help them clarify their understanding of the structures. By contrast, the learners in Group 2 (where L1 use is prohibited) admitted that they had difficulty in using grammatical terms to discuss the target structures. Their attempts to talk about the target structures were clumsy, unclear and incomplete.

L1 use and task management

The strategy that the learners doing the form-focused task in Scott and De La Fuente (2008) used to make their task manageable is translation.

The form-focused task in Scott and De La Fuente (2008) requires learners to figure out the rule describing the meaning of the two targeted forms and how they are used in the target language. This task was so cognitively demanding that even the learners who were not allowed to use the L1 still fell back on their L1 to make sense of the grammar structures in focus. They admitted that they translated words in their mind. For example, a learner confessed *"We did not say that 'que' is 'that' and 'cuyo' is 'whose' because you said we could not use any English . . . but I knew that, I did it in my head, I mean, when I read 'una ciudad que' I translated in my head 'a city that'"* (Scott and De La Fuente, 2008, p.105).

Likewise, the learners, who were allowed to use their L1, took advantage of translation strategy to understand the meaning of “*que*” and “*dont*”.

L1 use and interpersonal relationship establishment

Scott and De La Fuente (2008) find that the use of L1 fostered effective and smooth interaction and allowed a more balanced contribution between partners in pairs. If communication is smooth, effective and unlikely to suffer from breakdown caused by language difficulties, it is easier for learners to establish a friendly and supportive environment. In addition, balanced contributions may lead to a fairer environment, where learning opportunities are not limited to more proficient learners but are also provided to less proficient learners who are not confident enough to converse their ideas in L2. It can be inferred that the use of L1 may bring about a friendly and fair environment, which is favorable for constructing and maintaining interpersonal relationship.

The intrapsychological role of L1 use

Language functioning on the intrapsychological plane is often externalized through private speech which is typically defined as speech addressed to the self, not to others for the purpose of self-regulation when coping with a cognitive demanding task, rather than for communication (Vygotsky, 1979).

Intrapsychological role of L1 in meaning-focused teaching

The intrapsychological role of L1 in meaning-focused teaching is realized through private speech which serves as a cognitive tool in directing learners' thinking for the production of L2 forms to convey meaning. The following excerpt illustrates how private speech in L1 can help learners to evaluate an L2 form and produce an L2 sentence for the completion of the writing task.

1. S: *I don't want to tell you what to say. I just thought. (laugh)*
2. D: *No... I just don't know what else to say there's more I want to say, I just can't, we haven't learnt it... la ciudad de Mexico... es or ésta? Es...*



3. S: You say “hay” there’re a lot of people
4. D: I am going to say es muy grande...
5. S: That’s, that’s great...
6. D: Yhay... muchos personas... here, how about this? Hay... hay mas personas, wait, no, en la ciudad de Mexico, estan mas personas que Indianapolis... is that right?
7. S: I don’t... say it again...
8. D: Uh, en la ciudad de Mexico estan mas personas, uh que... Indianapolis.
(Anton and DiCamilla, 1998, p.243)

In this example, in line 2, D seemed to pose a question to S about making a choice between two forms “es” and “ésta”; but right after that, D answered the question herself. By vocalizing the question, D activated her cognitive ability that enabled her to evaluate two forms “es” and “ésta”, and then provided the correct answer. Another instance of private speech that serves to regulate thinking is found in line 6, when D was trying to create a new L2 sentence. Her words “no”, “wait” in the middle seemed to address to herself, not to her partner. These words indicated D’s self-evaluation of what she had produced so far. By uttering these words D was going through a cognitive process that helped her to direct her thinking for the production of the L2 sentence.

Intrapsychological role of L1 in form-focused teaching

Private speech also plays an important role in regulating learners’ thinking for the completion of form-focused tasks. It is evident in the following excerpt that S1 and S2 used their private speech to test hypotheses about the meaning and use of the relative pronouns “que” and “cuyo” and discover the syntactical function of an L2 sentence. At first in line 1, S1 did not talk to S2. She asked herself a question and then answered it after a brief pause. By vocalizing her thought, S1 was able to find out the answer. Similarly, in line 5, S2’s private speech was useful for testing a hypothesis about the syntax of the sentence being analyzed. The last phrase in her speech “yeah, that’s a clause” indicates that finally she was able to work out the syntactical function of the target form.



1. S1: *[Beginning of private speech] But . . . why can't you say 'cuyas' like instead use 'whose many tourists' . . . ah, that doesn't really make any sense I guess but . . . like it is always good to know . . . [end of private speech]*
2. S1: *'Visitantes' is the subject.*
3. S2: *Oh, OK, that's like a . . . it's like a phrase, like a . . . like a clause . . . like a dependent...*
4. S1: *a dependent clause . . .*
5. S2: *Yeah, [beginning of private speech] because you take that out and say "los visitantes disfrutan" . . . but then inside you have "cuyo inter'es". . . [end of private speech]. Yeah, that's a clause!*

(Scott and De La Fuente, 2008, p.108)

In summary, L1 private speech may work as an important intrapsychological tool for the completion of both task types. Nonetheless, the two different teaching approaches may involve different cognitive functions of private speech. The cognitive function of private speech in meaning-focused teaching involves the production of L2 forms while in form-focused teaching it deals with the comprehension of L2 forms. The function of private speech differs in the two teaching approaches because each approach embeds a different pedagogical theory. Meaning-focused teaching emphasizes understanding and conveying message in L2; by contrast, form-focused teaching aims at understanding the formal features of L2.

Conclusion

The use of L1 is found to have both interpsychological and intrapsychological roles in both teaching approaches. The interpsychological role of L1 manifests through collaborative dialogue, which results in scaffolded help necessary for task completion, task management and interpersonal relationship establishment. The intrapsychological role of L1 manifests through learners' private speech, which serves to regulate their thinking in the face of cognitively demanding tasks.



In conclusion, whether it is in meaning-focused or form-focused teaching, the use of L1 is shown to be beneficial to L2 learning. It works as an effective medium for learners to provide scaffolded help for task completion and task management and interpersonal relationship establishment. Moreover, it serves as a useful tool for learners to solve cognitively difficult problems arising from their learning tasks. In addition to these learning benefits, the use of L1 can result in other social benefits such as the establishment of socially favorable environments that facilitate interpersonal relationships. Therefore, L2 teachers should allow their learners to use their L1 in certain circumstances so that they can enhance their learning outcomes and enjoy other social benefits.

Biodata

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