Understanding the role of first language (L1) in Instructed Second Language Acquisition: effects of using a principled approach to L1 in the foreign language classroom

María J. de la Fuente and Carola Goldenberg
The George Washington University

Abstract
This study addressed the effects of a principled use of the mother language (L1) in the foreign language (L2) classroom. In particular, it compared the development of speaking and writing L2 proficiency over the course of one semester of two groups of learners: one exposed to instruction that incorporated specific L1 uses, and one exposed to instruction conducted exclusively in the L2. A pre-post test design was used to measure proficiency. Results showed that students in the +L1 condition improved significantly more than those in the –L1 condition, both in speaking and writing proficiency.

Review of the literature
- Long-held anti-L1 attitudes have dominated Foreign Language pedagogy for several decades. However, no study has been able to demonstrate a relationship between exclusion of the L1 and improved L2 learning (Macaro, 2001).
- Few studies in Instructed Second Language Acquisition consider the bilingual nature of L2 learners’ minds or have empirically addressed the impact of L1.
- Cook’s (2001) notion that L2 learners should be viewed as multi-competent language users rather than deficient native speakers is founded on the premise that L1 and L2 co-exist collaboratively in the learner’s mind.
- Several studies suggest that the L1 may play a significant role in L2 learning (Centeno-Cortez & Gimenez, 2004).
- At the early stages of L2 learning, L1 governs language processing (Grosjean, 1999).
- L1 use facilitates processing of L2 by reducing the cognitive load on learners’ working memory. (Scott & de la Fuente, 2008; de la Fuente, 2015).

Research question
Does classroom instruction which incorporates a principled approach to the use of L1 by students and instructors have an effect (positive or negative) on the development of speaking and writing L2 proficiency by beginning learners of Spanish, compared to L2 only instruction, over the course of one semester?

Methodology
Participants: 52 beginner learners of Spanish at GWU. Six intact groups assigned to two experimental groups, both exposed to same task-based curriculum.
- Group 1, instruction and interaction exclusively in L2.
- Group 2, instruction and interaction marked by the use of L1 for specific functions.

Instruments
- Pre-post test design (weeks 3 and 15 of Fall 2017) to measure proficiency using Avant STAMP 4S adaptive Test (assigns a benchmark level for speaking and writing).

- Self-report student survey to support the qualitative analysis of results.

Data analysis
- Statistical (t-test) to control for differences between groups at onset of study.
- Statistical (t-test): pre and post-test comparisons to (a) measure individual and group changes in proficiency per skill and (b) determine significant differences between groups for each skill.

Results and Conclusions
- Both conditions showed gains, but +L1 group improved significantly more than –L1 in speaking and writing.
- Results do NOT substantiate the claim that exclusive use of L2 translates into more L2 learning. Results point to a potentially more important role for the L1 in the development of L2 by beginning learners.
- Regardless of condition, students relied heavily on their L1 to mediate their performance during tasks, and their understanding of the L2.
- The results of the study should be attributed to the effect of instructors’ use or lack of use of the L1.

Pedagogical Implications
- There is a need to reconsider the role of the L1 in the FL classroom.
- Task-based pedagogy may particularly benefit from a principled use of the L1 (more effectively implemented if the L1 is introduced as a learning tool).
- A learner-centered approach should acknowledge adult L2 learners as multi-competent L2 users.