Supporting linguistically and culturally diverse English language learners by integrating first language

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Abstract
This qualitative study is to report an activity designed in the Learning English through the Arts program to explore the L1 use in an L2 class at a Canadian University English Language Improvement Center. The participants are five adult English language learners registered in different departments and faculties at a Canadian university. The results showed that: 1) L1 can, to some extent, facilitate students' L2 learning; 2) home culture sharing is an effective activity when teachers consider integrating L1 in L2 class, and 3) multimodal ways of presentation are crucial in integrating L1 into L2 learning. This study can provide insights for English language teachers who want to integrate L1 into L2 classes. In addition, for teacher educators, this study can also offer suggestions for teacher education programs with an increasing need to develop competent teachers to support English language learners in a diverse learning environment.

Keywords: First Language, English language learning, English through the Arts, gamification, mobile apps

Introduction

English language learners do not learn English simply through imitation and practice (Lightbown & Spada 2018). One of the important aspects that educators need to consider in language teaching and learning is the role of the first language in second language learning (Cummins 2007). From a traditionalist's point of view, when acquiring a new language, learners need to have a pure language environment where the first language is not encouraged or allowed to use. It is challenging for English language learners with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds to acquire English without support from their first language skills. In addition, English language learners from different cultures often have identity issues and seek identity affiliation (Chi & Sefton 2021). Therefore, unpacking the role of the first language in English language learning is of great importance.

Language acquisition is one of the essential aspects of human development. With the advancement of transportation tools and communication channels, interactions between people and people have become increasingly frequent and diverse. Furthermore, human mobility occurred quite often. For example, Canada will receive 1,500,000 new immigrants (BBC 2022) by the end of 2025. Most immigrants are from Asia, accounting for 50% of the new immigrants. These new immigrants bring their languages, cultures, and identities to Canada, contributing to the diversity of Canadian society (Xu 2017). However, one of the challenges for these immigrants is language learning. According to Zhou and Zhang (2014), most immigrants experience language barriers in their daily communications. However, the Canadian government launched various programs to support English or French Language learning. It is noted that English language learners encounter a variety of difficulties when they learn English, such as

first language interference (Avanika et al. 2009, Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015), loss of cultural identity (Alfarhan, 2016), insufficient grammatical foundations (Zhou & Zhang, 2014), and limited learning resource support (Genesee et al. 2005). Among these issues, first language interference is often badly blamed (Mägiste 1979, Schmitt 2000). Therefore, successful second language learners are often associated with language immersion programs and second language learning environments without recognizing the importance of the first language in their learning process (Cook 2003).

The role of first language (l1) in second language (l2) acquisition

Language is a complex system studied by linguists and researchers from different disciplines for centuries. In the context of second language (L2) acquisition, the role of first language (L1) has been a topic of interest for several decades. The influence of L1 on L2 learning is widely accepted in the literature. Many studies have shown that L1 plays a significant role in the L2 acquisition (Hakuta 1986, Swain & Lapkin 2000, Scarcella & Oxford 1992). Researchers have demonstrated that L1 affects L2 acquisition in various ways, including vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, and processing. For example, when learning a new language, learners often transfer their L1 knowledge to the L2, which can lead to interlanguage development (Selinker 1972). This transfer can be positive, creating grammatical structures that are not present in the target language but are consistent with the learner's L1 (positive transfer). On the other hand, the transfer can also be negative, leading to the application of L1 rules that are not appropriate in the target language (negative transfer).

Vocabulary acquisition is one area where the impact of L1 is particularly evident. Research has shown that L1 can significantly impact the development of vocabulary in an L2 (Schmitt & Meara 1997). For example, L1 can affect how new vocabulary is learned and retained and the speed at which new words are acquired (Schmitt 2000). This is because learners often use their L1 to understand new words and concepts in the target language. This can lead to the development of bilingual lexical processing, where the L1 and L2 lexical systems interact and influence each other (Gollan, Forster, & Frost 1997).

Grammar is another area where the influence of L1 is evident. Research has shown that L1 can significantly impact grammar development in an L2 (Færch & Kasper 1983). For example, learners often transfer their L1 grammar rules to the L2, leading to interlanguage development (Selinker 1972). This transfer can lead to the creation of grammatical structures that are not present in the target language but are consistent with the learner's L1 (positive transfer). On the other hand, the transfer can also lead to the application of L1 rules that are not appropriate in the target language (negative transfer).

Pragmatics is a third area where the influence of L1 is evident. Research has shown that L1 can significantly impact the development of pragmatics in an L2 (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989). For example, learners often transfer their L1 pragmatic conventions to the L2, leading to interlanguage development (Selinker 1972). This transfer can lead to using L1 pragmatic conventions that are inappropriate in the target language (negative transfer). On the other hand, the transfer can also lead to the development of pragmatic competence that is not present in the learner's L1 but is consistent with the target language (positive transfer).

The implications of L1 influence on L2 learning are important for language teaching and learning. In multilingual classrooms, teachers need to be aware of the potential impact of L1 on L2 and make appropriate pedagogical decisions that support L2 learning. For example, teachers can use the learners' L1 as a resource for vocabulary acquisition and grammar instruction while explicitly addressing potential negative transfer. They can also create opportunities for learners to use their L1 as a resource for learning and practicing pragmatics in the target language.

Moreover, teachers must be mindful of the potential challenges in multilingual classrooms. For example, some students may struggle to use their L1 as a resource for L2 learning, while others may over-rely on their L1 and have difficulty switching to the target language. Additionally, learners may

have different levels of L1 proficiency, which can affect their ability to use their L1 as a resource for L2 learning. Teachers need to be aware of these challenges and provide appropriate support and resources to help learners overcome them.

In conclusion, the role of L1 in L2 learning is a complex and multi-faceted issue. L1 can significantly impact vocabulary acquisition, grammar, and pragmatics in an L2. Teachers need to be aware of the potential impact of L1 on L2 and make appropriate pedagogical decisions to support L2 learning. Moreover, they need to be mindful of the potential challenges in multilingual classrooms and provide appropriate support and resources to help learners overcome them.

The benefits of using first language (l1) in second language (l2) learning

Many scholars found that the first language is not detrimental to English language learners' learning but, to some extent, can contribute the second language acquisition (e.g., Al Masaeed 2016, Brooks-Lewis 2009, Bruen & Kelly 2014, Edstrom 2006, Kim & Elder 2005, Littlewood & Yu 2011, Macaro 2009). For example, Swain and Lapkin (2000) argue that students using their first language in the French immersion program is not for naught. The purposes of using the first language for second language learners are:

> To understand and make sense of the requirements and content of the task, to focus attention on language form, vocabulary use, and overall organization, and to establish the tone and nature of their collaboration (p. 268).

Based on their research, they argue that "judicious use of the L1 can indeed support L2 learning and use" (p. 269). Cook made a similar argument in 2003. However, Turnbull disagreed with this argument and believed that if teachers rely too extensively on the first language, the use of the second language may decrease dramatically. Cummins (2007) summarized the three inter-related monolingual instructional assumptions

> 1) Instruction should be carried out exclusively in the target language without recourse to students' L1; 2) Translation between L1 and L2 has no place in the teaching of language or literacy; and 3) Within immersion and bilingual programs, the two languages should be kept rigidly separate (p. 222-223).

Cummins (2007) explained that these assumptions are referred to 'monolingual principle,' which highlights the use of the target language and minimizes the use of the first language. Such a way of thinking is embedded in the *direct method* and audiolingual approaches to language teaching. These two pedagogies are dominant language teaching pedagogies. Cummins (2007) concluded:

> … Students' L1 is not the enemy in promoting high levels of L2 proficiency; rather, when students' L1 is invoked as a cognitive and linguistic resource through bilingual instructional strategies, it can function as a steppingstone to scaffold more accomplished performance in the L2. (p. 238).

Jim Cummins, an expert in this area from the University of Toronto, strove to promote, not ignore, the importance of the first language in second language learning. His close collaboration with teachers and practitioners provided many cases showing how the first language contributes to the learning of the second language (e.g., Cummins 2001, Cummins et al. 2005, Cummins et al. 2015).

Other scholars also engaged in this academic dialogue to support the first language use in English language learning. They argue that the use of L1 in English language learning can: 1) foster communication in the classroom and enhance the student-teacher relationship (Harbord 1992, Mart 2013, Harmer 2007) and 2) greatly contribute to students' English language learning (Mohebbi & Alavi 2014, Bozorgian & Fallahpour 2015). However, some studies showed that using L1 is like a double-edged sword. For example, Varshney and Lanziti (2006) revealed that using L1 could reduce students' anxiety

in learning English; however, it can also lead to fewer opportunities to use the target language. Carson has supported such sentiment, and Kashihara's (2012) and Manara (2007)'s studies.

Although many scholars have conducted studies to support L1 use in English language learning, there is nonetheless evidence of negative reports on L1 use. For example, Turnbull (2001) believed that L1 in the L2 classroom could, to some extent, negatively impact the L2 learning process by reducing students of L2 input. Another important argument was that excessive L1 use was detrimental to students' L2 learning (Atkinson 1987, Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie 2008). Harbord (1992), who believed that L1 could enhance L2 teaching, thought that L1 should not be considered "a device to be used to save time for more useful activities, nor to make life easier for the teacher of the students" (p. 355).

Contextualizing the study

In 2016, Chenkai proposed a program called learning English through the arts to the university's English language improvement center director. The English Language improvement center's program was designed for international students who want to further their studies at the University. Normally, these students do not have enough English language skills. The University provided them with opportunities to horn their English language skills. Once they complete this program, they will be issued a certificate showing they already master enough English skills for undergraduate or graduate-level study. Chenkai proposed this idea to his master's supervisor and worked with the center's director to design the program's curriculum of learning English with the arts. More information about this program has been published in the ERL Journal Volume 2020-2(4).

Methodology

This qualitative study is to report an activity designed in the Learning English through the Arts program to explore the L1 use in an L2 class at a Canadian University English Language Improvement Center. Therefore, the purpose of this study is not to prove the effectiveness of L1 in L2 learning quantitatively; rather, it reported the detailed accounts and observation notes in a specific language program to understand how L1 impact L2 learning qualitatively.

There are 5 participants in my project. The below table shows their demographic information

Name	Home country	Sex	Major
Participant 1	China	Female	Accounting
Participant 2	China	Female	Education
Participant 3	Kazakhstan	Female	Earth Science
Participant 4	Saudi Arabic	Male	Criminology
Participant 5	India	Male	Engineering

I (Chenkai) designed an activity called "Introducing your home culture using your native language." Students needed to use their first language to introduce their home culture to their class peers. Before this lesson, students had taken the first session of this program, "Learning English through the Arts," and had known each other.

Findings
Class observation findings

Students were encouraged to introduce their home culture in their first language. Then, students from other countries needed to guess and explain what the student was introducing in English. Based on my participant observation notes, participants highly involved in this activity:

When I prepared for this session, I doubted whether students would be interested in this activity. When I gave students instructions for this activity, they became excited. Participant 1 from China wrote a Chinese poem on the blackboard and acted up the poem. The contents of the poem are 十年生死两茫茫，不思量，自难忘 ². She asked other students to guess the meaning. Participant 3 raised her hands, saying that she did not know the meaning of this poem, but she could feel that this poem was about love and homesickness. Next, participant 2 from China played a song named 龙的传人, the descendants of the dragon. Participant 5 quickly said that this song is about culture and patriotism because he saw a dragon in the video. Participant 3 from Kazakhstan shared a story in her language. She told the story quietly and slowly. After telling the story, participant 1 said that this story was sad. Participant 3 said this was a tragic love story. Next, participant 4 brought a teapot and shared his experiences with the teapot when he was in Saudi Arabic in his first language. Other students tasted his tea and guessed the story. Students even started to talk with others. Finally, participant 5 from India told his experiences working in a restaurant in India in his first language. This time, no one can guess the meaning. Participant 5 then draw the story on the whiteboard. The learning environment is inclusive. I, as the instructor, felt that students became more willing to participate in the class. When students used their first language to introduce themselves, they were initially shy, but when other students started to guess the meaning, the presenter became confident and willing to share (Chenkai, Fieldnotes, 20170321)

In this activity, it was interesting that students were more willing to talk and write when multimodal communication ways were incorporated. For example, when Chenkai asked students to share their home culture by verbally introducing simply without multimedia support, only one student stood up and spoke about his home culture. Therefore, Chenkai, as the instructor, decided to invite students to use multimodal ways of presentation, such as music and poems. Then, students became more willing to share their thoughts and experiences.

Follow-up interview findings

After this activity, I had follow-up interviews with these participants. I chose some quotes from the participants.

Participant 1: I never thought you could allow me to use Chinese in the session. It is my first time that I can use Chinese to learn English. It is so fun and interesting. I like this way.

Participant 2: I enjoy this activity and am willing to share Chinese culture with them. Other students asked me in English, and then I used English to communicate with them. It is a great experience for me.

Participant 3: I have to say that I experienced high pressure because I am pregnant. There is only me in the rented apartment. This activity helped me to speak in my most familiar language, which made me very happy. Also, I want to introduce this story to my classmates.

Participant 4: I felt our relationship became closer when I shared Arabic tea with other students. They enjoy listening to me introduce this teapot's story in my first language. I practiced my English when I explained to them the meaning. I like this learning environment.

Participant 5: I believe that at that moment, I was welcomed. Everyone enjoyed listening to my story. Although they could not understand what I said the first time, they could still say a few words based on my facial expression and body language. I love this activity.

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² The meaning of the poem: Ten years, dead and living dim and draw apart. I do not try to remember but forgetting is hard.

Discussion

These students are from different countries and cultures. They speak different languages and have different life values. It is challenging to have a session like this. Chenkai, as the instructor, appreciated integrating their first language into their English Language learning. Based on the story, we believe that allowing English language learners to use their first language in the classroom, to some extent, eases their learning stress and provides a good opportunity to establish a good rapport with other students. All findings align with the previous studies (e.g., Harbord 1992, Mart 2013, Harmer 2007, Mohebbi & Alavi 2014, Bozorgian & Fallahpour 2015). In addition, our study also showcases the importance of the first language in second language learning, which corresponds to Swain and Lapkin's (2000), Cook's (2003), and Cummins (2000)'s arguments.

However, it is noted that the use of the first language in second language learning should be balanced (Harbord 1992, Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002). Teachers should prepare carefully before first language related activities are implemented. Furthermore, based on the findings, home culture sharing is an effective activity where students can bring their cultural identities in this activity. It is also noted that L1 can, to some extent, engage students' L2 learning, but we noticed that simple integration of L1 in L2 learning was hard to engage students. In this activity, Chenkai encouraged students to use multimodal ways of presentation. For example, in the observational notes, students with multimodal ways of presentations, such as videos, drawings, and poems, were more engaged in the activity compared to students without multimedia support. This result resonated with Chi and Sefton's study (2021), focusing on integrating arts into language learning.

In terms of multimodal communication, we want to bring two important trends into this discussion: Gamification and Mobile Apps. Zuocheng, whose research interest is using games to facilitate English language learners' English learning, shared his thoughts. The integration of games in second language acquisition yields various advantages. For example, games help second language (L2) learners to improve their cognitive abilities and enhance their active learning (Chun & Ho 2010, Nguyen 2020, Poole & Clark – Midura 2020). Furthermore, video games help to enhance English vocabulary instruction compared to teacher-centered traditional instructional approaches (Henry 2013, Rasti & Vadat 2013). Henry (2013) then argued that video games help language learners increase their motivation to accelerate language learning. In addition, Wang and Han (2021) argued that video games positively impact learners' improvement of complexity, accuracy, and fluency in the English language learners. We believe that gamification is a widely recognizable phenomenon in education. Many games have been implemented in students' learning, including English language learners. We think that this trend is unavoidable with the advancement of technology. However, we also noticed that many companies designed games to make profits as their utmost goal. We advocated that educators should also be involved in designing games for students.

Yuhan Xiang, whose expertise is computer science, brings in another important application: Mobile Apps. Learning English through mobile devices and applications is common worldwide. In China, mobile apps are widely used by English Language learners. We think that schools with many Asian immigrants can consider using some of the apps to facilitate their English language learning. Kang and Lin (2019) compared the four popular mobile English learning Apps in China: 1) Youdao Dictionary (有道词典), 2) Shanbay Vocabulary (扇贝单词), 3) Qupeiyin (dubbing, 趣配音), and 4) Liulishuo (English speaking流利说). Wang and Christiansen used mix-method to explore the learning experiences of older Chinese adults using free and popular English learning mobile apps such as Baicizhan (百词斩) and Liulishuo (流利说). The results show that apps can greatly contribute to older Chinese adults' English language learning. However, more support and guidance should be provided during their learning process. Furthermore, Chinese university students show a higher acceptance rate of using mobile apps

to support English language learning, which has been supported by Zou, Yan, and Li (2020), Zhu (2018), and Li, J., Li, S., and Li, Y's (2016) research.

This study reported the results of using L1 in the L2 classroom at a Canadian university. Based on the results of this study, we also bring in two important discussions associated with multimodal learning methods for English language learners. Learning a new language is a complex process that requires a multifaceted approach. While many people view language learning as simply memorizing vocabulary words and grammar rules, the reality is much more nuanced and complex. To truly understand language learning, it is important to consider a variety of perspectives. It is important to consider a multifaceted approach to language learning. By considering multiple perspectives and taking a holistic approach, language teachers and learners can better understand the complexities of language learning and develop effective strategies for success. Therefore, we hope in the future study, we can work on the two trendy topics and aim for publication in this journal.

Conclusion

This qualitative study reported an activity designed in the Learning English through the Arts program to explore the L1 use in a Canadian University English Language Improvement Center. The results showed that 1) L1 can, to some extent, facilitate students' L2 learning; 2) home culture sharing is an effective activity when teachers consider integrating L1 in L2 class, and 3) multimodal ways of presentation is crucial in this activity. This study's results echoed many scholars' sentiments. Few studies have been conducted in Canadian contexts. This study filled this gap. This study can provide insights for English language teachers who want to integrate L1 into L2 classes. In addition, for teacher educators, this study can also offer suggestions for teacher education programs with an increasing need to develop competent teachers to support English language learners in a diverse learning environment.

Acknowledgement

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