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# Chinese learners' perceptions towards teachers' language use in lexical explanations: A comparison between Chinese-only and English-only instructions

Lili Tian<sup>a,\*</sup>, Mairin Hennebry<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Renmin University of China, 59# Zhongguancun Street, Haidian District, Beijing 100872, PR China<sup>b</sup> Division of English Language Education, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Meng Wah 658, Pok Fu Lam Road, Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Chinese learners' contextualized perceptions of and preferences towards teachers' language use for explaining unknown lexical items, and compares the perceptions of 68 Chinese university students in the context of English-only versus Chinese-only lexical explanations. A questionnaire was administered to students to investigate their general language use preferences. 36 follow-up interviews were also conducted in order to examine students' perceptions in the context of more specific lexical explanations. While questionnaire responses suggested that a majority of students held positive attitude towards both types of explanations, interview data indicated more negative perceptions towards the lexical explanations they received. The perceived distinctions of learners towards the use of English and the use of Chinese as teachers' language choices for lexical explanations were uncovered with regard to the learning of lexis. The paper discusses the implications of the study for classroom practice specifically in the area of lexical explanations and situates the discussion in the broader context of the debate around L1 use in the L2 classroom.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years the field of Second Language (L2) learning has experienced a pendulum swing from the promotion of exclusive L2 use in the classroom to, arguably, an 'anything goes' stance in terms of the use of L1. Indeed, it is difficult to find recent studies arguing that the use of L1 in the L2 classroom might not be altogether beneficial for L2 learning. In a recent paper, [Macaro \(2015\)](#) argued that teachers' use of L1 in today's classrooms has become characterized by the use of L1 as a shortcut to exams; namely he explained that teachers typically use the L1 as a faster means of covering all the material that needs to be covered in preparation for exams, rather than due to any specific pedagogical principle. Arguably this results in teachers engaging with L1 use practices that are based not on sound theory and research evidence for effective learning, but instead shaped by a wash-back effect of examinations. In this context there is a need for more nuanced understandings of how teachers might use L1 in a principled manner. One way of contributing to this aim is to focus attention on a specific area for which L1 might typically be used, namely lexical explanations (see [Tian, 2014](#)), looking particularly at how teachers explain unfamiliar lexical items (see for instance, [Macaro & Tian, 2015](#)) and on how learners perceive teachers' L1 use.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [lili.tian@ruc.edu.cn](mailto:lili.tian@ruc.edu.cn) (L. Tian), [mhennebr@hku.hk](mailto:mhennebr@hku.hk) (M. Hennebry).

Teachers' L1 use in L2 classrooms has been a major focus of L2 researchers across a variety of contexts, but few studies have examined learners' perceptions towards teachers' language use (e.g. Levine, 2003). Furthermore, previous studies have for the most part gathered data on general perceptions not contextualized in specific practices, allowing only general implications to be drawn. Given the acknowledged significance of context in shaping perceptions and attitudes, studies focusing on learners' perceptions of teachers' specific lexical explanation behavior have the potential to yield a more fine-grained understanding of the way in which students react to teachers' practices, allowing focused reflection on factors contributing to effective teaching and learning of lexis.

This paper, part of a broader experimental study (Tian & Macaro, 2012), focuses on Chinese learners in an EFL university context and their perceptions of teachers' use of L1, specifically in offering lexical explanations for unknown lexical items. A comparison of perceptions is drawn between instances when learners are provided with an English-only explanation and those where a Chinese-only explanation is offered. Compared with the classroom context where a mixture of both L1 and L2 lexical explanations are relatively less employed by some teachers due to limited class time (Macaro & Tian, 2015), such a contextualized comparison enables researchers to elicit much clearer perceptions of learners. The reported benefits and problems of English and Chinese lexical explanations are presented and illustrated in depth.

## 2. Research background

In the 1980s, the exclusive use of L2 and more specifically immersion language environments have been deemed facilitative for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). However, as studies on L1 use and codeswitching (CS) in L2 classrooms proliferate, the role of L1 has been increasingly advocated, with L1 seen to serve as a scaffolding strategy in constructing collaborative dialogue (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998), as mediation between an L2 word and its concept (Kroll & Stewart, 1994), as a compensatory strategy for lexical gaps (Ong & Zhang, 2010; Zhang, 2002), as a tool for offering lexical and grammatical explanations (Levine, 2003), and as a medium through which to build rapport (Gao & Dai, 2007).

Initial results from studies probing into the effects of L1 use on L2 learners' learning outcomes suggest mixed results. Some studies indicate at least some short-term acquisitional benefit to be gained from L1 rather than L2 lexical explanations (e.g. Hennebry, Rogers, Macaro, & Murphy, 2013; Lee & Macaro, 2013). However, in an experimental study of 65 adult Chinese learners of English, Zhang (2002) found that Chinese L1 students who used mother tongue morphological knowledge in the retention and retrieval of English lexicon experienced less success than those who used target language morphological knowledge. Thus, further research is needed to unpack and explain the complex nature of interactions between the L1 and the L2 in the process of language learning. A key aspect of this interaction is the learners' perceptions of their teachers' lexical explanations and specifically the teachers' code choice in providing the explanations. Where research has placed an emphasis on describing the amount and functions of L1 use, it needs also to specifically explore the perspective of the learner, as a key player in the teaching and learning process, on their teachers' specific code choice.

Previous studies have explored learners' general perceptions towards teachers' language use. In a questionnaire study conducted within a multilingual classroom, Duff & Polio (1990) found that the majority of American university students held positive attitudes towards their teachers' language use proportions, despite the fact that the teacher's L1 use ranged from 0 to 90%. In addition, in every class, over 70% of the students claimed to understand "most" or "all" of the teacher's L2 use. Arguably, these results might be interpreted to indicate that the amount of L1 use may not be the deciding factor for students, rather the effectiveness of L1 use in allowing students to understand and keep up with the content of the lesson is of greater significance. Indeed this is supported by Macaro's (1997) large-scale study on language use in the UK classroom context. The study examined learners' perspectives on their teachers' L1 use through questionnaire and focus group interviews. The majority of participants in this study reported needing their teachers to speak the L1 sometimes in order to facilitate understanding, with many adding that they could not learn if they could not understand their teacher. Levine (2003), however, found that students who reported higher TL use in their FL classes actually tended to report lower levels of anxiety about TL use, presumably because the exposure allowed the L2 to become a familiar phenomenon to the students, thus lowering the potential sense of inhibition learners often experience when using the L2. Such findings support calls for a deeper understanding of what might constitute principled use of L1 that facilitates understanding on the one hand but provides sufficient L2 exposure on the other.

In Chinese contexts, the following studies examined the general perceptions of Chinese university undergraduates towards teachers' L1 use. Kong & Zhang (2005), for example, found that of the 20%–35% of talk in the class that was teacher talk, 2%–5% was in the L1 (Chinese); a proportion with which over 70% of students expressed satisfaction. Examining the L1 use of four teachers, Zhong (2007) found greater variability in the amount of English used, ranging between 57% and 87%. Nevertheless, 88% of the students were satisfied with the proportion of teacher's current English/Chinese use, with students citing reasons such as L1 helping establish their confidence, making them feel relaxed, encouraging them to greater participation in classroom activities and generally supporting their L2 learning. Given the fact that in both studies, students expressed satisfaction with their teachers' use of L1 despite the considerable differences, there is reason to hypothesize that what is more significant to students is the effectiveness and function of L1 use, rather than the amount. Through stimulated recall interviews, Guo (2007) investigated students' perceptions of their teachers' L1 use. 12 of the 16 Chinese non-English-major undergraduates interviewed reported positive attitudes towards the use of L1 in the English classroom, explaining that for them L2 exclusivity destroyed their confidence, making them feel deprived and helpless and leaving them craving for meaning and clarity. However, the remaining four students expressed negative opinions towards teachers' L1 use. While

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