

## Relation Between Use of Learners' L1 in Foreign Language Teaching and Anxiety : A case study of a French Language Classroom in an Indian University

**Dr. Nivedita Bhattacharya**

Assistant Professor, Hod, Department of French,  
Syamaprasad College, Kolkata  
Email: bhattacharyanivedita@gmail.com

### Abstract:

*With globalisation being part of India's economic policies since the 1990s, foreign language teaching in India has come of age. However foreign language teachers in India follow pedagogical methods and theories mostly developed in Western countries. Thus, it has become imperative to test the applicability of some of the fundamental precepts advocated for foreign language teaching, of which the debate over the use of a mediating language is one among many. This research paper, which surveys debutant learners at a University Language learning centre analyses whether a certain amount of code switching can put learners at ease in the light of the theories put forward by the proponents of the use of bilingualism in foreign language class through three questionnaires as well as interaction with teachers of French through emails. It also analyses the Indian teacher's reasons for using or rejecting a mediating language and puts forward suggestions regarding the modalities of the use of a mediating language for teaching of L2. The studies show a positive correlation between use of a mediating language in FL teaching and decrease in learner's anxiety. It further shows that despite strictures by Communicative and Task based approaches in language teaching, teachers feel that a certain amount of learner's own language is required for effective teaching.*

**Keywords:** own language, mediating language, foreign language class room, code switching, optimality, L1, L2.

### Introduction

Irrespective of historical, political and pedagogical roots of debates over the role of learner's first language in teaching a second or foreign language, the issue of the use of codeswitching for foreign language (FL) teaching remains contentious. The earlier works vis-à-vis first language (L1) and second or foreign language (L2) use were published mostly in Europe, North America and the UK, with largely monolingual, anglophone backdrops and/or with native teachers. They covered certain core areas of research, which included papers on theoretical positioning on codeswitching (Cummins 1981; Krashen, 1982) and empirical and observational studies, which argued, either for (Auerbach 1993; Macaro 1995), or against codeswitching (Polio & Duff, 1994; Pica, 1996).

Over the years the popularity of foreign language learning has grown in India with Indian Universities language learning centres registering a large number of enrolment in certificate courses. The FL classrooms in India are multilingual, with mostly non-native speakers teaching the target language.

Thus, the debate over the acceptance or rejection of learners' first language acquires a more complicated dimension in an Indian environment and hence the need for modified research paradigms vis-à-vis investigations on CS.

Research on code-switching has investigated several issues which have mostly included :1) teachers' and learner's attitude towards CS (Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014; Cheng, 2013); 2) the amount of CS used in the class (Macao, 2001; Makulloluwa, 2013); 3) reasons for codeswitching (Anton & Dicomilla, 1999; Macaro, 2005). However, very few studies (with the exception of Levine, 2003) have focussed on the correlation of CS with psychological constructs like learner anxiety, comfortability or affectivity.

In India too, though a large number of studies have investigated the first three issues (particularly in English Language Classroom), no study has focussed on the relation between code-switching and learners' psychological constructs. Thus a large gap remains on the study of the use of codeswitching, which is so pertinent in the Indian context. This paper thus aims at demonstrating the effect of code-switching on learner comfort at the debutant level.

**In Support of Bilingualism: Literature Review**

The 1990s saw a resurgence of research which re-examined the idealized situation of total exclusion of L1 and the use of a native speaker, a trend which was started by Lado (1957), through his theory on contrastive analysis during Second Language Acquisition. His work was one of the earliest that advocated the use of the first language in second language acquisition (SLA). The early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been seeing a firmer call for review over the use of strict monolingualism. It has been felt that '...what is fashionable in the literature does not necessarily reflect what happens in classrooms in all parts of the world, and despite its disappearance from ELT theory and methodological texts, the use of learner's own languages in ELT classrooms has survived' (Hall & Cook, 2014: 2).

Macaro, who has done extensive work on the use of CS in FL classrooms has analysed the reasons for its use (Macaro, 2000), the impact of not using it (Macaro, 2005) and the teachers' position regarding the amount of CS used (2001). Macaro (2001) proposes three theoretical positions vis-à-vis the amount of target language use: maximal, virtual and an optimal position. He suggests that an optimal amount for the use of L1 should be decided upon by the teacher.

Anton & Dica-milla (1999) delineates use of L1 in executing socio-cognitive functions in the classroom. They categorize such functions into two groups: inter-psychological and intra-psychological. They demonstrate the use of L1 for scaffolding.

V. Cook (2001), in his paper on the use of first language in the FL class, strongly argues against the total exclusion of L1 from the foreign language class. He too analyses the reasons initially put forward by researchers for excluding L1 from the teaching learning process of L2. These include -comparing L2 acquisition with the linguistic and psychological processes of acquiring the first language by children which he refutes by pointing out that L2 learners have more mature minds and more than one language accessible to them (Cook, 2001). He suggests that L1 can be used for creating collaborative classroom atmosphere, speeding up of teaching of grammar and vocabulary and equipping students for outside world L2 use (Cook, 2014).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century a large number of works have been undertaken on CS, which support the use of L1 in teaching L2. Many of these have been conducted in Asian countries, though they have largely surveyed EFL (English as foreign language) classrooms. Investigations have been carried out in China (Tang, 2002), Bangladesh (Islam & Ahsan, 2011), Sri Lanka (Makulloluwa, 2013), to cite a few. All such studies have tried to justify the utility of CS in teaching a foreign language.

However, purely quantitative studies on code-switching have been few and far between. Macaro (2001) used a quantitative analysis to study the amount of L1 used in the classroom. Levine's (2003) seminal work is one of the first studies to undertake a quantitative approach to correlate the use of L1 in L2 teaching and students' anxiety level.

**L1 or L2? A case study of a Foreign Language learning centre of an Indian University**

Thus, sieving through literature favouring own/maternal/common language use, the question that arises is the applicability of CS in the Indian foreign language class scenario. As noted above, since very few works have concentrated on the relationship between learners' comfortability level and the use of code-switching, this author has focussed on this particular aspect.

This study involves a survey of a group of French learners (45 beginner level learners) at the language learning centre of a University in India. The learners were pursuing an elementary level course.

The objective of this project was:

- a. To analyse the language(s) used for teaching the foreign language, in this case French, at University Language Learning Centres.
- b. To analyse student's perception and attitude towards the use of learner's native language for instruction and explanations in a foreign language class, in a very early stage of learning.
- c. To analyse the correlation between language of teaching and comfortability level of learners

The hypothesis that this study aimed at establishing was twofold:

Ho1: Beginner level language teachers use a mixture of native language (or English, English being the dominant language of communication in plurilingual India) and target language, despite strictures laid by communicative methodology on the use of L1.

Ho2: The use of bilingualism creates a positive response from learners and thus less classroom anxiety

### Method

To prove the above hypotheses the research addressed the following research questions:

- What is the principal language used in teaching and instruction in a beginner's level language class?
- What is the learner's level of comfort vis-à-vis the use of bilingualism?
- Is there a correlation between the use of bilingualism and a positive classroom atmosphere?

### Research Design

Three questionnaires were used in the study to collect data from learners. Validity and reliability of the questionnaires were established. The reason for the choice of the above-mentioned University was the long tradition of foreign language teaching, as well as the demand for foreign language in the corporate structure which ensures a steady supply of learners to the University Language Centre.

The students selected for survey are required to complete 160 hours of class in order to complete their first level (certificate level) course. The learners are not taught by native speakers of French and have limited access to the target language either spoken or written, outside of class.

The students who were surveyed had completed 18 hours of class. This was done expressly to gauge the first effects of the language used, on the attitude of the learners. The number of learners surveyed was 45 in a total of three batches.

Over and above the learner questionnaires, a set of interview questions were given to the teachers who were either currently handling beginners or had handled them before in order to assess the amount of 'other language' used for instruction and explanation in the class as well as their perception on the use of 'only French' for teaching beginners.

### Research instruments

Three questionnaires were used for student survey:

QUESTIONNAIRE 1: This was used to determine demographic characteristics such as age, sex, medium of instruction, reason for learning French etc. (Attached as Appendix 1)

QUESTIONNAIRE 2: The second analysed the primary language used for instructions and explanations in the class. (Attached as Appendix 2)

QUESTIONNAIRE 3: This measured the attitude of students towards language used for instruction and their feeling of comfort with it. (Attached as Appendix 3)

Questionnaire 2 and 3 consisted of a series of closed items and were based on Likert type scale. [The questionnaires have been attached as annexure 1, 2, & 3].

The questionnaires were followed up by interviews of the teachers via e-mail to assess their opinions on the use of bilingualism in the class. Two broad questions were e-mailed to teachers.

- a. Do you support the use of monolingualism in your beginner level classes as is advocated by Task based and Communicative Approaches? Or do you think bilingualism or even multilingualism (i.e. using a language a student is familiar with for explanation and instruction) helps learners learn better? In either case please justify.
- b. Do you use the learner's own language or English while teaching? If yes for what purpose and to what extent?

### Analysis

An analysis of the demographic data based on

QUESTIONNAIRE 1 revealed the following results:

- a. AGE: The majority of the learners are in the age group of 25 even though the range extends from 15 to 40
- b. GENDER: There were more women than men studying French with a ratio of almost 2:1
- c. FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE: Only 20% of the sample had any kind of experience in foreign language learning.
- d. REASONS FOR LEARNING FRENCH: The majority of learners want to learn French to experience learning a foreign language.

The second most important reason is to increase chances of getting a job. An open question asking for any other reasons also revealed that some were learning French for immigration purposes.

- e. **MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN SCHOOL AND HIGHER EDUCATION:** Most learners have had their education in English both at school and higher education levels. Thus it was possible for teachers to use English for instruction and explanation even though some improvisations had to be made for non-anglophones.
- f. **EMPLOYMENT STATUS:** Majority of the learners are students which correlates with the age profile. The next biggest group being those of the fully employed.

**QUESTIONNAIRE 2**

This questionnaire assessed the amount of ‘other language’ (that is languages other than French was being used in the class both for explanation and instructions). A Likert type scale was used. Item wise analysis of the questionnaire revealed that “other language” was used frequently for teaching the target language.

**QUESTIONNAIRE 3**

This questionnaire measured students’ attitude to the use of languages other than French in the class. This questionnaire too used a Likert type scale. Itemwise analysis revealed that whereas the learners responded positively to the use of “other languages” for instruction and explanations in class, use of only French by the teacher neither caused any nervousness nor anxiety in the learners. They seemed to be open to use of only the target language although quite a few did feel that they would make better progress if a mixture of languages were used in the class.

**ITEMWISE ANALYSIS OF LIKERT SCALE TYPE QUESTIONNAIRE**

- a. **Questionnaire 2:** (Independent variable: Language used for explanation and instruction)

<b>Cronbach’s alpha</b>	<b>N: No of items</b>
<b>.981</b>	<b>8</b>

**TABLE 1**

<b>ITEMS IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Agree Nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
My teacher uses an adequate mixture of French and other languages in class for explanations	5%	24%	18%	44%	9%
My teacher uses an adequate mixture of French and other languages in class for instructions	9%	24%	16%	42%	9%
My teacher uses too little French in the class for explanations	60%	27%	4%	7%	2%
My teacher uses too little French in the class for instructions	56%	33%	4%	7%	0
My teacher uses only English (or another language other than French) for giving explanations in the class	49%	37%	7%	7%	0
My teacher uses only English (or other languages except French) for instructions in class	49%	37%	2%	12%	
For general interaction in class teacher uses an adequate mixture of French and English (or other languages) in class	5%	18%	13%	55%	9%
My teacher rarely switches to another language from French even if I request her for understanding of subject matter	9%	9%	11%	44%	27%

The questionnaire uses the term “adequate mixture of languages” which allows the learners to decide whether enough L1 is being used for classes to be comprehensible without trying to analyse how much and for what purpose L1 is being used. However just over half the sample agree (53%) that “an adequate amount of other language” is being used by the teacher for explanation and 51% agree that other language(s) is being used for instruction. 71% agree that the teacher rarely switches languages even if requested to do so which indicates that he/she

probably uses only a predetermined amount of L1, an amount decided by the teacher as well as the purpose for which the other language will be used. The above analysis shows that teachers use both the target language as well as English (or other language that learners are familiar with). However the target language is used sufficiently enough for the learners to have taken note of its use. Thus, despite the restrictions on the use of L1 and translation in the communicative approach, teachers are not averse to using other languages (here mainly English) in the class for explanation and instruction. On the other hand, that the teacher strives to uphold the 'virtual position' of Macaro is shown by the fact that an overwhelming 87% and 89% disagree that the teacher uses too little French in the class.

b. *Questionnaire 3* : (Dependant variable: class room environment)

<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	<b>N: no of items</b>
.754	7

**TABLE 2**

ITEMS	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
I feel bored if all explanations are given in French in class	9%	60%	13%	13%	5%
I feel lost if all explanations are given in French in class	9%	36%	24%	20%	11%
I enjoy classes the most when my teacher uses a mixture of French and English	5%	13%	20%	49%	13%

(or other languages to give explanations in class					
I feel I would make better progress in French if my teacher uses both French and other languages to explain in class	5%	20%	13%	49%	13%
I feel afraid to respond if my teacher uses only French in class	25%	49%	13%	13%	0
I feel my classmates and teacher will laugh at me when I have to speak in French	53%	33%	9%	3	2
I feel more nervous if my teacher uses French	40%	44%	9%	7%	0

Although 49% of learners agree that a mixture of French and English (or other language) would help them progress better, they strongly disagree (60%) with the fact that they would be bored with only French being used in class. However, the difference between disagree (36%) and agree (20%) regarding the learner following the class in case of only the target language being used, is only 16%, indicating that more students agree that at least for explanations in the class, a mixture of languages should be used.

Contrary to the tepid disagreement regarding 'feeling lost' if only French is used in class, most learners disagree (53%+33% =86%) that they feel any kind of fear of being ridiculed. Neither do they feel any fear (disagree-49%, strongly disagree-25%) nor nervousness (strongly disagree 40%, disagree 44%) if the teacher uses French in the class.

However, majority agree (agree 49%, strongly agree 13%) that they would make a better progress in a class which does not use solely the target language. This is true also regarding the learner's enjoyment of the class with a mixture of French and other language.

An analysis of the correlation between the amount of L1 use in the class and level of comfortability of learners showed a figure of .663 which proves that despite learners claiming to be comfortable with L2-only use the use of L1 in the classroom puts beginner level learners at ease.

This research also took into consideration the teachers' view on the use of learner's own language for teaching. This researcher asked the following two questions to teachers teaching at this centre and other centres.

1. Do you support the use of monolingualism (i.e. using only French) in your beginner level classes as is advocated by Task based and Communicative approaches? Or do you think bilingualism or even multilingualism (i.e. using a language a student is familiar with for explanation and instruction) helps learners learn better? In either case please justify.
2. Do you use the learner's own language or English while teaching? If yes for what purpose and to what extent?

The replies were as follows:

**Teacher-1**

I support monolingualism along with a bit of multilingualism as with the help of monolingualism, students listen to more and more French and also try talking in the language. A bit of multilingualism helps teach a few concepts or words that can't be explained or situations where there is equivalence in both the languages and especially, cultures.

I majorly use French while teaching but take help of either English or another language on very few occasions.

**Teacher-2**

1) I do support the use of monolingualism since the students do not get exposure to foreign languages outside of class. The more they listen to a foreign language the better they are able to retain the words and comprehend the sentence structure.

2) I do use English (or learner's own language) in class. However, I would say the proportion is 90-10. (i.e.10% of English...). I use English (or learner's own language) in following cases.

- 1) If the word is difficult to explain with gestures or examples.
- 2) If after giving several examples the students are not able to guess the meaning.
- 3) If the text contains a part of grammar which has not been done in the class.

**Teacher-3**

Personally, I think using one single language that is French in beginner level is quite interesting for me as a teacher. It is a complete immersion method that helps students acquire the language skills faster. Since the task based and communicative approaches require a student to get used to a situation where there is no support from another language, he is forced to develop certain survival abilities in expressing himself in a given situation.

I would however not deny that use of a few words in English comes naturally while teaching the basics but not multiple languages in which one or several others might be comfortable. This is particularly because different languages have their own specificities that might not match with French or while some might have similarities others don't. As for me I use mostly French in beginners' classes and I do use English only for explaining certain grammatical aspects if at all and only if a particular student fails to understand at all.

Thus, it is obvious from the above responses that no one teacher can claim that they have not had to use the first language. What is common to all is the fact that all of them use the first language or English to explain vocabulary or grammar. One respondent says that English comes "naturally" to explain some words. Since English (even though a foreign

language) in multilingual India is the link language (most learning another foreign language have at least a rudimentary knowledge of it) we can say that English is the L1 of another foreign language, in this case French. So consciously or unconsciously, the Indian teachers of foreign language end up using an L1 while teaching L2.

### Discussion

This research in the learner population surveyed concludes that the teacher takes recourse to the use of other language(s) for explanation and instruction in the class and learners seem to have a positive attitude towards this use. However, they do not seem averse to the use of French as the principal language used in the class. They show no negative attitude or anxiety towards an overwhelming use of the target language.

The correlation (standardized coefficient) between the use of English (or other language) in the class with students' positive attitude to the class is .633. Thus, it wouldn't be erroneous to conclude that whereas students are receptive to the use of bilingualism in class for the purpose of explanation and instruction, a high degree of use of target language would not produce any adverse reactions in learners. The teacher, to use Cook's phrase tries to 'maximise the use of L2 in the classroom utilising the usefulness of L2 rather than the harm of the first', (Cook, 2001: 404).

### Conclusion

Critiques of target-language use only policy have argued that "... exclusion of the mother tongue is a criticism of the mother tongue and renders it a second class language. This degradation of the mother tongue has harmful psychological effects on learners (Nation 1990 cited in Tang, 2002:37). In India, where regional languages are strong and English is an important language for communication, the use of learners' first or other language is an issue which has to be dealt with cautiously.

Whereas this author sees the exclusion of L1 from the Foreign language classroom as sometimes necessary in case of a native speaker teaching, with no knowledge of learners' previous language repertoire, with Indian teachers a certain amount of use of L1 to teach L2 could promote affectivity

amongst learners, especially at the debutant level. As is obvious from the responses this author received from teachers of French, despite their apparent belief in the advantages of L2-only use for teaching they are compelled to use L1 for certain purposes. In the author's opinion, Indian teachers of foreign language should have a well-planned use of L1, for all levels to increase the affective content of the course as well as to aide learners to become true bilinguals/multilinguals in the real world.

Lesson planning for Teachers should include the decision regarding the point on the continuum (Turnbull, 2009: Introduction 3-5) on which he/she will place herself. What is further required is a judicious use of L1 so as not to deprive learners of maximum exposure to target language on the one hand and not to leave debutant learners grappling for a better understanding of the target language on the other.

There is scope for further research in the domain of CS in a FL classroom in India. Analysis of learners' reaction to CS and bilingualism, of the amount of L1 that is used by a teacher and whether the teachers feel any guilt regarding the use of bilingualism are some of the aspects to be researched upon. Given the unique position of India as a multilingual society, with strong regional languages, it will be wiser for Indian teachers of foreign languages to be discerning in their application of pedagogical tenets developed in the Western World.

### References

1. Auerbach, E.R. (1993). Re-examining English Only in the ESL Classroom. *Tesol Quarterly*, Vol 27 (1), 1-18.
2. Anton.M. & Dicamilla, F. (1999). Socio-Cognitive functions of L1 collaborative interaction in the L2 Classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 83(2), 233-247.
3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/330338>. Accessed: 25/08/2021.
4. Cheng, X. (2013) *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 4, No. 6, pp. 1277-1284.
5. Cook, G. (2010) *Translation in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
6. Cook, V. (2001). *Using First Language in the Classroom*. The Canadian Modern Language

- Review/La Revue Canadienne des langues vivantes, 57,3 (March/mars), 402-419
7. Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education. (Ed) Schoolin and language minority students :A theoretical framework, 3-49. Los Angeles : Evaluation.
  8. Hall, G., & Cook, G. (2014). Own language use in ELT: exploring global practices and attitudes. *Language issues: The ESOL journal*, 25(1), 35-43. <https://rb.gy/z7xsed> (Accessed 11 January 2023).
  9. Islam, M. J., & Ahsan, S. (2011). Use of Bangla in EFL classes: The reaction of the secondary level Student and the teachers in Bangladesh. *ASA University Review*, Vol 5(2), (pp.197-222). See <https://rb.gy/qh7i1k>. (Accessed: 21 October 2021).
  11. Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
  12. Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. University of Michigan Press
  13. Levine, G. S. (2003). Student and instructor beliefs and attitudes about target language use, first language use, and anxiety: Report of a questionnaire study. *The modern language journal* 87(3), 343-364.
  14. Macaro, E. (1995). Target language use in Italy. *The Language Learning Journal*, Vol (11), 52-54, DOI: 10.1080/09571739585200171, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09571739585200171>. (Accessed 27 August 2021)
  15. Macaro, E. (2000). Issues in target Language Teaching. In K. Field (ed.) *Issues in Modern Foreign Language Teaching* (pp.171-189). London: Routledge
  16. Macaro, E. (2001) Analysing student teachers' codeswitching in foreign language classrooms: Theories and decision making. *The Modern Language Journal* 85 (4), 531-548
  17. Macaro, E. (2005) Codeswitching in the L2 classroom: A communication and learning strategy. In E. Liruda (ed.) *Non-Native Language Teachers: Perceptions, Challenges and Contributions to the Profession* (pp. 63-84). New York: Springer
  18. Makulloluwa, E. (2013). Code switching by teachers in the second language classroom. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, Vol 6(3), 581-598. <https://rb.gy/rw53c2>. (Accessed 14 June, 2021)
  19. Mohebbi, H & Alavi, S.M, (2014). An investigation into teachers' first language use in a second Language Learning Classroom Context: A Questionnaire -based Study. *Bellaterra Journal Of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature*, Vol. 7(4), Nov-Dec, 57-73.
  20. Pica, T. (1996). Second language learning through interaction: multiple perspectives. *Working papers in educational linguistics*, Vol.12, 1-22. See <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED401756.pdf>. (Accessed: 7 June 2021)
  21. Polio, C.G. & Duff, P.A. (1994). Teachers' language use in university foreign language classrooms: A qualitative analysis of English and target language alternation. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 78 (3), 313-326. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/330110>. (Accessed: 1 July 2020).
  22. Tang, J. (2002). Using the L1 in the English Classroom. In *Forum* (Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 36-43). <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/>. <https://rb.gy/xzemhh> (Accessed 11 January 2023).
  23. Turnbull, Miles and Jennifer Dailey-O'Cain, (2009) Ed, *First Language Use in Second and Foreign Language Learning*. Multilingual Matters, Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto