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# L1 use among young EFL mainstream and CLIL learners in task-supported interaction

María del Pilar García Mayo\*, María de los Ángeles Hidalgo

University of the Basque Country, Paseo de la Universidad 5, 01006 Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

A growing body of research suggests that a balanced use of the first language (L1) in the foreign language classroom yields beneficial effects for second language (L2) learning. Still, the extent to which young learners in foreign language contexts actually make use of their L1 while completing tasks is in need of further research, especially in an approach that has become prevalent in Europe: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The current longitudinal study analyzes the oral interactions of 32 young Spanish learners (ages 8–10) when performing a communicative task twice in two consecutive academic years. We have analyzed the learners' L1 use and the functions it serves, the differences between two foreign language instructional settings (mainstream foreign language lessons and CLIL) and the changes over a year. Our findings confirmed the facilitative role of the L1 which mainly served to assist learners as they coped with unknown vocabulary. CLIL learners used their L1 significantly less than mainstream learners, and, interestingly, the L1 was more frequently used the second time the learners carried out the task. The findings shed light on the facilitative role of the L1 for task completion by young learners in foreign language settings.

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## 1. Introduction

Numerous studies to date illustrate the benefits of a balanced use of the first language (L1) when learning a second language (L2). [Macaro \(2005\)](#) described the use of the L1 in the foreign language (FL) classroom as “natural” because it can be used as a tool “to compensate for lack of linguistic knowledge” (p. 67). In a recent study on teenage students' perceptions of L1 use in Cyprus, [Neokleous \(2016\)](#) showed that learners perceived their shared language as beneficial for FL learning. Specifically, the L1 was seen as a valuable resource to solve comprehension difficulties and to cultivate a positive classroom atmosphere. Additionally, the L1 afforded the learners the self-confidence to actively participate in classroom activities.

Although different studies have shown that L1 use is limited and serves functions that facilitate task completion ([Storch & Aldosari, 2010](#)), some teachers in FL contexts are concerned about learners resorting to their shared L1 when engaged in communicative tasks ([Brooks & Donato, 1994](#); [Carless, 2008](#); [Tognini & Oliver, 2012](#)). The facilitative role of the L1 has been reported particularly in communicative tasks and with adult low proficiency learners in FL classrooms ([Alegria de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009](#); [Moore, 2013](#); [Scott & De la Fuente, 2008](#)). Moreover, several studies claim that L1 use varies as a function of age and proficiency, suggesting that the higher the proficiency, the lower the amount of L1 use ([Storch & Aldosari, 2010](#);

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [mariapilar.garciamayo@ehu.es](mailto:mariapilar.garciamayo@ehu.es) (M.P. García Mayo), [mariadelosangeles.hidalgo@ehu.es](mailto:mariadelosangeles.hidalgo@ehu.es) (M.Á. Hidalgo).

Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). However, recent findings in English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) contexts suggest that this connection may be more complex than first assumed and that other variables such as learner motivation, task complexity, task repetition, or instructional setting might affect L1 use (García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015; Lázaro Ibarrola & Azpilicueta Martínez, 2015).

Despite the existing literature, comparatively little research has been conducted with young EFL learners, a surprising fact considering the increasing number of FL programs for children (Enever, 2011). This growing international trend that sees the establishing of bilingual programs at the primary level can be attributed in part to the perceived success of French immersion in Canada (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). Research has shown that these programs promote greater L2 proficiency and more advanced literacy skills than traditional teaching approaches. Studies in FL settings, where language learners have limited access to the target language (TL) outside the classroom and reduced opportunities to interact compared to learners in Second Language (SL) settings (Philp & Tognini, 2009), suggest that the instructional context, rather than age, may constitute the determining factor underlying the success of these programs (Murphy, 2014; Muñoz, 2006).

The goal of the current study is to analyze the L1 use of 32 young EFL learners while they complete a communicative task in two school years and in two distinct instructional settings: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Dalton-Puffer, 2011) and mainstream FL lessons. Specifically, we will try to determine whether the use of the L1 as well as the functions it serves evolve over time and explore the potential relationship between any observed changes and the instructional setting.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Interaction and young learners

Research has demonstrated the beneficial effects of interaction on L2 acquisition (García Mayo & Alcón Soler, 2013; Mackey, 2007; Mackey, Abbuhl, & Gass, 2012; Pica, 2013). Interaction fosters opportunities for negotiation of meaning, providing learners with comprehensible input and feedback on their production, as well as with occasions in which they need to modify their output in order to make themselves understood, a process which is believed to facilitate L2 acquisition (Long, 1996; Mackey, Kanganas, & Oliver, 2007; Oliver & Mackey, 2003; Oliver, 1998, 2009).

Accordingly, a wealth of studies has explored the different learning variables that promote interaction such as task type or student pairing. Moreover, as individual learner differences affect distinct aspects of language acquisition, the learner's age is believed to have significant effects on L2 learning (Mackey, Oliver, & Leeman, 2003; Oliver, 2009). Still, most research on interaction has addressed adult L2 populations, leading to findings that cannot be extended to young learners (henceforth YLs) without further analysis of the performance of members of this cohort.

Studies dealing with YLs are becoming more numerous, and the contexts in which this research is being carried out are more varied, including not only SL settings but also FL learning contexts (García Mayo, 2017; Butler & Zeng, 2014; Nikolov, 2009; Nikolov & Mihaljevic-Djigunović, 2011). Still, research dealing with child L2 interaction remains relatively scant when compared with that focused on adults (García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015; Butler & Zeng, 2014; Gagné & Parks, 2013; Mackey & Oliver, 2002; Oliver, 2009; Pinter, 2007).

The results from existing research on YLs have revealed that children in both SL and FL contexts benefit linguistically from opportunities to interact, both with native speakers and fellow language learners, whether adults or children (Oliver, 1998, 2009; Philp & Duchesne, 2008). When YLs have been compared to adult learners, it has been reported that, even though children are able to interact and engage in conversation cooperatively and make use of all the negotiation strategies identified in adult studies, they do so to a lesser degree and rarely use comprehension checks (Oliver, 1998, 2009; Pinter, 2006). Moreover, Pinter (2006) maintains that children and adults understand and complete tasks in different ways; while adult learners seem to have more efficient task-related strategies at their disposal, children do not follow an apparent order and use less time and language to complete the task.

### 2.2. Learning context

The context in which the learning of an L2 takes place is an important aspect to be considered. Although the internal (i.e., cognitive processes) and external (i.e., positive/negative input and output) factors that regulate language learning are present in both SL and FL contexts, there continue to be important differences between the two settings. FL contexts have been defined as 'low input contexts', as opposed to 'high input' SL settings, where learners are exposed to large amounts of input (Pinter, 2011). Conventionally, in an FL setting the TL is not the L1 in the country or region in question and is therefore not generally used as a means of communication by the local community, the media or the government or as the medium of instruction in schools. Contrasting YLs' performance in FL and SL settings, the main finding in interaction research has been that, although young FL learners are also capable of interacting and negotiating for meaning, they negotiate to a lesser extent than their SL counterparts (García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015; Lázaro Ibarrola & Azpilicueta Martínez, 2015).

In Europe, two primary educational approaches coexist: traditional, mainstream (henceforth MS) schooling in which all subjects are taught in the official language of the community and FLs are included as a separate subject, and CLIL, a form of education (Nikula, Dafouz, Moore, & Smit, 2016) that emerged as a possible solution to the shortcomings often associated with

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