# The influence of mother tongue (Albanian) in learning and teaching EFL

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**Abstract:**

Using first language (L1) as a necessary and facilitating role in the second /foreign language (L2) classroom, has been a very hotly debated issue among teachers of English. This paper aims at examining students' and teachers' perceptions of the use of mother tongue and translation in various linguistic situations. This study examined language transfer while learning and teaching EFL, respectively the language interference in the written English of Albanian students. The study focused on recognizing, describing and explaining transfer-induced lexical and syntactic patterns that occur in essays written by Albanian University level students, and on following a possible change in the quantity and quality of these transfer patterns. The analysis of these transfer patterns aims at explaining the written English production by Albanian students, namely, how it is influenced by their mother tongue and what types of changes have taken place in it. The activities that help raise learners' awareness of the language use are described. The findings reveal that all learners need a support of mother tongue in English classes, but the amount of the native language needed depends on students' proficiency in English. This article will report on a piece of research that will be carried out in my own teaching/learning environment at the Language Center - South East European University in Tetova, and will present a comparative study of students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the use of L1 in EFL classes in the monolingual classroom.

**Keywords:** *Native language, English language, learning, teaching, contrastive analysis.*

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## *Introduction*

First language (L1) use in second language acquisition (SLA) is at issue. Extensive research has been carried out in the area of native language influence on the target language and a large number of terms are used when the influence of the native language is discussed, including *contrastive analysis* and *positive* and *negative transfer*. In this research a number of dimensions are addressed: students' perspective on mother tongue use, teachers' perspective on mother tongue use, and strategies for encouraging use of the target language and relevant implications for teaching methodology. Having taught in Albanian universities for twelve years, it strikes me as odd that the notion that native teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) should use only English in the classroom remains virtually unquestioned. The extent to which such a view actually reflects reality or enjoys support worldwide is debatable, however. These days, increasing numbers of teachers and researchers are questioning the validity of the assumption that limited mother tongue (MT) usage impedes successful second language (L2) learning. I feel the time has come to reconsider whether or not this fixation with 'English only' is truly justifiable. The first language is often seen as a negative feature of the L2 classroom, and decisions about whether to use the L1 are amongst the most common dilemmas that language teachers in monolingual classrooms face. In the last decades it was generally accepted that we, as language teachers, should use only target language in L2 classes and avoid L1 under any circumstance. But renewed interest in the role of L1 in SLA has questioned long-held anti L1 approaches that have exercised control over ESL/EFL classes. On the one hand, the main reasons against using the L1 have been that it does not encourage learners to use the L2 and

that when the teacher uses the L1 it deprives the learners of input in the L2.[1]

On the contrary, there are several benefits of using the L1 have also been proposed: Auerbach states that "it reduces learner anxiety"[2]. Additionally, "it creates a more relaxing learning environment[3]. Moreover, according to Atkinson, L1 facilitates checking understanding and giving instructions[4]. Research shows that complete deletion of L1 in L2 situation is not appropriate[5]. Also, Buckmaster stated that L1 usage facilitates the task of explaining the meaning of abstract words and of introducing the main differences in grammar and pronunciation between L1 and L2[6]. Research has also shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2[7] Students' native language plays a fundamental role in teaching language skills and subskills and in classroom activities as well. In fact, L1 has a wide range of deliberate functions. According to Butzcamm "successful learners capitalize on the vast amount of linguistic skills and world knowledge they have

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[1] Luke Prodromou. *From Mother Tongue to Other Tongue*, 2001, (Online), Last accessed 15 June 2017, Available at: https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/mother-tongue-other-tongue.

[2] Elsa Roberts, Auerbach. *Reexamining English Only in the ESL Classroom*. TESOL QUARTERLY Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 1993. (Online), Last Accessed, 15 June 2017. Available at: http://www.ncela.us/files/rcd/BE019020/Reexamining_English_Only.pdf

[3] Peter Burden. *The use of the students" mother tongue in monolingual English "conversation" classes at Japanese universities*. The Language Teacher 2000, (Online) Last Accessed 15 June 2017, Available at: http://jalt-publications.org/old_tlt/articles/2000/06/burden

[4] David Atkinson. *The Mother Tongue in the Classroom-a Neglected Resource? ELT Journal,* v41 n4 p241-47 Oct 1987.

[5] *Wolfgang Butzkamm.* We only learn language once. The role of the mother tongue in FL classrooms: death of a dogma Language *Learning Journal, Winter 2003, No 28, 29-39. (Online) Last Accessed 15 June 2017, Available at* http://www.fremdsprachendidaktik.rwth-aachen.de/Ww/programmatisches/pachl.html

[6] R. Wayne Buckmaster. *Using L1: What Kind of Sin? "IATEFL Poland Newsletter*, (Online) No 18, October 2000. Available at http://www.iatefl.org.pl/nletter/nletter18/nlet18_2.html [last accessed 13 June 2017.

[7] Guy Cook. *Unmarked Improvement: values, facts, and first languages.* In IATEFL Conference, Aberdeen April 2007, pg. 18-20.

accumulated via the mother tongue". Furthermore, Mattioli refers to five functions of L1 in an EFL classroom. They are: explaining vocabulary, giving instructions, explaining language rules, reprimanding students, and talking to individual students[8]. Here, the importance of L1 for instructing language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking), subskills (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and culture) will be highlighted, and the role of mother tongue in conducting classroom activities will be discussed. Generally, the term "L2" was not perceived distinct from "FL" throughout the literature review. As it is noted:

… "*the term ESL (English as a Second Language) will be used even in cases in which EFL (English as a Foreign Language) might be more appropriate. While such a terminological distinction can be crucial for those developing syllabi or preparing pedagogical materials, the distinction is less important for researches studying cross-linguistic influence*"[9].

Learning a foreign language involves new grammatical rules, vocabulary, sounds etc. One problem that can affect learners of foreign languages, both positively and negatively, is their mother tongue. Second language learners tend to rely on structures of their native language to produce target language utterances and this can be both a help and a hindrance. The study of the role of mother tongue in learning a foreign language, also known as: *Language Transfer, Language Interference, Language Contact, Code Switching,* and *Cross Linguistic Influence*, comprise essential sub-fields of linguistic inquiry within the SLA research.

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[8] Gyl Mattioli. *On native language intrusions and making do with words: Linguistically homogeneous classrooms and native language use*. English Teaching Forum, 42, 2004, pg.20-25.
[9] Terence Odlin. *Language transfer: cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pg.73-74.

## *Literature Review*

The development of the field of study 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESP) was as a result of the acknowledgment of the importance of the purpose and needs of language learners. There are many peculiarities found within the English language that have led to a growing interest from researchers who strive to make it possible to distinguish English for Tourism, English for Law and Business English among others. Linguists have observed that since languages are constantly subjected to change due to its flaccid state, one cannot exclusively claim that they speak perfect English or any other language as of that Choroleeva K[10]. Even a native speaker cannot be considered to perfectly know his/her mother tongue. The foreign language of choice for most Albanian students is English. The students do not solely want to understand how a language functions or merely know how it compares stylistically with other learned languages. The learners are interested in learning the functions of the language because it is an aspect of professional and social acceptance and it also is a self-actualization aspect. However, even after investing ample time and effort in learning a foreign language, it has been noted that students usually have inhibitions when it comes to expressing themselves in the foreign language. They still use their native language when speaking or writing. This can be blamed on the methodology that most students use when acquiring a foreign language. Instead of learning for oral communication, they learn to gain reading proficiency in a foreign language or for the sake of being scholarly[11]

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[10] Kornelia Choroleeva. *Language Transfer Types of Linguistic Errors Committed by Francophones Learning English as a Second Foreign Language*, In Humanizing Language Teaching Magazine. (Online), Last Accessed 12 June 2017, Available at: http://www.hltmag.co.uk/oct09/. 2009, Pg.90-102.

[11] Artemis Dralo, A. *Creative Stimulating Environment for Studying and Development.* International Journal of Linguistics, 4(1), 2012, Pg. 287-293.

## The Role of Language Transfer in Second Language Acquisition

Language transfer affects speakers or writers either positively or negatively depending on the relevant unit structure of both their native and acquired languages. Most learners apply knowledge from their native language to the second language and this transfer can result in both positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when the meaning of items that are transferred is in line with the native speakers' notion of acceptability. Negative transfer occurs when the opposite happens resulting in errors. Negative transfer happens at a greater scale when the difference between two languages is big. The similarities and dissimilarities in word meanings and word forms affect how quickly a learner can acquire a foreign language [12].

The method used in teaching foreign languages in most educational institutions is Grammar Translation. The major characteristics of Grammar Translations are:

The target language is taught in mother tongue and there is little active use of the language

Most of the vocabulary is taught in the form of isolated lists of words

Learners are given long elaborate explanations of the complexities of grammar

Difficult texts are learnt to be read early

The exercise given to students is mostly that of translating disconnected sentences from the target language into mother tongue and vise-versa.

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[12] Terence Odlin. *Language transfer: cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xii, 1989, pg. 77.

Little to no attention is given to how words should be pronounced[13].

The importance of language transfer in learning a second language has over the last few decades been revaluated severally.

The foundation of ESP is not a familiar subject-matter concepts and lexis. For learners to succeed, they need to be proficient in reading and writing. Arguments, on how much one's mother tongue affects his/her acquisition of a new language, have risen and a divide has been created between groups that are for monolingualism in the classroom and those that are against it. Butzkamm as cited in[14] remarked, "The international dominance of English native speakers who find absolution in the dogma of monolingualism when they cannot understand the language of their pupils, together with the cheaper mass production of strictly English-speaking in the Anglo-American mother country, constitutes one of the reasons behind the sanctification of, and the demand for, monolingualism in the classroom." Here, Butzkamm supports the use of first language in the classroom as it is a useful tool which can be used to explain difficult grammar. L1 can also be used when giving instructions which learners might not be able to understand in English, and for checking understanding, especially when using complex contexts[15].

The use of the first language provides students with a sense of security that enables them to learn with ease and in comfort. Mother tongue serves social and cognitive functions in that students who work in groups will discuss in their native language. This allows them to relate and have a sense of identity. Language

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[13] Artemis Dralo, A. *Creative Stimulating Environment for Studying and Development.* International Journal of Linguistics, 4(1), 2012, Pg. 287-293. Also, (Online) available at: http://www.macrothink.org/journal/index.php/ijl/article/view/1173/pdf

[14] Vairamuthu Suntharesan. *Role of Mother Tongue in Teaching English to Tamil Students (Special Reference to Undergraduates of the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka),* Academic Journal, Language in India, Dec.2012, Vol.12 Issue 12, p437,

[15] Ibid

transfer or translation is an involuntary thing done by language learners. Using L1 in cases where students are incapable of activating vocabulary proves useful in their learning, and gives them the comfort to read difficult texts in the second language. With texts that require higher proficiency, learners are advised to first read the text in their first language, then in the second language to better understand the concept[16].

The influence of a learner's native language in making the acquisition of a second language easy or difficult varies depending on factors that will be analyzed in this study. Many learners need a sense of security when learning a foreign language. It is challenging for them to completely abandon their native tongue despite the communicative methods that emphasize that a foreign language (FL) be taught, and learnt through the foreign language. The idea of ceasing the usage of mother tongue in the language classroom was brought by the odd phenomenon where after studying a foreign language (FL) for a long time through grammar-translation; students were still unable to fluently speak in the language. In the 1970s and 1980s, challenges to assumptions about the importance of transfer arose. This was due to claims made by Fries and Lado about the existence of cross-linguistic differences. The two stated that the differences in cross-linguistic differences in the acquisition of second language could be defined by contrastive analysis[17].

Two different versions of the contrastive analysis hypothesis (C.A) have since risen: C.A. a priori and C.A a posteriori. The former is also known as the predictive or strong version while the latter is known as the weak or explanatory version. C.A a priori is the point to point analysis of syntactic, phonological,

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[16] Ibid

[17] Maria del Mar Ramon Torrijos, *Effects of cross-linguistic influences on second language acquisition*: A corpus based study of semantic transfer in written production. Revista de Linguistica y Languas Aplicadas, 2012, pg. 147-159.

morphological and other subsystems of both languages learnt. This hypothesis suggests that with the similarities between both languages, a student will easily acquire a foreign language but with the differences, acquiring it will be harder. C.A a posteriori concentrates more on error analysis. Most errors occur due to the strategies that students use to acquire a foreign language thus linguists and teachers should pay more attention to what learners actually do than concentrating on their assumptions of what the student will do[18].

Most semantic errors made by learners occur due to overgeneralization of the target language, strategies of learning the second language, language transfer, transfer of training and strategies of second language communication. Translation is important at the intermediate and advanced level, and is also referred to as the fifth language skill alongside listening, speaking, reading and writing which are the four basic skills. Translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 gives room for understanding between strangers and is an important social skill. Teachers of foreign languages are aware of the importance of translation in language classrooms since all students, whether good or bad at comprehending reading or listening materials, mentally translate the material from L2 to L1 and the other way around[19]. It is difficult for students to directly think in the foreign language while writing since translation from FL to L1 in their minds is inevitable. Learners of a second language rely on the structure of their native language to produce utterances in the target language, and this can either be helpful or contrary. Their use of mother tongue tends to influence their learning of a foreign language both positively and negatively. The influence of a student's native language, on how easy or difficult acquiring a foreign language is,

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[18] Ibid

[19] Terence Odlin. *Language transfer: cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xii, 1989, p77.

all lies in the process through which learners of the foreign language go through while learning. Some learners may acquire native-like proficiency in more than one foreign language learnt, while others fail to achieve the same proficiency in a foreign language as they do in their native language. Learners acquire a second language by using the knowledge they already have of their native language. They use general learning strategies and universal properties of language. These universal properties enable them to internalize the second language. The student is able to construct a transitional system that reflects to his/her current knowledge (interlanguage) of the foreign language. Students also acquire a foreign language through using existing knowledge that enables them to cope with communication difficulties.

Students draw on their background experiences and prior knowledge of their native language to acquire a second language. They use structures from their first language that are similar to the second language and experiment with this new language. An inter-language, which consists of the learner's existing knowledge of the second language, is thus created. The learner is in the end able to overcome communication breakdowns by using what they already know Garza. However, it has also been viewed that as much as mother tongue can support a learner's use of a foreign language's vocabulary, it can also fail to support or hinder their ability especially when trying to construct complex words and expressions.

Languages differ in not only the forms used for meanings, but also in the meanings themselves. For example, the alleged computer translation of "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" into Russian and back is "the vodka is all right, but the meat is bad,"[20]. This shows that different languages have different

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[20] Michael Swan. *Non-systematic Variability: a Self-inflicted Conundrum?'* in: Rod Ellis, *Second Language Acquisition in Context.* London: Prentice-Hall. 1987, pg. 64-76.

meanings for certain words. A word in a certain language may have several equivalents in another language. However, a relative exact fit in meanings can be found in words relating to concepts that are steadfastly grounded in physical reality. Japanese speakers have different lexicon for talking about dressing unlike English speakers who use only one lexicon 'put on for' dressing. In English, the verb 'put on' is used for all clothing from headgear to shoes while in Japanese, different verbs are used for upper body garments, lower body garments and even shoes[21].

One of the objectives of this study are to find answers to the following basic research questions and to examine answers in the context of theories which describe the relationship between ESP and mother tongue:

1) What is the relationship between L1 and EFL?
2) How much is L1 (L1) used in EFL classes?
3) Is L1 helping students mastering EFL lessons?
4) What are students' perceptions when using L1 in EFL classes?

One of the aims was to verify whether using students L1 in acquiring a second language has a facilitating role. Showing also if it helps students feel more relaxed and comfortable when acquiring a foreign or second language.

Using or not the mother tongue in second or foreign language acquisition deals mainly with the teaching methodology. In classes where teachers use L1 are referred to as using the traditional method or the grammar translation method, whereas classes where teachers do not use L1 are referred to those that use the direct method as a teaching methodology.

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[21] Eve V. Clark. The Lexicon in Acquisition, Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pg.123-134.

## Methods

Four types of data collection were used:
Questionnaire for students; they were asked to fill in a questionnaire with their impressions about the usage of L1 in English classes. Interview with teachers; they were asked questions for their impressions about the usage of L1 in English classes. Classroom observations. I observed four of our colleague's classes and filled in observation forms, according to whether they used the learner's native language, if so, when and why? Students were given translation activities through writing.

## Participants

SEEU undergraduate students, between the ages of 18-25. The total sample of 60 students, male and female, from different ethnic groups (Albanian, Macedonian Turks and Roma). Students follow the beginner and pre-intermediate level of English. Two Albanian and two Macedonian speaking English teachers

## Results
## Student Questionnaire Results

Student's questionnaire showed that students have positive attitude towards teachers' use of the L1 in EFL classes. The students use their native language when they do not understand a particular word or concept, to discuss with their colleagues before speaking in English, to ask questions, and to express opinions which they are not able to do in the target language. Students expressed the necessity of using the L1 during the classes as it helped them become more confident. They claimed that

English teachers' use of the L1helped them learn and understand English more easily. Students confirmed that English teachers usually use L1 to explain difficult concepts, to check comprehension and to elicit language. Most of the students claim that it was very difficult for them to understand the English lesson if English teacher exclusively used English. A few students were found using English for interaction in the pair/ group work.

## Classroom Observation Results

From the classroom observations, it was concluded that only few students could interact in English with the teacher regarding the content that the teachers were teaching. English teachers do use the L1 during teaching classes. L1 is generally used to: motivate students (Informal chat/joking), explaining complex grammar rules, Explain the meaning of certain unknown words, give instructions. L1 is also used: Among the students (they use L1 to speak to each other when they do the group/pair work). The students use L1 to seek each other'shelp.Most of the students were found to be using the L1 to ask questions to teachers. The teachers explained or responded to the queries of students in both English and students L1.

## Techniques used to convey the meaning

Teachers occasionally wrote a sentence on the board and encouraged a collective translation. Teacher asked a few general relevant questions to activate the students' background knowledge so there might be better comprehension by them.

Teachers used picture, flashcards, definitions Teacher used synonyms to describe the word(s).

## *Teacher responses (Interviews)*

In this study, I also asked teachers to respond to the question "If you use L1 in your classroom, why do you think this may be more effective than using English exclusively?"

**Here are some of their responses:**
Some difficult concepts really need to be translated in students' mother tongue in order to help them follow up the activities.L1 Enables students to understand new professional concepts that are first created first in English and as such they need exclusive explanation in L1.Using of L1 definitely helps the learner, since they become more capable of understanding the concepts and learn better all language skills. Sometimes it might be helpful to clarify very difficult concepts or vocabulary which is unfamiliar to students and the teachers cannot elicit their meaning from students, or when they cannot guess their meaning from the context. Sometimes students need translation into their native language in order to understand better concepts that seem difficult for them. Students might feel less nervous in learning the difficult concepts in English language. In some cases, L1 helps to check understanding of very complex expressions, like idioms, phrases, etc. Therefore, I use L1 to clarify or check understanding in very complex language expressions. I believe that using L1 in L1 classes helps lower level student when new vocabulary is introduced or when we teach them comparative grammar. Students understand better L2 if they base it upon L1.

**Results from Student Essays: Single word translation errors**

| Albanian | Incorrect translation | Correct translation |
|----------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Aktualisht | actually (në fakt) | currently |
| Edukim | education (arsim) | upbringing |
| ekonomist (që merret me një biznes të caktuar, jo me shkencën e ekon.) | economist (economist që merret me shkencën e ekon.) | accountant |
| Gjimnaz | gymnasium (palestër) | high school |
| inxhinier (që nuk merret me sisteme shumë të ndërlikuara) | engineer (inxhinierqëmerret me sisteme shumë të ndërlikuara) | mechanic |
| klasë (në kuptimin e dhomës së nxënësve) | class (shtresë sociale, nivel, grup nx.) | classroom |
| klasë (nivelshkollor) | Class | grade (Am.), form (Br.) |
| Kontrolloj | control (zotëroj) | check (on), monitor |
| Library | library (bibliotekë) | bookstore, bookshop |
| Note | note (shënim) | grade (Am.), mark (Br.) |
| Rregulloj | regulate (vënëkontroll, sistemoj) | fix |
| Shef | chief (kryetar) chef (kuzhinier) | Boss |
| shkollë e lartë | high school (shkollë e mesme) | college (Am.), higher education |
| shkollë e mesme | middle school (klasat 7-8) | high school |

**There were other errors that were caused by students due to L1 influence in L2. These errors were mainly caused in language structure, respectively, morphology and syntax.**

| I didn't knew that customers came early, | Wrong Tense Formation | **I didn't know that customers came earlier.**<br><br>Unë nuk e dija që klientët kishin ardhur më heret.<br><br>Exp. Usually the main verb should be in<br>present simple when using Past Simple Tense in English. |
|---|---|---|
| Our boos sent<br><br>to us valuable<br><br>informations. | Plural<br><br>formation<br><br>errors | Our boss sent to us valuable information. |
| He is lawyer. | Articles | He is a lawyer. Exp: indefinite article is not used before a profession in Albanian. |
| Managers don't like nothing. | Negatives | Managers don't like nything.Exp: double negatives are routinely used in Albanian. "Menaxheret nuk pëlqejnë asgjë" |
| Please, don't allow them never to fight again. | Negatives | Please, don't ever allow them to fight again. Julutem, mos I lejoni kurrë më ata të grinden. |

## Conclusions

First, all the learners customarily rely on their mother tongue in learning English. Second, the amount of the native language that students need depends on their proficiency and linguistic

situations. Third, the statistical processing of the research findings showed that the data are significant in spite of the small sample of recipients. Finally, the students' autonomously generated reading comprehension exercises, summary writing and back-translation activities help raise learners' awareness of differences between English and the mother tongue and facilitate linguistic development. Also, teachers have to take into consideration the teaching environment and the target population they teach. Some of them would say that in such classes using L2 as much as you can is very crucial, since students are only exposed to L2 only in classes; therefore they need more exposure to L2, because they do not practice their L2 outside classrooms. Others would also say that if you only use L2, you make your students try to communicate with you in that language, giving them the opportunity to practice the target language and drag out as much output in L2 as possible. English teachers do use the L1 during teaching classes, however Macedonian teachers use less L1 than the Albanian teachers. This is due to the fact that Albanian teachers knew Macedonian language and were able to use both native languages during the classes. Whereas, Macedonian teachers lack the knowledge of the Albanian language therefore were not able to use both native languages, and were forced to use English only. Additionally, I agree that English should be the primary means of communication in L2 classroom and that you should give students ample opportunities to process English receptively as well as to give them the opportunity to practice the target language and drag out as much output in L2 as possible even outside classrooms. Moreover, if we are interested in creating a student-centered classroom seriously, then my findings have important implications on what we do in our classes. My research also proves that a second language can be learned through comparison of similarities and differences between the L1 and the L2. Moreover, bringing L1 into the English classes has made

learning English appear to be less of tense and less lost students but students being more comfortable. This way, students will be more courageous and willing to learn English since their preferences are taken into consideration and are valued properly.

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