

# To Use or Not to Use L1: That is the Question

By Kristin Reimer

*A significant topic of discussion in the ESL field today is the use of students' native language in the English language classroom. Much debate exists over when and how students' L1 should be used in the L2 classroom. Based on this topic, a survey was distributed to 109 students and 28 teachers at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University to discover their perceptions on the use of Chinese in the English language classroom. Results revealed that most students and teachers tend to support using English as much as possible in class; however, students seem to perceive the use of Chinese to be more beneficial for certain types of courses and learning than teachers.*

## Introduction

With the growth of English as a global language and an increase in the number of people studying English worldwide, there has been much debate centered on the issue of how students' native language(s) (L1) and the target language (L2) should be used in the language learning classroom. Many educators tend to support one of two stances regarding L1 use when teaching English: either English is the only language used in the classroom, or English and the students' L1 can both be used. Advocates of a policy of using as much English as possible in the classroom point to the benefits of giving students an authentic environment where they must use the L2 to communicate meaning outside of assigned tasks and activities (Meij & Zhao, 2010). In certain contexts, students may not need to speak the L2 outside of class, such as in English as a foreign language situations and thus, the classroom is the only place students can fully immerse themselves in the L2. Furthermore, second language acquisition researchers, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) point out that putting students in an English-only classroom will prepare them better for unpredictable uses of the language by both teacher and classmates, which is a more accurate reflection of how they will need to interact

with the L2 in real life (as cited in Meij & Zhao, 2010, p. 397).

On the other hand, a bilingual classroom, where both the L2 and students' L1 are used, can create just as conducive an environment for language learning as the English-only classroom. In the bilingual classroom, teachers can show students relationships between their L1 and the L2 and help them to view different languages as more interconnected than separate, and thus facilitate better language learning (Cook, 2001, as cited in Meij & Zhao, 2010, p. 397). At the same time, more meaningful communication can happen in the bilingual classroom as certain ideas can better be expressed in one language versus the other (Butzkamm, 2003, as cited in Meij & Zhao, 2010, p. 397). Lastly, having a classroom where students are allowed to use their L1 can reduce anxiety and fear, thus lowering the affective filters that can sometimes hinder second language acquisition.

After reviewing the above literature, it was determined that a study focused on the use of L1 in the L2 (target language) classroom could be of great benefit to the teachers at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU). XJTLU is an international university in Suzhou, China, supported by both University of Liverpool in the UK and Xi'an Jiaotong University in Xi'an, China. Many students spend the first two years of

their degree studies in China and then go to the University of Liverpool in the UK for the last two years. In the Year 1 program at XJTLU, students are required to take 10 hours of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes a week, which are delivered by teachers in the university's English Language Center (ELC). These classes are divided into two sections, each taught by a different teacher: one section focuses on reading and writing, which is referred to as EAP class and the other focuses on speaking and listening, which is referred to as Skills class. In Year 2, students take four hours of English classes which are called EAP and integrate all four language skills. A majority of XJTLU students speak Chinese as their first language, so this study specifically looks at the use of Chinese in the English classroom. The specific aim of this research study was to explore students' and teachers' general perceptions of Chinese use in ELC classes in order to see if there were any common patterns of thinking about the topic of L1 (Chinese) use in the L2 (English) classroom. It is hypothesized that most teachers will support a view of using less L1 in the L2 classroom when teaching and that students' will have strong expectations that teachers should not use Chinese during English classes.

## Methodology

For this study, the sample consisted of 109 Year 1 students at XJTLU and 28 teachers in the English Language Center of XJTLU. Of the 109 Year 1 students, all were native speakers of Chinese and had around an intermediate level of English. Of the 28 teachers, 20 taught Year 1 EAP and Skills classes and 8 taught Year 2 EAP classes.

The teachers were a mix of non-native and native speakers of Chinese.

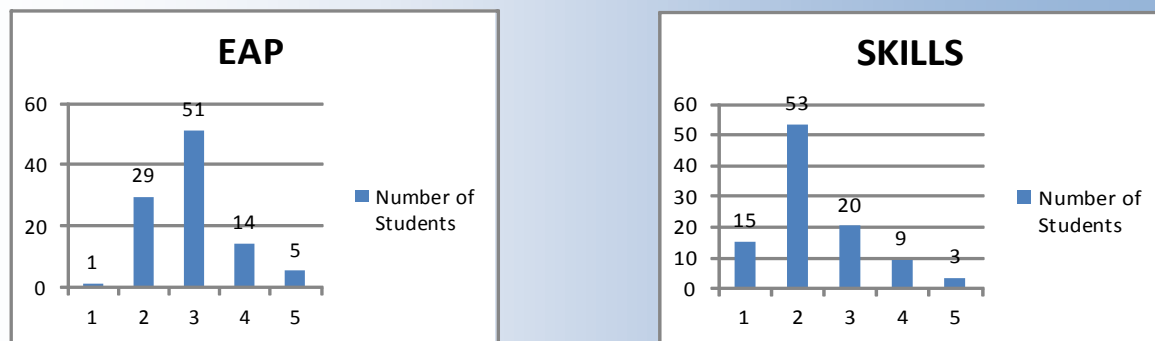
The research tools used in this study were two questionnaires, one for teachers and one for students, as they could be distributed quickly and anonymously and easily analyzed to find students' and teachers' perceptions. The student questionnaire was given to six different Year 1 ELC teachers and distributed in either their EAP or Skills classes. The teacher questionnaire was designed using the website Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) and the link to the questionnaire was then made available to all ELC teachers through an online forum. Any interested teachers in the ELC could complete the survey and responses to the survey were collected over a one month period. Each questionnaire consisted of five questions, which included multiple choice and open-ended questions about the frequency of using Chinese in English classes, reasons for using Chinese, and lastly, opinions on whether the use of Chinese by teachers was useful in class. The teacher questionnaire also included a question asking about techniques used to encourage more English use in the classroom.

After all the questionnaires were collected, the data was collated and analyzed for significant findings, which will be discussed in detail below (see Appendix A for questionnaires).

## Results and analysis

Generally, students felt they did not use Chinese very often in their English classes. As seen in Figure 1 below, most students thought their use of Chinese during class was in the range of 1 to 3 on a 5 point scale, with 1 representing never

**Figure 1.** Students' Perceived Frequency of Chinese Use in EAP and Skills Classes (On a Scale of 1-5, with 1 Being Never and 5 Being Always)



and 5 representing always. An interesting point to highlight, though, is the difference students see between EAP (reading and writing) and Skills (listening and speaking) classes for both themselves and teachers speaking Chinese. In reference to their own perceived use of Chinese, 51 students chose the level 3 on the 5 point scale for EAP class as compared to only 20 students for Skills classes, whereas 53 chose 2 on the 5 point scale for Skills class as opposed to 29 for EAP. Furthermore, a total of 19 students chose above 3 for EAP class while only 12 chose the same for Skills class.

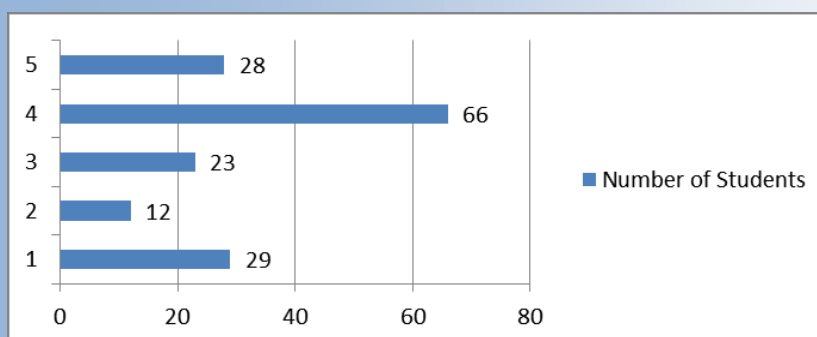
This same distinction between the two types of courses was also seen in students' answers to the last two questions of the survey, which asked students, "Do you think it is helpful for your EAP/Skills tutor to use Chinese in class? Why/why not?" The data revealed that 81% of students thought teachers using Chinese was not helpful in Skills class, while only 52% felt the same way with EAP class. For the open-ended part of these two questions, responses were categorized into similar types and it was found some students felt Chinese was useful in EAP classes to help them understand better (17 responses), for teachers to explain new vocabulary (13 responses) and key concepts (6 responses), whereas a smaller number of students gave the same responses for Skills class (5 responses for understanding better and 4 for vocabulary; see Appendix B for categorization of responses). Moreover, while many students thought that teachers using Chinese in either EAP or Skills class was not helpful, as these classes should have an English environment (32 responses for EAP class, 19 for Skills), less gave improving their speaking and listening skills as a reason for tutors not speaking Chinese in EAP as compared to Skills (8 respondents for EAP class, 23 for

skills). Another 10 students also responded that Skills class should be only for using English while none said the same about EAP class. Based on these results, it seems that students think it is more common and acceptable for Chinese to be spoken in the EAP classes than the Skills classes; however, it is not fully clear as to why they make this distinction.

Perhaps one reason may be the greater emphasis that is placed on new vocabulary in the EAP class than Skills. In question 3 of the student survey, students were asked to indicate their reason for speaking Chinese in class and 66 out of the 109 students chose the option, "I don't understand a vocabulary word" (see Figure 2 below). This was followed by 28 students choosing the option of "I don't understand my tutor's instructions" and 29 students choosing "Other." It is clear that students are switching to Chinese use mostly when they do not understand a new word, which is more likely to happen in an EAP class than Skills as the materials for EAP tend to have far more unfamiliar vocabulary. Furthermore, as stated above, the most common response given by students for why it would be helpful for a tutor to use Chinese in EAP class was to explain new vocabulary. Thus, it could be assumed that students' perceive Chinese use to be more frequent and beneficial in EAP class than Skills class because of the greater focus on new vocabulary.

Another reason for the distinction in students' minds of EAP and Skills classes could also be related to how they view the type of each of these courses. According to the results of a survey about teachers using Chinese in English classes done by Meij and Zhao (2011), students desired teachers to use less Chinese when teaching Oral English classes than reading or writing classes. This seems to fit with the responses stu-

**Figure 2.** Students' Reasons for Speaking Chinese in Class



5. I don't understand my tutor's instructions
4. I don't understand a vocabulary word
3. I don't understand a key concept
2. I'm bored
1. Other

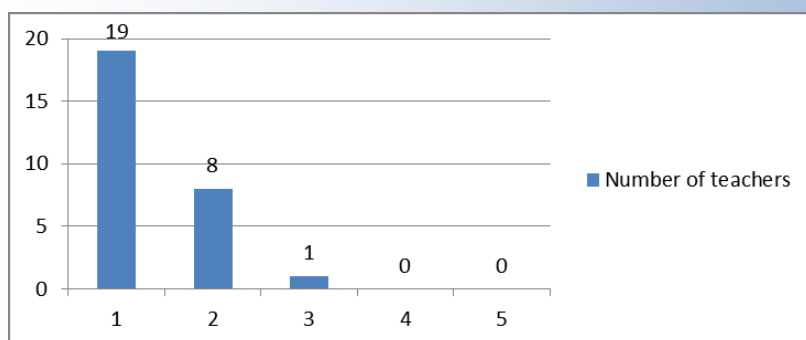
dents gave to the open-ended questions mentioned above about how Skills class is for improving speaking and listening skills and therefore, it is not beneficial for a tutor to speak Chinese in class. A final reason for this distinction may also be based on whether or not the students' teacher is a native speaker of Chinese. In this questionnaire, students did not indicate whether their English teachers were native speakers of Chinese and so it cannot be clearly seen how much effect the Chinese ability of the teacher had on students' perception of Chinese use in the class.

However, in contrast to students, teachers who responded to the survey did not make this distinction between EAP and Skills class. Generally, most respondents chose level 1 (68%) or 2 (29%) when asked about their use of Chinese in class (see Figure 3 below). Furthermore, of those teachers who taught Year 1 students and spoke Chinese in class, only two teachers believed they used Chinese differently in the two classes, with one teacher indicating he or she spoke more in EAP class and the other indicating more in Skills class. Perhaps a reason for this difference between teachers' and students' views of using Chinese in different types of courses has to do with the

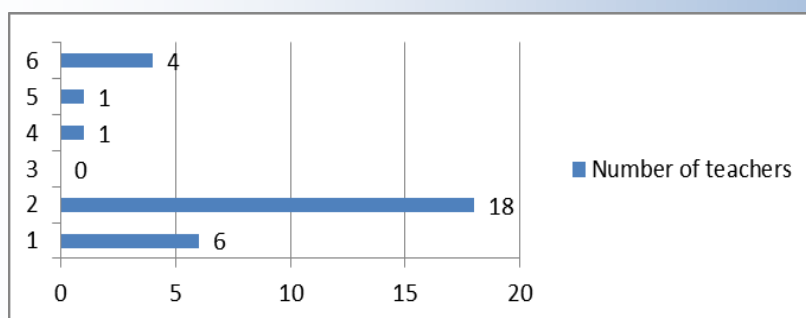
fact that most of the teachers do not perceive themselves as using Chinese as frequently in class as the students do; thus, less Chinese use overall would mean less reason to differentiate between the two courses. Furthermore, the teacher questionnaire did not have a place for respondents to indicate if they were native or non-native speakers of Chinese, so it is unclear what the effect of teacher proficiency level in Chinese could have on teachers' perceptions of their use of Chinese in the classroom.

It is interesting to note that explanation of vocabulary was the main reason given by students and 50% of the teachers who speak Chinese in class for speaking Chinese in the English classroom (see Figure 4 below). Although it is not certain what the Chinese level is of the four teachers, the data does show that compared to the other choices offered, explaining vocabulary is the most common reason for using Chinese. The other responses given for speaking Chinese in class that were not included in the multiple-choice question mostly included environmental factors, such as adding humor to the classroom, and making students feel more relaxed (see Appendix B for complete list of responses)<sup>2</sup>. Based on the results

**Figure 3.** Teachers' Perceived Frequency of Use of Chinese in Class (On a Scale of 1-5, with 1 Being Never and 5 Being Always)



**Figure 4.** Teachers' Reasons for Speaking Chinese in Class



6. To define new vocabulary
5. To explain a key concept
4. To give instructions
3. To give an evaluation / correction
2. I never speak Chinese in class
1. Other

from the teacher survey, it seems the majority of respondents are not using Chinese in either EAP or Skills class and those that do are using it either to explain vocabulary or to build better rapport with their students.

## Conclusion

Based on the research results described above, the frequency of students speaking Chinese in class is higher than teachers according to each groups' perceptions of their Chinese use; however, students believe they speak Chinese less often in Skills classes than in EAP classes while most teachers who do speak Chinese in class do not perceive a difference in the frequency of their use of Chinese in the two courses. Thus, it seems that while Chinese is used in classes in XJTLU, it is mostly used among students and not teachers. Whether teachers are not using Chinese in class because of strong beliefs regarding the use of L1 in the L2 classroom is a matter that needs to be further researched; perhaps more teachers would use Chinese in class if they first of all had the ability to speak Chinese well, and secondly, if they were more familiar with the possible benefits of L2 use in the L1 classroom.

Based on the results of this questionnaire, though, a few recommendations for teachers to consider can be made. Firstly, it is important to note that the main reason students and teachers gave for using Chinese in class was related to vocabulary; moreover, a majority of student respondents who believe that teachers speaking Chinese in class is beneficial also gave the reason of explaining new words, especially in the EAP courses. Thus, teachers could consider ways to use students' native language more when introducing new words in EAP classes. Secondly, some students seem to relate the difference of language skills taught in the two courses of EAP and Skills class to the amount of Chinese that can be used; in their minds, if a course is focused on listening and speaking skills, then it is much more important to use English in class. However, this may not be in line with teachers' expectations of L1 and L2 use in the classroom and so it could be beneficial for teachers to make it clear what their expectations are of L2

use to their students in each course and not assume that students think the same way they do about speaking Chinese in class.

Furthermore, the questionnaire results at XJTLU and previous studies on the topic of L1 use in the L2 classroom also indicate that students are using L1 in class for a variety of reasons (Chen & Hird, 2006; Liang, 2006). It is important for teachers to try to be aware of what these reasons are and not assume that students speak Chinese in class only for one or two particular reasons. It would be beneficial for teachers to do more research in their own classrooms to find out the specific reasons their students use Chinese in class and then create strategies to encourage L2 use that align more with these reasons. For example, teaching students strategies about how to learn and discuss new vocabulary using English could help to increase the level of L2 use in the classroom if teachers feel their students are using too much Chinese in class when talking about new words.

In conclusion, further research needs to be done in order to gain a more in-depth picture of teacher and student attitudes toward L1 use in the L2 classroom and how this may fit into current debate over the topic. The scope of this survey was limited, especially in regard to the number of teachers that responded and the types of questions asked in the questionnaires. Also, analysis needs to be done on whether the Chinese ability level of teachers has any influence on how teachers use Chinese in class and students' feelings towards teachers using Chinese. Finally, it would be insightful to conduct classroom observations in order to see if students' and teachers' perceptions of their Chinese use in class accurately reflect the reality of what takes place in the classroom. Once further research has been completed, more comprehensive recommendations could then be made to enable teachers to create the best environments in their classrooms for English language learning. However, this initial study does provide educators with a glimpse into the minds of students in regard to using Chinese in the classroom and gives an idea of how some teachers at XJTLU approach the issue of L1 use in the L2 classroom.

## References

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## Appendix A

### *Sample of Student Survey (Distributed by paper copy)*

1. How often do you speak Chinese in EAP class?  
(Never) 1 2 3 4 5 (Always)
2. How often do you speak Chinese in SKILLS class?  
(Never) 1 2 3 4 5 (Always)
3. Why do you speak Chinese in EAP/SKILLS classes? Circle all that apply.
  - a. I don't understand my tutor's instructions.
  - b. I don't understand a vocabulary word.
  - c. I don't understand a key concept.
  - d. I'm bored.
  - e. Other:
4. Do you think it is helpful if your EAP tutor speaks Chinese in class? Why/why not?
5. Do you think it is helpful if your SKILLS tutor speaks Chinese in class? Why/why not?

### *Sample of Teacher Survey (Distributed on [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com))*

1. What year do you currently teach?
  - a. Year 1
  - b. Year 2
2. How often do you speak Chinese in class?  
(Never) 1 2 3 4 5 (Always)
3. If you are teaching Year 1, do you tend to speak more Chinese in EAP or SKILLS class?
  - a. I speak more in EAP class.
  - b. I speak more in SKILLS class.
  - c. I speak the same amount in each class.
  - d. I don't speak Chinese at all in class.
4. What are the reasons you speak Chinese in class?
  - a. To define new vocabulary.
  - b. To explain a key concept.
  - c. To give instructions.
  - d. To give correction/evaluation.
  - e. I never speak Chinese in class.
  - f. Other (please specify)
5. What strategies do you use in class to encourage students to use English instead of Chinese?

## Appendix B

### *Categorization of Most Common (5 or more) Responses to Questions 4 and 5 of Student Survey*

#### *Chinese is helpful because...*

- Help us to understand better (17 from EAP, 5 from Skills)
- Understand some key concept (6 from EAP)
- Understand something difficult (5 from EAP)
- Some vocabulary I don't know (13 from EAP, 4 from Skills)

#### *Chinese is not helpful because...*

- Tutor doesn't know Chinese (3 from EAP, 2 from Skills)
- Need to create an English environment (32 from EAP, 19 from Skills)
- Helps to improve our speaking and listening (8 from EAP, 23 from Skills)
- Skills class is for speaking English (10 from Skills)

#### *Responses from Question 4, choice of "Other" on Teacher Survey*

- To add humor to the class / to show an understanding of students' native language / to confirm understanding of a new word after I've already attempted to explain it in English
- Concept Checking and Add some relaxation into the class...eg if I am telling an anecdote...
- To put across or emphasize a point students can relate to in their own language humour; maintain cosy atmosphere
- To let students know you understand some and not to speak it
- To lighten the mood - students like to hear a teacher struggle in Chinese!