

Own language use in ELT

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/seminars/own-language-use-elt>



Guy Cook and Graham Hall

1. Introduction
 2. History of the approach
 3. Background to the research
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 5. Further data and conclusions
- Q1 What do you think are the limitations of the study?
- Q2 Is the research affected by the fact that 60% of respondents say they are experts in their students' native language?
- Q3 Does a teacher who speaks the native language still have an advantage in the classroom?

This stimulating seminar puts the spotlight once more on the important subject of L1 versus L2 usage in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom. The speakers refer to this in their study as 'learners' own language' versus 'the target language'. Their research provides pertinent insight into what is really happening in the ELT classroom, and what teacher educators and materials writers need to know

Session summary and objectives

Throughout the 20th century, the use of learners' own languages in ELT was frowned upon. Yet despite its disappearance from theory and methodological texts, it has survived in ELT classrooms.

Now, a wider re-evaluation of own-language use in ELT classes is emerging. Pedagogic arguments include the efficient conveying of meaning, maintenance of class discipline and organisation, and teacher-learner rapport. Meanwhile, it is widely recognised that learning proceeds best when it is 'scaffolded' onto existing knowledge. Politically, monolingual teaching has been critiqued for its devastating effect on the status of non-native English speaker teachers, and for inhibiting the development of bilingual and bicultural identities and skills amongst learners.

Despite the recent focus upon this issue, however, there remain gaps in our understanding of the extent to which, and how, learners' own languages are used in ELT classes, and the attitudes practising teachers hold towards own-language use.

Drawing upon the views of almost 3,000 teachers in over 100 countries, this seminar reports on a British Council ELTRA-funded global survey of classroom practices, teachers' attitudes and the possible reasons for these attitudes. In the seminar, the presenters discuss the potential dislocation between theory and practice and between theorists and teachers; they recognize and appreciate existing own-language practices; and they address the issue of teacher (and learner) 'guilt' about own-language use in ELT.

By raising awareness of own-language practices, the seminar encourages participants to consider the role and value of bi- and multi-lingual approaches to language learning and education both in pedagogy and in wider policy making.

Who is this session for?

- All English language teachers around the world who are interested in the subject of L1 and L2 language use in the ELT classroom
- Teacher educators and pre-service training providers
- ELT materials writers

About the speaker

Professor Guy Cook is Professor of Language in Education at Kings College London. He was formerly head of TESOL at the London University Institute of Education (1991 – 98), Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading (1998 – 2004) and Professor of Language in Education at The Open University (2005 –12). In his work on English language teaching, he is an advocate of the use of translation and students' own languages, and an opponent of exclusively monolingual and utilitarian approaches (see bibliography).

Mr. Graham Hall is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics/TESOL at Northumbria University, Newcastle. He has taught English (TESOL) in Hungary, Poland, Saudi Arabia and the UK in state sector schools, language schools, universities and for the British Council. He joined Northumbria University in 1998. He is the editor of ELT Journal and has published *Exploring English Language Teaching: Language in Action* (Routledge, 2011), which was the winner of the British Association for Applied Linguistics Book Prize in 2012.

Before you watch

Consider these criteria: state schools versus private schools, geographical location, language level of students, and teacher experience. Which of these criteria do you think most influences a teacher's use of the learners' own language in the classroom?

Real life practice

Task 1

We recommend you read the full report behind this seminar if you are interested in this subject area. You can download it free of charge from EnglishAgenda.

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/research-papers/own-language-use-elt-exploring-global-practices-and-attitudes>

Task 2

Reflect on how, and to what extent, the learners' own language is used in your own classroom.

1. When do you use the learners own language in class and for what purpose? Consider these options:
 - to welcome the students into class
 - to introduce new vocabulary
 - to give instructions
 - to explain grammar
 - to clarify a point that the learners do not understand
 - to maintain rapport and social connection with the students
 - to deal with non-English language matters such as student well-being
 - Other reasons – add your own suggestions
2. What percentage of classroom time do you typically speak in English versus speaking in the learners' own language? What factors affect this, do you think?
3. Consider your experience of teaching a lesson in which you use the English language the whole time, and do not use the learners' own language at all. What is the effect of this on the learners? Has there been any effect on classroom management? How about on achieving the aims of the lesson?
4. Make a note of your results and reflections. What conclusions do you draw? Is there anything you would like to share with other teachers? Or discuss with other teachers?
5. Share your conclusions with your teaching colleagues or on a professional teaching forum. How do your own experiences compare to the experiences of other teachers?

Top tips

1. Tip one is that there is no right or wrong answer regarding the right amount of own language usage that must be used in the classroom! Each teaching context will be different and it would be naïve to assume there is one right way to do things.
2. The rationale for the English language classroom is for learners to learn to use the English language, not to learn about the English language. To achieve this, they must use the target language as often as possible, in a variety of meaningful ways, in order to get sufficient practice and to build their confidence.
3. When lesson planning, be very clear to yourself about why, when and how you plan to use the learners' own language in the classroom. Focus on appropriacy and purpose. Pay attention to L1 strategies that you find effective in the classroom and be mindful about those that are not.

4. If learners are to become able users of the English language, it is important that they become increasingly less dependent on the use of their own language to communicate. Teachers need to incentivise students to use English and to frequently acknowledge their progress and accomplishments in order to build confidence.
5. Teacher educators and teachers trainers now have the incentive and the opportunity to further explore the subject of learner's own language usage in learning and teaching practice with teachers, be they pre-service, novice or experienced teachers. The aim is to inform best practice in teacher training and teacher development programmes.

Join the discussion!

Discuss this question with your colleagues, if you can:

It has often been suggested that English language teachers feel guilty about using the learners' own language in the classroom; that deep down they think they don't use enough of the target language (English) in their lessons? What is your response to this notion?