Longitudinal study on limiting the use of L1 in L2 learning

Estudo longitudinal sobre limitação do uso da L1 em aprendizado de L2

Estudio longitudinal sobre la limitación del uso de la L1 en el aprendizaje de la L2

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Ana Beatriz Vasques de Araujo
Doctoral student in Linguistics
Institution: Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR)
Address: Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil
E-mail: vasques.anab@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The limitation of using the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classes has been the object of study in the plurilingual educational field, whose objective is to investigate the appropriate use of L1 in learning additional languages. To this end, an empirical, predominantly qualitative study sought to examine the academic performance of L2 learning in two groups – the experimental group with restricted use of the first language and the control group with unrestricted use of the L1. In the first part of the study, participant observation was chosen as a qualitative documentation method and the oral communication skills expected at the end of the school year were noticed. As an aid to participant observations, monthly analyses of the predetermined oral competencies of the subjects were implemented through quantitative observation. Furthermore, a statistical analysis of the annual tests was conducted to compare the studied group with the control group. The condition of preferential use of L2 seems to improve the willingness of learners to communicate in the target language and to associate the teaching figure with the L2, making interpellations mainly in the L2. Providing exclusive input in L2 appears to help in grasping a broad vocabulary in the language. However, L1 seems to have a pedagogical significance, indicating the importance of L1 as a cognitive and metacognitive tool for learners. Therefore, restricting the use of L1 can affect learning the target language.

Keywords: Limitation of L1 in L2 Learning. L1 in L2 Learning. L1 X L2 in Bilingual Programs. Additional Language Learning. Second Language Acquisition.
A limitação do uso da primeira língua (L1) no aprendizado de uma segunda língua (L2) tem sido objeto de estudo no campo educacional plurilingue, cujo objetivo é investigar o uso adequado da L1 na aprendizagem de línguas adicionais. Para tanto, um estudo empírico, predominantemente qualitativo, buscou examinar o desempenho acadêmico na aprendizagem da L2 em dois grupos – o grupo experimental com uso restrito da primeira língua e o grupo controle com uso irrestrito da L1. Na primeira parte do estudo, a observação participante foi escolhida como método qualitativo de documentação e foram observadas as competências orais previstas no final do ano letivo. Como auxílio às observações participantes, foram elaboradas verificações mensais de competências orais pré-determinadas dos sujeitos por meio de observação quantitativa. Além disso, foi realizada uma análise estatística dos testes anuais, a fim de comparar o grupo estudado com o grupo controle. A condição de uso preferencial de L2 parece melhorar a disposição de aprendizes em se comunicarem na língua-alvo e em associarem a figura docente à L2, fazendo interpelações principalmente na L2. O fornecimento de input exclusivo em L2 parece ajudar na apreensão de um amplo vocabulário na língua-alvo. No entanto, a L1 parece ter um significado pedagógico, indicando a importância da L1 como ferramenta cognitiva e metacognitiva para aprendizes, o que permite concluir que a restrição do uso da L1 pode afetar a aprendizagem da própria língua-alvo.

1 INTRODUCTION

There are many discussions about using the first language, henceforth L1 when learning a second language (L2). They involve questions regarding whether it is appropriate or acceptable, or in what situations to use it. Furthermore, the question of how the use of languages in the classroom influences the learning of the target language remains unresolved (Swain; Lapkin, 2013). In this sense, an investigative study on using L1 and L2 in learning a second language and its impact on learning the target language is necessary.

The English-only movement appears to have emerged in the 1980s to guarantee the hegemony of the English language in the USA, thus avoiding using minority languages. Even the practice of bilingualism in education was considered unfavorable, as supporters of the movement saw the country's language being threatened by communities speaking other languages (Crawford, 2000). In this sense, the pedagogical ideal was to avoid using L1 in L2 teaching classrooms as much as possible, to ensure the country's linguistic supremacy. This monolingual approach continues in many educational institutions worldwide, intending to provide more efficient teaching of the target language (Han; Park, 2017).

On the other hand, through a sociocultural perspective on L2 teaching, Swain and Lapkin (2013) mention that the first language can provide better insight into the interpretations between the L1 and L2 in a collaborative dialogue. DiCamilla and Antón (2012) indicate that learners use the L1 as a mediation tool to carry out tasks when it is still difficult to use just the L2. For example, Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez (2004) present studies investigating verbal thinking in learning an L2, examining the role of L1 and L2 in this process.

The study was carried out from the beginning of the 2017 school year to the end of the 2018 school year. Two groups were examined. The teaching approach was implemented in the experimental group without L1 mediation, and in
the control group, L1 was acceptable. The data collection was qualitative and quantitative.

Conclusively, the maximal use of the target language appears to be relevant for L2 learning. However, L1 has a pedagogical significance as a cognitive and metacognitive tool for learners learning an L2 and, in this context, its restriction could affect the learning of the target language itself. In this sense, the present study generated guiding principles to assist teachers in language use choices in L2 learning classrooms.

The theoretical scope of the current article deals with the discussion about the use of L1 in L2 learning spaces and the role of understanding and affection in this process. Next, the methodological procedures are presented; the subjects and the contextualization of the study; the data collection methods, with their respective results and discussion; and the closing with final considerations.

This article aims to examine the resources learners use when communicating in L2 without using L1. How students seek to understand the teacher/researcher, who only communicates in L2, is evaluated. It is also investigated to what extent this L1 limitation can impact L2 learning.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 THE L1 / L2 DEBATE

A recurring problem in the approach to teaching an L2 focuses on the appropriate use of the L1 in the classroom. There is much debate about whether using the L1 in second language learning environments would be acceptable or under what circumstances it would be appropriate to use that language. In these contexts, the question of which language should be used by whom and under what conditions is quite complex (Swain; Lapkin, 2013).
2.2 FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE IN LEARNING

Language is used to transmit something to another person and mediate higher mental functions, such as the focus of attention, development, organization, and control of thoughts and actions (Swain; Lapkin, 2013).

Swain and Lapkin (2013) mention in their article on L2 immersion teaching through a Vygotskyan sociocultural perspective that language, in the form of collaborative dialogue, provides an understanding of the differences in meaning between the L1 and L2. The authors also refer to collaborative dialogue as a language defined by two or more people as a common language construction, when language use and learning co-occur (Swain, 1997). In their observations, the collaborative dialogue was often conveyed in L1. Still, its solutions were established in L2, and according to the researchers, using L1 was essential to resolve subtle differences in meaning that could arise in certain contexts (Swain; Lapkin, 2013). They also suggest that by using L1, learners can focus attention, organize thoughts, and internalize aspects of the meaning of certain terms.

DiCamilla and Antón (2012) point out that students use the L1 as a mediation tool to carry out tasks, and the L2 would be the learning object. As a result, the researchers propose that, in the same way, L2 plays a significant role in the interaction of learners, it is no longer just the system to be learned, but also the system itself used for learning.

Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez (2004) conducted a study analysing individual verbal thinking in problem-solving activities in a second language, examining the role of L1 and L2 in this course. The investigation found that L1 was a fundamental element in the reasoning process. It was also concluded that individual verbal thought in L2 is used differently depending on the knowledge levels of language learners. It has been suggested that the prohibition of L1 in teaching a second language may affect L2 learning itself, since L1, as shown, serves as a basic cognitive and metacognitive tool for learners.
2.3 KNOWLEDGE AND AFFECTION

Vygotsky (1934, *apud* Wertsch, 1985) saw language not only as a means of communicating with others but also as a psychological tool. Furthermore, he saw knowledge and affection as two inseparable processes. This theoretical perspective from Vygotsky is useful to help develop strategies and criteria for using L1 and L2 in immersion classes. It would be difficult to separate the roles of affect and knowledge when using L1 to convey explanations, as they are closely related. By combining intellectual and emotional adjustment to find a solution to clarify meaning, an interpretation of data from a Vygotskyan perspective takes place, recognizing that using the L1 can represent a fusion of cognitive and emotional objectives for the learners (Swain; Lapkin, 2013).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research was conducted at an international school in Pinhais, the metropolitan area of Curitiba in Paraná, Brazil. The objectives of the study were to investigate to what extent the exclusive use of L2 by the teacher influences L2 learning; to observe what skills learners acquire given the monolingual approach; to analyse whether, due to the monolingual approach (without the use of L1), a significant difference is found in the L2 performance of the experimental group compared to the control group. From these objectives, the following research questions arise:

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1 “The separation of the intellectual side of our consciousness from its affective, volitional side is one of the fundamental flaws of traditional psychology. Because of it, thinking is inevitably transformed into an autonomous flow of thoughts thinking themselves. It is separated from all the fullness of real life, from the living motives, interests and attractions of the thinking human” (Vygotsky, 1934, as cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 189).
a) What oral skills are achieved by primary school students in a bilingual school with a teaching approach without any teacher mediation in L1, in German as a Foreign Language classes?

b) Is there a significant difference in the results of the annual German tests when comparing the examined group with the control group?

c) To what extent is communication in L2 impaired by not using L1?

3.2 CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted during the 2017 and 2018 school years. One group was examined in comparison to their respective control group. The group examined comprised six second-year elementary school students in the afternoon shift, and the control group comprised eight students of the same age but in the morning shift. Both groups had the same level of L2 learning, that is, both were in German group C². This means the group's performance was equal, as they had been leveled through the previous year's annual German tests. In the experiment conductor's group, the monolingual approach was implemented without the support of L1. The first language was accepted in the control group, and no classroom observations were carried out with this group. However, the 2017 and 2018 annual test results of the control group were collected to compare the L2 development of the two groups.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Data acquisition was qualitative and quantitative and could, for the most part, be integrated into the general research process since the descriptive statistical results on the frequency of certain characteristics could be completed and explained with general qualitative interpretation phenomena (Döring; Bortz, 2016).

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² At the time of the study, there were three German groups per class: Group A, B and C, which were leveled annually through annual tests and analysis of performance during the year.
3.3.1 Participant observation and language competency analysis

In the first part of the study, participant observation was chosen as a qualitative method of documentation in the form of field notes due to the dual role of the researcher and teacher. The oral skills expected at the end of the school year for the level of the respective group examined were observed. There was, however, a certain openness to observations that were not directly related to these skills. In this sense, the field notes had a partially standardized character (Spranz-Fogasy; Deppermann, 2001). Observations were collected daily and organized in the form of weekly notes.

Monthly analyses of the subjects’ pre-determined oral skills were carried out to aid participant observations. Such competencies were collected through quantitative observation, which made it possible to measure some characteristics during the observation process (Döring; Bortz, 2016).

The descriptions of the oral communication skills achieved or not served as individual control of the subjects and were analysed based on diagrams obtained through numerical data inserted into an Excel table. They contain the competencies acquired throughout the year. Diagrams on the development of subjects' skill acquisition were combined with data collected from participant observations and analysed qualitatively.

3.3.2 Annual tests

To compare the studied group with the control group and obtain analytical data to discover whether there was a difference in performance and L2 development in communication competencies between the subjects, a statistical analysis of the annual tests covered the four skills assessed: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

To this end, the statistical software Minitab 19 (2019) was used as it provides suitable methods for controlling the statistical process and experimental design, contributing to understanding and communicating its calculations. The program included data from all involved students’ 2017 and 2018 annual test
scores. A statistical review was carried out as part of this quantitative process, with greater weight on oral and written skills. Combined with the data collected from participant observations, these skills provided more elements for in-depth analysis and interpretation of the observed phenomena. The decision to use calculations with greater weight on these capabilities is because both are part of communicative language skills, including language and strategic skills (Bachmann; Fontana, 2003).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis was carried out in three phases: in the first phase, comments from participant observations were examined and grouped into subtopics. The observations were then weighted with the skills acquired by the experiment subjects. As mentioned, such competencies were collected monthly, and six diagrams (Figure 1 and Figure 3) were created for each academic year – one for each subject. A quantitative record within the qualitative data collection was created to support further examining the results. Finally, a statistical analysis of the annual tests was carried out, producing two histograms (Figure 2 and Figure 4) and four tables, which were subsequently examined. In this article, it was only necessary to show two tables (Table 1 and Table 2). To facilitate analysis, the study was divided into two years of research.

4.1 PARTICIPANT AND LANGUAGE COMPETENCY OBSERVATIONS: THE YEAR 2017

Different aspects were observed in the experimental group. They show students’ reactions observed and noted from the first day of class. Some of them point out the children's spontaneous speeches when they helped others with difficulties, and that this occurred mostly in L1; they show collaborative dialogues between learners to convey an understanding of the difference in meanings between Portuguese and German languages; they present the students’ attempts
to communicate in L2 and the linguistic resources used (their interlanguages<sup>3</sup>) to make themselves understood in the target language; and they reveal that students who were unable to express themselves in their L2 rarely participated in debates or barely expressed their opinions, among others.

This section addresses the first research question<sup>4</sup>, and a summary of the study data is shown in Figure 1. The diagrams show the previously selected competencies acquired by the subjects throughout the year.

<sup>3</sup> Interlanguage is an intermediate stage in learning a second language, in which there is interference from the L1, as there is not yet mastery of the L2 (Selinker, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> What oral skills are achieved by primary school students in a bilingual school with a teaching approach, without any teacher mediation in L1, in German as a Foreign Language classes?
4.2 ANUAL TESTS: THE YEAR 2017

With the results of the annual tests, a histogram was created (Figure 2) with the average of the subjects’ evaluations. Class 2B was the experimental group, in which the teacher/researcher used the immersive approach without L1...
mediation. Class 2A was the control group, in which L1 was also used for instruction.

Figure 2. Histogram of annual tests: Year 2017

Fig. 2: This figure demonstrates the results of the 2017 annual tests. Class 2B had a higher performance than class 2A: In the control group, the average of the four language skills in the tests was 7.806, while in the experimental group, the average was 8.794. The standard deviation curves also show differences: class 2A grades have a standard deviation of 1.191, with a smoother curve and greater dispersion, which means that the grades are further apart and the subjects perform worse. Class 2B has a standard deviation of 0.6820, accentuating the curve more as the grades are closer and higher.

Source: Prepared by the author.

This section addresses the second and third research questions. The smaller standard deviation of the examined class (Figure 2) may also lead to the interpretation that the exclusive use of L2 by the teacher/researcher and the subjects' frequent attempts to communicate in the target language may have contributed to a more uniform performance of the students. This is because when learners try to speak in L2, the opportunity arises to produce language in utterances, which leads this production to be what Swain (1985) considers necessary for advancing interlanguage. Learners may receive feedback from instructors or peers by articulating a false or incomprehensible statement. By reformulating their statements, there is the opportunity to negotiate the meaning of their declarations. These negotiations can occur at a semantic or

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5 Is there a significant difference in the results of the annual German tests when comparing the examined group with the control group? To what extent is communication in L2 impaired by not using L1?
morphological-syntactic level and both help in the acquisition of the L2 or can confirm or consolidate existing knowledge (Swain, 1985).

The annual average showing superior performances in the experimental group (Figure 2) may indicate that the immersive approach without using L1 can lead to better performance by learners. This is especially true in written and oral communication skills, which intentionally had greater statistical weight.

The histogram (Figure 2) shows that the non-use of L1 by the teacher/researcher does not seem to have harmed L2 learning, as the experimental group's grades were higher than the control group's. However, other variables need to be considered, as demonstrated by participant observations. For example, some learners would not express themselves in the classroom if they lacked the self-confidence to communicate in L2. Without using L1, they seemed prevented from sharing their opinions on certain topics.

4.3 PARTICIPANT AND LANGUAGE COMPETENCY OBSERVATIONS: THE YEAR 2018

2018 was the second year of the study the following aspects recorded in class 3B through participant observations were documented: Students no longer tried to speak to the teacher/researcher in L1, as they had already related the L2 to her; complex arguments or assistance to other students were carried out mainly in L1; very abstract characteristics of the target language are difficult for children aged 7 to 8 to internalize and, in this sense, explicit clarifications in L1 help in understanding certain linguistic aspects; encouraging students to communicate in L2 appears to lead to a willingness and readiness to express themselves in the target language.

A summary of the data collected is shown in Figure 3. The diagrams show the selected skills that the subjects acquired throughout the year. This section addresses the first research question6.

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6 What oral skills are achieved by primary school students in a bilingual school with a teaching approach, without any teacher mediation in L1, in German as a Foreign Language classes?
Figure 3. Diagrams of acquired competencies: Year 2018

Fig. 3: Proband/Probandin - subject; Februar- February; März- March; April- April; May- May, Juni- June; Juli- July; August- August; September- September; Oktober- October; November- November; Kompetenzen- competencies. This figure demonstrates the development of the language competencies of six subjects through the year 2018. The measurements for the competency range were 2 for achieved, 1 for partially achieved, and 0 for not achieved. The skills are listed from A to J: Students: A - can ask and answer (in complete sentences); B - can spontaneously use long sentences or structures; C - can construct a correct grammatical structure; D - can explain how a work result was achieved; E - can assert themselves in conflicts and propose solutions; F - understand appropriate words and idiomatic expressions according to the knowledge learned from everyday life, topics, and projects; G - continually expand passive vocabulary; H - use vocabulary and expressions in different areas of learning and everyday life, which go beyond the vocabulary learned; I - constantly develop an active vocabulary. It must be observed whether the student understands a rich and differentiated vocabulary.

Source: Prepared by the author.

4.4 ANUAL TESTS: THE YEAR 2018

A summary of the data collected from annual subject testing in 2018 is shown in Figure 4.
This section addresses the second and third research questions⁷, and the 2018 histogram (Figure 4) shows that according to the annual test results, L2 performance in both groups was better than in 2017 (Figure 2). However, the experimental group's average rating remains above the control group's, which may indicate that the approach without L1 mediation can increase L2 learning.

The standard deviation of the two groups in 2018 (Figure 4) is shown in the histogram by a very steep curve, indicating that the two groups' performance was more homogeneous. This was not the case in the previous year's control group (Figure 2). Although both groups showed an increase in annual test scores from year to year (Figure 2 and Figure 4), the performance development in the control group was more evident.

A separate analysis of the scores for the 2018 skills (Table 1 and Table 2) shows the difference in scores for the four skills between the groups. Reading comprehension scores were close to written and oral communication (Table 1 and Table 2). This may indicate that the use of L1 in the control group does not

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⁷ Is there a significant difference in the results of the annual German tests when comparing the examined group with the control group? To what extent is communication in L2 impaired by not using L1?
seem to affect the development of L2 in terms of expressiveness, that is, in written and oral communication. However, when examining the listening comprehension ability of the control group (Table 1), a significantly lower performance can be seen compared to other skills. The lower result of this listening skill may indicate that the exclusive use of L2 in the experimental group (Table 2) may lead to a more considerable gain in vocabulary. This may have helped the subjects’ superior performance in listening comprehension skills. (Table 2).

Table 1. Yearly German test scores 2018- Class 3A

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<th>Final Grade</th>
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Table 1. R- reading; L- listening; W- writing; S- speaking.
Source: Prepared by the author.

Table 2. Yearly German test scores 2018- Class 3B

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Table 2. R- reading; L- listening; W- writing; S- speaking.
Source: Prepared by the author.

The non-use of L1 by the teacher/researcher in the experimental group does not seem to have negatively affected L2 learning, as the group's L2 performance increased from one year to the next. Likewise, the use of L1 by the teacher in the control group also does not seem to have negatively influenced school performance, as grades were increased from 2017 to 2018 (Figure 2 and Figure 4).
5 CONCLUSIONS

The objectives of the research were to investigate whether the exclusive use of the L2 by the teacher/researcher could influence L2 learning. To this end, the students' acquired communicative skills were observed and analysed to determine whether a significant difference was found in the L2 performance of the experimental group compared to the control group due to the monolingual approach.

The requirement of preferential use of L2 in second language learning classes seems to improve the willingness of learners to communicate in L2 and, according to the results of the present study, helps in the acquisition of vocabulary. It also increases mediation resources for this end. This aligns with an output function for speech enhancement described by Swain (2005). According to the author, to improve communication in an L2, one must practice attempts through speech to make oneself understandable in this L2. The requirement to use L2 for this purpose also appears to encourage greater engagement for learners when communicating in the target language. Likewise, when using only L2 in language classes, learners associate the teaching figure with L2 and make inquiries mainly in L2. Similarly, the study results convey that providing exclusive L2 input helps grasp a broad L2 vocabulary.

If, on the one hand, the need to communicate in L2 caused a greater willingness and readiness to use the target language, on the other hand, it discouraged some students from participating in classes because they felt they did not have enough vocabulary in L2. Considering this, it is worth questioning the monolingual approach, which makes the possibility of interaction in L1 unfeasible as it violates socio-educational principles. From this perspective, preventing the use of L1 can affect semantic understanding. L1 also appears useful in organizing thoughts and directing attention, since explanations in L1 seemed to facilitate the understanding of more abstract vocabulary and concepts.

The exclusive use of the target language by the teacher/researcher seems to direct the learners' focus more on understanding L2 than on using both languages. This appears to happen because, upon knowing that an additional
explanation in L1 may eventually occur if there is no understanding of the explanation in L2, students may not focus on the target language. However, the L1 can serve as a comprehensible input when there is uncertainty in the perception or interpretation of vocabulary (Krashen, 1982). Since the role of consciousness and attention in the language learning process highlights the act of consciously perceiving new information from linguistic input, the L1 could serve as a focus of attention for a deeper level of mental processing. It could promote the perception of relevant characteristics of the language, such as the semantic mapping of vocabulary (Housen; Pierrard, 2008). On the other hand, the same study also suggests using non-verbal means to make the input comprehensible, using visual aids and gestures to reduce the amount of translation from L2 to L1.

In short, maximum use of the target language in L2 classrooms appears relevant because, according to the present study, it gives the impression of favoring its development. At the same time, however, L1 appears to have a pedagogical significance for learning a second language, which indicates the importance of L1 as a cognitive and metacognitive tool for learners (Dicamilla; Anton, 2012; Swain; Lapkin, 2013). In this context, restricting using L1 in L2 teaching can hinder learning the target language. Nevertheless, care must be taken that the first language is not used for all purposes in L2 acquisition environments. It is up to the sensitivity of language teachers to perceive the key moments in which the use of L1 can serve as an aid in learning L2, while at the same time encouraging the use of the target language in L2 teaching as much as possible.

In this sense, the results of this study generated guiding principles to assist foreign language teachers in language use preferences in L2 classrooms, by showing the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in the acquisition of additional languages. The research can also contribute to the academic discussion about linguistic choices in learning or acquiring a second language.

For further studies, if there is experimental replication, a larger number of subjects is recommended to interpret the control and experimental groups more precisely. It is also suggested that participant observation be implemented with
both groups to add credibility to the research and, if possible, that the same researchers from both groups conduct the study.

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