The Role of the First Language in Second Language Learning for Adult Learners – A Vygotskian Perspective

Thesis

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by

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Certificate of Authorship / Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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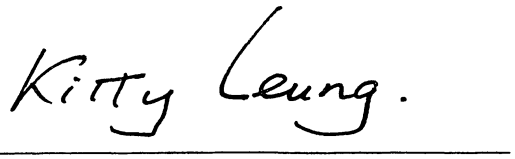

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Abbreviations:

AMES	Adult Migrant English Service
CAH	Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to provide a view of the second language learning process, in which the first language (L1) was used for second language learning (L2). Through data collected in authentic classrooms from two groups of learners, Level One and Level Two, it is hoped that the present study will provide insight, which will enable teachers and researchers who are interested in second language development to see how adult L2 learners used their L1 in L2 learning. The study also sheds light on the way adult learners perceive their use of L1 for L2 learning.

The first language has long been regarded as 'interference', playing a negative role. Research and theories in the past focused on the problems caused by the first language in the second language learning. With the notion of 'English only' in the ESL classroom, not many teachers allowed the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, and little research has been conducted to determine how L1 could contribute towards L2 learning. Although more recent research suggests that the first language can be a resource, not many significant studies focus on exactly how adult learners make use of their first language in second language learning, and what significance it has for adult second language learning. In reality, adult learners have access to their first language when they learn the second language, and they make use of L1 as a tool to help understand the L2 and to build into their L2 learning. That is to say, there is a discrepancy between theory and practice, and the present study addresses this discrepancy.

The present study attempts to look at the role of the first language from a different perspective, a Vygotskian perspective. The theory of Vygotsky (1962), a sociocultural theory that is based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts that are mediated by language and other symbol systems, provides a

comprehensive framework for considering the use of L1 in L2 learning. Cook (1999), though with a different perspective from that of Vygotsky, regards L2 learners as speakers in their own right and suggests exploiting the students' L1. Cook's idea provides an illuminating way of seeing the L1 use.

Using tape-recorded classroom discourse data from the authentic second language classroom and interviews with learners from two different groups, the present study suggests that L1 plays a complex role in L2 learning. This complex role, with support of data from the present study, comprises the use of L1 for active construction of knowledge; the use of L1 as a tool for thinking and learning; and the use of L1 for support and encouragement.

Apart from playing a complex role, this study concludes that the role of the first language goes beyond the translation of L2, and using L1 does not necessarily imply a lack of competence in L2. Data suggest that adult learners use L1 to define, to dispute and to compare the L2 language. L1 is like a useful tool which helps to obtain deep knowledge and profound understanding in L2 learning. Data also suggest that adult learners use L1 when they need it, and they may not achieve the same degree of learning without L1 use.

Based on the data, the present study draws some implications for teaching and learning. These include the need for teachers to be positive about the use of L1 in L2 learning; to acknowledge and respect the second language learner's first language; to consider the need of L1 use and make appropriate plan to incorporate L1 into L2 learning; and researchers need to note that what the learners say can be different from what they do.

Finally, the present study has made some recommendations for further studies. The present study suggests firstly, to use authentic classroom data; secondly, to extend the study of L1 to other ESL classrooms; and thirdly, to compare and find out various strategies of L1 use for various classrooms.