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Using a shared L1 to reduce cognitive overload and anxiety levels in the L2 classroom

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This paper considers the attitudes and behaviours of university language lecturers and their students regarding the use of the L1 in the higher education L2 classroom. A case study of one Irish higher education institution was carried out and qualitative interviews conducted with six lecturers in Japanese and six in German. The results indicated widespread support among the participants for the judicious use of the L1 in limited instances, particularly where it can facilitate a reduction in cognitive overload and learner anxiety by, for example, the explanation of complex terminology, concepts and grammatical structures, as well as aiding in the creation of a relaxed classroom environment. Implications for the language classroom and for this field of research are considered.

Keywords: L1 use; L2 classroom; L2 pedagogy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider the attitudes of university language lecturers towards the use of the L1 in the foreign language classroom, as well as their behaviours in this regard, and ultimately to identify specific instances where the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom is potentially beneficial. In order to contextualise the study, this paper begins with a broad review of key movements in language pedagogy from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. A particular emphasis is placed on the role of the L1 in the L2 classroom from both a theoretical and an empirical perspective. Against this backdrop, this paper then focuses on lecturers' views concerning the merits or otherwise of the use of the learners' L1 in the L2 classroom.

Language pedagogy was dominated by the Grammar-Translation (GT) method until the end of the nineteenth century. According to this approach, which derived from the teaching of Greek and Latin, language learners studied grammatical rules, and applied these rules using drills and by translating sentences into and out of the L2. The classes themselves were conducted primarily through the L1 and the emphasis was placed on the development of an ability to read literature and on general intellectual development and discipline. Minimal emphasis was placed on speaking or listening, or on communication generally (Cook 2010).

The Reform Movement developed out of a sense of dissatisfaction with this approach and its outcomes. One of the proponents of the Reform Movement, Wilhelm Viëtor (1850–1918),

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criticised in particular the fact that the GT method ignored the spoken language. In his seminal work *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren! Ein Beitrag zur Überbürdungsfrage*, published in 1882 under the pseudonym *Quousque Tandem?* (*How Long More?*), he questions for how much longer language teachers and learners must endure the GT method of language teaching. Viëtor himself published extensively on language pedagogy, emphasising the importance of spoken rather than written tasks (Viëtor 1880a, 1880b). Other members of the Reform Movement advocated a focus on authentic language use.

Building on these arguments, the Reform Movement resulted in the development of what became known as the Direct Method (DM) of language teaching, which replaced the GT method and became increasingly popular in France and Germany in the 1900s, and continues to influence much of language teaching today. While the GT method approached language learning through the language learners' mother tongue (L1), advocates of the DM approach language learning through the target language (L2) in a manner considered to be analogous to the way in which a first language is acquired (Krashen 1985, 1988). In other words, ideal conditions for language learning are considered to be those which emulate the way in which a child acquires their first language. As such, they involve a sustained period of time in a naturalistic setting surrounded by the L2 in oral and written form and with comprehensible input directed towards the learner. Meaning is to be directly related to the target language without translation from or into the L1 and students deduce rules based on examples and illustrations. The use of the L1 in the classroom ranges from a total ban to its use as a 'last refuge for the incompetent' (Koch 1947: 271). In the words of Cook (2009: 112):

> From the end of the nineteenth century onwards almost all influential theoretical works on language teaching have assumed without argument that a new language (L2) should be taught without reference to the student's first language (L1).

Thus, much of the current literature around language teaching and learning derives from the DM and advocates an almost complete avoidance of the L1 in the classroom, with L2 classrooms conducted entirely through the L2 viewed as optimum (Storch and Wigglesworth 2003; Valdés 1998). Macaro (2009: 36) refers to this as the 'virtual position', an approach adopted by those who believe that the L2 can only be learned through that language, where exclusive use of the L2 provides a kind of 'virtual reality' classroom, mirroring the environment of the first language learner and the newly arrived immigrant to the target language country.

Particularly significant in this regard has been the emergence of a communicative pedagogical approach that places the focus on the meaning rather than the form of the language and which has further emphasised the importance of authentic communication through the L2 without recourse to the L1. Proponents of this Focus on Meaning approach (Krashen and Terrell 1998) prioritise the meaningful communication of the L2, paying attention to the meaning of the message to be conveyed, at the expense of Focus on Form (accuracy), where the emphasis is placed on the grammatical components and rules of the L2.

Similarly, task-based approaches emphasise the design of activities and tasks which maximise learners' exposure to and use of the L2 (Canale and Swain 1980; Ellis 2003; Storch and Wigglesworth 2003), with an additional feature of such approaches being the use of the L2 as much as is feasible in classroom interactions (Crichton 2009), both between learners and between learners and teachers. In this way, it is argued that an ethos can be created in the classroom whereby learners accept the need to make their own contributions in the L2, something which Dörnyei (2001) argues can have a powerful

affective impact in an L2 classroom. Similarly, Ellis (2008) includes both exposure to extensive L2 input and the need for opportunities for L2 output among his 10 Principles of Instructed Second Language Acquisition. By implication at least, use of the L1 is to be avoided wherever possible.

However, while accepting the value of much of the above and the absolute requirement for extensive use of the L2 in the classroom, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009a, 2009b: 4–5) refer to a number of studies that have challenged the virtual position's hegemony. In addition, alternative perspectives on the nature of the language learner and the language learning process suggest that there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the view that a causal relationship exists between the exclusive use of the L2 and improved language learning. For example, on the basis of a case study of six student teachers of French in secondary schools, Macaro (2001) concludes that the quantity of student teacher L1 use does not impact significantly on the quantity of L1 or L2 use by the learners, casting doubt upon the argument that even limited use of the L1 by the teacher in particular instances might undermine the L2 learning process. On the contrary, there is instead evidence emerging to suggest that the L1 may actually be a useful tool for learning the L2 in particular instances (Brooks and Donato 1994; Cook 2010; Macaro 2001; Park 2013; Storch and Wigglesworth 2003), including, for example, in the acquisition of vocabulary in intentional, lexical focus-on-form contexts (Tian and Macaro 2012). In support of this view, Macaro (2005: 75) argues that research on cognition highlights issues associated with limitations of components of working memory with regard to both capacity and duration and suggests that the use of the L1 particularly among learners with less advanced proficiency levels can lighten the cognitive load on working memory.

In a similar vein, Cook has played a central role in altering the terms in which the language learner is perceived. Rather than a view of the learner as a 'deficient monolingual' whose aim is to achieve native speaker-like competence in discrete languages, he instead conceptualises the learner as an individual with degrees of competence in various languages which interact with and complement each other – in other words, as a multicompetent, plurilingual individual (see for example Cook 2010). This view of the language learner as a plurilingual individual also underlies the language policy of the Council of Europe, which views the development of partial competences in a number of languages in a complementary fashion as a right of citizens of Europe (Council of Europe 2006). This view is underlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), which emphasises the importance of partial competencies in a range of languages as part of a language learner's 'linguistic repertoire' (Breidback 2003: 8). Such a sense of the language learner as an individual whose L1, L2 and potentially L3 and L4 interact with one another, does not co-exist comfortably with an approach to language pedagogy which prohibits the use of the L1. Thus, it is unsurprising that Cook advocates the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom in the development of, for example, metalinguistic competence, language awareness and vocabulary acquisition.

Cummins (1983, 2000) also continues to argue in favour of the interdependency of language proficiency in general and, in particular, between the L1 and the L2. In proposing a Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP), he argues that a high level of proficiency in the L1 will have a positive effect on the acquisition of the L2 and a level of proficiency in the L2 will help in the development of the L1, as skills, concepts and ideas learned in one language can be transferred to the other language – a view supported by Skinner (1985) in his synthesis of the theories of Piaget, Chomsky, Vygotsky and Cummins himself. MacSwan and Rolstad (2005) further enhance Cummins' notion of the CUP in terms of knowledge transfer and, rather than talking about knowledge being transferred between the L1 and the L2,

favour the notion that both languages have access to the same knowledge stock. As explained by Chamberlain-Quinlisk and Senyshyn (2012: 17), if a learner already understands the concept of 'regression' or 'prejudice' in their L1, they only need to acquire the label for these notions in the L2, which is not as challenging as the acquisition of both the understanding of the concept and the label for it in the L2.

Similarly, based on empirical evidence from research conducted by a Japanese university, Cummins (2000) reports on the positive relationship or interdependence between the learners' L1 and L2, which emerges once the L1 has reached a certain level. Cummins (1979, 1994) put forward the Developmental Interdependence hypothesis to explain this:

> The 'developmental interdependence' hypothesis proposes that the development of competence in a second language (L2) is partially a function of the type of competence already developed in the L1 at the time that intensive exposure to the L2 begins. (Cummins 1979: 222)

In other words, a solid foundation in the L1 will ease the transition and serve as a bridge to the second language, enabling the student to develop L2 proficiency to the extent whereby they can receive instruction in both the L1 and the L2 and achieve literacy fluency in L1 and L2, leading to lifelong learning in both languages (Kosonen, Malone and Young 2007).

An important underlying assumption in both Cook's notion of the multicompetent learner and Cummins' CUP is that the processes of first language acquisition and second language learning are not identical, and that it is therefore not necessary or perhaps not feasible to emulate the conditions in which the first language is acquired in the L2 classroom. A significant difference between the two is, of course, time (Crichton 2009), with the average learner engaged in L2 classes for perhaps 3–4 hours per week. In addition, the L2 learner has the L1 at their disposal, as well as significant cognitive, analytical and problem-solving abilities (Cook 2008).

Other studies also suggest that a shared L1 can function as a 'psychological tool' (Cook 2001; Storch and Wigglesworth 2003: 760), emphasising that it can provide language learners with additional cognitive support, in line with Macaro's (2005) perspective discussed previously with regard to the relationship between the use of the L1, cognition and working memory. Acting as a 'psychological tool' in this sense, the use of the L1 can prevent cognitive overload while completing tasks through an L2. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) suggest that the use of the L1 can also help to maintain learner interest in a task and assist in the development of strategies to aid the accomplishment of complex tasks. In particular, they argue that the L1 can play such a role when permitted in the course of group work by learners. Scott and de la Fuente (2008) support this view and report that participants in a study of the role of the L1 in consciousness-raising, form-focused grammar tasks, which required the learners to discuss particular grammatical structures and articulate a grammatical rule, benefited from being allowed to use their shared L1 in that they approached tasks in a more collaborative and coherent manner. In particular, they suggest that allowing the use of the L1 in group work of intermediate level by university students of French and Spanish facilitated the completion of more complex tasks than would have been possible had learners been operating exclusively through the L2. Furthermore, on the basis of the findings from her study, Roehr (2007) argues that metalinguistic knowledge expressed through the L1 and defined by her as the ability to correct, describe and explain errors correlates with proficiency levels in the L2. Finally, Brooks-Lewis (2009), reporting on a study conducted in an introductory English course for Spanish speakers in Mexico, concludes that facilitating the use of the L1 during the course made the experience more meaningful and enjoyable and less anxiety-provoking for the participants.

The belief that there is some recognisable value in using the L1 in the L2 classroom is described by its advocates, including Macaro (2009: 36), as the 'optimal position'; its proponents believe that at certain times in the language learning process, the use of the L1 may enhance learning more than exclusive use of the L2. Macaro (2009: 38–39) expands on this, stating that the optimal position involves the teacher making a judgement about the possible detrimental effects of failing to draw the learners' attention to aspects of their L1 or failing to make comparisons between the learners' L1 and L2. Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009b: 183), in synthesising the collection of papers in their publication, propose the following definition for optimal L1 use:

> Optimal first language use in communicative and immersion second and foreign language classrooms recognizes the benefits of the learner's first language as a cognitive and meta-cognitive tool, as a strategic organizer, and as a scaffold for language development. In addition, the first language helps learners navigate a bilingual identity and thereby learn to function as a bilingual. Neither the classroom teacher nor the second or foreign language learner becomes so dependent on the first language that neither can function without the first language. Optimal codeswitching practices will ultimately lead to enhanced language learning and the development of bilingual communicative practices.

Thus it would appear that, while the goal of maximisation of L2 input and interaction is a laudable one, it may not be inconsistent with the judicious use of the L1 in particular instances. These would appear to include in particular those where the cognitive load is high and the material or task complex. Against this backdrop, the following sections present a case study of one higher education institute, with a focus on the views of language lecturers and their related behaviours concerning the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom.

Case study

The present study forms part of a larger, qualitative case study designed to assess the attitudes and behaviours of teachers and learners towards the use of translation (Kelly and Bruen forthcoming) and the L1 as pedagogical tools in the L2 classroom. The focus in this particular paper is on findings pertaining to the use of the L1.

In order to gain further insight into the actual use or otherwise of the L1 in the language classroom, interviews were conducted with 12 language lecturers, of whom six teach Japanese language and six teach German language to students whose shared L1 is English at a higher education institute (HEI) in Ireland. Of the Japanese lecturers, three were non-native Japanese speakers and spoke English as their L1, thus sharing an L1 with the vast majority of their students. The other three were native Japanese speakers, two of whom were highly proficient in English and had spent a considerable portion of their lives in an English-speaking country. One native speaker of Japanese had limited English proficiency and had not spent much time in an English-speaking country prior to this study. Of the German lecturers, three were native speakers of the students' L2, two were non-native speakers of the L2 and shared the same L1 as the majority of the students and one teacher's L1 was different to both the L1 and L2 of the students. While the focus here is on the attitudes and behaviours of the language lecturers who participated in this study, the views of their learners are also included where relevant in order to provide a more complete picture. These were obtained through analysis of the anonymous course evaluations filled out by students as a matter of routine either following the completion of or over the course of each module at the HEI in question.

Table 1. Modules used in the study.

Module code/name	Year	Hours per week	Year-long/ semester-long module	Beginners track or Intermediate track
German				
GE110 German Language 1	1	6	Year-long	Beginners track
GE268 German Language 6	2	3	Semester-long	Intermediate track
GE238 German for Business	2	2	Semester-long	Intermediate track
GE267 German Language 6	2	3	Semester-long	Beginners track
GE478 German Language 8	4	2	Semester-long	Both tracks
GE488 German Language 8	4	2	Semester-long	Both tracks
Japanese				
JA110 Japanese Language 1	1	8	Year-long	Beginners track
JA242 Japanese Reading and Translating	2	2	Semester-long	Beginners track
JA240 Japanese Language 3	2	4	Semester-long	Beginners track
JA267 Japanese Language 4	2	4	Semester-long	Beginners track
JA470 Japanese Advanced Language 7	4	4	Semester-long	Both tracks
JA480 Japanese Advanced Language 8	4	4	Semester-long	Both tracks

The L2s of relevance here, i.e. German and Japanese, are both offered on two four-year undergraduate degrees: the BA in Applied Language and Translation Studies and the BA in International Business. Within these degrees, six German and six Japanese language modules were selected and these, together with their coordinators/lecturers and the students taking them, formed the heart of this study. The particular modules selected (Table 1) cover both degrees from first to final year and involve almost all of the faculty teaching of German and Japanese language at this HEI. Third-year language modules do not form part of this study, as students enrolled on these degrees spend their third year in a partner university in a country in which their L2 is one of the official languages.

The data were collected using individual, semi-structured interviews involving each lecturer and one of the researchers. The interviews with the lecturers, which were conducted in the spring of 2013, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Interviews were guided by the research questions outlined in the first paragraph of this paper. In particular, they concerned the participants' attitudes towards the use of the L1 in their L2 classroom and their behaviours in this regard.

Findings

Responses by participants indicate that the L1 is used in some manner in the L2 classroom by all 12 of the lecturers interviewed without exception, reinforcing Macaro's (2005: 68) observation that in none of the studies he had come across was 'there a majority of teachers in favour of excluding the L1 altogether'. The most significant way in which the L1 is used by the participants in this study appears to be to explain complex language. This can concern, for example, specialised business terms but also includes all words and phrases with which the lecturers perceive their students as having difficulty. For example, the following comments are representative:

> I use the L1 in the classroom when I feel it is necessary for explanation/clarification. … . to provide oral explanations for complex terms as this is a beginners' module … specialised business terms are translated orally in the form of explanations for students where this is necessary for understanding. I mostly use the L1 to explain a word or phrase that students have difficulty in understanding in the L2.

Comments by students indicated that they were appreciative of such an approach, stating, for example:

> I personally think that English is used when necessary in the class. It is generally used to allow us understand what the German words mean. I do not think it needs to be changed. (German, Year 2, Ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

> [English should be used] … for new complex ideas. (German, Year 2, Ex-beginner, CEFR level B1)

However, unlike the lecturers interviewed for this study, the students also appeared to include more procedural or operational classroom issues under the heading of complex material with which they might have a difficulty. This is in line with the different contexts identified by Macaro (1997, 2005: 69) as those in which the L1 tends to be used, i.e. procedural instruction, explicit grammar teaching, ensuring of comprehension, relationship building and maintenance of control, and included explaining, where necessary, how a task should be carried out, the nature of assessments and 'what will be on the exam'. One student commented:

> English should be used for translating words, explaining the different areas of what will be on the exam, explaining the different task we've to do in class. (German, Year 2, Ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

Again, in line with the contexts highlighted by Macaro (2005: 69), the second most common use of the L1 is in the explanation of complex grammatical structures and rules. The lecturers interviewed took a pragmatic view in expressing the opinion that where a lecturer shares the students' L1, this is a positive resource that can usefully aid the language learning process, with one stating:

> If you don't understand then you won't be able to learn. They must be able to understand basic language and need an explanation in English […] I think that if you have the L1, why not use it and if it is useful for the student, why not use it – as long as you do it in context.

The students appear to concur with the lecturers' comments, with the following representative of their views:

> I understand that many things won't relate to/translate perfectly between the two; however, I see no other way to go about it really. I don't think this is a bad thing at all as I've had no problems picking it up thus far. (Japanese, Year 1, beginner, CEFR level A2)

> I'd get most of it [classes taught primarily through the L2] but if I don't get something then it's good to have it explained in English especially vocab [sic] and grammar. (German, year 2, ex-beginner, CEFR level B1)

> [English should be used] … when trying to explain grammar! (German, Year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

> I believe [the use of the L1] is a good thing, because it provides clarification in English, but there's also a sufficient amount of Japanese spoken to learn and be familiar with it. (Japanese, Year 1, beginner, CEFR level A2)

> Maybe a little more English wouldn't hurt. In most classes I am lost because the lecturer only speaks in Japanese and I can't associate anything she is saying. (Japanese, Year 1, beginner, CEFR level A2)

It is clear from the students' responses that they appreciate using the L1 and the L2 in different language learning contexts:

> [the use of the L1] is a good thing, as using English ensures that every grammar point is fully understood by everyone. It is understandable to use all Japanese in an oral class, but for grammar it is important to use English. (Japanese, Year 2, ex-beginner, CEFR level B2)

> Grammar needs to be taught through English. I think some requests such as 'could you please read' could be given in Japanese more often. (Japanese, Year 1, beginner, CEFR level A2)

> I find the Japanese-speaking classes help to improve the fluency of the students, while the English-speaking classes are intense enough to cover grammar points quickly, while there is enough Japanese incorporated into the class to make it enjoyable and helpful. (Japanese, Year 1, beginner, CEFR level A2)

In a context of reduced contact hours for language teaching, several lecturers highlighted the fact that use of the L1 can be economical in terms of the amount of time required to explain core concepts which can be particularly complex. One commented, for example, that

> It is an advantage at the earlier stage of learning the L2 to explain complex concepts, for example, it would be very hard to explain what a syllabry is in Japanese and give examples, yet you cannot master Japanese without an understanding of this concept. (Japanese, year 4, advanced, CEFR level B2)

Several lecturers described how the occasional use of the L1 helped to create a less intimidating and more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, commenting for example that

> it [the L1] is familiar and less intimidating to students. It is also helpful for giving examples of situations where certain phrases are used, or to say something anecdotal. It can also be somewhat of a shock if the students only hear the L2 in the classroom.

Similar responses came from students:

> I would feel more comfortable with a bit more English. (Japanese, Year 2, ex-beginner, CEFR level B2)

> I find it very intimidating when sitting in a learning environment in the [L2] language. (Japanese, Year 2, ex-beginner, CEFR level B2)

> I find I am falling behind when it is taught using Japanese, although I do see the benefits of using Japanese. (Japanese, Year 2, ex-beginner, CEFR level B2)

This is perhaps particularly the case for first-year students coming from a secondary school background where they may not have been exposed to significant amounts of the L2 in their classrooms. Some of the lecturers in this study suggested that the amount of the L1 used in the L2 classroom would decrease over the course of a four-year undergraduate degree as the learners' proficiency levels and cognitive abilities developed. Students tended to concur with this, stating:

[the L2 should be used] only once a good understanding of the language has already been established. (Japanese, Year 1, beginner, CEFR level A2)

I prefer natural levels of both languages until it is agreed or known that the language level is improved. (Japanese, Year 1, beginner, CEFR level A2)

The majority of lecturers interviewed stressed, however, that there should always be a good and valid reason for the use of the L1, such as to ensure comprehension (an additional context identified by Macaro 2005) in explaining grammar at lower proficiency levels, for example, and highlighted that it should not be over-used:

I think balance is very important. The reason for using the L1 must be very clear. I am not a native English speaker, and sometimes I think it is better to ask the students to explain it in English. I also think that it is all a question of time – to save time, we explain things in English, but we must get the balance right.

Furthermore, several participants were of the opinion that, while the L1 is familiar and less intimidating to students, its overuse could hinder effective preparation for study abroad in an L2 context in the third year of the degrees of interest in this study. One commented:

Hearing so much of the L1 in the classroom leaves you less prepared for going to the country of the L2 where you hear it spoken the whole time, and when you do go [to] the country of the L2, it takes longer to adjust and acclimatise. (Japanese, year 4, advanced, CEFR level B2)

Other comments included:

One disadvantage to using the L1 in the classroom is that when you do go to the country of the L2 it is like been thrown in at the deep-end, however, more exposure to the L2 in the classroom would help you to get used to it. (Japanese, year 4, advanced, CEFR level B2)

In my first year learning the L2, grammar was taught through the L1, and it would not have been possible to understand grammar points had they been taught through the L2. But the disadvantage of this was that I was familiar with hearing the L2 when I went to the country. I would have coped better in Japan if I had more exposure to the L2 in my first few years in college. We did have an oral exam in second year, but I wasn't really used to speaking unless it was part of a prepared sentence. (Japanese, year 4, advanced, CEFR level B2)

Comments by students echoed this perspective, with several expressing that, for example:

I think it's [primarily using the L2 in the classroom] a good idea to prepare me for Germany where all lectures are in German. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

This is a good idea as students need to be immersed in the German language even if only for a few hours a week to be prepared for what is to come [study abroad]. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

I think it's good as it prepares us better for Reutlingen [study abroad in the Fachhochschule in Germany], and anything that is too difficult is always explained in English. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

More generally:

The more German you hear, the better you get at it. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

> It's a good idea because it improves your speaking ability and helps get you thinking in German. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

> It's a good idea because it really improved my vocab [sic] and diction. It also improved my pronunciation of German words. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

> It is good because people pay closer attention and learn while doing so. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

The proviso was highlighted that

> … it is good in one sense but I think English should be spoken a bit more in terms of translating, etc., as if German is spoken constantly and we don't understand what's being said, then it's hard to learn. (German, year 2, ex-intermediate, CEFR level B2)

> Studying Spanish which is taught through Spanish … I find these classes the most difficult by far. (Japanese, beginner, year 1, CEFR, level A2)

In conclusion, the need to find a balance was a consistent thread throughout the 12 interviews with the lecturers who participated in this case study and was echoed in the student feedback. Overuse, it was emphasised, can hinder students in learning to think in the L2 and create a false impression, in the view of these lecturers, that exact equivalence exists at all times between an L1 (in this case English) and an L2 (here, either German or Japanese).

Concluding remarks

Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009a: 8) state that despite the growing body of literature weakening the virtual position's hegemony among researchers – whether in primary, secondary or higher education; whether in Canada, the United States, Europe or Asia – it is clear that the virtual position still enjoys significant support. However, this view is not reflected in this study's exploration of one higher level institute in Ireland. The 12 lecturers involved in this study expressed the view that the language learning process can be enhanced through the use, albeit limited, of a shared L1 in the L2 classroom. Furthermore, in terms of their behaviours, they all described using the students' L1 in their classrooms despite the fact that in some cases, it was not their own L1. They drew attention in particular to three areas where they favour the use of the L1, which mirror three of the five contexts identified by Macaro (2005). These include the explanation of complex language and concepts, the explanation of complex grammatical structures and the monitoring and ensuring of comprehension. Interestingly, two of the contexts in which the L1 tends to be used as identified by Macaro (2005) were not explicitly mentioned by either the teachers or learners who participated in this study. These were the maintenance of control and the building of relationships. It may be that discipline and control are less of an issue among university students than in the secondary school in which Macaro (2005) conducted his research. The issue of building relationships, on the other hand, may actually be associated with the creation of a comfortable and relaxed classroom atmosphere, an additional context highlighted by the participants in this study.

Thus it would appear that a complete avoidance of the L1, as recommended by approaches derived from the DM, does not reflect the reality of classroom practice, despite the 'negative press' associated with the use of the L1 in the academic literature in this field. Instead, the understanding of the language learner as a multicompetent, plurilingual individual whose languages interact in a positive manner appears to underlie current practice

to a greater extent than is reflected in the literature. In addition, the suggestion that the use of the L1 can reduce cognitive overload when dealing with complex material and concepts would appear to be implicitly recognised by language lecturers – or, in any case, by those who participated in this study. It also appears to be recognised by their students. Finally, the value of using a shared L1 in order to create a relaxed classroom atmosphere in which students remain engaged and do not find themselves overwhelmed would also appear to find favour on the ground. Again, this is a view supported by the language learners who commented on this issue in their end-of-module course evaluations.

Intermediate students in the study expressed the view that they liked having a balance between L1 and L2 in the classroom but also commented that previously, when they were in the beginners' language programme, they had favoured the use of the L1, particularly when they could not comprehend the L2 content. This view would echo that expressed by Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009a: 6), that the cognitive benefits of the L1 may be particularly relevant in learning contexts where the learners' L2 skills are limited.

There was, nonetheless, agreement with the basic tenet of communicative language teaching that the L2 should be used as much as is feasible, and with the fact that there are dangers associated with overuse of the L1, such as an exaggerated sense of the equivalence between languages and a resultant failure on the part of the learner to acquire an ability to think in the L2. In the view of the participants in this study, this can impact particularly negatively on learners' ability to function effectively when in the L2 environment – an issue on which considerable emphasis is placed in the HEI in question, given that study abroad is a compulsory component of core language degrees, with considerable emphasis placed on the preparation of students (Bruen 2013). Therefore, although any suggestion that a pedagogical approach that favours authentic language use and the use of the L1 are mutually exclusive is rejected, in the opinion of these lecturers, a balance is required. The question remains as to how such a balance is to be achieved. At present, it would appear that attempts to achieve it are made on what appears to be an ad hoc basis by the individual lecturer in the classroom. However, it should be pointed out that such an approach is in keeping with Macaro's definition of the optimal position, which requires teachers to exercise judgement on the possible detrimental effects of not drawing on the learners' L1 in particular situations (Macaro 2009: 38). The finding from this study – that teachers use their judgement on how to achieve an optimal L1/L2 balance – reflects that of Levine (2009) and Dailey-O'Kane and Liebscher (2009), who suggest that teachers create guidelines around what is optimal L1 use in their classroom.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide some preliminary pointers in the direction of effective use of the L1 in the L2 classroom, indicating that its use is justified in situations where it can help to reduce either cognitive overload or learner anxiety. How to support teachers in identifying such situations remains an area in which further research and guidance is likely to be fruitful. For example, as we have seen above, Scott and de la Fuente (2008) and Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) argue that permitting the use of the L1 during group work allows for the completion of more complex tasks ultimately using the L2. On the other hand, learners must speak in the L2 in order to develop their competence in this regard. Further research is required in order to assist teachers and researchers in identifying the point at which limiting communication to the L2 becomes counterproductive.

Finally, the findings presented above are based on the responses of a sample of 12 lecturers involved with two L2s in one HEI in Ireland; as such, they must be viewed as exploratory and any conclusions as tentative. In addition, the student feedback came primarily from those between levels A2 and B2 in the CEFR, highlighting the need for

further research on both complete beginners (A1) and those at the highest proficiency levels (C1 and C2). The findings would nonetheless appear to resonate with several of the studies reviewed in the introduction which argue in favour of limited, judicious use of the L1 in the L2 classroom. They also support the finding of Scott and de la Fuente (2008: 110) that

> … there is not agreement on this subject and questions abound. When should the L1 be used? What is productive use of the L1 and what is too much? … It is essential that contemporary pedagogical approaches and practices be based on an informed understanding of the benefits of L1 use in the L2 classroom.

Similarly, in the words of Macaro (2001: 545):

> As a teaching community we need to provide, especially for less experienced teachers, a framework that identifies when reference to the L1 can be a valuable tool and when it is simply used as an easy option.

In other words, as highlighted above, we have to 'empower the teacher to make informed decisions around when the use of the L1 is justified' (Macaro 2005: 81). By highlighting the potential value of the L1 in the reduction of cognitive overload and learner anxiety, we hope in this study to have moved in some small way towards the achievement of this objective. As indicated above, further research is required both to corroborate this view and to assist in the identification of general guidelines concerning when cognitive overload is likely to occur and when learner anxiety is likely to be a particular issue.

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