Practical Application of Learners' First Language to Teaching Meaning in EFL Classes: A Case Study Conducted in the Department of English at King Khalid University

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Abstract

There has long been a question of whether learners' first language can help with teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) when the focus is teaching meaning. This issue has always been controversial. The study, therefore, aims at exploring how learners' first language (L1) can be applied effectively in EFL classes to help with the teaching of meaning with the minimization of L1's potential negative impact. The study examined (a), faculty members' general opinion about the use of L1 in EFL teaching, (b) the effectiveness of L1 use in teaching meaning, and (c) the students' views on L1 use. The study was undoubtedly of great importance as it solved the question of how much L1 could be used in teaching meaning in EFL classes in the most practical way. The method adopted was primarily qualitative involving semi-structured interviews with lecturers and professors who had experience of language teaching. A survey conducted on the first-year students also provided the researcher with some quantitative data. The result revealed both positive and negative opinions. The positive ones remarkably outnumbered the negative ones. The findings also helped the researcher ponder some pedagogical implications. The study concludes that learners' first language can be a fascinating and effective tool for teaching meaning provided that the teacher has full control over the class to ensure that the classroom still has the target language environment.

Keywords: EFL classes, L1's negative impact, L1's positive impact, learners' first language, practical application of L1, teaching meaning

Introduction

Indeed, the use of learners' first language in language teaching has long been in the balance. Although research in the field of language teaching has so far given rise to a lot of approaches and techniques, the status of L1 use is still in a confused state. In most modern teaching methods, the idea of using L1 in a language class is almost always considered problematic. One of the obvious reasons is that using L1 in language teaching is closely associated with the Grammar- Translation Method. For the time being, it is reasonably logical to believe that the learning and teaching of meaning with the help of learners'L1 is strictly old-fashioned. However, sometimes old ideas emerge as new ones being effective through a revolution in language teaching. Therefore, old ideas are often incorporated with new methods because of their potential usefulness in language teaching. The Principled Eclecticism, for instance, supports all kinds of techniques, either modern or old, that can be applied in order to make language teaching a success. It is therefore important to realize that any teaching techniques can be fruitful provided that they are applied in the most practical way. The key idea, therefore, is that rejecting the idea about using L1 in explaining or teaching meaning is baseless and illogical.

Literature review

It is of crucial importance to explore the scholarly authors' and researchers' belief about the use of learners' first language in teaching meaning. We shall explore both the first language's advantages and disadvantages in the case of teaching meaning.

There has been a lot of evidence that advocates the view that the application of learners' first language to language teaching is problematic rather than advantageous. Al-Rifa'i's (2014) recent study reveals that translation activities may result in misconceptions about language learning among students because of the lack of correspondence between two languages. Maximum target language exposure is obviously necessary for teaching meaning to avoid the above-mentioned problem (Juárez & Oxbrow, 2008). Limited and appropriate use of L1 in class is useful, but such use should not reduce the target language exposure (Jadallah & Hasan, 2010). A study by Almoayidi (2018) shows that teaching English only through English with complete avoidance of learners' mother can bring better learning outcomes. This research also argues that teaching through proper second language exposure is the appropriate teaching method.

There have been a number of opinions by scholars that support the use of learners' L1 in language teaching. We often forget the fact that translation itself is labeled as a cognitive activity (Albir & Alves, 2009). Palmer (1976) emphasizes translating from obscure and technical terms into words for clear understanding. Learners' L1 can be useful in understanding meaning. In this case, our primary purpose for applying learners' L1 will be "pedagogical" (Kaudy, 2003, as cited in Vermes, 2010, p. 83), not general translation. Some research shows the effectiveness of using L1 in giving new instructions (Sali, 2014). Also, in dealing with low-level students, L1 can be very useful in clarifying the appropriateness of a lexical item (Khresheh, 2012). It also encourages learners to understand the similarities and differences between the two languages (Juárez and Oxbrow, 2008). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Lee and Macaro (2013), it is found that code-switching instructions are more beneficial for adult learners than English-only instructions. L1, no doubt, can play a significant role in teaching meaning, giving instructions, explaining grammar rules (Sharma, 2006). In the Arabic context, L1 can play an essential role in explaining

new lexical items and grammar points (Alshammari, 2011; Storch & Aldosari 2010). Unquestionably, L1 can play the role of an effective pedagogical tool in a language class, as concluded in a study conducted by De la Campa and Nassaji (2009). A quantitative study conducted by Jingxia (2010) shows that most of the teachers (81.7%) and students (75.3) were in favor of code-switching to Chinese, which is of great benefit in EFL classes.

As regards L1 use, learners' level is worth considering. For example, low-level students are unlikely to understand the meaning of a particular grammatical structure if explained in the target language. If students do not have enough English proficiency, according to Mahmoudi's (2011) research conducted on Iranian students, L1 should be used in class. Her research also shows that L1 is more beneficial for explaining rules and giving examples. Level of proficiency is a crucial factor in the case of a pedagogical decision on the use of L1 which is also emphasized in Mouhanna's (2009) study.

Undoubtedly, the use of L1 straightforwardly saves time. Thornbury (2002) focuses on time-saving while discussing how vocabulary is learned. He emphasizes that a second language learner always looks for a short-cut way, for example, to learn new words. Thornbury (2002) states, "if a German-speaking learner learns the English word *table,* rather than creating a direct link from *table* to the concept of the table, they are more likely to create a link to their L1 equivalent" (p.19).

The semantic difference between the first language and target language structures can be easily explained in learners' L1, which is, more accessible and more straightforward. "The first thing to remember is that, especially at beginner levels, students are going to translate what is happening into their L1 whether teachers want them to or not. It is a natural process of learning a foreign language" (Harmer, 2007, p.38).

It is, therefore, illogical to believe that the use of Learners' L1 adversely affects the language learning environment. Overall, the use of L1 "makes instructions clear" (Al-Rifa'i, 2014, p.36).

Conceptual framework
The teaching of meaning: An overview
We shall discuss now the essence of teaching meaning in different areas of language teaching. It is not surprising that it is almost impossible to think of language teaching without the concept of understanding meaning.

By 'meaning', we understand "what a language expresses about the world we live in or any possible or imaginary world" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 355). It is obvious that 'meaning' is everywhere in a language, and of course, in language teaching. Teaching meaning is closely associated with vocabulary teaching. A learner learns a particular lexical item successfully once he or she understands its meaning accurately. Learners, once the meaning is understood, gradually become used to using the lexical item in different contexts. Understanding and using vocabulary are, of course, essential in four skills. Comprehension (listening and reading), for instance, is meaningless if the meaning of a lexical item is not properly understood. In other words, there is a positive correlation between successful comprehension and the proper understanding of meaning. Apart from the receptive skills, productive skills such as speaking and writing even involve the

perception of meaning. For instance, a speaker or a writer uses a lexical item keeping a particular meaning in his or her mind while speaking or writing.

Apart from skills, learning grammar entails understanding meaning as well. A teacher, when explaining grammatical rules, emphasizes the meaning involved in the structure he or she is teaching. Teaching singular and plural nouns, for instance, involves a proper understanding of the idea that the singular noun is 'one thing' while the plural noun indicates 'more than one'. Also understanding the semantic distinction between the present simple and present progressive tense is essential. The teacher, in this case, has to explain that the latter indicates an action in progress. There are also various semantic layers of modal auxiliary verbs and conditional sentences that require a clear explanation.

Meaning, therefore, is ubiquitous in language teaching and learning. The key idea, at this point, is that in language teaching and learning, the proper understanding of meaning is paramount.

Research methodology
Study design
The study was primarily qualitative. The researcher opted for this because of its flexible nature (Dörnyei, 2007). The target group included lecturers and professors teaching skill courses in the department of English at King Khalid University. The questionnaire was proofread and approved by two professors for its validity. The research also involved a survey on level 1 and level 2 students.

Tools
Three tools were used:
- Interviewing teachers
- A survey on level 1 and 2 students
- General observation

In order to interview the teachers, an online questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent through Google forms to twenty of them, of which ten responded. The main reason for sending an online questionnaire is that the researcher wanted the participants to feel confident and respond at their convenience. In qualitative research, questions are in general open and informal (Seliner & Shohamy, 2003). Also, free-form answers from open questions usually result in insightful data and "more accurately reflect what the respondent wants to say" (Nunan, 2002, p. 143). The questionnaire, therefore, comprised some semi-structured interview questions.

In addition to this, a survey was conducted with the help of a task (Appendix B) given to twenty-five first-year students (level 1 and 2) for them to choose one teacher and express the reason for their choice. That survey helped the researcher understand their behavior and opinions (Nunan, 2002). They had to look at PowerPoint slides with two pictures. One picture showed teacher 'A' explaining the meaning of a word and a grammatical structure using the target language. Another one showed teacher 'B' doing the same using learners' L1 very tactfully so that the English environment was not hampered. That survey provided the researcher with some quantitative data as well.

In qualitative research, observations are a major data collecting tool (Seliger & Shohamy, 2003). Apart from the questionnaires, the researcher's general observation provided some more qualitative data as well. Such observation aimed at finding the effectiveness of L1 in teaching meaning and its potential negative impact. This included careful classroom observation while meaning was explained and taught to students in different ways.

Data analysis
For qualitative data (the primary research), the participants' responses in the Google forms sent were stored in a word file and categorized. Students' responses were kept in tables in a word file and later calculated with Microsoft Excel for the quantitative data.

Results
The findings split into four parts: demographic details of the participants, thematic analysis, general observation, and learners' views.
Demographic details of the participants

Table 1. *Teachers*

Variable	Number of Participants 10 out of 20	
	F	Percentage
Education		
Masters and PhD	10	50%

Table 2. *Students*

Variable	Number of Participants 25	
	F	Percentage
Level		
1	15	60%
2	10	40%
Grades		
A	5	20%
B	5	20%
C	7	28%
D	8	32%

Thematic analysis of the data (based on interviews with teachers)
The study reveals four main themes:
1. Language teachers' general views on the use of L1 in teaching
2. The potential negative impact of L1 on language learning
3. Minimizing the negative impact of L1

    4. Effectiveness of the use of L1 in teaching meaning

1. Language teachers' general views on the use of L1 in teaching

L1, as stated by some participants, must be avoided as much as possible as it is an obstacle to learning and using the target language. Therefore, minimizing its use is practical in an EFL situation. They emphasize the L1 use in early levels (1 and 2), but not in the other levels. However, many participants speak in favor of L1. For example, L1 in EFL teaching may facilitate the learning process, states one teacher. Mother tongue is one of the important tools of teaching in terms of getting the information easy and in little time, he adds. One participant emphasizes code-switching between L1 and L2 so that students can best benefit from both. He adds that a dedicated language teacher will always shape his or her own style of making L1 and L2 work together harmoniously, based on immediate or long-term objectives, the students' needs, and their proficiency level. We should use L1 wisely and to the minimum, states one of the participants. We have to do our best to encourage our students to use L2 as it is, without looking at L1, adds the teacher. A judicious use of L1 in L2 teaching settings helps language learners, and can contribute to a positive learning situation, states one participant. Teachers can use his or her students' L1, he adds, only when they have exhausted all possible means to get their message across in the target language. Generally speaking, a controlled use of L 1 could be of great help in the classroom depending on the level and proficiency of learners of the second language, states another participant. Therefore, he adds, L1 should not be used on a large scale.

2. Potential negative impacts of L1 on language learning

If L1 is used excessively, students will not get much opportunity to build solid communicative skills in L2, states one participant. Also, L1 can sometimes interfere with L2 and hinders the learning outcomes, he adds. For example, he says, teaching EFL students with L1 in the productive skills, namely speaking and writing may lead to many errors such as copying the use and structure of L1 and apply them to English. Some participants mention the fact that the L1 structure can influence the target language structure. It can have an adverse effect on learners' cognitive skills and critical thinking, they emphasize. They may lose the opportunity to think in the target language. It is vital to help students think and speak in English, but using L1, on the other hand, fosters the habit of translating from LI to L2 and vice versa when speaking or writing in the target language, he adds. The main drawback of using L1 in EFL class is the broad L1 context compared to the limited L2 exposure that EFL students need the most, states one participant. Another participant states that the overuse of L1 makes learners over-dependent on their instructors and the whole instruction will be derailed from learner-centered to teacher-centered. Moreover, he adds, the learners will be more analytical comparing L1 and L2 at every juncture resulting in a situation that hampers real communication in the target language. The main long-term negative effect, as stated by one teacher, is the fact that the students will not be able to "think" in the foreign language and thus will never rid themselves of mother-tongue interference. Any uncontrolled or unguided use may create problems, and there might be a kind of conflict or intervention between L 1 and L 2, he adds. In the case of Arabic and English, he clarifies, some nouns in English are singular only (non-count nouns), but in Arabic, they have singular and plural as well.

Some participants, however, overgeneralize the L1 use by stating that L1 has no serious negative effect on the process of learning at all.

3. Minimizing the negative impact of L1

One participant states that the issue here is how much of L1 is used in the L2 class. A learning environment that is characterized by rich L2 input, he adds, which is meaningful and professionally introduced will not be negatively harmed by little recourse to the students L1. If the teacher teaches only in English and the use of L1 is limited to an explanation of tasks only, L1 may not affect the learning process, states one faculty member. In this case, he adds, learners are supposed to use English in class all the time and depend on L1 just for the purpose of understanding complicated concepts still speaking in English about the L1 version, and the only way to minimize the negative effect of LI is to encourage students to use the target language in the classroom. One states that in order to minimize the negative impact, if any, teachers have to be reflective. The intensity of the negative impact, he adds, should be accurately diagnosed as a first step. One teacher states that it is always better to use L2 to teach L2 meaning. When there is a need for using L1 for this purpose, seize it as an opportunity to develop students' critical thinking by asking them to evaluate and compare using the target language.

4. Effectiveness of the use of L1 in teaching meaning

L1 can be very useful when the target language does not clarify the exact meaning of what the teacher is trying to say, states one participant. In EFL grammar and reading, he adds, the use of L1 in explaining the grammatical similarities and differences between L1 and L2 can facilitate the learning process and make students cautious to adjust such grammatical usages. Using L1 in teaching EFL reading can help students to make use of the reading strategies already used in L1 such as scanning and skimming, states one faculty member. In teaching meaning, even in more advanced levels, one participant states, the use of L1 by the students can be beneficial when this is aimed at developing their metalinguistic awareness of lexical fields, collocations, functional equivalence, cross-cultural pragmatic phenomena, and so on. Using L1 in teaching non-related culture words such as religious, technical, or environmental words can be of help, states one teacher. L1 can be used only with beginners and when explaining abstract concepts, or when visual aids are not available, states a faculty member. Using L1 can be even preferable - for class management purposes; for comparative purposes, i.e. when students are required to be aware of structural, semantic, or stylistic differences and similarities between L1 and L2, says one teacher. He adds, in explaining the meaning of a particular grammatical structure with beginners, L1 greatly helps and also helps improve reading strategies and explain abstract words. One faculty member mentions his application of L1 to teaching L2 proverbs, and he found it useful because of the element of culture. His students enjoyed comparing similar proverbs in L1 and L2, which are different at the surface level but identical at the deep structure. L1 is useful in teaching vocabulary, as stated by one teacher, such as explaining false friends, partial synonymy, idiomatic expressions; in advanced translation classes when dealing with equivalence in all its complexity; for contrastive or comparative purposes in linguistics: grammatical gender in Arabic vs. English, for instance.

Researcher's general observation

From the point of view of teaching, the use of L1 can lead to L1 environment in class. If, for instance, the teacher depends on L1 in explaining meaning all the time, learners may develop a

habit of translating all target language lexical items into their first language. This is an outright negative impact.

L1 grammar can adversely influence the target language grammar. For instance, in the case of the target group of learners, post modification of adjectives is prevalent. Below is an example of a Saudi elementary learner trying to speak about his vacation.

> "I go…err….went to Jeddah last week. I drive to Jeddah. We stay in <u>hotel expensive</u>. Next day, I visited a <u>mall big</u>. And it was <u>trip interesting</u>. …."

It is evident that the first language can easily influence the target language in terms of structure. The overuse of L1, therefore, affects negatively.

However, in dealing with low-level students, learners' L1, if handled carefully and judiciously, can be an overwhelmingly effective tool. If the teacher has little or no knowledge about learners' L1, all he or she can do is nominate a fast learner in the group who can translate unknown words or expressions. The researcher applied this method in his teaching many times while explaining abstract words or concepts that were beyond learners' understanding level. It was found that L1 was beneficial saving time.

The above-mentioned problem related to L1 influence can be easily overcome if frequent drilling takes place in class. Also, this problem is more syntactic than semantic. Once the meaning properly sinks in, such a problem disappears gradually after frequent practice. According to the researcher's open observation, both level 1 and level 2 students benefited a lot from the use of L1. An unknown word or expression was better understood when explained in L1 by a nominated fast learner. Likewise, the researcher sometimes nominated fast learners in class to explain difficult grammatical concepts that were beyond their understanding level. Such a method was overwhelmingly effective.

Learners' views on the use of L1 in teaching meaning

Interestingly, more level 1 students chose teacher 'B' (Using L1 when required) and explained their reasons for their choice both in the case of teaching vocabulary and grammar (Appendix C, table 3 & 4). In the case of Level 2 students, although the number of reasons in favor of teacher 'A' was slightly higher than those in the case of level 1, the number of reasons for choosing teacher 'B' was still higher than those for choosing teacher 'A' (Appendix D, Table 5 & 6). Figure 1 shows the statistical data (grammar and vocabulary) regarding learners' choice in terms of their exam grades. Overall, from grade A to grade D, L1 use shows an upward trend. Also, except for level 2 grade B, more students found L1 more effective in the case of teaching meaning. Figure 2 shows the statistical data regarding learners' choice in terms of levels. It remarkably shows a positive correlation between their progress and the learners' preference to TL over L1.
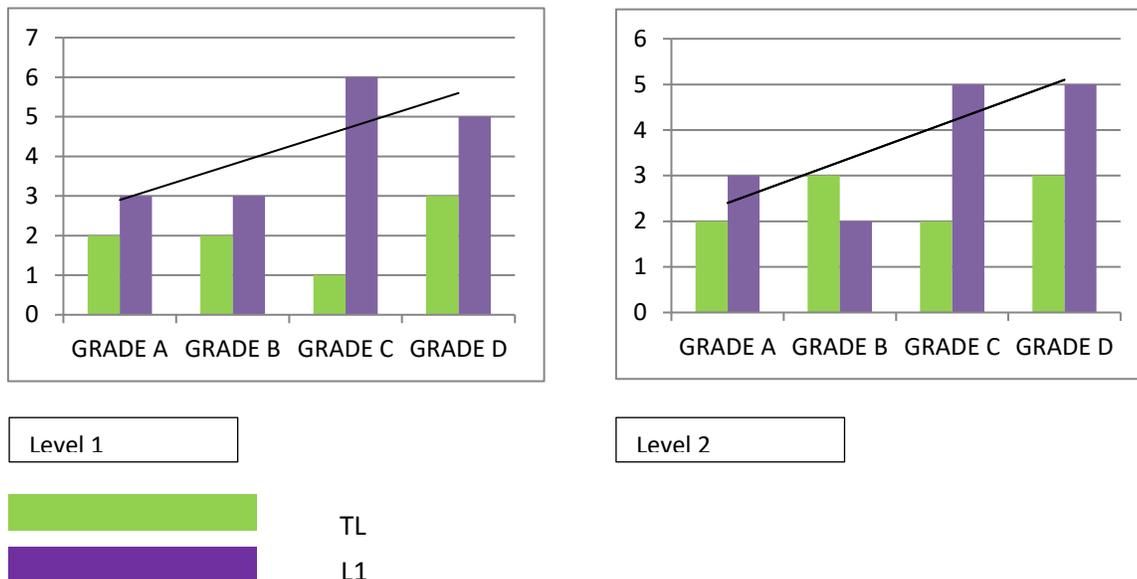
Level 1

Level 2

TL

L1

Figure 1. Learners' choice between TL and L1 in accordance with exam results
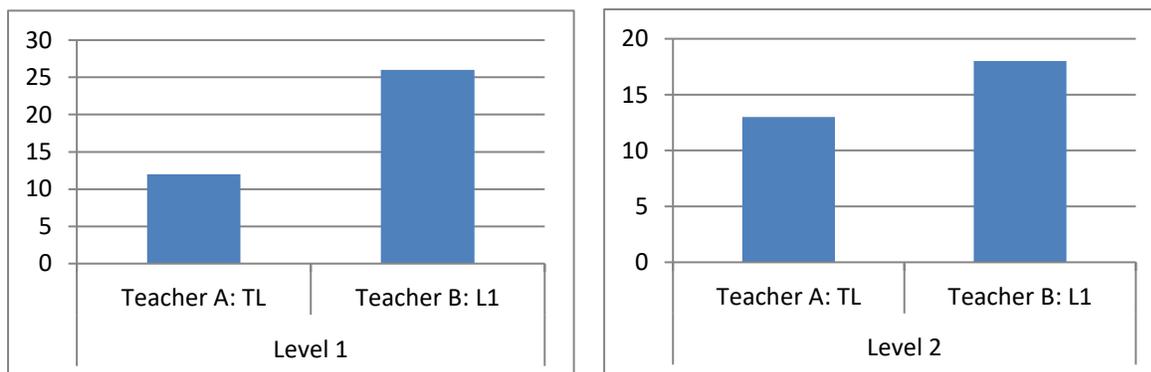

Figure 2. Learners' choice between TL and L1 in terms of levels

Discussion
Major related issues
The most significant limitation associated L1 use is its failure to convey the exact meaning the target language expresses. The layers of meaning of a particular lexicon in one language overwhelmingly differ from those of the literal meaning in another language. Such a phenomenon substantiates the fact that nothing can be perfectly translated. In this regard, Bell (1991) states "There is no one-to-one correspondence between the items of one language and those of another" (p. 83). Given this fact, the danger is obvious, if the meaning is taught through the use of L1.

Another problem related to structure and meaning is the difference between count and non-count nouns in English. In this regard, Palmer (1976) writes, "in terms of 'one' and 'more than one', *wheat* and *oats* cannot be distinguished" (p.120). The example nouns above are

grammatically different, but in terms of meaning, they are exactly the same. In English, for example, the word *advice* is non-count and therefore cannot be plural, and to make it singular, we say *a piece of advice*. If we look at the word-for-word Bangla translation of this phrase, the meaning will be strange. In Bangla, speakers commonly say *an advice**. Exactly the same goes for the word *information*. Therefore, the use of L1 may not work smoothly in teaching meaning.

Let us imagine that a teacher is discussing an English word with a group of learners whose first language is not English. He or she has already told the learners the L1 equivalent of the word. Interestingly, not all the synonyms of the target language word will correspond to those of the L1 equivalent. For example, the English word *get* can have various layers of meaning such as *take, become, bring or fetch,* etc. In Bangla, for instance, we can never expect similar meanings of *get*. In Bangla, Hindi and Urdu, for example, *bring* is by no means related to *get*, but semantically closely related to *give,* because *give* and *take* are antonyms. Let us look at an example. The translation of *I will/am going to get you some paper* in Bangla is *Ami apnake kichhu kagoj pathachchi.* In this example, the word *pathachchi* means *I will fetch* or *I'm going to fetch*. This word can be easily replaced by *dichchi*, which means *I'll give* or *I'm going to give,* which is strictly the opposite of *I'll take*. At the same time, *get* and *take* are synonymous in English. In Bangla, the meaning of *get* is only related to *receiving* or *taking*, but never *bringing* or *giving*. Therefore, word-for-word translation, in this case, is impractical.

Another interesting example is the meaning of *take* in *taking examinations*. If we translate this expression word for word into Bangla, Urdu, or Hindi, the meaning will be opposite. In fact, in these languages, the meanings of *take* and *give* are completely reversed when it comes to *examinations*. While in English a teacher *gives,* and a student *takes* an exam, in Bangla, Hindi, and Urdu, in contrast, a teacher *takes**, and a student *gives** an exam. Let us look at the Bangla translation of *give* and *take*. *Give* means *deya* and *take* means *neya* (the letter *d* represents a dental voiced stop). The Bangla translation of Examination is *porikkha.* If we translate *giving examinations* and *taking examinations* into Bangla, the translations will be *porikkha neya (take)* and *porikkha deya (give)* respectively.

However, not depending on L1 can be a problem. Sometimes, understanding meaning by guessing leads to fossilization. In Bangladesh, based on the researcher's personal experience, a very recent instance of fossilization is the meaning of *rally.* This word has long been overgeneralized and is now being used for a *procession*. Interestingly, at present, even many educated people in Bangladesh have already forgotten the word *procession*. The major reason behind this misunderstanding is the fact that in the 1990's English newspapers in Bangladesh used the word *rally* frequently and fully appropriately when covering political news stories where both *processions* and *rallies* took place simultaneously. Some readers, presumably, tried to interpret the meaning of *rally* just by guessing. Such readers came up with the conclusion that *rally* and *procession* were synonymous. For almost three decades, the general population in Bangladesh has been using these words interchangeably with a little preference for the former, not realizing that there are exact Bangla equivalents for these words.

Rally – jonoshomabesh (i.e. a mass meeting of people making a political protest)
Procession – michhil, shobhajatra (i.e. a number of people moving forward in an orderly fashion, especially as part of a ceremony)

It is obvious that the readers, in that case, tried to pick up the meaning from the context, which unfortunately resulted in a failure and eventually fossilization. If, on the other hand, someone who was absolutely clear about the distinction between these words had told those readers the Bangla equivalent of the word *rally* (*jonoshomabesh),* such fossilization would perhaps have never taken place.

Traditional and modern pedagogical practices
The Grammar-Translation Method made substantial use of L1. In most of cases, learners were provided with an inventory of words with their meaning in L1 (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The researcher's personal academic experience reveals that in the 1980s, in some countries like India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, teaching meaning through translation was overwhelmingly a common practice. Phrases and idioms, for instance, were listed with their meaning in L1 followed by an example. Apparently, such an inventory is useful, but the learners are very likely to forget the idioms that are not contextualized, and therefore such an approach has little pragmatic value.

The researcher's academic experience also shows that in old grammar books, grammatical structures were usually explained in L1. For instance, modal verbs such as *should, may, might, have to* were all explained in L1 along with their meanings. It was based on the assumption that a structure could not be successfully learned unless its meaning was understood in L1.

In the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method, Total Physical Response, on the other hand, L1 is entirely avoided. The Direct Method (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) is based on the principle that translation can never help with proper language learning. Meaning can be directly expressed, learned, or taught, if there is a context. In Audio Lingual Method, meaning is not emphasized at all. It only focuses on mastering structures through Rote Learning.

Apart from the traditional ones, some methods that emerged later also supported the use of L1. The most modern idea about the application of L1 is its judicious use. Such use is fully supported by Communicative Language Teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). The key idea is that in language teaching, we should have no logical reason why L1 is problematic.

Pedagogical implication
Abstract words can be expressed easily through the use of L1. It is often easier for learners to understand the meaning of words through L1 equivalents. Let us imagine that one teacher is trying to teach the meaning of the word *exaggerate* by concept checking and another one through explaining the dictionary definition. Undoubtedly, concept checking is the most modern approach to explaining meaning. The latter sounds a bit old-fashioned. We shall now look at what happens to the learning situation if they apply these techniques.

> Teacher: Well, when I'm 'exaggerating' a story, am I telling you exactly what happened?
> Student 1: No….err…yes….sorry… No. (Hesitant)

> Teacher: Am I overstating it?
> Student 2: Yes.
> Student 1: No…..No…Yes. (Again hesitant)

The teacher is inevitably applying the right technique for explaining the meaning, but student 1 is not familiar with the word *overstate*, and therefore hesitant. Another teacher, in contrast, is explaining the meaning in an old-fashioned way.

> Teacher: Well, when you exaggerate something, you are trying to represent it as being larger, better or worse than it really is.
> Student: Is it the same as modify?
> T: Not really, but similar.
> S: I'm not happy with my essay. I want to modify it. Can I say, I want to exaggerate it?
> T: Well, no! When you modify something, you are trying to make it better. You could say you are producing an improved version.
> S: So, *exaggerate* is a bad thing?
> T: Not necessarily. Say, you are exaggerating a story. It means you are not telling exactly what happened. You are overstating it by adding many things.
> S: Not very clear!

The interactions above prove that explaining the meaning in the target language can often be misleading. In that case, the use of L1 can be useful. Below is how a teacher can opt for direct translation after some explanation in the target language (in this case, English). The example below shows how the first conversation above could have been continued.

> Teacher: Well, when I'm exaggerating a story, am I telling you exactly what happened?
> Student 1: No….err…yes….sorry …No.
> T: Am I overstating it?
> S2: Yes.
> S1: No…..No…Yes (confused).
> T: Well, in Arabic, you can say يبالغ.
> S1: It's very clear now!

L1 can also play a prominent role in teaching skills. In reading and listening, for instance, learners' unfamiliarity with some lexical items leads to difficulty of understanding a text. If the meaning is clear, comprehension will be faster. It is evident that the keywords must sink in for successful comprehension. The most efficient comprehension takes place where the meaning of a text or discourse is fully understood. Lectures often go over learners' heads because of their lack of understanding of the meaning of some vocabulary their teachers use. In comprehension tasks, therefore, L1 can be a very useful tool. Lexical items can be taught using L1 in advance before the main task.

L1 can have a significant role in explaining the meaning of grammatical structures. Scrivener (2005) states "When a new grammatical item is learned, encourage learners to think how they would say the same things in their own language" (p. 309). A teacher may be interested in explaining the difference between *have to* and *should* in Arabic.

T: If I say, you have to go, I mean علیك أن, but if I say, you should go, I mean يجب أن
This is less time-consuming and the most straightforward way to clarify the meaning of various similar structures. In Bangla, Hindi and Urdu, for instance, the modal verbs above can be precisely translated to express a clear distinction between the two. The present simple and present progressive sentences have exact Bangla equivalents. In this case, translating sentences into L1 can be more productive. The conversation below shows a teacher explaining this difference to a group of Bangladeshi learners using L1 (still speaking in English).

> T: Please have a look at these sentences – *I play football* and *I'm playing football*. When you say *I play football*, you mean *ami football kheli*, but when you say *I'm playing football*, you mean *ami football khelchhi*.
> S: It's clear! We understand.

chhi is a suffix marking present progressive in Bangla. If there is a direct L1 equivalent of the target language, translation works best.

Conclusion

Learners' first language can be a very useful tool that helps with the clarification of meaning in language teaching. It often prevents a lexeme from being fossilized, if there is a proper L1 equivalent. If meaning is fully understood, there is minimal possibility of misconceptions. It is also true that concept checking in class, no matter how effective most of the time can be misleading and eventually does lead to fossilization. In this case, L1 saves time and straightforwardly expresses the meaning.

It is, at the same time, logical to believe that excessive dependence on L1 in language learning can be disastrous. Although it can help with understanding meaning, it can at the same time lead to misconceptions since vocabulary in the target language do not always have exact L1 equivalence. Also, overuse of L1 has an adverse effect on the cognitive process. Frequent use of L1 in teaching meaning reduces learners' ability to think in the target language. If a learner, instead of looking for an L1 equivalent, frequently reads and tries to understand meanings of words in the target language using a monolingual dictionary, his or her cognitive development will successfully take place. Although L1 seems to speed up understanding meaning, it has the opposite effect of learners' proper cognitive development.

The teacher must remember that L1 in teaching meaning can simply play a supporting role in the learning process in terms of understanding meaning. The most practical approach, therefore, should be the judicious use of learners' L1. In other words, the use of learners' first language must be fully controlled by the teacher in such a way that the classroom still has the target language environment and the potential adverse effect of L1 is entirely eliminated or at least minimized.

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Appendix A

Practical Application of Learners' L1 to Teaching Meaning in EFL Classes

This questionnaire comprises questions that will provide me with qualitative data for the following research objective:

Knowing how effective learners' L1 is in teaching meaning with the minimization of its negative impacts on learning

Part 1: General opinion

1. What is your general opinion about using L1 in overall teaching?

_____

2. What do you think is the potential negative impact of using L1 on a language class?

_____

Part 2: Effectiveness of the use of L1 in teaching meaning.

Instead of writing a paragraph, you may use <u>bulleted points</u> to save words and time.

1. Mention a teaching situation or situations in which L1 can be successfully or effectively used in teaching meaning. (E.g. explaining the meaning of abstract words)

_____

2. How do you think you would avoid or overcome the negative impact of L1 on learners' learning process while using L1 in teaching meaning?

Part 3: Further comments or suggestions on the idea about using L1 in teaching meaning (if there is).

_____
Thank you for your time

Appendix B

STUDENTS' OPINION

Name _____

Level _____

Teaching vocabulary

Q 1: Look at the pictures. Which teacher is doing a better job? Circle A or B.

A

B

Q 2: Why? Write down the reasons in <u>English</u> or <u>Arabic</u>.

_____
_____
_____

Teaching grammar

Q 1: Look at the pictures. Which teacher is doing a better job? Circle A or B.

A

B

Q 2: Why? Write down the reasons in <u>English</u> or <u>Arabic</u>.

_____
_____
Thank you for your time

Appendix C

Table 3: *Reasons for Level 1 students' choice - Vocabulary teaching*

Teacher A (Using only TL)	Teacher B (Using L1 when required)
1. The way is nice.	1. Explanation is clear.
2. Better than B.	2. Competent.
3. Explanation is clear and easy to understand.	3. Helps with students' weaknesses.
4. English helps with explanation.	4. He wants everyone to understand.

5. Smart.	5. It is a good idea to use some Arabic words in class for students who don't understand English very well.
	6. Meaning can be better understood in Arabic.
	7. Meaning can be better understood in Arabic.
	8. Teacher B is asking a student for an answer. It means he is involving the students.
	9. His technique is excellent.
	10. He is friendly and wants to help the students.
	11. He is testing his students understanding.

Table 4: *Reasons for Level 1 students' choice - Explaining the meaning of a grammatical structure*

Teacher A (Using only TL)	Teacher B (Using L1 when required)
1. Develop students' talent and thinking ability.	1. He wants to explain to students in a better way.
2. Best teacher	2. He wants to help.
3. He can summarize ideas.	3. In Arabic, explanation is easier.
4. The way he is communicating with students is better.	4. It's a good idea to use some Arabic for better understanding.
5. The teacher is teaching English, not translation.	5. The teacher wants the students to work together.
	6. Respectful
	7. Good idea to use Arabic
	8. Students are happy with L1
	9. The explanation is nice.

Appendix D

Table 5: *Reasons for Level 2 students' choice - Vocabulary teaching*

Teacher A (Using only TL)	Teacher B (Using L1 when required)
1. It is more useful to express the meaning in English.	1. The lesson is less stressful.
2. Students are learning English, not Arabic!	2. Less stress and anxiety
3. Students are studying English. Arabic is not necessary.	3. Knowing the meaning in Arabic is more practical.
4. We have to study everything in English.	4. The word is better understood.

5. It's better to explain an English word in English. It helps to enhance his knowledge.	5. Arabic is better for low level students.
6. He is explaining everything in English and this is better. We are learning English, not Arabic.	6. Students don't speak English very well, so Arabic is better.
	7. He is testing his students' knowledge and understanding.
	8. Clear explanation.
	9. He is trying to involve the students who can't speak English very well.
	10. He is asking the students about it.
	11. Students can understand better.
	12. It helps when a student knows the meaning in Arabic.

Table 6: *Reasons for Level 2 students' choice - Explaining the meaning of a grammatical structure*

Teacher A (Using only TL)	Teacher B (Using L1 when required)
1. We have to study everything in English.	1. If students don't know the meaning, they can't use the grammatical structure properly.
2. Students are studying English, not translation.	2. He is trying to involve the students who can't speak English very well.
3. Explaining an English expression in Arabic makes the lesson more difficult.	3. He is asking if anyone knows it.
4. Students need to know the meaning in context. Translation in this case can create an issue.	4. It's clear to everyone.
	5. It helps when a student knows the meaning in Arabic.