Introduction and issues of terminology

Putting aside the thorny issue of which, or whose, English would be represented, an English-only policy in an English language classroom presents relatively few problems from a terminological perspective. It presumably means precisely what it says: a monolingual approach with no other languages permitted. Problems rapidly arise, however, when we wish to discuss the alternatives. How do we refer to the language(s), other than English, that might be used in a bilingual classroom that does not adhere to the English-only line?

‘Mother tongue’, ‘native language’ and ‘first language’ (or ‘L1’) are all problematic to varying degrees because of their emotive force or a lack of precision or accuracy (Rampton, 1990; Kecskes and Papp, 2000: 1–2; Cook, 2010: xxi–xxii; Hall and Cook, 2012: 273–274). Cook (2010), and subsequently Hall and Cook (2012, 2013) and Kerr (2014), use the term ‘own language’ to refer to “the language which the students already know, and through which (if allowed) they will approach the new language” (Cook, 2010: xxii). ‘Own language’ is not without its own shortcomings, not least as it does not differentiate clearly between monolingual and bilingual language learners. It will, however, be the preferred choice in this chapter.

An English-only policy necessarily precludes the use of translation as a classroom activity, and it is around the question of translation that the discussion of the relative merits of monolingual and bilingual language teaching has primarily centred. But translation is only one of many classroom activities that involve the learners’ own language, and translation itself has many different guises. Own-language activities have come to be associated with translation, and translation has come to be associated with the particular kind of translation practised in grammar-translation approaches. In this chapter, ‘own-language activities’ will refer to all classroom activities that involve the use of the learners’ own language, and ‘translation’ will refer to a subset of these.

Teacher practices and attitudes

The belief that English, as a new language, is best learnt in an English-only environment, through processes resembling in some ways first-language acquisition, is widespread and seductive.
To many people, it is self-evident that the more a learner is surrounded by English, the more English they will learn. From this perspective, the less use that is made of their own language, the more they will make progress in English. In an optimisation of this perspective, zero use of the learners’ own language is the ideal to be aspired to.

In the twentieth century, a global industry of private English language schools grew up that catered to this belief. Employing, wherever possible, native-speaker teachers (NESTs in Medgyessy’ (1994) terminology; for discussion of the complexities surrounding the term ‘native speaker’, see Llurda, this volume), who often could not speak the language of their students, the English-only environment that these schools offered proved popular and commercially successful. Some of the larger and more influential chains of schools made, and still make, a point of their English-only policy in their marketing. One of the most well-known, Berlitz, describes its patented method as follows:

Talk and think in your target language from the very beginning. . . . By continually using the new language and interacting with native speaker instructors and other students on the course, you will be immediately submerged in your new language. You learn faster and your learning progress is significantly greater than in bilingual teaching sessions.

(Berlitz, n.d.)

Inlingua, with 320 schools in 36 countries, similarly employs native speakers, and the first of its ten pedagogical principles is “only the target language is used” (Inlingua, n.d.).

The connection between the private sector of English language teaching and the monolingual approach can be seen in the results of the only large-scale investigation into own-language use. Teachers in private institutions are approximately twice as likely as their counterparts in state institutions to adopt an English-only policy (Hall and Cook, 2013: 42).

State-sponsored English language teaching has, in many places, followed the lead of the private language schools. In some cases, there has been a blanket prohibition on own-language use. Mouhanna (2009: 3), for example, reports that many institutions in the UAE have banned “the use of L1 in the classroom which is commonly perceived to be an impediment to EFL learning”. In Hong Kong, teachers are exhorted to “teach English through English” (Littlewood and Yu, 2011: 66). More frequently, there is a recognition that, although an English-only environment is the ideal, own-language use may be unavoidable at times. Macaro (2000: 171) cites the example of France, where the learner must be “led gradually towards distancing himself / herself from the mother tongue”, and Lee (2012) discusses the case of Seoul, South Korea, where a proposed policy of ‘teaching English in English’ has been modified to allow teachers more flexibility in their use of Korean in English language classrooms.

In an attempt to uncover global practices, Hall and Cook (2013) carried out a survey of 2,785 primary, secondary and tertiary teachers of English in 111 countries. Nearly three quarters of the respondents felt that they could exercise their own judgement in deciding on an appropriate balance of English and own-language use, but 63 per cent suggested that their school or institution expected classes to be taught only in English and 46 per cent believed that English-only teaching was favoured by their educational ministries (Hall and Cook, 2013: 20). The institutional preference for English-only approaches was also reflected in the overwhelming number of respondents, who reported that “both the pre-service and in-service teacher-training programmes that they had experienced discouraged own-language use in the ELT classroom” (ibid.: 21).

The textbooks that currently form the basis of most instructional programmes may also shed some light on policies regarding own-language use, since these are often selected by institutions and ministries rather than by individual teachers. This is especially the case in
the primary and secondary sectors, where lists of ‘approved’ books are commonly drawn up. Textbooks can be entirely in English, or they can contain own-language features. The latter typically include rubrics, translated word lists and grammar explanations, including contrastive analysis, in the students’ own language. Sales figures are closely guarded commercial secrets, but it is clear that the use of textbooks with own-language features is widespread. In Poland, for example, books that are designed to prepare students for the Matura examination invariably include own-language features. Without these, ministerial approval will not be granted. This is despite the fact that English-only approaches are actively promoted in teacher training courses in the country. In Greece, textbooks are usually accompanied by supplementary books, known as ‘Companions’, which contain bilingual word lists and additional grammar explanations, usually in Greek. In China and Japan, textbooks produced by local publishers invariably have rubrics written in the local language (Ellis and Shintani, 2014: 227). The number of country-specific versions (i.e. with some information in the local language) of international English-only textbooks is also growing. Likewise, language learning apps with bilingual features are growing in popularity.

Insights into actual classroom practices are harder to gain. The observation or recording of classes in order to measure teachers’ own-language use is likely to provide a distorted picture of everyday unobserved, unrecorded realities. The reasons for this will be explored later in this section. Self-reporting is sometimes used by researchers as an alternative, but this, too, is not very reliable. Two general pictures, however, emerge from the research. First, there is a wide variation in the amount of own-language use, ranging from 0 per cent to 90 per cent of classroom time (Levine, 2014: 335), but strict English-only approaches are “rarely encountered” (Macaro, 1997: 96). Second, the average overall amount of reported own-language use is somewhere between 20 per cent (Levine, 2014: 335) and something in excess of 40 per cent (Littlewood and Yu, 2011: 67). Outside of contexts where students come from multiple language backgrounds or where the teacher does not share the students’ language, some degree of own-language use on the part of the teacher appears to be the norm. It is, as Hall and Cook (2012: 16) put it, “a part of many teachers’ everyday classroom practice.”

A wide range of variables are to be expected in attempts to calculate averages in English language teaching as a whole, given the very heterogeneous nature of the enterprise. A widely cited reason for increased own-language use is the learners’ language level and age (which often correlate). Swain and Lapkin (2000: 267) have argued that greater own-language use is needed with “lower-achieving students”. With fewer linguistic resources in English, they can “get more easily frustrated” (Macaro, 2000: 68), and it is no surprise to find that teachers use the students’ own language approximately twice as often with lower levels as they do with the higher (Hall and Cook, 2013: 45). In addition to language level, larger class size, the early stages of a course, longer lessons and the previous learning experiences of the students may all entail proportionately greater own-language use. The particular activity at any given point of a lesson will also have an impact on the teacher’s perception of the need to use the shared language. All of these variables will interact with each other, creating such a wide variety of classroom circumstances that one researcher has concluded that decisions about appropriate own-language use “cannot be predetermined nor easily generalized from one context to another” (Edstrom, 2009: 14)

The functions of teachers’ own-language use

Easier to describe than the amount of teachers’ own-language use is the range of functions that they use it for. A number of studies (e.g. Polio and Duff, 1994; Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney, 2008; Littlewood and Yu, 2011) have investigated these functions, and the results are similar.
Combining two classificatory systems (Ellis, 1994; Kim and Elder, 2005), these functions are summarised in Figure 36.1.

Any given own-language intervention by the teacher can serve more than one function, so the categories are not always mutually exclusive. Interventions from either category can also be either planned / strategic or unplanned / compensatory (Pennington, 1995). The word “crutch” has been used by Cohen (2011) and Littlewood and Yu (2011) to refer to this compensatory function. In both cases, but particularly for the latter, the decision to use the learners’ language may be motivated by a desire to “speed things up” (Macaro, 2005: 69). Time-saving is one of the most frequently cited reasons for own-language use by teachers: the “time saved by communicating in the mother tongue can be used for more productive activities” (Harbord, 1992: 352). Finally, in both categories, teachers may use the shared language because they are tired. Edstrom (2009: 14), in an evaluation of her own practice, “identified many instances in which [she] could have used the L2 and could identify no reason, other than laziness, for having done so”. A lack of confidence in one’s own English language proficiency, which has been reported in many studies (Littlewood and Yu, 2011: 69), may also be a contributing factor.

Hall and Cook (2013) found that own-language use by teachers was more common for the ‘medium-oriented’ or ‘core’ functions than it was for ‘framework’ and ‘social’ functions. As can be seen from Table 36.1, own-language use is most common in ‘medium-oriented’ functions, with a significant majority of teachers using this when ‘explaining when meanings in English are unclear’ and ‘explaining grammar’.

For all of these functions, the greater use of the shared language in the state sector is noteworthy. Although the survey provides an insight into the relationship between function and own-language use, it does not give any information about the amount of time devoted to these functions. Teachers in the state sector use the shared language significantly more than their private sector counterparts for explanations, but are they in explanatory mode more often, too? Own-language maintenance of discipline shows a wide difference between state-sector and private sector teachers, and here it is not unreasonable to assume that the private sector, which typically has smaller class sizes and more motivated students, may require fewer disciplinary interventions.

It is probably advisable to treat the statistics for own-language use that emerge from self-reporting research and surveys as minima. There is, as Hall and Cook (2012: 285) observe, a

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**Figure 36.1 Functions of own-language use by the teacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Medium-oriented’ or ‘core’ functions</th>
<th>‘Framework’ and ‘social’ functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i.e. concerned with the teaching of language)</td>
<td>(i.e. concerned with the management of the classroom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching, explaining and checking understanding of grammar, vocabulary and texts</td>
<td>Managing personal relationships in the classroom (e.g. building rapport, maintaining discipline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving instructions for classroom and homework tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving administrative information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lightening cognitive load</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussing methodological options</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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tendency for teachers to under-report their own-language use. Edstrom (2006), for example, estimated her own use of her own language at between 5 and 10 per cent of total teacher talking time. On investigation, she discovered it was more like 23 per cent. Other researchers (e.g. Polio and Duff, 1994; Árva and Medgyes, 2000) have found similar differences between teachers’ stated and actual own-language use. In the light of this evidence, Levine (2014: 6) concludes that own-language use is the “unmarked language of communication in many arguably crucial moments of communication in the classroom”.

The tension between attitudes and practice

In Hall and Cook’s survey (2013: 17), 61.4 per cent of teachers believe or strongly believe that own language should be excluded from or limited in English language classrooms; a similar number believe that such an approach is institutionally approved of. Yet an even greater number report regular or systematic use of own language for a wide range of teacher-talk functions. Under-reporting of own-language use is hardly surprising, therefore. “The teachers’ professed desires about L1 use,” write Copland and Neokleous (2011: 271), “are clearly in conflict with their classroom realities, leaving them feeling damned if they speak L1 and damned if they do not.”

A number of researchers (e.g. Mitchell, 1988; Macaro, 2000, 2005; Littlewood and Yu, 2011) have reported feelings of ‘guilt’ on the part of teachers when they ‘resort’ to using own language. The choice of the word ‘resort’ rather than the more neutral ‘use’ is itself revealing in the way that it suggests that teachers see their use of own language as a crutch. The number of teachers experiencing feelings of guilt may not form a majority: Hall and Cook’s survey (2013: 41) found that 36 per cent felt guilty, compared to 37.9 per cent who did not. Nevertheless, feelings of guilt are clearly widespread, a situation which, as Macaro (2005: 69) observes, is not “a healthy outcome of a pedagogical debate”.

| Table 36.1 A comparison of teacher own-language use by function and sector |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                  | Overall per cent | Per cent of     | Per cent of     |
|                  | of respondents   | respondents in   | respondents in   |
|                  | using own        | the private sector using own | the state sector using own |
|                  | language ‘rarely’| language ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ | language ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ |
| ‘medium-oriented’ functions | explaining when meanings in English are unclear | 28 | 39.9 | 19.5 |
|                        | explaining vocabulary | 38.5 | 47.4 | 32.3 |
|                        | explaining grammar | 41.9 | 57.1 | 30.7 |
| ‘framework’ or ‘social’ functions | developing rapport | 46.8 | 55.0 | 41.0 |
|                        | maintaining discipline | 49.6 | 62.8 | 39.4 |
|                        | giving instructions | 56.9 | 67.9 | 49.0 |

* Three functions from the survey have been omitted from this table. These are the correction of spoken errors, feedback on written work and testing.

Source: Data extracted from Hall and Cook’s survey (2013).
Macaro (2000: 180–181) suggests that teachers’ attitudes towards own-language use can be grouped into three categories. The first of these he calls ‘the total exclusion position’, where no pedagogical value in own-language use is seen. The second, ‘the maximalist position’, is similar to the first, except that it acknowledges that, in the real world of the classroom, considerations of affect and discipline may override the desire for total exclusion. This position has “a more socio-cultural dependence” than the former. Third, ‘the optimal use position’ sees some pedagogical value in own-language use. How and why have the first two positions come to predominate in teachers’ thinking?

The tradition of own-language exclusion

The influence of the private sector in English language teaching on attitudes towards own-language use has already been mentioned in the brief discussion of the genesis of ‘the maximalist position’. As we will see, this influence has continued to the present day. Historical accounts of English-language teaching often begin with grammar-translation approaches of the nineteenth century, a method in which “much of the lesson is devoted to translating sentences into and out of the target language” (Richards and Rodgers, 2014: 6). Adopting a “procession of methods” approach (Howatt and Smith, 2014: 76; see also Hall, this volume, ch. 15), such histories then move on to the Reform movement of the late nineteenth century, where translation is relegated to a subordinate role, “although the native language could be used in order to explain new words or check comprehension” (Richards and Rodgers, 2014: 11). The decisive moment of change within this narrative comes with the advent of the direct method, whose most strident champion, Berlitz (1916: 3–4), described all own-language use in the learning of another language as “necessarily defective and incomplete”.

The problem with such accounts is that, although the activity of language teaching in its succeeding historical phases appears to have some sort of continuity, the purposes of this activity were very different. Grammar-translation teaching was “designed and developed for use in secondary schools” (Howatt with Widdowson, 2004: 151), and the point of studying a language was to learn to read literature or “to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign language study” (Richards and Rodgers, 2014: 6). The Reform movement was, similarly, concerned with language teaching in secondary schools, but shifted emphasis away from literature to the oral production of language. The direct method, as exemplified by Berlitz, maintained the interest in oral production but had a very different orientation. The method was popularised, not in secondary schools, but in language schools, usually located in industrial towns with strong international trade links, where the adult students were learning English for strictly utilitarian purposes such as preparing for emigration to an English-speaking country or dealing with English-speaking clients (Howatt with Widdowson, 2004: 224–226).

The direct method failed to make significant inroads into secondary schools, partly because of an unrealisable requirement for NESTs and partly because the banning of own language was impracticable (Laviosa, 2014: 12). However, the assumption that the primary purpose of language learning was utilitarian, even when the learners were children rather than adults, took a firm and increasing hold. In schools, a combination of the ideas of the Reform movement and some of the practices of the direct method led to the oral method of Harold Palmer and the situational language teaching of A.S. Hornby (Richards and Rodgers, 2014: 44–57). In neither of these was own-language use banned, but its use was to be as limited as possible. Negative attitudes towards own-language use were reinforced with the emergence of audiolingualism. Here, interest shifted once more away from teenagers to young adults at colleges and universities, and this
shift (as with Berlitz) was accompanied by a hardening of attitudes towards own-language use. With a psychological grounding in behaviourist habit formation, audiolingualism sought to avoid errors, and errors were considered to be “the result of L1 interference” (Ellis, 1990: 25). Ergo, the learner’s own language was to be avoided, too. Nelson Brooks, who coined the term ‘audiolingual’, did, however, allow translation as “a literary exercise at an advanced level” (Brooks, 1964: 142). The concession to own-language use only for less utilitarian purposes is striking. (See Hall, this volume, ch. 15 for further discussion of the methods and approaches outlined in this section.)

In the above account, I have highlighted the connections between the purposes (utilitarian or otherwise) and subjects (adults or children, fee-paying or free) of language teaching, on the one hand, and the processes of teaching (exclusion or admission of own language) on the other (Laviosa, 2014: 4). Jumping to the present day, utilitarian (or vocational approaches) to English language learning have become so ubiquitous that it is “difficult to challenge [them] in the present climate where education has come to be seen in almost entirely instrumental terms” (Lawes, 2010). At the same time, the last 25 years have seen a huge rise in educational discourse (including the discourse of English language teaching) of what has been termed ‘learnification’ (Biesta, 2004, 2010), an overriding concern with how something is learnt as opposed to an interest in the purposes of that learning and the social relationships through which it takes place. The predominance of ‘the maximalist position’ on English-only can be better understood through a consideration of these broader educational trends.

Curricular objectives for the teaching of English in secondary schools usually underline a utilitarian purpose, but it is rare for this to be the only objective. Others include the awareness raising of aspects of the culture of English-speaking countries (including literature; see Hall, this volume, ch. 32), the development of intercultural competence (see Kramsch and Zhu, this volume) and the development of general language awareness (see Svalberg, this volume). When these other objectives are brought more to the fore, the more there are reasons for not adopting an English-only policy.

An issue ignored: ‘The elephant in the room’

Yet in the literature for English language teachers in training, it is rare to find injunctions against own-language use. More often, the issue is simply ignored, or given only passing or historical reference. For example, two of the most well-known and best-selling handbooks for pre-service teachers, Harmer (1983) and Scrivener (1994), paid very little attention to own-language use in their early editions. These handbooks are widely used in teacher training colleges (i.e. for secondary school teachers) around the world, but were initially conceived for and sold to the market of predominantly NESTs, studying for qualifications such as the Cambridge English CELTA, a qualification for teaching adults, primarily in private language schools. In later editions (e.g. Scrivener, 2011; Harmer, 2015), more space has been given to own-language use. It is probably not a coincidence that this change has taken place at the same time as the market for books like these has grown rapidly in state-sponsored sectors.

At ELT conferences around the world, such as those organised by organisations such as the TESOL International Association and IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) and their affiliates, own-language use has been similarly ignored. Once again, it is noticeable that there is a disproportionate representation of NESTs, working in or with a background in the private sector, often with adults, among the organisers and plenary speakers of these conferences. Here, too, though, there are indications of change, with, for example, five sessions related to own-language use at the 2015 international IATEFL conference in the UK.
The arguments against own-language use

For such a widely shared belief, there are extremely few contemporary or near-contemporary published enumerations of the reasons why a policy of English-only is desirable in English language classrooms. Slightly more frequent are lists of the disadvantages of translation, and these (e.g. Newson, 1998) suffer from the ‘straw man’ fallacy where a particular and limited approach to translation is criticised. The arguments most frequently advanced against own-language use are the following:

1. Translation is less important than the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and, in any case, is not a useful skill for most learners to acquire.
2. Time spent using own language is time lost using English.
3. Learners need to learn to think in English, and own-language use discourages them from doing so.
4. Own language use encourages the false belief that there is a word-for-word equivalence between languages and, therefore, leads to language interference problems.

Counter-arguments have been put forward by Malmkjær (1998), Vermes (2010), Cook (2010), Hall and Cook (2012), Laviosa (2014) and Ellis and Shintani (2014), among many others, and these counter-arguments have yet to be rebutted. Thus, the argument that translation is not a useful skill to acquire relies on a very narrow definition of translation. If translation is understood more broadly as mediation between speakers of two languages, it is hardly contentious to argue that it is a skill of paramount importance, “on a par at least with the traditional four skills” (Cook, 2008: 81). The reasons for the importance of this kind of mediation will be explored further in the next section.

The second argument, concerning time, falsely assumes that language use in the classroom is a zero-sum game. Some time spent on particular kinds of own-language activities may lead to more production of English than would otherwise be the case. As we saw earlier, own-language use by teachers is often motivated by a desire to save time, which can then be devoted to more productive activities.

Meanwhile, the relationship between thought and language is extremely complex, and the notion of ‘thinking in a language’ is therefore not as straightforward as it might appear (Cohen, 2011: 234–255). The idea that English language learners need to learn to think in English assumes that English and their own language are compartmentalised as separate systems in their minds. This, in turn, suggests that the task of English language learners is to leave their own language behind them and to attempt to become more like native speakers of English. However, it is unlikely that different languages are stored in different parts of the brain as completely separate systems (Grosjean, 1989). Research into word associations (e.g. Spivey and Hirsch, 2003) shows that the brain processes knowledge of two or more languages in parallel, at least to some extent. Learners will not, therefore, leave their own language behind them: learning English as a new language is a journey towards compound bilingual (or multilingual) competence (Kecskes and Papp, 2000; see also Carroll and Combs, this volume).

Learners cannot therefore be prevented from thinking in their own language. Except for the most advanced learners, the language of thought is inevitably their own language (Macaro, 2005: 68; Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain, 2009: 5–6). In some respects, this may be no bad thing. Research has shown that own-language thinking may be beneficial to learners of another language when they are reading, as it more readily enables them, among other things, “to chunk
material into semantic clusters, to keep their train of thought, to create a network of associations” (Cohen, 2011: 233).

The fourth argument against own-language use is more fully stated by Lado:

1. Few words if any are fully equivalent in any two languages, (2) the student, thinking that the words are equivalent, erroneously assumes that his translation can be extended to the same situations as the original and as a result makes mistakes, and (3) word-for-word translations produce incorrect constructions.

Lado saw the influence of the learner’s own language on the acquisition of the new one as entirely negative, and the term ‘interference’, still widely used by teachers, reflects this. More recently, however, it has been recognised that ‘language transfer’ (a term that is now preferred to ‘interference’) is a complex phenomenon which can operate two ways (i.e. the new language can also influence the own language) and is not necessarily negative (Ellis and Shintani, 2014: 235–240). Transfer is known to take place in all learning situations, and not just those where translation is used, so transfer cannot be the consequence of translation (Vermes, 2010: 89). Translation may, indeed, be a useful tool to deal with the phenomenon of transfer. Learners’ awareness of false friends, for example, is most efficiently raised by direct comparison of the two languages. Word-for-word translation exercises (from English to the learners’ own language) may, in fact, be one of the most effective ways of promoting the noticing of differences between languages (Laufer and Girsai, 2008).

There is no research which demonstrates that instructional approaches employing translation and other own-language activities result in more significant transfer effects than with monolingual approaches. There is, however, now ample research which demonstrates the positive effects of translation (e.g. bilingual dictionaries and bilingual wordlists) in the learning of vocabulary (Nation, 1997).

The arguments for own-language use (1): different purposes

Some of the most forceful arguments for own-language use come from those who are seeking to steer English language teaching away from a purely utilitarian approach in the framing of the goals of the enterprise. One of the clearest statements of this kind comes from the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (2007) document, ‘Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World’. It argues that the desired outcome of language teaching in higher education should be “educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence”. It moves away from the goal of attempting to “replicate the competence of an educated native speaker”, a goal which is “not necessarily useful, desirable or obtainable” (Hall and Cook, 2013: 8). Instead, the process of English language learning, during which functional language abilities are acquired, is seen as facilitating the development of “critical language awareness, interpretation and translation [skills], historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). From this perspective, own-language use plays a necessary and central role, and translation is a valuable skill in its own right (Laviosa, 2014: 1). Although this report is concerned with higher education, its recommendations may also be viewed as relevant to secondary schools.

A similar position is also clearly stated in the introductory chapter of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001: 1–8), which informs
the English language education policies of many countries both in Europe and beyond. Here, the purpose of language learning and teaching is presented as the promotion of plurilingualism, an approach which recognises that language is used in cultural contexts and that languages and cultures are not kept ‘in strictly separated mental compartments’. Rather, the lifelong task of language learning is to develop “a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (ibid.: 4).

In ecological approaches such as these, intercultural awareness is both an enabler of language proficiency and an outcome of reflection on language proficiency (Kramsch, 1993: 8). Teaching English, or any other language, is “teaching the very core of what it means to become multilingual . . . teaching language as a living form, experienced and remembered bodily, with a relation to an Other that is mediated by symbolic forms” (Kramsch, 2009: 191).

The decision to include or exclude own-language activities in English language teaching is not, therefore, just a process option in pursuing instrumental goals (although it is that, as well). Inclusion is a corollary of reframing the purposes of language teaching towards purposes that are more broadly educational, as opposed to training-oriented. As a result, it is not a surprise to find that such approaches find a more welcoming climate in state-sponsored higher education (e.g. Canagarajah, 2013; Laviosa, 2014) than they do in private language schools.

The arguments for own-language use (2): learner practices and attitudes

Contemporary constructivist theories of learning assume that the learning of anything new is always built upon previous knowledge and experiences. For low-level language learners, the most significant previous knowledge is their knowledge of their own language. It “lays the foundation for all other languages we might want to learn . . . it is the most valuable resource, indeed the critical one, that a talking child brings to the classroom” (Butzkamm and Caldwell, 2009:13). A comparison of English, the new language, with one’s own language is to be expected, and it is what we find. In Hall and Cook’s survey (2013), teachers reported that their students used their own languages to a significant degree in the classroom, and that, most frequently, they did this when studying vocabulary and grammar (Hall and Cook, 2013: 40). Also, as may now be expected, the students’ own-language use was higher in state-sponsored institutions than in private schools.

Surveys of learners’ attitudes towards own-language use (e.g. Chavez, 2003; Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney, 2008; Lee, 2012) have consistently shown that a majority have positive attitudes towards it, especially when they are at a low level. This preference is also shown by the huge commercial success of online language learning programmes such as Duolingo, which are organised around translation exercises. Many learners, it seems, are happy to use their own language as a cognitive tool in their language learning.

Building on constructivist theories of learning, sociocultural accounts of learning see language development as “a mediated, collaborative process driven by social interaction” (Levine, 2011: 24; see Negueruela-Azarola and García, this volume). Own-language use can play an important role in this collaborative process, besides the ‘medium-oriented’ function of coming to a better understanding of vocabulary items and grammar. Studies (e.g. Antón and DiCamilla, 1999; Swain and Lapkin, 2000) have found a range of ‘framework’ or ‘social’ functions in students’ own-language use. These may be divided into two broad groups. First, there are those uses of own language in which students prepare for a classroom task by, for example, coming to a joint understanding of the requirements of the task and the best strategic approach to it. They may also use own language to “maintain each other’s interest in the task throughout its performance” (Swain and Lapkin, 2000: 254). Own-language use may reduce the cognitive load and, in so
done, transform a task from something that is excessively challenging (and may not therefore be completed) to something that can be done and from which learning may result. Hall and Cook’s survey (2013: 40) found this use of own language to be very common: only 30 per cent of teachers reported that their students never used own-language for this purpose. The second group of functions is concerned with interpersonal interactions and creating a positive learning environment. Own-language use may be more appropriate for the expression of, for example, concern and sympathy (Kim and Elder, 2005); it may limit the possibilities of embarrassment or negative peer evaluation; it may allow adolescents to express and explore their emerging identities by ‘talking the right talk’ (Tarone and Swain, 1995). Whilst some of these uses may be seen by teachers as ‘off-task’, or even disciplinary matters, effective classroom management invariably entails some tolerance of off-task behaviour.

Conclusion

For applied linguists, there are probably few aspects of English language teaching that are less contentious than the question of English-only classrooms. The claim that English is best learnt in an English-only environment is, at best, “not proven” (Macaro, 2000: 174), and, at worst, “detrimental” and “untenable” (Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain, 2009: 182–186). There is a very clear consensus that some own-language use can support the learning of a new language. The historical arguments in favour of excluding own language are “based on a limited view of translation” (Vermes, 2010: 91) and do not take account of teaching and learning contexts (Ellis and Shintani, 2014: 233). On the whole, their roots were to be found in political and commercial considerations (Cook, 2010: xvi) rather than in any “considered pedagogic principle” (Widdowson, 2003: 160).

However, the popular received wisdom that new languages are best learnt in something approaching a ‘naturalistic’ setting, preferably with NEST teachers, is promoted and catered to by the private sector, which benefits from the contemporary dominant political narrative in which the private sector is more dynamic and efficient than the public. Huge private sector inroads into public education (Ball, 2012) are likely to strengthen the case for more vocational approaches to language education. The tests and the technologies that are sold by the private sector are largely incompatible with the ecological classroom approaches that underpin so many of the critiques of English-only. Discussions about changes to own-language policies will take place within this broader context.

Yet most teachers will need little persuading, since the emerging critical consensus on own-language use confirms their own practice-driven understanding of language classrooms. An ‘English-mainly’, as opposed to ‘English-only’, approach is already the norm. Of more concern to them will be the practical questions of how much own-language use, and of what kind, is appropriate (Sampson, 2012). The answers to both questions can be informed by research, but, ultimately, answers will be reached by teachers themselves as they explore their own local contexts (Hall and Cook, 2012: 296).

A move away from own-language use as a ‘crutch’ and towards more principled practices will be facilitated by two changes within English language teaching. The first is the incorporation of own-language issues in teacher training and development. There are already signs of this taking place in some contexts, and the greater prominence given to these issues in the recent literature for teachers in training (e.g. Harmer, 2012), as well as at conferences, is likely to accelerate acceptance. Secondly, the appearance of more practical suggestions in published form will provide teachers with more options to explore. Duff’s *Translation* (1989) and Deller and Rinvolucri’s *Using the Mother Tongue* (2002) were for a long time the only practical handbooks available.
Recent years have seen the publication of Butzkamm and Caldwell’s *The Bilingual Reform* (2009) and Kerr’s *Translation and Own-Language Activities* (2014), and both offer an extensive variety of own-language activities for general English contexts, including secondary schools. For university teachers, González Davies (2004) offers almost one hundred tasks, activities and projects, and, more recently, Levine (2011) and Laviosa (2014) have added substantially to the number of practical possibilities. At the same time, it is no longer rare to find textbooks (and their accompanying manuals for teachers) that include suggestions for own-language use. The elephant in the room is becoming increasingly visible.

**Discussion questions**

- As a learner of another language, what did you, your fellow students and your teachers use own language for? How did everyone feel about these uses?
- In your own institutional teaching context, how much variation is there in the attitudes that are expressed regarding own-language use?
- In your own teaching context, what are (or would be) the most important functions of own-language use by (a) students and (b) teachers?
- Why do you think that own-language use has been an ‘elephant in the room’ for so long?
- What potential dangers do you see in the legitimation of own-language activities? How significant are these dangers in your own context or other contexts that you know about?

**Related topics**

Bilingual education in a multilingual world; Method, methods and methodology; ‘Native speakers’, English and ELT.

**Further reading**

Cook, G. (2010) *Translation in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (This award-winning book is probably more responsible than any other for reigniting interest in own-language issues.)

Hall, G. and Cook, G. (2012) ‘Own-language use in language teaching and learning’. *Language Teaching*, 45/3, 271–308. (A ‘state-of-the-art’ survey of this area which is the most comprehensive examination of the research literature.)

Kerr, P. (2014) *Translation and own-language activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Currently the most extensive handbook of practical classroom activities.)

**References**


Pennington, M. C. (1995) *Eight case studies of classroom discourse in the Hong Kong secondary English class*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Department of English.


