Walk into any classroom where English is being taught as a second language on the first day of class, and you will likely hear the teacher say something like, “And remember this classroom is English only.” I have taught at schools where students were given merit points for speaking in English to encourage them not to use their native language. In other schools, too much native language would lower students’ grades. However, many teachers will tell you that native language use creeps into the classroom no matter how strictly the teacher tries to enforce an English-only rule! Even in environments where “English-only” rules are enforced strictly, students will chat in their native languages or ask questions of each other. They ask each other to translate words, or use translators. They may even translate whole paragraphs or essays. Is this an unavoidable but unfortunate situation or does allowing students to speak their native languages in class have any benefits? If so, what are the best situations or roles for the native language? This literature review will look at research on whether students should be allowed to use the native language to enter the ESL classroom and if so, when and for what purposes.

One limitation of this literature review is that I was unable to find much recent research on the benefits of the English-only classroom. There are likely two main reasons for this. First, most, if not all, the literature clearly states that the use of English is necessary in the classroom. No one is disputing that most classroom time should be spent speaking English. Second, this new interest in native language use (L1) is largely reacting to the belief that immersion in English is
the best way to learn, an attitude that was developed starting with the Natural or Direct Method of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Krashen was the most recent researcher to put forth a method that relies on immersion and most of his research on this topic stopped in the 80s. Thus, there is little recent research because until recently, the benefits of an English-only environment were seen as obvious, without the need for research to back it up.

It is also important to note that most of the research I found on this topic, indeed most research on ESL classrooms focuses on programs in public schools (e.g. Auerbach 1993; Cook 2001; Harless 2011; Lucas & Katz 1994; Manyak 2004; Palmer 2001; Ramos 2001). Thus the majority of the students described are school-age children who live in the United States. Some students were born in another country but a significant number of students in these programs were born in the US and to non-native speakers. So most classrooms described in the literature are homogenous in background. Other ESL classrooms may have more diverse student populations.

Finally, because these studies mainly focused on immigrants in public schools, the students studied were studying not only English but a whole range of school subjects including math, science, history and social studies. I have tried to limit myself to examples and arguments that apply universally to English language learners—indeed the research itself tends to focus only on the ESL classes within the school curriculum. However a classroom of students studying privately in order to enter a masters’ program in the US will have different needs and dynamics. In short, not everything in this review can be applied to all ESL classrooms universally.

**STUDENT ATTITUDES TO NATIVE LANGUAGE USE**

Most teachers can tell you anecdotally about student attitudes on the use of their L1s in the classroom. On the one hand, students value the chance to speak English-only. In my
experience as a teacher, students often prefer struggling to communicate a difficult thought in English rather than say it in their L1 (if the teacher speaks it) or have a friend translate. On the other hand, when they want to chat in class many students revert to their L1 and outside of the classroom most students are annoyed by a teacher reminding them to practice their English. As noted in the introduction, teachers are constantly telling students to speak in English because L1 use is rife.

Unfortunately, there is almost no literature on the topic of student attitudes to native language use or even on the quantity of English language use. There is some research (e.g. Levine, 2003) on the use of English where native English speakers are learning a foreign language i.e. English is the L1. However, that situation is different from ESL as the teacher is almost always a native or fluent English language speaker, making slipping into L1 far easier. Furthermore, the target language is not widely spoken outside the classroom so there is some reason to accept that in foreign language classrooms target language use should be maximized.

Some articles on language use (Auerbach 1993; Lucas & Katz 1994; Palmer 2011) mention anecdotes of students’ opinions but not qualitative evidence. This may be a sign how strongly the attitude that teachers and administrators control what happens in the classroom is held. (Ramos, 2001). Student attitudes may be viewed as largely irrelevant as students have no control over their environment.

One study, Damra & Qudah (2012), did look at the attitudes of students in Jordan on the use of Arabic to teach grammar (as a secondary research goal). They note that English learning students in Jordan are largely mixed on the question of whether L1 has a role in explaining grammar. Students were asked if they agree, disagree or are neutral to various statements about the use of Arabic and grammar teaching. Responses to questions such as: “I think learning
English grammar by using English makes me lost” or “Using Arabic is necessary to explain complex grammar points” were generally in the middle for the class on average (p. 304) indicating a wide range of attitudes to the use of Arabic. While these students are not studying in America, they may be future ESL students in the US so the study might have some relevance to the US classroom.

**Teacher Ambivalence to Native Language Use**

There is far more research (Ramos, 2001; Palmer, 2011; Auerbach 1993) on attitudes of teachers to language use in the classroom. Overall the consensus appears to be that teachers support native language use in theory, but English-only classrooms in practice. One reason or this contradiction may be that teachers are ambivalent about the benefits of the use of L1 in the classroom. Ramos (2001), for instance, surveyed teachers of ESL students in public schools from kindergarten through eighth grade. He found that while teachers agreed that in theory students should preserve their L1 and their cultural identity, they only weakly supported practical implementation of L1 use in the classroom. For example, teachers strongly agreed that students should learn school subjects in both English and their L1—that is they should preserve their bilingualism. They also agreed that learning a subject such as math or history in their L1 first can help them understand better (p. 368).

However, respondents did not strongly disagree with the proposition that the classroom should be English only, and some teachers agreed. There was also no strong disagreement for the proposition that students should stop using their L1 after they master English. Some teachers even agreed with this statement (p. 367). In other words, it seems that while many teachers seem to feel in theory that students should be bilingual, they support practices that create an English-only environment. Ramos’ study is particularly interesting as she found no correlation between
attitudes and amount of training or education or experience. Teacher’s opinions appeared to be self-generated and not influenced by years of telling students to speak only English or a mentor from their certification program.

Palmer (2011) also found what could be called more insidious contradictions—or “tension” (p. 109) when conducting interviews with ESL teachers of Spanish-speaking children in Texas. First, she found that the majority of teachers agreed that students coming to live in the US should be, or continue to be, bicultural and bilingual. Learning English was characterized as taking on a new heritage but not replacing their original ethnic heritage (p. 109-10). In other words, the majority of teachers did not support the idea that in America everyone should only speak English. However, she also found three attitudes running through the teachers’ answers that indicated a belief that English is the dominant language. First, many teachers equated knowledge of English with higher intelligence and inability to speak English with a lower intellectual ability. For example, one teacher was quoted as saying, “It was just a coincidence or maybe not a coincidence that kids who really lack the foundation [in mathematics] and who needed like [sic] extra manipulative use were the dominant Spanish speakers.” (Palmer, 2011, p. 111) The teacher clearly implies there may be some connection between low math ability and not being able to speak English.

In other interviews, Spanish was described as if it was a crutch that students need to get over by learning English. Teacher quotes such as, “My job is to get them where they need to be in Spanish so that next year they’ll be ready to transition to English” (p. 111) belie a belief that these children live in a world where both languages are equally valued. Spanish is something they need at lower levels, whereas English is something more valuable, something they have to get ready for (p. 111). This leads to the Palmer’s third finding, that teachers felt that eventually
students would have to enter a English-only environment and thus Spanish should be left behind, reinforcing the idea that English is a valued language and L1 is not. (p. 113). So similarly to Ramos’ study, Palmer’s research found that many teachers see speaking English only as the goal of ESL classes even though they support the idea of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual classroom and society.

One issue with Palmer’s study is that it mixes the political with the pedagogical. Her research was done against the backdrop of the English-only movement, which seeks to name English as the national language of the US. Political and social issues of immigrants thus play a role in people’s attitudes here including teachers. When Palmer and her respondents talk about the students’ environment it is not always clear if they mean the classroom or the community in general. Thus these teachers’ attitudes may not be relevant to ESL classes full of masters’ students who intend to return to their home country for example.

Nonetheless, one issue we might look at is why teachers who believe in supporting bilingualism in general do not do more to ensure a bilingual classroom. Auerbach (1993) looked at some of the reasons behind the English only classroom. She found many teachers believed that immersion in a foreign language leads to faster acquisition, an idea that gained popularity with Stephen Krashen and acquisition theory. Other teachers believed that students would not use English if they were not forced to do so by an English-only rule. Finally, teachers tended to feel that other methods, such as grammar-translation, that rely heavily on students’ L1 had failed or been discredited. For this reason, many teachers were embracing the other extreme of English only classrooms. From a practical point of view, teachers also cited several reasons why they were afraid of letting students use their L1 in class such as a fear of losing control of the
While the Auerbach article is twenty years old, it is widely cited in more recent articles. It appears to have the status of a seminal article as one of the first to openly critique the then-prevalent assumption that an English-only classroom was better.

So while most teachers do appear to support at least nominally the idea of a classroom where at least some L1 can be used, many teachers are not sure how to implement this idea in practice or they still believe that the English-only classroom is a better learning environment. However, there are many benefits to incorporating students’ L1 in class work, both in improving classroom atmosphere and in academic achievement

**Advantages of Native Language Use in the Classroom**

One advantage of making a place for L1s in the ESL classroom is that it makes students feel included and valued. According to Lucas & Katz (1994), classrooms that exclude students from using their L1s can make the students feel that their culture and national identity is being excluded. Students can feel that they are not valued as human beings. Auerbach (1993) similarly found that students are more open to learning when they can use their L1. She attributed this to the feeling that their identity mattered. When students are forced to speak English only, they can feel that nothing of their past life before they came to America matters. Thus, a classroom that does not exclude L1s makes students feel included and valued (Auerbach, 1993, p. 17-18).

Palmer (2011) observed a nice example of this. Two teachers one of whom taught in English only and one of whom taught in Spanish only began to mix their classes together for some portion of the day. One day the Spanish-speaking teacher was sick. The English-speaking teacher asked the Spanish-speaking students to translate words and tried to use what little Spanish she
had (p. 116). Thus even though that day English was the dominant classroom language, Spanish was seen as having equal value in school, much as mixing the two classes demonstrated that both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students are equal in status. It should be noted that while Palmer writes that the message of openness to different cultures are equality was received “loud and clear” (p. 116), she does not quote any students or give any data as to whether student learning was in fact improved in these students’ classes.

There are also practical benefits to multi-lingual classrooms. Auerbach (1993) found that beginning-level students were more likely to skip classes that were English only. School attendance can rise when students are allowed to use their L1 (p. 16). Likely they felt more stress in such classes as noted above and also less able to complete the work. Beginning level students may still need their L1 to help them learn.

Letting students study in their L1 does not appear to harm them academically and it may lead to better learning. Harless (2011) studied ESL programs for immigrants. She found that students in bilingual programs in the US had the same or better academic achievement as students who were immersed in English. Looking at mastery of English specifically, Damra & Qudah (2012) found that using Arabic to teach English grammar helped students learn English grammar. For their study, Damra and Qudah put English language students in Jordan into two groups. The first group was taught English grammar in both English and Arabic. Arabic was used to explain complex rules or instructions, to interpret words, to check understanding and even to translate grammatical structures. The second group was taught English grammar in English only. After six weeks both groups were given a test on the material studied. Students in the first group scored significantly higher. So use of L1 definitely can lead to better English language learning.
Most dramatically, letting students compose in L1 first and then in English may lead to better essays than those written in English first. Auerbach (1993) and Palmer (2011) both found that some teachers feel that students should learn to think in English. This is a common justification for the English-only immersion classroom. As a teacher, I have received many an essay that had large parts clearly translated from L1 to English. Such essays tend to have awkward vocabulary choices, incomprehensible syntax and confusing word order. Yet, Osburne (as cited in Auerbach, 1993, p. 21) found that students who used L1 in composing essays in English produced quality work and had more confidence. In one assignment, students were encouraged to reflect on their writing process in L1, write a composition in L1 and compare writing strategies with other students before reflecting on how to write in English. Another study by Osburne and Harss-Covaleski (as cited in Auerbach, 1993, p. 21) showed that writing in L1 and then translating into English led to essays that were as good as essays that were written in English. I could not access copies of the Osburne and Harss-Covaleski study to read the exact criteria they used or the conditions of the study. However, my students, who are held strictly to an English-only policy and write under tight deadlines tend to translate with Google Translate or another computer service. The essays in the Osburne and Harss-Covaleski study may have been translating themselves, thus fixing any idiomatic mistakes that a literal word-for-word translator would catch.

In fact, excluding L1 from the classroom may be to exclude prior knowledge for students, not only their previous knowledge about writing or composing essays but also knowledge about the world and learning skills (Cummins, 2007). This is one area where the practical and the psychological benefits dovetail. Students who are able to communicate ideas in L1 first before expressing themselves in English will often come up with more complicated ideas. That is,
students with limited English who are forced to “think in English” will think limited thoughts. This can lead to inferior compositions or contributions to conversations (Cummins, 2007, p. 236). It can also lead to students feeling demeaned because they are forced to communicate with limited language. (Auerbach, 1993) They can feel like children and I have even heard teachers describe beginning level students as “child-like”. The feeling of being treated like a child can create an unpleasant classroom environment where a student’s previous accomplishments and abilities are not valued (p. 22). So forcing students to communicate in English only at lower levels can lead to both inferior content and a sense of personal inferiority.

In conclusion, research shows that there are clear benefits to using students’ L1s in the classroom. This leads to the last point, what is the best way to incorporate L1 into the classroom?

**When to Use Students’ Native Languages**

Certainly, everyone agrees that a classroom designed to teach English should feature a great deal of English-language use. The majority of the time teachers and students should be speaking in English. Teachers need to provide input in the target language and students need to practice. However, if research shows that using L1 in the classroom can be beneficial, then it is worth looking at some of the roles students’ L1s can and do play.

One widely cited study sought to describe L1 use in nine bilingual programs in public schools in Texas, programs where students were taught a normal school curriculum. Lucas & Katz (1994) found that in almost every program, students used their L1s to help each other, to answer and ask questions and to socialize. Lucas & Katz described one classroom where teachers deliberately paired students with the same native language that they could help each other, even if it meant speaking in L1 (p. 555). This contrasts with many teachers’ instincts to pair students in heterogeneous groups so that they are forced to speak English only.
Lucas & Katz (1994) also found that teachers used students’ L1s where they spoke it. Teachers also widely used students’ L1s to socialize and to explain an activity or check comprehension. One limitation of this study is that the authors did not evaluate the use of L1 or attempt to analyze advantages or disadvantages. The study was purely descriptive. Thus we do not know if the use of L1 was beneficial or not. Also, it should be noted that for teachers to use a student’s L1 they must speak it.

Giving directions or explaining an activity is one of the most common uses of L1 in classrooms. Lucas & Katz (1994) cite examples of teachers giving directions in L1 so that they whole class understands—while doing comprehension checks in English. In one case, teachers noted that a Vietnamese student, Quong, was not writing when he was given a task. The teacher allowed a stronger student to explain the activity to Quong in Vietnamese. By the end of class, Quong had written a few sentences (p. 548-549). Cook (2001) notes that giving instructions in L1 can often be more efficient than doing it in English. He notes that many teachers “resort” to giving instructions in L1 after trying in English, time wasted that could have been spent on the task itself. On a related note, Auerbach (1994) lists giving directions and classroom management as two of the most common uses of L1 along with presenting grammar rules, and empowering students.

If we look at when English *should* be used, Cook (2001) names four criteria that teachers should keep in mind when deciding whether to use L1 or L2: Efficiency, learning, naturalness, and external relevance (p. 413).

In terms of efficiency, it is indeed sometimes much faster to explain a word or grammar rule in a students’ L1 or allow another student to explain something. Comprehension checks can also go much faster if the teacher speaks the students’ L1. (Cook 2011; Lucas & Katz 1994;
Cook (2011). Furthermore, Manyak (2004) and Auerbach (1993) both point out that beginners often need to translate or have vocabulary explained to them in their L1 as they simply do not have the lexical foundation to learn new words in English. Lucas and Katz (1994) give an example of a comprehension check (in a sixth grade mathematics class) where a bilingual teacher went over the process of adding fractions with a student, using Spanish to make sure he understood how to convert denominators (p. 547). Obviously, a mathematics classroom is different from an English classroom where English is the goal but the example of a comprehension check done efficiently in the student’s L1 still stands.

Besides classroom management tasks, L1 can be included in the learning process. Cummins (2007) cites the benefit of knowing a Romance language in learning the thousands of words in English that are derived from Latin or Greek as Romance languages often share the same words. Thus using L1 can help students elicit cognates and acquire a huge academic vocabulary (p. 230). We saw earlier that Damra & Qudah (2012) found students who get grammar explanations in their L1 are able to learn English grammar better than students who learn grammar only in English. Cook (2001) also cites the dread many language teachers have in teaching grammar in the target language as grammatical rules are often complex and students have many questions about them. Thus L1 use facilitate learning more efficiently, meeting two of Cook’s criteria.

There are also cases where L1 use may be more natural than English. One obvious area is socializing both among students and between teachers and students. Lucas and Katz (1994) noted that in every school they observed, L1 (in this case Spanish) was used to socialize before and after class. This also lead to better rapport between students and between students and the teacher. Many teachers begin a class by asking students about their weekend. Forcing students to
respond in English can lead to short or grammatically mangled answers. If the goal of chatting with students is to build rapport, it might be more natural to do so in the students’ L1—if the teacher speaks it, of course. Cook (2001) also cites giving praise and personal remarks such as, “Are you ok?” after a student has a coughing fit as situations where using L1 may be more natural.

Finally, given that many English language learners will continue to use both English and their L1 throughout their lives, we can consider the relevance or validity of using L1. Children of immigrants may need translation skills as they translate for their parents at the doctor or during PTA meetings. Even future PhD students may need to be able to translate texts from their L1 to English. As English becomes a more international language, slang and informal talk in many languages includes bits of English just as bits of other languages creep into English. Students may need code-switching skills to know when to speak in English and when in their L1. Thus letting students chat or help each other in L1, doing translation tasks, and even teaching bilingual slang may all be appropriate activities in the classroom (Cook 2001; Cummins 2011).

**CONCLUSION**

The title of this literature review asks whether students should be allowed to use L1 in the classroom. Perhaps it should have been phrased, “How can we best use L1 in the classroom?”. From the literature, there is plenty of evidence that students’ native languages can be used beneficially in the classroom. Teachers can build rapport or allow the class to build rapport by socializing in the native language, A student’s cultural and individual identity can also be promoted and encouraged through socializing in the native language, allowing students to answer questions in their native language and then translate, and even ask questions of each other. Students, particularly students with a low level of English, can learn better and be
encouraged to come to school if they are allowed to translate and get help in their native language. Even students with higher levels of English can produce more complicated ideas in essays and discussions if allowed to translate. Finally, teachers can present information more comprehensively and efficiently when they teach, at least in part, in students native language or support students who assist each other in L1. This should hopefully encourage teachers to be less dogmatic about enforcing an English-only policy. And raise awareness that using L1 or allowing students to use L1 can be better than forcing students to speak English in every situation. L1 use can be more efficient, benefit learning, feel more natural, or be relevant to students’ outside behavior.
REFERENCES


http://www.jstor.org/stable/3587307


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2001.10162798.

---

i It took me a while to get to this topic. My original intent was to research the expectations of Saudi students coming into ESL programs in the US and the differences between classroom cultures in Saudi Arabia and the US. However, I was disappointed to note that there was almost no research on this topic. I then thought I could take a step toward this goal by describing ESL classroom culture in the US. Later, I could compare the results of my research with the expectations of my Saudi students. Unfortunately, I ran into the opposite problem: there is simply too much scholarly work on ESL classrooms.

English as a Second Language classrooms are extremely diverse. Students may be refugees, recent immigrants, or high school students planning to attend university. They may be illiterate in their first language or scholars with PhDs, children or adults. English is taught in the public schools, at private language schools, in community colleges, and NGOs. The goal of the class may be academic English or survival English. Therefore it is impossible to research the culture of a typical ESL classroom for the simple fact that there is no typical ESL classroom. Furthermore, there is extensive research on classroom management, comparative teaching strategies, technology in the classroom, and a whole host of other issues that fit under the umbrella of classroom culture. In the process of limiting and organizing, I noticed a number of articles about language use in the classroom, specifically the use of students’ native or first language. Hence I ended up with this topic.