



The target language revisited

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Student teachers receive mixed messages about use of the target language (TL).
- Student teachers fall into line with the TL practice of school colleagues.
- Student teachers' mentors are a major influence on their TL use.
- Behaviour management, examinations and inspection are key concerns.
- A research informed, agreed TL policy is overdue.

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study on the use of the target language (TL) in foreign language classrooms, drawing on the perspectives of student teachers and practising teachers. Observational and group discussion data showed that TL use was not extensive. While student teachers and practising teachers shared a commitment to using the TL, this was undermined by several factors, notably inconsistencies between university and school positions on TL use, challenging classes, external inspection and examinations. Lack of coherence between student teachers' experiences at university and in schools has implications not only for languages but also other subjects in teacher preparation.

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1. Introduction

In the course of the last few years, colleagues responsible for University X's¹ Modern Foreign Languages² teacher preparation course have identified a diminution in our student teachers' use of the target language³ (TL) in their teaching whilst on school placements. This is happening against a background of our promoting on our course the benefits of optimising⁴ use of the TL (Macaro, 2001),

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¹ University X is UK-based.

² The languages offered on the course are French, German and Spanish. English is not the foreign language in this article.

³ It was decided to use the term 'target language' because of its currency and in spite of Hall and Cook's (2012) concerns about its "unfortunate military overtones" (p. 274) and their preference for "new language". Our students are placed in schools where English is the language of instruction. The TLs referred to here are French, German and Spanish.

⁴ Macaro's 'optimal position' acknowledges that judicious L1 use can enhance TL learning. This contrasts with the 'maximal position' where if teachers use the L1, they feel guilty about doing so.

whilst recognising the challenges of differing teaching contexts. We endeavour to enhance our student teachers' confidence and competence by providing language support classes and collaborating with our school-based colleagues in training sessions.

In the context of schools in England, the Ofsted⁵ report on foreign languages provision (2011) was critical of teaching and learning in general and teachers' and pupils' use of the TL in particular: '... the use of the TL was too limited, so that pupils heard less than they might have, and did not practise the language sufficiently.' (p. 12).

The purpose of this study was therefore to gain greater understanding, from the student teachers' and practising teachers' perspectives, of the reasons why the TL was not used more extensively.

⁵ Ofsted – The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills inspects and regulates services which care for children and young people, and those providing education and skills for learners of all ages. It reports directly to Parliament. Inspection findings are accessible to all and are often widely published in the media.

2. What can be learned from the literature?

The literature which informs this article confirms that use of the TL in languages classrooms is not a challenge unique to the UK. Research carried out in locations as diverse as the Far East (Carless, 2007; in Hong Kong), the Middle East (Vaezi & Mirzaei, 2007 in Iran), North America (Cook, 2001; in Canada; Bateman, 2008; Levine 2003 in the USA), New Zealand (Kim & Elder, 2008) and other parts of Europe (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; in Cyprus; Djurić, 2008 in Slovenia; Butzkamm, 2003; in Germany) reflect similar problems in spite of differing contexts.

Macaro's (2010) review of policy guidance on the TL over the last 20 years in England reflects a gradually diminishing priority given to the TL. More internationally, the literature of the last decade on FL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching confirms much greater acceptance of the place of the learner's own language (L1),⁶ as a real support to the enhancement of FL learning (Butzkamm 2003; Carless, 2007; Copland & Neokleous, 2011). Turnbull and Arnett's (2002) comprehensive review of the TL versus L1 literature suggests that empirical evidence to inform policy and teaching decisions is lacking. Research has tended to look into the practice, attitudes and beliefs of practising teachers rather than student teachers (for exceptions, see Bateman, 2008 and, in relation to a study based in Israel, Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2005).

2.1. Arguments for (near) TL exclusivity

The argument most commonly made for the dominance of the TL in the FL classroom relates to pupil exposure to rich comprehensible input (Cullen, 1998; Ellis, 1984; Krashen, 1982; Long, 1996), especially in those contexts where the TL speaking community is not easily accessible. Using the TL can motivate learners to see its usefulness. They may experience a feeling of success immediately rather than waiting for some future time (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). Exposure to the TL provides opportunities for consolidation of known vocabulary and the introduction of unknown vocabulary, for practice in pronunciation and intonation, with which L1 can interfere, if used injudiciously (Cook, 2001; Kieu, 2010).

Whilst the teacher serves as the source of TL input, this is only part of her/his TL role. S/he must also provide pupils with meaningful opportunities to participate in communicative interaction (Kim and Elder, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Pica 2000), if learning is to be optimised. Macaro (2001) sees this as a key consideration: 'The over-arching pedagogical tool should, therefore, be learners' use of the TL, not teacher use of the TL' (p. 184).

2.2. The place of L1 in the foreign languages classroom⁷

From the Vietnamese context, Kieu (2010), referring to studies supporting the use of L1, such as Miles (2004) and Vaezi and Mirzaei (2007), concludes that the "mother tongue, if used purposefully and systematically, can have a constructive role in teaching other languages" (p. 122). Macaro (2006) suggests that L1 use can reduce the burden on learners' memory and therefore make cognitive processing easier. It is important, therefore, that careful consideration is given to when the L1 might be used, when

the TL is used and how the TL input might be tailored to suit the competence of the learners (Bateman, 2008; Wong-Fillmore, 1985).

Cook (2010), in his work on the place of translation as a language learning tool, underlines how languages relate to each other, as opposed to operating in separate compartments. In the FL learning classroom, L1 use can "offer psychological and social support for minority children and provide a much needed continuity between home and school environment" (p. 47). Pachler and Field (2001) suggest that some pupils, in the absence of L1 support, may even feel alienated from the learning process.

Meiring and Norman (2002) refer to the value of use of L1 in relation to language awareness (see Carless 2007; Deller & Rinvulucry, 2002) and cultural awareness, both important aspects of the languages learning experience. Researching in Canada, Cook (2001) sees the L1 as providing "the 'scaffolding' support that the learners need to build up the L2" (p. 6). He believes it is unhelpful for teachers to be made to feel guilty about the lack of TL use in their classrooms but rather that they should be supported in implementing a methodology where use of L1 is 'not incompatible with use of the foreign language' (p. 1). He exploits Vygotskian-style research (eg Tomasello, 1999) and the theory of cultural learning to support this view. He refers to efficiency, the quality of learning, 'naturalness' (ie enabling pupils to feel comfortable in the way they learn) and external relevance (ie how pupils might use languages beyond the classroom).

Macaro (2001) recommends the development of a research-informed framework to support teachers in making judgements on when L1 is appropriate, so that they do not simply take what they perceive as the easy option in their interactions with pupils in the classroom. Edstrom (2006: 289) argues that "thoughtful [and] honest self-analysis" should inform "judicious" use of the L1, as opposed to ad hoc "purposeless" or "lazy" use.

2.3. Impediments to use of the TL in the classroom

Evidence (eg Bateman, 2008; Kim & Elder, 2008) suggests that teachers and student teachers generally agree with the principles underpinning the judicious use of the TL and want to use it in their teaching but find that the reality within and beyond the classroom impacts negatively on their TL intentions.

From a societal point of view, teachers may find the perceived status of the TL (Macaro, 2001) to be an impediment. Kim and Elder (2008) conducted their research in New Zealand and found that the status of FL study was low; FL learning was not compulsory beyond the age of 14; the time allocated to FL on most school timetables was limited; there was limited access to the communities of the languages taught. These contextual factors were identified by the teacher respondents as posing a particular challenge in terms of extensive use of the TL, given the consequent attitude to languages which some learners brought from the outside into lessons.

Within the context of the school, Kim and Elder (2008) identify pupil- and teacher-related factors which combine to determine the teacher's decision to use either TL or L1 in lessons. Pupil-specific factors include their level of ability and the range of ability within the same class. In mixed ability settings, using the TL may be a challenge too far in the face of the other challenges of differentiation. Pupils' motivation to learn the TL and their attitude to it, the mind-set which they bring to the lesson are key influences.

Teacher-specific influences include a lack of competence and confidence in relation to TL use. Some researchers (eg Bateman, 2008; Elder 1994) suggest that this is particularly the case with non-native speakers of the language. Others (eg Polio & Duff, 1994), however, have found little to support a distinction between native and non-native speakers' use of the TL in lessons. The impact of other perceived impediments can lead to native speakers resorting

⁶ It was decided to use this term, given its widespread use, in spite of the valid arguments against it (and for "own language", Hall and Cook, 2012: 274) in relation to the L1 not necessarily being the 'first' or 'native' language of the learners in the class, most of which have representation from various countries and cultures.

⁷ For a comprehensive review of the importance of L1 in FL learning, "compound bilingualism", "co-ordinate bilingualism" and "contrastive analysis", see Hall and Cook (2012).

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