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## **Using the target language in beginner-level classrooms: The influence of learners' affective state on teachers' practice**

SUSAN OGURO

*University of Technology, Sydney*

### **ABSTRACT**

Although focused on learning a specific target language, learners also bring knowledge of their first languages (L1) to the classroom context. When their teachers are also proficient users of the learners' L1, then both the target and first languages can be used in classroom interactions, particularly in beginner-level courses. This study investigates the language choices made by teachers at an Australian university when communicating with their beginner-level students from six different language programs. The experiences of 27 teachers were canvassed through questionnaires and interviews. Data revealed that the learners' unease about extensive classroom target language use influenced the teachers' decisions to use the L1 or the target language at specific stages of a lesson. Various consequences for teachers' practices are discussed, including the strategy of explicitly discussing the value of using the target language with students. This article demonstrates a valuable and strategic use of the learners' first language which may ultimately lead to more extensive use of the target language, as learners come to

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Address for correspondence: Susan Oguro, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, PO Box 123 Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia; Email: [susan.oguro@uts.edu.au](mailto:susan.oguro@uts.edu.au)

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understand the pedagogical value of exposure to and interaction in the target language.

## INTRODUCTION

In foreign or second language classrooms, the language being taught (the target language) is naturally a primary focus for the learners and the teacher. However, this target language is not the only language present in the language classroom since learners also bring knowledge of (at least) one other language to the learning process. For example, learners in an EFL class in Beijing typically share knowledge of Mandarin (and perhaps other languages as well). Their language teachers are also often multilingual, being proficient not only in the language being taught (English) but also in the language normally used in the broader society beyond the classroom (Mandarin in this example).

In classrooms with such multilingual participants, although learning to use the target language is the primary aim, learners and teachers may also make use of their shared, common language when communicating with each other. The use of a language other than the target language for classroom interaction is commonly referred to in the research literature as first language use or L1 use. In the example of the EFL class in Beijing, classroom interactions may take place in English (the target language), Mandarin (the L1) or a mix of both languages depending on what is being communicated and to whom, at different stages throughout a lesson.

Notwithstanding the “near consensus that teachers should aim to make maximum use of the TL” (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002, p.211), classroom use of the L1 has been observed in a range of language learning contexts (e.g., Cook, 2001; Ellis, 2007; Forman, 2010; Levine, 2011; Ma, 2009; Macaro, 2005; Murray, 2005) and many benefits of its use have been identified. The use of the L1 has been shown to facilitate the process of learning a target language (Dickson, 1992; Long, 1996; Py, 1996; Turnbull, 2001; van Lier, 1995) and Cook (1999) has argued that the learners’ first languages are an intrinsic part of

their identity which should not be ignored in the classroom. Furthermore, because the practice of switching between two or more languages is a feature commonly found in the speech of multilinguals in a variety of social contexts, a teacher's use of both the target language and L1 in the classroom provides learners with a realistic model of 'multicompetence' to emulate (Belz, 2003; Blyth, 1995; Cook, 1992).

However, the issue of how much and for what purposes the L1 is used in the language classroom remains a "controversial issue in applied linguistics and language teaching" (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009, p.1). While teachers generally support the notion of minimising their use of the L1 in favour of providing learners with greater opportunities to hear and use the target language, in practice the L1 may be utilised more extensively than teachers consider ideal for facilitating the learning process.

A range of factors have been identified which lead teachers to restrict their use of the target language with their learners. These factors include time limitations (Celik, 2003; Macaro, 1997); the need to convey administrative information to learners (Cook, 2001; Duff & Polio, 1990); the teaching of grammar (Cook, 2001; Dickson, 1996; Franklin, 1990; Kim & Elder, 2005; Macaro, 1997; Neil, 1997; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002); and explanations of complex notions of language and culture (Celik, 2003; Chambers, 1992; Cook, 2001). The learners' level of target language proficiency also impacts on how much teachers feel they are able to interact with their learners through the target language. The study reported here focuses on teachers' choice of language in courses for beginner-level learners. Research has identified that teachers tend to limit their use of the target language with learners whose level of proficiency in the language is low (Franklin, 1990; Meiring & Norman, 2002).

Although numerous factors have been identified as influential on teachers' choice of language at specific stages of a lesson, this article focuses on one particular factor: teachers' perceptions of the extent of learners' unease or anxiety towards the use of the target language in

the classroom. It has been argued that foreign language learner anxiety impairs the learning process (Scovel, 1991) and that learners' anxiety is linked to the perception of difficulty of the target language (Horwitz, 1989). In terms of the relationship between learner anxiety and language pedagogy, Ariza (2002) found that the use of the 'Community Language Learning' method (Curran, 1972) which aimed to create feelings of comfort in learners was effective with reluctant and resistant learners of Spanish. Other teaching methodologies of the 1970s such as 'Suggestopedia' and 'The Silent Way' also attempted to reduce learner anxiety related to language learning (Stevick, 1980). In their discussion of the issues concerning the use of target language and the L1 in the classroom, Guest and Pachler (2001) described the need for teachers to create feelings of "confidence and security" in the classroom (p.85). Similarly, Polio and Duff's (1994) study into the attitudes and practices of US teachers towards the use of the TL and English in university classrooms found that the teachers' wish to create a 'relaxed atmosphere' (p.318) influenced their classroom language choice.

The relationship of learner anxiety and classroom target language use is worthy of further investigation because, as Levine (2003) points out, the literature on language learning anxiety generally addresses social and personal variables whereas learners' anxiety about target language use in particular is seldom taken into account (p.346). Levine's (2003) study of foreign language learners and teachers in the US and Canada examined the relationship between reported uses of the target language in the classroom and learner anxiety towards its use. He found that although the learners in the study appeared to appreciate the value of target language interactions for the language learning process, they nevertheless expressed some level of anxiety towards its use in the language classroom. The study reported here aimed to identify the impact of learners' affective responses towards use of the target language on teachers' practices, in particular on teachers' language choices with beginner-level language learners.

## METHODOLOGY

This study collected qualitative data from the language teaching staff at an urban Australian University. Twenty-seven language teachers out of the thirty-six employed at the university at the time of the study agreed to participate. The participant teachers taught one of the six languages offered at the university: French, German, Italian, Spanish, Chinese or Japanese. Table 1 shows the number of teachers from each of the language programs who took part in the study. It shows that there were proportionally more teachers of Japanese compared to teachers of other languages participating in the study, reflecting the larger size of the Japanese language program at the university.

**TABLE 1**  
**Number of teachers from each language programs who participated in the study**

Language Program	Number of Participant Teachers from this program
French	3
German	6
Italian	3
Japanese	10
Chinese	3
Spanish	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>

The majority of the language courses offered at the research site were at beginner to lower-intermediate level where the students have no or very limited experience in learning the particular foreign language before joining the course. The students are all undergraduates and have elected to study a language as part of their degree program. They receive four hours of face-to-face language instruction per week over a 14-week semester (a total of 56 hours of face-to-face instruction of the semester).

The data for this study were collected in two phases using two data collection tools: online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaire was completed anonymously by twenty of the participant teachers while the remaining seven teachers were interviewed individually. Similar items were included in both the questionnaires and interviews, however the interviews allowed for more extensive responses to be recorded. A copy of the questionnaire and interview items used in this can be found in Appendix A.

Both tools started by collecting background information on the teachers' qualifications and level of experience. All participants reported holding formal qualifications in Languages Education/Teaching and high-level proficiency in the language taught. Regarding their length of professional experience, only one teacher reported less than two years teaching experience with the remaining twenty-seven teachers reporting over six years teaching experience.

In the design of the questionnaires and interviews, the initial items in each did not lead participants towards particular issues of classroom language use but were intended to allow the teachers to raise any aspects they wished to comment on. Later items in both instruments sought to elicit data on particular classroom situations or teacher practices. The data reported in this study form part of a larger doctoral dissertation project. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and the questionnaire responses were collated. Data from both sources were sorted for examples of teachers' experience of and attitudes towards the classroom uses of the target language and L1 using the method of content analysis for common and emerging themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

In the reporting of data collected in this study, the teachers' responses are reproduced here in italicised font with teachers referred to by pseudonyms. The responses also appear as originally written by the participant teachers in the online questionnaire or as

transcribed spoken text collected through interviews and therefore contain some inconsistencies in expression.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings emerging from the collected data will now be discussed in relation to the study's research question: To what extent do the affective responses of learners influence teachers' classroom language use? Overall, it was found that many of the participant teachers reported being concerned about the affective state of their learners, including in relation to learners' reactions to the use of the target language in the classroom. Another finding was that teachers identified the need to be aware of individual differences within groups of learners regarding their reactions to classroom target language use. The third key finding which will be discussed is that despite the teachers' sensitivity to their learners' affective state, the study also found variety in how the teachers responded in their classroom practice.

### **Teachers' Concern about their Learners' Affective State**

Overall, the data collected in this study show that not only did many of the group of teachers report being sensitive to their learners' reactions to the use of the target language in their classrooms, but that their perceptions of the learners' affective states influence the teachers' language choices and teaching practices. When asked for their views on using the TL and English with beginner-level learners in the first part of the questionnaire and interview (at item number 4), the teachers' responses related mostly to the many factors influencing the use of both languages at specific times. Table 2 contains a summary of their categorised responses to item 4.

The intentionally general nature of this opening item in the questionnaire and interview was designed to elicit any aspects of classroom language choice which the participants identified themselves before they were later guided to respond to specific issues in later sections of the questionnaire or in the interviews.

**TABLE 2**  
**Teachers' responses to Item 4: Views on using the Target Language and English in the beginner-level classrooms**

Themes raised by teachers (number of comments on sub-themes in brackets)	Number of comments
<b>Classroom Use of the Target Language</b> The teachers identify reasons for using the target language with learners, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to simulate the 'real' world (6)</li> <li>• to motivate students (5)</li> <li>• to develop learners' skills in comprehending spoken language (4)</li> <li>• to provide opportunity for students to hear the target language in foreign language teaching/learning contexts (2)</li> <li>• to create a 'natural' learning environment (2)</li> <li>• to show the target language as a tool for communication (2)</li> <li>• to assist in classroom management (2)</li> </ul>	17
The teachers aim to maximise their use of the target language with learners The teachers acknowledge the limitations of the target language used with learners	3
<b>Classroom Use of English</b> The teachers identify reasons for using English with learners, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in response to learners' affective condition (14)</li> <li>• to communicate complex messages or content (8)</li> <li>• to allow for greater student participation (1)</li> <li>• to save time (1)</li> </ul>	24
Teachers reject 'exclusive TL' teaching methods	6
<b>Length of teaching experience</b> has resulted in a change in teachers' attitudes towards classroom use of the TL and English	3
<b>Teachers' language choice is challenging</b> because of individual differences among students	3
Total number of comments collected	66

As shown in Table 2 of the 66 individual comments collected from the group of teachers, the most common theme identified related to the teachers' use of the L1 (English) and specifically to the category termed 'in response to learners' affective condition'. Fourteen of the 66 comments collected from participants were

assigned to this category. The teachers used terms such as, 'frustration', 'panic', 'feel threatened' and 'insecure' to describe their perceptions of learners' responses to the classroom use of the target language. Such comments were collected from teachers of all six language programs. For example, Silvio described the use of Italian in the classroom as desirable as long as it did not cause "*excessive stress on students*". During the interviews, Sandra, a teacher of German, responded that "*If I use too much German it freaks them out*" and Eri, a teacher of Japanese, commented that "*I know they want to be exposed to target language but at the same time they feel really threatened if they don't understand much.*" Such comments illustrate how these teachers perceive and interpret their learners' emotional responses to the use of the target language.

Further comments collected from the teachers also suggest that the teachers' perceptions of their learners' unease regarding target language use influences their practices and choice of language at specific points of their teaching. Yuji, a teacher of Japanese, described his practice of switching between using English and Japanese to allay student unease: "*I just quickly switch Japanese and English back-and-forth... I do that a lot. I think that helps the students. At least they don't panic that way.*" The teacher Sylvia also commented that the amount of English or Spanish used with students related to how '*comfortable*' she perceived them to be. An extreme experience of teaching students with high levels of unease about the use of the TL in the classroom was collected in an interview with Elke, a teacher of German:

*... it's important is to immerse students ... but I did have some experience with people who did not like it at all... where students who would not understand every word I was saying if I spoke German would start crying and leave the classroom and not come back to class. For some people it is a very insecure situation.*

Even though Elke identifies the importance of providing learners with TL input and aims to maximise her use of the TL with her

learners, her experience shows that it can be challenging when teaching beginner-level adult learners.

Sophie, a teacher of French, described how her attitude and practices regarding classroom language use had changed over her career of more than ten years particularly in response to her experience of learners' affective state:

*I started my career using very little English. Little by little I noticed that only students with healthy self-esteem and a high level of tolerance for ambiguity were benefiting from that. Therefore, I started to use English more and more. I've now become an advocate of the use of the first language in language classes. I've noticed that the level of anxiety in class is much lower, and as a result the learning retention is increased.*

The comments collected from the teachers of all the language programs indicate a widespread sensitivity at the university towards students' reactions to the use of the target language for classroom interactions.

### **Differences within Individual Groups of Learners**

As well as sensitivity to learners' reactions to classroom target language use, the comments of some participants also identified the need the teachers felt to adjust their approach to classroom language use in response to the individual differences amongst learners. The Japanese teacher, Eri, summed up the sentiment in her comment that:

*...some students are threatened to be spoken Japanese all the time, but some students may not like to be spoken English to. You need to be flexible about it.*

Given that the language classes at the university may include up to 30 individual students, it is unlikely that the affective responses of all the students in any particular class would not be similar.

Rita, a teacher of German, also identified more specific differences she had encountered amongst groups of learners who

had differing previous experience of FL learning. Describing students she had taught who had previously learnt other languages, she found:

*...normally they are a little bit more flexible... they are welcoming when the target language is used as much as possible, they may be a little bit more open and welcome it even more than others who are easier to be confused.*

Rita's experience is consistent with findings from Levine's (2003) study of university FL students' level of anxiety towards classroom TL use. He also found that "students who come from bi- or multilingual backgrounds may feel less anxious about TL use than students from monolingual backgrounds" (p.354).

### **Differences in Teachers' Practices**

The data presented above suggest that many teachers across the language programs at this university identified learner unease or anxiety as relevant to their use of the TL and English in the classroom. However, the teachers' comments also revealed that this level of concern for learners has different consequences for their teaching practices across the participant group. For example through the questionnaire, both Chen-Xiao, a teacher of Chinese, and Emiko, a teacher of Japanese, raised the issue of students' level of confidence in relation to their classroom use of the target language, but reported different strategies in response to it. Chen-Xiao felt that: "*English should be the dominant language of instruction in order to give the students more confidence.*" In contrast, Emiko felt that increasing learner confidence could be achieved not by limiting the use of the target language, but by increasing it:

*...an important issue regarding the successful use of Target Language in the classroom is developing students' confidence in the language, not only using it but even being exposed to large amounts of it.*

Emiko's response highlights the challenge that teachers face in allowing for low-proficiency learners minimal comprehension of the

TL, yet also providing learners with opportunity to listen to more extensive uses of the TL in the classroom. The teacher provided further explanation of the approach used with students:

*So at the beginning of the course we talk about the fact that in a natural situation in the country, students would not understand everything, so in the classroom too they would not be expected to understand or certainly produce every word. (This is done in English) I then proceed to use as much target language as possible supporting it with gestures, teaching aids, pictures etc.*

This teacher has described one technique used to reduce the unease experienced by beginner level learners: making explicit to learners the benefits of using the target language in the classroom. This strategy was specifically investigated in item 6 of the questionnaire and also in the interviews where teachers were asked whether they discuss their use of the target language with learners. Whereas other items in the questionnaire which probed teachers' use of different teaching techniques yielded generally consistent responses from all the teachers, responses to this item varied across the group of participants. Table 3 details the Likert scale responses collected through the questionnaire regarding this suggested teaching strategy.

The open-ended comments from teachers on this issue (collected through the questionnaire and interview) also show a divergence in attitudes about the value of discussing with their students the rationale for using the TL. The teachers who replied that they 'never' discuss classroom use of the TL with learners felt it was unnecessary as students would "*understand why I use it*" (Jacqueline, teacher of French). Similarly Ute, a teacher of German, commented that students "*don't need to know the didactics behind my strategies. They learn better sometimes, when they don't know.*"

In contrast to the teachers who rejected the practice of discussing their approach to teaching with learners, there were an almost equal number who indicated it was a practice they used, particularly in the first class of the semester. Carmel, a teacher of Italian responded: "*I*

tell them that I will be avoiding English as soon as they are progressing in the TL." The teachers' practice of discussing classroom language use with students was also explained by Sandra, a teacher of German:

*I also always make a point with my classes of telling them, say at the beginning of semester, that I don't expect them to understand every single word but that's not the point. It's about the importance of exposure.*

**TABLE 3**

**Teachers' Responses to the Statement: "I discuss with my beginner-level students why I use the target language with them"**

Possible Responses	Number of Teachers
'Always'	2
'Sometimes'	5
'Rarely'	3
'Never'	7
'Unsure'	2
No response	1
TOTAL	20

Several teachers also described how they seek to allay students concerns about not comprehending the target language they may hear in the classroom (and beyond), by making explicit the processes involved in listening. For example, Eri, the Japanese teacher, described her own experiences using the target language: "*Sometimes I tell them about how I don't understand everything in Japanese even as a native-speaker and also how I don't listen to everything.*" By raising the issue with learners, the teachers seem to be seeking to reduce the level of learner unease about listening to the target language.

### LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The level of language teachers' sensitivity towards beginner-level students' reactions to the use of the target language in the classroom has also been shown to be an important factor in influencing how (and in which language) teachers interact with their students in language classrooms. In particular, the study has identified a teaching strategy employed by teachers to allay students' concerns:

the explicit discussion of classroom target language use. However, given that many of the teachers in this study reported that these discussions typically occur within the first meetings of the class, subsequent research which observes classroom interactions in the first stage of a course would allow for the investigations of the types of discussions which take place and specifically how teachers frame classroom uses of the target language for learners.

This study has explored the perceptions of a group of teachers in one educational institution. It would also be constructive for future research to investigate the perspectives of learners on the issue. This would allow an examination of how beneficial learners find discussions of classroom language use and to what extent teachers' perceptions of the level of students anxiety were accurate or whether, as Levine (2003) found, teachers tended to overestimate the negative impact of their target language use on learners. There is also the need to investigate teachers' attitudes and practices in different teaching contexts to test the viability of the strategy among different groups of learners.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has collected data on teacher perceptions of learner unease and the effect these perceptions have on classroom interaction practices in one university beginner-level FL learning context. However, it is important to remember that this is a study of teacher perceptions of learners' feelings and that such perceptions may or may not be accurate. As found in the study by Levine (2003), language teachers sometimes overestimate the level of anxiety experienced by learners. In this study, even though the teacher perceptions of learners' level of anxiety cannot be verified, it is nevertheless an important factor to investigate as many teachers expressed sensitivity to their learners' negative reactions to the use of the target language in the classroom. It also impacted on the choice of language used in the classroom by some of the teachers.

The data collected has also shown that the issue of teachers' use of the target language and the L1 in beginner-level language class is a complex one. The goal to maximise target language use cannot simply be achieved through teachers relentlessly using the target language with learners and ignoring a powerful resource available for communicating meaning: the learners' L1. The teachers in this study described how they use English with their beginner-level students for a number of reasons, including to seek to allay student unease, to reduce student frustrations and to build student confidence.

This study has also revealed a teaching technique which utilises the L1 to explicitly discuss the classroom use of the target language with learners. The participant teachers described how they address student concerns about not comprehending the target language used in classroom interactions by specifying that learners do not need to comprehend all that they hear, by giving opportunities for learners to confirm understandings and by highlighting the value of being exposed to the target language. Macaro (2001) argued the need to identify "when reference to the L1 can be a valuable tool and when it is simply used as an easy option" (p.545). This study has highlighted one example of how the L1 tool can be valuably used: to address perceived learner unease concerning use of the target language, which may ultimately assist to create the conditions for the target language to be used more extensively in classroom interactions.

## **THE AUTHOR**

Susan Oguro is a lecturer in International Studies and Education in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her PhD study examines classroom practices, particularly teachers' use of language(s), which support adult language learners. Her other research interest is in the area of Heritage Language Education.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW ITEMS RELEVANT TO THIS STUDY

Item Number	Item
4	Teachers of beginner-level courses differ in how (and how much) they use the Target Language (TL) and English with their learners. What are your own views about using the target language and English in beginner-level language classes?
6	Some teachers adjust the way they speak when they are using the TL with beginner-level learners. Do you do this?
8	Thinking about when you teach beginner-level classes, do you ever find yourself using more English with your students than had planned?
9	<p>In this section, there are 11 statements about what some teachers do in their classes. Please read each statement and choose the response which best matches what you do in your beginner-level classes.</p> <p>Statement # 6: "I discuss with my beginner-level students why I use the target language with them"</p> <p>Always / Sometimes/ Rarely / Never / Unsure.</p> <p>Please comment on your answer</p>