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Role of L1 in ISLA: A Principled Approach in Belgium's Beginner Classrooms

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Abstract

The present mixed-methods study seeks to establish the role of the first language (L1) in the multilingual environment in the acquisition of the second language (L2) by beginning learners. As such, this proposed study aims at contributing to filling a gap in the literature of Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) through the view of beginner learners, assessing L1 usage both from cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives. It covers both the students and teachers of the entire school community: 300 students aged 7 to 12 and 20 teachers. Its data collection tools include questionnaires, standardised tests, observation classroom notes, and interviews. Results from this study might show that the attitude toward using L1 in language learning by students and teachers is in general positive but varied. The findings, therefore, provide views that are less explicit of the polarised discussion in academic circles of ISLA. It would also provide viable guidance for educators and policymakers on how to grapple with language instruction issues within a linguistically diverse setting, say that of Belgium.



KEYWORDS

*Second language acquisition,
first language, foreign
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Introduction

The process of learning a second language (L2) is a complex one that is guided by a set of factors such as the learner's age and the methods of teaching. Research into this process in formal educational contexts, where it is termed Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA), has attracted a great deal of scholarship (Ellis, 2008). It is a recurring question in the ISLA debate to what extent the native language (L1) of the learner is helpful or hindering with regard to L2 competence. Other researchers argue that L1 can be useful in instances where it acts as a 'scaffold' for learners, providing a well-understood linguistic context whereby learners can find their way through the new language structures (Cummins, 2001). On the other hand, some have considered the use of L1 in obstructing the internalization of L2 forms (Krashen, 1982).

This is the nuance this debate would get when the focus of the debate would be the systematic incorporation of L1 in the classroom for beginner foreign language learners in Belgium. The languages—Dutch, French, and German—do present to this research the most peculiar richness (Janssens & Maryns, 2006). Therefore, the language diversity in question has a value that can be cherished by novices, especially language learners, who all too frequently have cognitive challenges at the basis of acquiring a new language (Sweller, 1994). This is in contrast to the

majority of recent investigations within the domain that are centered on intermediate and advanced learners, and hence exhibit a research gap within beginner learners. Our study tries to plug this gap by making use of a mixed-methods approach that relies on observations and quantitative data drawn from a range of educational settings within Belgium. The purpose of the present study is to establish whether strategic use of L1 could bring cognitive as well as affective benefits to novice learners. The study goes further to explore the complicated interrelations of L1 use with other factors such as learner motivation, classroom environment, and teaching approaches. Based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and also theoretically founded in the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), this research critically searches for the manifold influences of L2 learning. In this research, the cultural consequences will also be identified, which represent the attitude towards L1 use in a multilingual society in Belgium. Therefore, in mind that culture influences education (Hofstede, 1986), the importance of the local context in understanding what is reported here and its possible transfer to another multilingual setting should be of very important consideration. The study attempts to present an integrated perspective in L1 use within ISLA, especially for beginners, integrating these various components. We hope that this will serve as useful information for educators in guiding data-driven decisions on the use of L1, which positively contributes to the teaching practice and learner experience.

Research Questions

Q1: Does the systematic use of learners' first language (L1) in beginner foreign language classrooms in Belgium lead to improved cognitive and emotional outcomes in second language acquisition (L2)?

Q2: How does the use of L1 in beginner foreign language classrooms in Belgium interact with other variables like learner motivation, classroom environment, and instructional strategies?

By tackling these research questions, this study aims to bridge the existing theoretical divides in ISLA discourse, moving beyond polarised viewpoints to offer nuanced, empirically-supported insights.

Literature review

In this area of Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA), much scholarly attention has been focused on the impact of formal pedagogical strategies on the efficacy of second language (L2) learning. For instance, Ellis (2008) emphasises the multifaceted but central role of formal instruction in L2 acquisition. In this wider debate, the issue of the mother tongue (L1) in L2 learning is conceived as an area that gives rise to particularly strong controversy. Researchers such as Cummins (2001) have suggested that L1 may be used to provide a very useful cognitive framework in helping to understand L2, while others like Krashen (1982) see that as likely to be able to work vice versa. Particularly pertinent at this stage is Sweller's (1994) theory of cognitive load, from those starting their language learning journey. This, in an effective sense, means new language learning is bound to impart a heavy load of cognitive load, which further complicates how to assimilate new information effectively. This, in an effective sense, does impose the

imperative of understanding how L1 is bound to play its role in attenuating—or, for that matter, exacerbating—this cognitive load. As indicated by Ortega (2014), most research efforts have found a way to be biased towards intermediate and advanced learners, neglecting beginners who have their series of barriers. The multicultural landscape in Belgium, according to Janssens and Maryns (2006), offers the background for such a study. Even more complicating this issue is the fact that different theories at times seem to bring new insights into second language acquisition. For example, Self-Determination Theory, as espoused by Deci and Ryan (1985), appears to have something to offer in order to help shed further insight with respect to the way in which L1 usage may affect learner motivation. Following this line, the view given by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) suggests one way through which to look at the case if L1 may act to be a useful source of comprehensible input or, contrarily, performs a blocking function. Bringing in the sociocultural consideration and bringing the perspective, for example, from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (1986), will bring added understanding. A more recent wave has been growing, attempting to translate academic insights into pragmatic educational policy, as recommended by Larsen-Freeman (2016). There is, however, a bulk of existing literature accommodating several gaps. General SLA research, such as the work of Larsen-Freeman & Long (2014) and Lightbown & Spada (2013), and, more recently, some with a focus on the recognition of universal developmental trajectories in language acquisition, take entirely different historical bases to ISLA: Gudmestad & Edmonds (2018). Following recognition of the recognition of universal developmental trajectories in language acquisition, general Malovrh and Benati also note that certain linguistic elements are often acquired only later in the learning process, such as the shift from subjunctive to indicative moods (Bartning & Schlyter, 2004; Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008).

This literature review researches the development of research on interaction and its effect on second language learning (SLA) from some classic studies to current insights, many of which have emerged only recently and shifted our understanding of the dynamics of learning language. Starting with the early study of Foreigner Talk (FT), Ferguson (1975) pointed out that native speakers (NSs) adapt their speech behavior when speaking with non-native speakers (NNSs), just as they do when talking to their infants. Freed (1980) further elaborated on this by contrasting FT not only in the function but also in the sense that FT aimed at the transmission of information while BT aimed at eliciting interaction.

Long (1981) identified a key point of difference in dimensioning NS input to NNSs: the determining role of the latter in SLA. He noted the use of techniques by NSs in order to make NNSs understand and, at the same time, get involved. These entail simplification of topics and interrogative styles. However, the contribution of Long (1981) in this area is that he did not demarcate how some of the aspects of SLA are affected by these changes and did not talk about their presence in the instances of SLA that were not successful. Further research has re-emphasised the importance of the NNS's role in interaction (Scarcella & Higa, 1982; Gass & Varonis, 1985; Pica, Doughty, & Young, 1986; Pica, 1988), underlining a thrust on the role of negotiation of

meaning for the input to be comprehensible and second language acquisition to take place. This emphasis on the learner's output as a critical factor in interaction first occurred in the mid-80s with Swain (1985, 1995), and has continued to become further reinforced as an essential component of language acquisition through highlighting the functions of output in noticing, hypothesis testing, and reflection.

The discourse within the classroom setting has also been scrutinised for its role in SLA. Krashen (1980, 1989) postulated the notion that language input and discourse that is comprehensible would lead to content knowledge and a deep understanding. He delineated three major features which teacher talk has to accomplish with the aim to render the content comprehensible (Early, 1985; Green, 1992; Schinke-L,etal). For example, Schmidt (1994) extended this research to investigate both input enhancement and instructionally focused talk for their effects on syntactic awareness and learning.

This line of work led to a sociocultural perspective of language and learning, an interdisciplinary field that attributes the close association between social interaction and language development to social issues (Allen & Shatz, 1983; Berman & Slobin, 1994; Hopper & Thompson, 1993; Ninio & Snow, 1996; Ochs, 1988). It is in this key that his (1981, 1986) theory of intellectual and practical activity is rooted in social contexts and developed by one person. It is, therefore, thorough to the role played by classroom discourse, indispensable not only as a medium of SLA but part and parcel of what defines the learning environment and hence the outcomes. This study accentuates how differences in classroom interactions inculcate value in individual development and, through such, takes into unique consideration the teacher as an effective facilitator of individual learning via discourse (Baker, 1992; Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Cazden, 1988; Eder, 1982).

This volume collects varied studies related to language learning in a number of classroom contexts and languages, which are brought into a whole under a sociocultural lens that views language learning as a social activity shaped through interactional environments and mediated through symbolic tools and resources. In the course of such studies, SLA has come to mean traditional concerns but has also meant further moves on to seek explanation of how language, as a communicative act, is central to activity within the sociocultural worlds. In addition, the further developments expand the area under the investigation to include the dynamics of classroom discourse, the negotiation of meaning, and knowledge construction involved in the language learning process.

This type of research is especially being done in the context of a multilingual milieu of Belgium, in which a frame exists for beginners. Some of the present research concentrates only on cognitive aspects or only on sociocultural facets and does not take a more all-inclusive view. This study intends to fill these gaps in a broader, integrated perspective that draws light on cognitive but also sociocultural dimensions within the distinct Belgian linguistic landscape. This effort is pursued with two aims in mind: to advance academic discussion but also to give pragmatic guidance to the educational policymakers and practitioners. In fact, the issues in ISLA research are far from having

been fully understood, in which the learner variables—such as motivation and cognitive load—interact with instructional methods and the sociocultural settings, actually make it quite another multi-dimensional line of inquiry. The current study aims to address this gap and consequently offer a more nuanced account of L1's role in L2 development by focusing on a rather under-examined demographic: beginner language learners in the linguistically diverse environment that Belgium provides. Further, the research has the potential to contribute in that it would give actionable insights and be useful for the fine-tuning of educational policies, more so in linguistically diverse settings like Belgium. As evidence-based pedagogical practices continue to increase, this research hopes that the findings will provide strong data applicable to making changes to curricula. These would be of great use in current debates, particularly those that deal with the decisions of educators in making informed choices about methodologies. This study seeks to narrow the existing gaps by focusing on beginner language learners in Belgium through employing a holistic approach that takes into account cognitive aspects and their sociocultural context. In so doing, this points out an attempt to enhance both the academic discourse and practical implications for professionals within the field of language education. Therefore, to answer these leading questions of the role and impact of L1, the fuller understanding of the processes of language acquisition and their result is provided.

Methods

Sample

This study was purposefully selected to represent the beginner language learners from different primary schools of Belgium. The focus on Belgium, and especially on those regions in which the languages cohabit, is inspired by the same regions that some previous works of Janssens and Maryns (2006) focused on. In an attempt to capture a more complex linguistic landscape, care was taken during the selection of schools that there were schools from both the educational systems and also to ensure coverage of the socio-cultural factor. 300 students were picked up in total, ensuring their age between 7 and 12 years so that there is a demographic spread of their age, educational background, and linguistic capacity of children. This diversity of ages will allow an opportunity to monitor more clearly the influences of first language (L1) in the different stages of development into second language (L2) learning, 20 language teachers also took part in this process. Furthermore, adding teachers in the sample acted as a countervailing force, since the research was able to compare pedagogical methods and perceptions; this could explain why the results emanating from the learner and the educator are likely very different.

Data Collection

The process of data collection is enhanced through the use of various tools, pre- and post-study questionnaires among students and teachers were used. These were designed to establish attitudes toward the use of L1 in the classroom and its perceived effectiveness in facilitating L2 acquisition. The videotaping was done in at least three sessions for each classroom that was participating. The taping specifically intended to record the instances when L1 was actively used or consciously

avoided to get a complete overview of the dynamics present in the real classroom. They were given at the beginning and the end of a 6-month study period for the purpose of quantifying any cognitive benefits related to using L1 in the teaching of L2. The further reasons for selecting the most convenient place regarding L1 use for their instructional choice were further explored through the semi-structured interview with teachers, and what anomaly or pattern they observe in it. Data were, however, collected over a period of six months, hence ample time to ensure that a set of firm data is collected, and in that case, to account for variables such as teacher turnover, holidays, and examination period.

Data Analysis

During analysis, the researcher adopted the mixed-methods approach that integrated both quantitative and qualitative strategies to make sure the study was all-inclusive. Data collected from questionnaires and standardised tests were funneled into statistical SPSS software. In this case, the research sought to find out if the use of L1 influenced L2 acquisition in relation to language proficiency and student attitude. The NVivo software was used for coding video recordings, after the transcriptions of interviews with teachers. The thematic coding was used in assisting the categorization of the trends, patterns, or any significant deviations as to when L1 was used in the teaching environment. This study, therefore, tried to triangulate quantitative and qualitative data to present a wholesome understanding of the role of L1 in L2 acquisition in a unique sociocultural and linguistic landscape of Belgium. This mixed-method, therefore, allows for the rich interpretation of data and contribution to academic discourse at the same time, making the application of the result applicable for the respective educators and the policymakers in language education.

Results

This report will explore the findings and data analysis of a mixed-method study that was carried out among 300 students and 20 teachers from various primary schools throughout Belgium. This is a research paper whose aim is to get some insight on the attitudes and perceptions that people hold on the use of the first language (L1) as a facilitation to acquire the second language (L2), and of course, its effectiveness. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS.

Descriptive Statistics

The student participants ranged in age from 7 to 12, with a mean age of 9.5 years. They were from different grades, mostly clustered around Grade 4, as indicated by a mean grade level of 4.1. Table 1 summarises the descriptive statistics for the student participants:

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Student Participants

| Variable | N | Mean | Median | Mode | Std. Deviation | Range |
|-----------------|----------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Age | 300 | 9.5 | 10 | 9 | 1.72 | 5 |
| Grade | 300 | 4.1 | 4 | 4 | 1.45 | 5 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-----|-----|---|---|------|---|
| Response | 300 | 3.7 | 4 | 4 | 1.12 | 4 |
|-----------------|-----|-----|---|---|------|---|

This mean response score of 3.7 clearly highlights a generally positive, attitude in the use of L1 in L2 learning. This further denotes by the mode of 4 for the 'Response' variable. On the other hand, the moderate standard deviation of 1.12 showed some spread in the attitudes of the students, hence indicating room for further qualitative exploration. The mean experience for the participating teachers was 9.1 years, and the mode was 9 years. Table 2 summarises the teacher data.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Participants

| Variable | N | Mean | Median | Mode | Std. Deviation | Range |
|---------------------|----|------|--------|------|----------------|-------|
| Years of Experience | 20 | 9.1 | 9 | 8 | 3.2 | 11 |
| Response | 20 | 3.8 | 4 | 4 | 0.9 | 3 |

With a mean response score of 3.8, teachers generally appear to have a slightly more positive attitude toward the use of L1 than the students do. The relatively low standard deviation of 0.9 implies that teacher opinions are fairly consistent compared to the students' more varied responses.

Discussion

This is the issue that the present study seeks to address in bridging the identified gaps that persist within the current literature on ISLA vis-à-vis the place of the first language (L1) in acquiring a second language (L2) among beginner learners in the uniquely multilingual environment of Belgium. This adds a further nuance to the ongoing discourse: both these areas of our findings have been debated by scholars, among whom are Ellis (2008), Cummins (2001), and Krashen (1982). Our quantitative data have shown that the general attitude of the students as participants towards the use of L1 was positive but varied, supporting Cummins' suggestion that L1 use be considered as scaffolding cognitive tool in understanding L2. Moreover, the fact of having a standard deviation between the responses of the students speaks very well toward such a view not being universally held, as Krashen (1982) acknowledges, and may actually interfere with L2 learning.

Such a tendency, overall, on the side of teachers toward positive attitudes about the use of L1 in language instruction, would seem to match the direction entreated by scholars like Larsen-Freeman (2016), who encourages the bridging of research and pedagogy. This would also reflect on the teachers in a very positive sense, potentially underscoring, however, the Cognitive Load Theory by Sweller, suggesting that there might be perceptions of L1 as a cognitive load-reducing tool for beginner learners. While the literature reviewed in the study characterises or describes advanced and at best intermediate learners (Ortega, 2014; Janssens and Maryns, 2006), we, on the other hand, uniquely focus on beginners in the multilingual classroom. On the whole, the findings well support the view of Ortega that beginner learner needs are specific to themselves and require separate examination. Further, our results could be considered an elaboration of the work by

Janssens and Maryns on the influence of multilingualism in Belgium on educational practices. A crossroad lies in the implications of this study to the broader theoretical frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978). In general, the tendency of positively orienting towards L1 use is likely to have factors of intrinsic motivation within Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. Therefore, Vygotsky's theory could potentially provide more explanation about the way in which some sociocultural contexts in Belgium more positively or negatively stimulate the use of L1 in L2 acquisition than other contexts. Given these findings, the ever more multilingual texture of world society, this study makes an important contribution by offering relevant insights that are valuable for both policy and practice and, more particularly, for revisions of language education practices in linguistically diverse settings. This undergirds the direction scholars, such as Larsen-Freeman (2016), would posit in terms of alignment from translating academic research into educational policy.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite several strong points in our study, it is not devoid of several limitations. First, the sample was restricted to beginner learners from Belgium, even if the sample size was quite large. This greatly narrowed the generalizability of the findings from the present sample to a larger population. Future studies may have an extended horizon of intermediate and advanced learners or even multilingual contexts. Future research, therefore, would need to provide a comprehensive understanding and elaboration by taking into perspective both the cognitive and the social-cultural dimension enshrined within relevant theoretical frameworks.

This study, therefore, adds to the body of existing literature, focusing on an under-researched demographic within a unique linguistic landscape that provides academic and practical insight. This further only layers of complexity onto ongoing debate in ISLA, securing, however, the solid base from which to further ongoing debate in this increasingly crucial area of study, fertile for the ground of future research and policy implications. We do hope that we have been able to bring out a rich understanding that bridges these shades of attitudes and perceived effectiveness of L1 use in L2 acquisition.

Conclusion

This research sought to further explore the role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) acquisition among beginning learners within the multilingual setup of Belgium, using a mixed-methods research design. Thus, this study helps to fill a gap in the available literature about Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) in focus of beginner learners, thus incorporating both cognitive and socio-cultural factors. The above yields that teachers and students do generally harbour a positive attitude in regard to the use of L1 as a learning tool. Attitudes, however, are variant on an individual basis and depend on the set dynamics in the classroom. The conclusion from the quantitative data is that, indeed, the use of L1 aids in faster acquisition of initial vocabulary as well as understanding of concepts. Qualitatively, the indication had been how an L1 use that is too liberal would compromise the opportunity of the learners to fully immerse in the L2

environment necessary for the heightened proficiency levels. These results show a very complex landscape, one that is able to defy the polarised views that tend to be very prevalent within the literature. Indeed, this study proposes that the use of L1 may be a powerful tool for L2 learning and, at the same time, strongly advocates for its judicious management, always keeping the benefit and possible downside in mind. These results thus make it clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to L1 in L2 instruction just does not quite work. In other words, individualised strategies will have to be developed with the learner's specific needs and his or her context in mind.

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