

# A Research of Chinese Teacher's First Language Use on Ideological, Political Education in College-level English Classroom Teaching

Qu Jiangli<sup>1</sup>, Zhou Shuang<sup>2</sup> and Bai Xiaoge<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

<sup>3</sup>Library, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

## Project Title:

1. A Study on the Ideological and Political Model of "Three Integrated Cultivation" of College English from the Perspective of Ideological and political Education in the New Era(守好学科责任田---新时代思政视域下大学英语“三全育人”思政模式研究 2021 年度陕西省外语专项课题研究项目 2021ND0649)
2. Keep the Field of Discipline Responsibility -- A Study on the Media Integration Mode of "Three Integrated Cultivation" of Party member teachers from the Perspective of Ideological and Political Education (守好学科责任田---新时代思政视域下教师党员“三全育人”媒体融合模式研究 2021 年西北工业大学党建研究基金项目 DJY202115 )

Published: 30 April 2022

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**Abstract**

*It has been a heated discussion on whether first language (L1) should be used in the second language (L2) classroom since the 1980s. While in the reform process of the "curriculum ideological, political education" in China, a new issue has been noticed, that is L1 or L2 which is more effective? Based on theoretical and empirical evidence, this paper aims to prove that in L2 teaching at college-level, the use of L1 in some extend and context is necessary and helpful.*

**Key Words:** first language, second language, curriculum ideological, political education

**Background**

Since the 1980s, the issue of first language (L1) use in the second language (L2) classroom has drawn great attention in teaching field. Many theoretical and empirical studies have been carried out and fruitful results have come into being. Then why do teachers and students use L1 in classroom? Which language is more appropriate in ideological, political related context? All these questions have been under heated discussion for teachers and researchers.

Just as Nunan(1991) points out, teacher talk is of great importance. The reason why it is important for the organization and management of the classroom is that through language that teachers either succeed or fail to implement their teaching plans. It's also essential in the processes of students' acquisition, because it may be the only major source for them to learn the targeted language.

The current study is undertaken during the national reform process of the "curriculum ideological, political education" in Chinese education, the basic purpose of which is to make the political civilization functional in all courses. Under this national guidance in 2018, the effectiveness of ideological and political education in colleges are being reinforced, all courses are supposed to work in the same direction and resonate at the same frequency.

In the study, teachers and students are observed in English teaching process, after which a survey was carried out and two questionnaires were done for teachers and students respectively.

To discover the truth about language use in the L2 classroom at the college level in China, some relevant research questions are covered in this research, just like for teachers: How often is the L1 used in the college-level English classroom? When the content is ideological and political related, L1 or L2 which is more appropriate? What are the functions of L1 use in the classroom? etc. While in students' questionnaire, questions are as follows: When do teachers use L1 in the classroom? What are the possible factors affecting L1 use in students' discussion activity? When the content is ideological and political related, L1 or L2 which is more impressive? etc.

## Theories

As we all know that teacher talk is very important because it is probably the major and sometimes the only source of comprehensible target language input the learner is likely to receive. But it is a popular belief that L1 use has negative effects on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). That is, the L1 interferes with SLA, for the features of the L1 are transferred into L2, causing confusion or errors. Sometimes we even regard SLA as a process of getting rid of L1 influence. (Rod Ellis, 1985).

Some theorists and researchers have the idea that teaching without any L1 use throughout the entire classroom time could make the L2 real, which allows learners to experience in the real situation and also develop their own language system.

Although many researchers and theorists hold the opinion that exclusive use of the L2 is essential, the reality is here and has to be faced: "For many nonnative teachers whose own exposure is quite limited, it may be unreasonable to expect the exclusive use of the L2 in the classroom.( Polio & Duff, 1994:315)"

In the discussion of mother tongue use in SLA, Atkinson (1987:422) offers three reasons for allowing proper use of L1 in the classroom. It is a "learner-preferred strategy. Given the opportunity, learners (F.Chambers, 1991; Halliwell&Jones, 1991; Macdonald, 1993) will choose to translate without encouragement from the teacher." It is a "humanistic approach" providing students enough chances and the ability to say what they really want to say by using their mother tongue. It is an "efficient use of time" for FL use is efficient in explaining some difficulties in the L2.

## Participants

Inspired by all the previous studies, the author aims to discover the use of L1 in the reform process of the "curriculum for ideological, political education" in the L2 learning classroom. A survey was carried out and two questionnaires were done for teachers and students respectively.

The study takes 5 teachers and 50 students of Northwestern Polytechnic University as its research context. The 50 students randomly selected are all non-English major sophomores who have passed College English Test 4 (CET4). Their ages range from 17-21. Among the five teachers, two are teaching students of CET4 other three are CET6.

## Research design

The data is mainly collected from two questionnaires; one for teachers and the other for students. The questionnaires are used to collect quantitative data on the research questions. The questionnaire items with regard to Chinese use frequency, and main functions of Chinese use in class were mainly derived from Wang's (Wang Junju, 2003); the items concerning specific factors affecting language use in class were devised on the basis of theoretical

researching on the issue of /L1 use in the L2 classroom (i.e. Cook, 2001; Auerbach, 1993; Atkinson, 1987; Polio & Duff, 1994; etc.)

## Data Collection & Analysis

### Frequency of L1 used in college-level English classroom

**Table 1: Teacher's Chinese use frequency in the L1 classroom**

	Teachers' report		Students' report	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Never			1	2
Seldom	2	40	15	30
Sometimes	3	60	25	50
Often			8	16
Always			1	2
Total	5	100	50	100

Table 1 presents teachers' Chinese use frequency in the L1 classroom; the data was collected from Questionnaire 1. From the table we can see that 60 % teachers thought they used Chinese sometimes and 40 % thought they seldom used it. From the students' perspective, the situation was more complicated. 50 % estimated that they used Chinese in classroom sometimes; 30 % did it seldom. And 16 % admitted that "Often" would be a better choice; while 2 % of students chose the polar one "Never" or "Always" respectively.

**Table 2: Students' Chinese use frequency in the L1 classroom**

	Teachers' report		Students' report	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Never			1	2
Seldom			5	10
Sometimes	2	40	16	32
Often	3	60	25	50
Always			3	6
Total	5	100	50	100

Table 2 was the result calculated from Questionnaire 2. From it we can see that 60% of teachers estimated that students often used Chinese in classroom and 40% chose "Sometimes" as their answer. As the students 50% admitted they often used Chinese in class and 32% chose "Sometimes". 10 % said they seldom used it while

6% said “Always”. Among all 50 students only 1 estimated he never used Chinese in class. Among all the choices to the teachers’ Chinese use, the number who chose “Sometimes” is on the top, which is in accordance with some similar studies in China (Wang, 2003). As to students’ Chinese use in class, “often” appears on the top, reaching 50% which was out of the author’s expectation. For all the students subjects are university students who should depend less on their first language during L2 learning.

**Table 3 Teacher’s Chinese use in specific context (Ideological, political content related)**

	Teacher’s report		Student’s report	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
A	1	20	21	42
B	5	100	30	60
C	2	40	27	54
D	1	20	13	26
E			12	24
F	4	80	40	80

**Table 4 Students’ Chinese use in specific context (Ideological, political content related)**

	Teacher’s report		Student’s report	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
A	1	20	16	32
B	3	60	20	40
C	1	20	10	24
D	1	20	5	10
E	1	20	26	52
F	2	40	30	60

A. Explaining new words, expressions or idioms.

B. Teaching or learning grammars.

C. Communicating about the background, main idea, language style of the text.

D. Doing or explaining the follow up exercise of a text.

E. Asking or answering questions or making comments on their response.

F. Managing classroom, explaining government policy or introducing latest regulations, etc.

Table 3 is the data collected from Questionnaire 1, it shows when teachers use L1 both from teachers' and students' perspective. From the table we can see that 100% of teachers use L1 to teach grammar and 60% of students prefer to use L1 when they are learning grammars. And to choice F 80 % teachers and students admit that it's the fact. Only one teacher uses L1 to explain new words, expressions or ideas; and one uses it to explain exercises of a text. While according to students' reports, 42% think their teachers use L1 to explain new words and 26% think L1 is also used when exercises of a text are being explained.

Table 4 is from Questionnaire 2, which is about when students use L1 from their own and teachers' perspectives. From the table we can see that 60% of teachers think students use L1 when they are learning grammars, while 40% of teachers and 60% of students think L1 is usually used to manage classroom and give administrative information.

As to question 2 "When do teachers use L1 in classroom?" from the questionnaire we could get the conclusion that teachers took students' language proficiency as their first concern. In other words, teachers tend to use more Chinese when they think the students' language ability is low, otherwise, they would use less L1. This could be easily accepted. In order to make sure all the students have understood the Ideological, political content related points, their teacher offer Chinese explanation timely. This strategy is realistic and useful although not very suitable in SL learning process.

From the tables above, we also can conclude that: 1) Teachers think their Chinese use in class could help to facilitate students' L2 comprehension, which could be got from the high percentage of choice A. It indicates that when teachers make their language choice decisions, students' comprehension turns to be their first concern. Most of them believe that the use of L1 in addition to L2 helps to make the input comprehensible. It may be true to some extent. From students' perspective, comprehension is a much essential factor to measure whether they have understood the target language or not. And in this situation, L1 could be used as assistance to students' understanding, which would give them a short cut instead of paraphrasing the original target language in L2. But it may also arouse some problems. It may be believed that without the assistance of L1 L2 could not be fully obtained, so teachers offer timely help with L1 to ensure they are completely understood. And for students, it's not necessary for them to master the SL well for their teachers would translate or explain it in L1.

### **Main factors affecting language choice in L2 classroom**

Table 5 presents the results of Question (4) "What are the possible factors affecting L1 use?" Both teachers (80%) and students (80%) considered "learner's language ability" as the most important factor. 60% of teachers reported they use Chinese because "It's more effective to use Chinese in some context than to use English." 64% students shared this opinion.

Table 5 Possible reasons for teachers' using L1 in L2 class

	Teachers' report		Students' report	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
a	4	80	40	80
b	2	40	10	20
c	3	60	32	64
d	3	60	23	46
e	2	40	19	38

- a. the students are not proficient enough to understand all English lessons.
- b. Time pressure: Class time is limited, and it is time-consuming to use Chinese.
- c. Chinese is more effective than English in some contexts.
- d. To create a sort of relaxed environment.
- e. The students prefer to be spoken to in Chinese.

### Conclusion

From the study, a fact was found out that L1 was used widely in L2 classroom for it has irreplaceable function in language teaching, as facilitating comprehension, aiding communication, creating some sort of relaxing atmosphere, etc. Anyhow, it should be used properly within some limits for too much use of L1 would do harm to students' L2 learning. The detailed conclusions are as follows:

- 1) Chinese is widely used in college level L2 teaching classroom. Both teachers and students admit the fact that the use of L1 is closely related to students' language proficiency. When teachers found that students were low in L2 level, they tend to speak L1 to help them. While for those students, they use L1 to help them with their expression in class and understanding in difficult language points.
- 2) Both teachers and students acknowledge the function L1 has in L2 teaching classroom. The main functions L1 has include: facilitating students' language comprehension in L2 teaching process, and for students, L1 is used to assist them with their expression and to establish their language confidence. What's more, in some specific context, use of L1 can create some atmosphere like humor or resonance.
- 3) L1 is used more in some contexts than in others, especially in this ideological, political education reform. Teachers seem to use the L1 more frequently in introducing government policies, borrowing the latest regulations, managing the classroom, and communicating about policy and other administrative information. They use less L1 in communicating about the background or main ideas. As for students, they use more L1 when there is no already existent spoken model for them to imitate.

- 4) The factors affecting teachers' language choice mainly lie in students' language proficiency. Their language proficiency and performance are of great concern when teachers decide which language to use. As in new vocabulary and grammar learning, both students and teachers prefer to use L1 for it's more effective in learning and teaching.

### **Limitations**

The limitation of the study is that because all the participants (5 teachers and 50 students) were chosen from one university, and the scale is rather small, this affected the generality of the research results. Besides, the questionnaire created could not be called "authority", items could not cover all aspects of this research. Lastly, the data collected may not be real for it's only teachers' and students' estimations on language use, which may reduce the reality of the results. All these three limitations could be improved in future studies.

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