

## **To Use or Not to Use: First Language in Tertiary Instruction of English as a Foreign Language**

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**Abstract:** The issue of whether first language (L1) use in teaching foreign languages (FL) is justified can be considered from various perspectives. The diachronic perspective considers the role of L1 in FL instruction along with the development of teaching methods and linguistic theories. The taxonomic perspective concerns the arguments for and against L1 use taking into account its cognitive, social and affective aspects. The role of L1 can also be viewed from the empirical perspective considering the effects of its use and examining attitudes, beliefs etc. of participants in the dynamic process of FL teaching and learning.

The survey presented in this paper aims to investigate and compare the perception of using Croatian in tertiary English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction concerning L1 use. Two groups of respondents involved in the study were undergraduate non-linguistic majors at a Croatian university and ESP instructors in various higher education institutions in several Croatian universities. The questions that the research in this paper addresses is 1) whether the tertiary students' perception of using Croatian as L1 in teaching EFL corresponds to that maintained by tertiary language instructors and 2) whether students and instructors, respectively, support the usage of L1 in the tertiary EFL classroom. First language use is explored in terms of necessity, frequency, usefulness and its appropriateness for selected examples of usage. The presented findings comprise those obtained by quantitative as well as qualitative data analysis.

**Key Words:** First language, EFL, ESP, tertiary instruction, research, survey

### **Introduction**

The question “*Should the first language (L1) be used in foreign language (FL) instruction?*” has posed a challenge for ESL/EFL materials writers, scholars and, in particular, instructors, who need to address it in their day-to-day teaching practice. In spite of its relevance for the stakeholders, it seems that there is no comprehensive agreement on L1 use. The authors whose formalization of L1 use over the last two and half decades has shaped the opinion of EFL/ESL professionals include Atkinson (1987), Auerbach (1993), Cook (2001b), Turnbull (2001) and Butzkamm (2003).

First language use in the FL classroom can be observed from three perspectives. The diachronic perspective considers the evolution of L1 in FL instruction along with the development of teaching methods and linguistic theories, often within the ESL context. Moving along the continuum between the two extremes – proscribed and firmly prescribed L1 use – was primarily reflected in the amount of precious class time during which the learner needs to be exposed to FL. The methods that advocate the orthodox use of FL are based on the assumption that a greater amount of FL is one of the preconditions for its easier acquisition, still allowing for L1 to be used when it aids comprehension (Krashen, 1989; Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Furthermore, L1 use can also be considered as one of the parameters that define the differences between methods in terms of differing functions assigned to L1 in each of them. Monolingual approach, which is based on the language compartmentalisation theory, is thus countered by methods that deliberately involve L1 (Cook, 2001b). The turning point in reassertion of L1 in FL teaching is the theory of multicompetence (Cook, 2001a). Butzkamm (2000) places “the ability to capitalise on the vast amount of both linguistic skills and world knowledge (...) already accumulated via the mother tongue” among habits of good language learners.

The taxonomic perspective concerns the arguments for and against L1 use, taking into account its cognitive, social and affective aspects. In that respect, the springboard for explicit consideration of L1 was the

paper by Atkinson (1987), who identified the gap in methodological literature on L1 use as one of the reasons for its indiscriminate use. Inventories of practical uses of L1 and its pedagogical implications have since ranged from resource books (e.g. Atkinson, 1993; Deller and Rinvoluceri, 2002) to articles comprising general principles for L1 use (e.g., Gill, 2005, Cook, 2001b), or those providing a cognitive rationale for L1/FL comparison (Došen, 2001, Ibarra Hidalgo, 2009).

The role of L1 can also be viewed from the empirical perspective, drawing on research into various aspects of participants' use of L1 in the dynamic context of the FL classroom. Scott and De la Fuente (2008) proposed the key questions to be addressed when L1 is concerned and also pointed out that most research into L1 use is conducted from the interactionist perspective. Accordingly, Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo (2009) examined the benefits of L1 use for lower proficiency students in collaborative tasks. Research into attitudes of students (*Kavaliauskienė, 2009*) or *students and teachers toward L1 use in tertiary FL/SL instruction* (e.g. Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002; Shimizu, 2006) revealed the respondents' tendency toward rational use of L1. Contrary to the findings of Prodromou (2002), who revealed that the students' preference to use L1 in FL class diminishes with their proficiency level, the research conducted among students in Iran (Nazary, 2008) showed that respondents were reluctant to use L1 in class regardless of their proficiency. Finally, of particular interest for practitioners are studies on teachers and students' attitudes toward different uses of L1 (Macaro, 1997). In their research among US university teachers, Polio and Duff (1994) established varying preferences for specific L1 uses.

The questions that the research in this paper addresses are 1) whether the tertiary ESP students' perception of using Croatian as L1 in teaching EFL corresponds to that maintained by tertiary language teachers and 2) whether students and teachers, respectively, support L1 use in the tertiary EFL classroom.

### **Method of the Study**

The survey presented in this paper aims to investigate and compare the perception of using L1 (Croatian) in tertiary ESP instruction concerning L1 use in terms of necessity, frequency, usefulness and its appropriateness for selected examples of usage. The research was conducted by means of two analogous questionnaires, one for the students and the other for the teachers. The instrument, which is an adapted version of the questionnaires used by Schweers (1999), Tang (2002) and Shimizu (2006), was administered in Croatian. Generally speaking, all the three groups of L1 uses specified by Cook (2001b), i.e., 'teacher conveying meaning', 'teacher organizing the class' and 'students using L1 within the classroom' were represented in our survey.

The student questionnaire consisted of 11 questions: 3 demographic questions; 2 questions concerning the linguistic competence level; 6 questions concerning perception of L1 use. The teacher questionnaire consisted of 8 questions: 1 on the respondents' general data; 6 questions concerning perception of L1 use and 1 open-ended question. In both questionnaires, among the 6 questions concerning perception of L1 use there were 2 dichotomous questions and 4 multiple-choice questions. Combining various question types makes it possible to collect data based on which hypotheses can subsequently be formulated and a scale of a higher internal consistency developed (Mackey and Gass, 2005).

### **Sampling**

Two groups of respondents included in the study were: 1) undergraduate non-linguistic majors at the Faculty of Organization and Informatics, University of Zagreb and 2) ESP instructors in Croatian higher education institutions.

The first group of respondents (N=171) were students in the undergraduate intermediate *English Language I* course in the 2008/2009 academic year. 121 (70.88%) of respondents were male and 48 (28.1%) female, while in 2 cases the data on gender was missing. Undergraduate respondents' age ranged between 19 and 28, 19 being the average (M=19.982, sd 0.939). This obligatory course is delivered in the first term, but can also be enrolled by second- and third-year students. The majority of respondents had been learning English for 9 years (M= 9.123, sd 3.453). The other formal indicator of students' EFL knowledge was the self-assessed active and passive EFL competence, on the scale from 5 (excellent) to 1 (unsatisfactory). The average passive competence obtained was 4 (M=4.147, sd 0.875). On the other hand, although the average active competence obtained was 3 (M=3.412, sd 1.064), due to the coefficient of variation V=31.18% respondents did not form a sufficiently homogeneous set. Therefore the mode (D=4.00) makes for a more representative value for the passive competence variable. In this paper, students' competence level is not discussed in relation to other variables.

The second group of respondents (N=20) were female instructors teaching non-linguistic majors in 15 Croatian higher education institutions. While 16 respondents were teachers of ESP, EAP and communication skills in 3 different Croatian universities, 4 respondents taught vocational ESP courses in 3 higher education institutions.

### **Data Analysis Processes**

The student survey was administered in class in January 2009. The teacher survey was conducted by electronic mail in January-February 2009, in accordance with guidelines in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007). The e-mail response rate was 41.6%. The data obtained by research was processed by means of SPSS software, using the descriptive statistics methods, with the exception of the last (open-ended) question in the teacher survey.

While applying analogous instruments to different groups of respondents enabled data triangulation, the qualitative question in the teacher survey allowed for methodological triangulation (Medved-Krajnović, 2010; Brown and Rodgers, 2002) with quantitative data in the rest of the teacher survey. Using the data collected by the open-ended question, we extracted several categories. They were further subdivided into subcategories, to which applicable parts of teachers' written replies were added.

### **Findings and Discussion**

By examining the problem using the questionnaires we obtained values for the following variables: *perception of the need to use L1*, *perception of L1 frequency*, *preferred frequency of L1 use*, *perception of L1 usefulness*, and *appropriateness of L1 for 12 concrete cases of use*. All the variables were examined on both groups, except for *preferred frequency*, which was only included in the student questionnaire.

#### **Perception of the Need to Use L1**

Most students (117, or 68.4%) provided a positive answer to the question "*Should Croatian be used in the English classroom?*". Most of the teachers (16, or 80%) also provided a positive answer, which generally indicates that both students and teachers consider that the use of L1 in their English classes is justified. Such answers are in correspondence with our expectations based on the results of similar research (e.g. Schweers, 1999). Moreover, since our research was conducted on a monolingual group of students taught by the speaker of their native language, it was unlikely that L1 would be totally excluded from instruction for naturalness sake (Cook, 2001b). The results obtained by Shimizu (2006) among Japanese students, in which 66% of non-linguistic majors supported L1 use in EFL classroom, with an additional 18% who opted for the answer 'It depends' are closest to those obtained in our research. Surprisingly, the percentage of undergraduate Chinese students supporting L1 use (70%) in Tang (2002) is also comparable to that in our research, although the Chinese study was conducted among English majors. In research by Schweers (1999) among L1 Spanish learners of ESL the percentage of students in favour of L1 was much higher (88.7%). Tang explains that by higher motivation among Chinese learners who, while aware of the merits of L1, still expect to use FL in class as much as possible.

#### **Perception of L1 Frequency and Preferred Frequency of L1 Use**

Among the 6 answers to the question "*How often do you think Croatian should be used in the English classroom?*" (see Appendix, Table 1), most students (96, or 56,1%) chose the answer 'sometimes'. This answer was also the most frequent one among teachers (9, or 45%), although in their case the percentage is slightly lower. Interestingly, when asked "*How often do you use Croatian in the English classroom?*", most teachers (13, or 65%), chose the same answer. However, from the slightly higher percentage of teachers who opted for this answer compared to the percentage obtained for the question at the beginning of this paragraph (45,00%) we may conclude that teachers find they use L1 more than they should. In her recent research, Edstrom (2006) confirmed that differences in the perception of teacher's L1 use and the actual L1 use are a worthwhile avenue of exploration. Furthermore, it is notable that although no universal agreement on the optimum amount of L1 in a

FL classroom exists, teachers' perception of their use of L1 tends to lean to the 'L1 used more than actually necessary' stance. The reason why teachers may feel uneasy using L1 is that they feel they are breaking 'the mother tongue taboo' (Deller and Rinvoluceri, 2002, in Gill, 2005).

Among the answers to the question "*Is it preferable that your teacher uses Croatian in class?*", ('not at all', 'a little', 'moderately', 'very') most students (87, or 50.9%) chose the answer 'moderately'. This result, which is in correspondence with the students' answer regarding the frequency of use, leads us to conclude that most students find occasional use of L1 FL classroom acceptable – the attitude also supported by most teachers – and that teachers should use it moderately.

### **Perception of L1 Usefulness**

Two questions in both summaries addressed the usefulness of L1. Most students (125, or 73.1%) found that using L1 in FL class is helpful for learning English, which is also the option selected by most teachers (16, or 80%). In the question "*Do you think it is necessary to use Croatian in your English class? If so, why?*", respondents had to choose one of 4 positive effects of L1 use – 'aid to comprehension', 'more effective classes', 'feeling less lost in class', 'saving time' – or the answer 'I don't find it necessary'. Most respondents in both groups found that the greatest benefit of using L1 is easier comprehension. However, this percentage was much higher among teachers (16, or 80%) compared to students (61, or 35.7%, with 15 missing answers). Namely, among students' answers all the other benefits of L1 use were also represented. For example, 32 (18.7%) of students reported that owing to L1 they felt less lost in class. Although L1 is often considered in terms of cross-linguistic influences and cognitive benefits, this particular result in our research points out the importance of affect in language learning and acquisition, recognized by Krashen (1981) in his Affective Filter hypothesis. In our survey, L1 was perceived by students as a valuable tool in lowering that filter.

### **L1 Appropriateness for Selected Cases of Use**

In the survey respondents were given a list of 12 cases of L1 use and were asked to choose several options for which they thought using L1 is appropriate. The answers for each group are shown in Table 2 (see Appendix). While most students (150, or 87.7%) stated that using L1 was appropriate for explaining difficult grammar points, a lot of them (123, or 71.9%) also opted for L1 use in explaining difficult concepts. These two answers were also the most frequent ones among teachers, but in reverse order. Interestingly, exactly half of the teachers found the use of L1 for explaining grammar and defining new vocabulary, respectively, equally appropriate. These results may arise from the awareness that L1 can be used to facilitate the intake process that is not automatically guaranteed by the FL input (Swain, 1993, in Turnbull, 2001). Alegria de la Colina and Garcia Mayo (2009) defined such use of L1 as a cognitive tool mediating higher-order thinking processes. It should be noted that the respondents in our survey were ESP students and the ability to understand and use technical terminology in a FL is among the learning outcomes of their course. Ibarra Hidalgo (2009) pointed out the paradox that, owing to techniques in which L1 was used to teach lexical items, learners gradually became less dependent on L1. Moreover, it is not surprising that both students and teachers found L1 acceptable in explaining grammar. Scott and De la Fuente (2008) established the positive role of L1 in explicit, form-focused collaborative tasks in which students were encouraged to use L1 to analyze grammar features and verbalize rules. Another example of L1 use ranked highly by the teachers (7, or 35%) were written translation exercises. Atkinson (1993, in Mattioli, 2004) recognized the value of translation in 'raising one's consciousness of the non-parallel nature of languages'.

It is notable that almost half of the students (77, or 45%) prefer having the instructions concerning activities done outside class to be delivered in L1. When we consider that, under the Bologna process, students are involved in the continuous assessment scheme and are exposed to a lot of administrative information concerning the course, projects, tests etc., it is natural they find clear and straightforward communication to be vital for academic success.

Finally, the L1 uses that refer to communicative practice in class and spoken comprehension checks were assigned fairly low rankings by both groups. This can be explained by other aids that students have at disposal when using FL in oral communication, like compensation strategies. Interestingly, such an explanation would be countered by some authors (Atkinson, 1987) who actually emphasized the usefulness of L1 in developing circumlocution strategies during FL use.

The frequency and percentage of respondents' answers by the total number of selected options among the 12 cases of L1 use (see Appendix, Table 3) reveal that most students (40, or 23.4%) chose 4 options, while most teachers opted for either 2 or 5 L1 uses (5, that is 25% of respondents, respectively). Since, on the whole,

most respondents selected between 2-5 options, we can conclude that both students and teachers are aware of the diversity of functions of L1 in the ESP classroom and the need for a varied use of L1.

### **Teachers' Impressions regarding the General Policy toward L1 Use**

Teachers were also asked to summarize their impression on their institution's policy regarding L1 use in FL instruction. From the collected answers we first extracted the categories that potentially impact teachers' decision whether to use L1. We divided the obtained categories into 3 'external' (*Consensus regarding L1 use, Awareness of the changing impact of teaching methods, Students*) and 3 'internal' elements (*Efficiency, Contrastive approach, Affective factors*). In our research the term 'external' refers to elements concerning the circumstances in which instruction takes place, not defined by teachers (e.g. educational policy). 'Internal' refers to individual factors that may be susceptible to change in accordance with the teacher's agency (e.g. techniques used). After further analysis, most of the categories were divided into subcategories (e.g. *Efficiency* was subdivided into *Saving class time, Exposure to L2, Lexical /structural /pragmatic accuracy* and *Course and classroom/task management*). In some cases, contrary statements from teachers' answers were integrated within the same subcategory. For example, consider the statements assigned to the subcategory *Mixed proficiency levels* that we grouped under the *Students* category:

(1) *"There is a significant number of students with poor foreknowledge of English, while within the Bologna Reform the only languages are English and German taught only as languages for specific purposes."*

(2) *"In my opinion, considering our students' level of knowledge, Croatian is not necessary."*

The examples above indicate one of the key organizational challenges of the current ESP teaching practice in Croatia. Namely, while in theory, tertiary ESP courses are automatically identified with high proficiency levels (with minimum L1 use), as in (2), in reality it is not uncommon that teachers have to deal with mixed levels of competence and motivation in one-size-fits-all ESP courses, as reported in (1).

Contrary views are also found in teachers' remarks concerning instruction efficiency. One of the identified subcategories here is *Lexical /structural /pragmatic accuracy*. Consider the statements related to acquisition of professional language skills:

(3) *"Skills of drafting contracts, writing instructions etc., vital for the engineers' future profession, are best acquired with the aid of Croatian."*

(4) *"Students are aware of the importance of English for their profession and readily accept communication in English, even outside the classroom."*

Both replies above reveal that teachers are aware that ESP courses need to fulfil the immediate needs of students' future profession. However, while in (3) L1 is seen as a catalyst for acquisition of professional competences, in (4) maximum exposure to FL is suggested as crucial in that respect.

Interestingly, most diverse answers were found in the category *Consensus regarding L1 use* at the institutional level, including: *Consensus in favour of L1 use, Consensus against L1 use, Consensus in favour of a balanced approach* and *Lack of consensus*. This last subcategory, which results in teachers making decisions on L1 use at the individual level, is illustrated as follows:

(5) *"It would seem that foreign language teachers still doubt whether to use L1, and to what extent. While some tend to avoid it, others overuse it."*

The analysis of the teachers' answers, only some of which are presented in this section, reveals that the open-ended question enabled the teachers to state their attitudes and preferences in accordance with but also beyond the set of possible uses listed in one of the multiple-choice questions. From a holistic perspective, we can argue that our qualitative findings support those obtained through quantitative analysis. Indeed, the findings presented in this section should be taken as 'words' that collated with 'figures' provide a more in-depth view, as suggested by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004).

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The research presented in this paper reveals that Croatian students and teachers involved in tertiary ESP courses generally support the use of L1 in FL instruction. Both students and teachers find that L1 use should be moderate. Although there are some differences between the two groups concerning selected examples of L1 usage, the most frequently selected examples are the ones also most frequently dealt with in recent research on pedagogical uses of L1.

Using L1 in a way that would add value to FL instruction while maximizing the use of FL in the classroom may seem a tall order. Not only do teachers need to adapt to the requirements and expectations of specific groups or teaching contexts, but they also need to balance between the institutional policies toward L1 (provided it exists) and their own beliefs and practices. Edstrom (2006) found that reflection can be a valuable tool for teachers and researchers in developing a more informed awareness of merits of L1 use.

Any attempt to quantify the amount of L1 to be used in the classroom needs to be made in conjunction with the functions that L1 will be used for. Along with the variables presented in this paper, in future research students' language competence level or motivation could be considered. Furthermore, it needs to be mentioned that the quantitative data obtained in this research refer to a specific population among EFL learners/teachers and cannot be generalized. Finally, regarding the processing of the teachers' open-ended answers, we are aware that coding qualitative data is a demanding and iterative process, as suggested by Dörnyei (2007). The classification proposed in this paper is therefore inconclusive.

In spite of the limitations of this study, we hope that it will help contribute to the research of L1 use in ESP in our country<sup>27</sup> or similar contexts. We also believe that the differing attitudes concerning various key facets of pedagogical L1 use identified in our research provide substantial evidence for its inclusion on researchers' as well as EFL teachers' agenda.

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<sup>27</sup> As a contribution to discussing this issue in public fora, a recent plenary delivered by Ms Mirna Radišić, M.A., at the Conference of the Association of Croatian Teachers of English (HUPE) in Opatija, Croatia, in April 2011, deserves to be mentioned.

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## Appendix

Table 1. *Perception of Frequency of L1 (Croatian) Use in the English Classroom*

Answer	Students (N=171)		Teachers (N=20)		Teachers (N=20)	
	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
No reply	2	1.2	0	0	0	0
Never	0	0	0	0	0	0
Very rarely	27	15.8	4	20	3	15
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>56.1</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>65</b>
Frequently	18	10.5	0	0	0	0
Fairly frequently	9	5.3	0	0	0	0
Only when necessary	19	11.1	7	35	4	20

Table 2. *Respondents' Frequency and Percentage for the 12 Cases of L1 (Croatian) Use*



*1st International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics  
May 5-7 2011 Sarajevo*

Answer	Students (N = 171)			Teachers (N = 20)		
	frequency	%	ranking	frequency	%	ranking
To explain difficult grammar points	<b>150</b>	<b>87.7</b>	<b>1</b>	10	50	2
To define new vocabulary items	94	55	3	10	50	2
To explain difficult concepts	123	71.9	2	<b>15</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>1</b>
To practice the use of new expressions and phrases	36	21.1	10	1	5	9
To help students feel more comfortable and confident	43	25.1	8	6	30	4
To give instructions concerning activities done in class	54	31.6	6	5	25	5
To give students advice on effective studying	31	18.1	11	3	15	7
To give feedback	52	30.4	7	2	10	8
To check for comprehension (in speaking)	20	11.7	12	4	20	6
To joke around with students	37	21.6	9	3	15	7
In written tests (translation tasks)	62	36.3	5	7	35	3
To give instructions concerning activities done outside class	77	45.0	4	3	15	7

Table 3. Respondents' Frequency and Percentage by the Total Number of Selected Options Among the 12 Cases of L1 (Croatian) Use

Number of selected options	Students (N = 171)		Teachers (N = 20)	
	frequency	%	frequency	%
None	2	1.2	0	0
1 option	3	1.8	2	10
<b>2 options</b>	23	13.5	<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>
3 options	29	17	3	15
<b>4 options</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>23.4</b>	4	20
<b>5 options</b>	26	15.2	<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>
6 options	17	9.9	0	0
7 options	16	9.4	1	5
8 options	6	3.5	0	0
9 options	5	2.9	0	0
10 options	1	0.6	0	0
11 options	0	0	0	0
all the 12 options	3	1.8	0	0
Total:	171	100	20	100