

## *The Role of L1 in the Instruction of L2: Perspectives of Thai EFL Teachers*

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### **Abstract**

The selection of a medium of instruction has long been a contentious issue in foreign language teaching. The teacher's decision about which language should be used to deliver the lesson and interact with the students in the classroom—whether it be the language or languages of the students and teachers or the target language—is not always dependent on existing national or institutional language policies. In countries like Thailand, such policies rarely exist, leaving it up to the teachers to make the decision on their own. This study therefore explores Thai EFL teachers' perspectives on their practice. Drawing on data from interviews with EFL lecturers at a university in Northeast Thailand, this study found overwhelmingly supportive attitudes among teachers for the use of L1 in teaching English for university students. What is interesting is their reasons, which juxtapose their perceptions of classroom-specific context with curriculum requirements, all of which make their self-positioning on the use of L1 in L2 instruction strikingly different from the continuum of perspectives on target language and first language use described in the current literature. Using Macaro (2001) as a starting point, this article argues that an additional position is needed in order to make sense of the self-reported thinking and practice of the lecturers in this study. These empirical findings allow us to critically discuss theoretical and practical implications for EFL teaching in additional contexts where English is taught as a foreign language.

Keywords: codeswitching, code choice, medium of instruction, EFL in Thailand

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## **1 Introduction**

Previous studies have painted different pictures of the proportions of L1 and L2 in the classroom, paying attention to variables such as the level of the L2 course, students' L2 proficiency, and the students' age cohort. Moreover, the absence or presence of language policies in L2 education pertaining to the medium of education seem to have a decisive role in shaping the proportion of L1 and L2 use in the teachers' speech in class. Classrooms under national or institutional policies supporting the use of L2 often use L1 much less frequently, and vice versa. For instance, in the UK, Macaro (2001) found that six student teachers of French employed L1 less than 10% of the time, on average, in classes with students who had one to three years of the foreign language already under their belt. Moreover, instances of L1 use were usually very short. Like Macaro, other researchers such as Neil (1997), Macaro and Mutton (2002) and Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie (2002) report relatively small amounts of L1 use in contexts in which policies discourage it.

Studies have found a very different outcome in contexts without policies explicitly supporting L2 use in the classroom. For instance, Humphries and Stroupe (2014) found that two English teachers in their study used L1 predominantly in teaching English to grade 11 Japanese students. In my study (Wongrak, 2017), I found that Thai lecturers of English in a university in Thailand used Thai more than English in all kinds of classroom interactions across different levels of English classes. Moreover, the stretches of L1 use were often found to be longer than those of L2.

These studies indicate that the language policy regarding the medium of instruction in L2 classrooms matters. When there is such a policy, teachers' agency on the decision to use L1 and L2 was at times superseded by state or institutional guidelines. When such a policy does not exist, teachers' autonomous agency is actually at work, and in this study, I explore how it works by analyzing the teachers' perspectives on L1 use in L2 instruction in their contexts.

## **2 Teachers' theoretical positioning and practice**

Despite the fact that teachers' work is largely influenced by state policies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990), teachers are not always agents of the state; their practices have been guided by their agency, informed by a juxtaposition of what they know about their specific contexts against what they wish to achieve. Researchers (Littlewood & Yu, 2011) have discussed different positions teachers in non-English speaking countries take on the use of L1 in their L2 classrooms. Macaro (1997) categorizes their self-positioning into three groups—which he calls the virtual, maximal and optimal positions—but these theoretical positions, developed from observations of specific Western contexts of language teaching, are, on the one hand, extremely useful in helping us think about the complexity in L1 use for L2 teaching, while at the same time they are not entirely applicable as a framework of analysis to every context.

According to Macaro (1997), the three positions can be differentiated by the extent to which the teachers agree on the necessity for L1 in L2 acquisition and learning. The virtual position is held by teachers whose theoretical orientation is on par with theories that posit the uselessness of L1 in L2 acquisition. It is closely aligned to

Krashen's (1987, 1988; Krashen & Terrell, 1988) hypotheses based on L1 acquisition theories. According to this line of thinking, L2 teaching must be conducted all in L2. This theoretical position has informed practices in language immersion programs around the world, even though a consistent use of only L2 has been proven to be very difficult (McMillan & Turnbull, 2009). While the virtual position is motivated by the fear of L1 interference, the maximal position is taken by those who are worried that L1 would cause "communication breakdown resulting in: pupils being distracted; pupils misbehaving; pupil being demotivated" (Macaro, 1997, p.91). Macaro (1997) explains that people with a maximal position do not perceive the practical value of L1. Therefore L2 use is emphasised in the L2 class. Teachers may use L1 if the context really leaves them no other options. However, such uses often lead them to have "feelings of guilt and inadequacy" (Macaro, 2001, p.535). Unlike the first two positions, however, teachers who realise that L1 can offer pedagogical contributions to their L2 classes are considered to possess the optimal position. Their use of L1 is theoretically guided, meaning that they often know when it is beneficial to use it and when it is not. According to Macaro (1997), although teachers may sometimes feel guilty about their L1 uses, they can still give reasons and explanations for such uses. The optimal use is not the same as an unabridged use of L1, and it offers effective results especially in helping build a good relationship between teachers and students. It is for this reason that many researchers like Macaro (2001, 2009) are trying to forge a principled use of L1 to enhance L2 education.

Macaro's continuum of perspectives on L1 and L2 use have been adopted by many researchers in their studies to discern the teachers' linguistic practice, but the continuum is not a definitive model due to the specific context of the data out of which it was originally derived. Some researchers have already pointed out this limitation in the use of this continuum to explain practices in other contexts, and so they have started to expand the continuum. Yonesaka (2005) and Yonesaka and Metoki (2007), for instance, explored a Japanese context of English teaching and found that their data did not sit comfortably with Macaro's original model. Yonesaka (2005) argues that in the Japanese context, teachers' low English proficiency became a significant factor leading them to take a different position, which they call the "regression position." If a teacher holds the regression position, he or she would believe that "foreign-language classes should rely mainly on L1 instruction, which is the most effective way for these classes to be taught" (Yonesaka & Metoki, 2007: 136), and they would use L1 for all purposes in the classroom. Previously, Macaro (2001, p.535) summarises conclusions from previous studies that none of the teachers in those studies held a view that L1 should be employed more than L2. The results from the Japanese studies supply us with a view that supplements earlier studies, and makes us realize the need to explore more from other contexts.

### **3 Methodology**

The article is based on a qualitative study of Thai EFL lecturers' reflections on their linguistic practice in the classroom as well as their theoretical self-positioning about the role of L1 in L2 acquisition and learning. The participants were university lecturers, each with a high proficiency in English and an M.A. or Ph.D. related to linguistics or language teaching. The context in which these lecturers were working can help us analyze their perspectives on their own linguistic practices.

In Thailand, English is neither an official language nor is it regularly used for official purposes except in dealing with foreigners and in some communities in Bangkok that use English as a lingua franca (Baker, 2012), but such communities do not prevail in the rural Northeast area where the university I studied is located. The university is a comprehensive university offering a wide range of programs to students mostly from Thailand's Northeast. It could be said that the majority of the students enrolled has a low English proficiency, probably at the A1 level or below on the CEFR scale, and they all have to take four English general education courses ranging from basic English courses to academic English courses. The university accepted around 4,000 students each year, but there were fewer than 30 English lecturers who had to teach as many as 80 students of mixed ability per class.

By using a purposive sampling technique (Bryman, 2015), six lecturers were recruited as the participants. For confidentiality and anonymity, the lecturers were given new names: T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 and T6. The male lecturers were T2, T5 and T6, and the female lecturers were T1, T3 and T4. T3, T4 and T6 had more than ten years of teaching experience at the university. T2 and T5 had been teaching there for five to ten years. T2 just started teaching for the first time less than a year before the study. T1, T3 and T6 were Ph.D. holders and the rest had an M.A. in related fields. Apart from T6 who is not a native of the region, the other teachers are Northerners and are each proficient in Lao Isan, the main local language of the region, except for T2 who is a monolingual in Thai, the national language. T2, T3 and T6 received their final degrees from English speaking countries. All lecturers were highly proficient in English. These lecturers taught English in general education courses for undergraduate students using Thai, on average, 50 per cent of the class time. Details of this quantitative analysis can be found in Wongrak (2017).

The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview with a set of questions about their theoretical beliefs about the role of L1 in L2 acquisition, and about their reflections on their L1 use in the classroom. The interviews were conducted by the researcher with an audio recorder. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes to one hour. The interviews were all transcribed for the analysis.

## **4 Findings**

An analysis of the interview data indicates that the lecturers all shared two opinions: on the one hand, the lecturers believed that in theory, learners' total exposure to English in the classroom would provide the most preferable language learning conditions for them; but on the other hand, English-only instruction was impossible given the specific contexts inside and outside their classes. I argue based on these findings that the lecturers' opinions suggest that they are taking an agency-based position, which I shall call "a relational position," on the use of L1 in L2 classrooms. I discuss the two opinions held by all of the lecturers below, quoting liberally from the interviews in translation.

### **4.1 Using L2 only is ideal.**

The lecturers in this study believed that a greater exposure to English in class would lead to the better acquisition of English. The lecturers' epistemological understanding of language acquisition was a heritage from their own exposure to second language acquisition theories passed on to them from their postgraduate education. The belief

in providing L2 input for learners as the most important part of L2 learning happened to be the most influential theoretical principle in the lecturers' theoretical repertoires. As T5 told me, "We believe in teaching English by allowing students to be exposed to the language directly. We believe this more than [any other ways of teaching]." In this quote, T5 expressed his opinion using the inclusive "we" in Thai, suggesting voices of other lecturers as well. Indeed, other lecturers in this study shared his theoretical view that L2 learning would need a great exposure to L2 input.

Nevertheless, the six lecturers concluded that their belief in the significance of students' exposure to L2 in classrooms through lecturers' exclusive use of L2 was more theoretical than practical. They reported a number of factors which limited their ability to put this theoretical ideal into real use in their classroom contexts. These factors led them to adopt their second opinion.

#### **4.2 The contexts of their EFL classrooms required the use of L1.**

Several contextual characteristics of the classes that the lecturers taught set limitations on the theoretical exploitation of L2 use in L2 learning. In this study, nine types of constraints can be identified. These constraints arise from macro contexts in 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, micro class-related contexts in 4.2.3 to 4.2.6, and more personal and experience-based contexts in 4.2.7 to 4.2.9.

##### **4.2.1 The status and use of English as a foreign language in Thailand**

The six lecturers explained that in Thailand, where English is a foreign language, their students had little exposure to English outside their secondary school classroom. Their low proficiency prior to attending the university became, in turn, an obstacle for the maximal use of English in their university classrooms. The lecturers related the context of language use outside the classroom to the pedagogical practice in their classrooms, arguing that "The condition or context of Thai society does not facilitate Thai students' use of English, so we have to use their mother tongue in the teaching of English to create understanding" (T3). That is to say the high proportion of L1 use in their classes was partly the result of the status of English as a foreign language in Thailand. English was not used outside of the classroom by the vast majority of people in the country, and coupled with their consideration for their students' understanding of the lesson, the classroom linguistic practice of the lecturers indeed mimicked the partially imagined reality of language use outside the classroom in Thailand in which Thai was the majority language and English was reserved as the de facto lingua franca for international contacts. Their belief in an ideal micro classroom practice in which L1 use was limited did not reflect the reality of language use in the Northeast where Lao Isan and other local languages are used as the main languages.

##### **4.2.2 Constraints from curriculum and assessment methods**

Another factor that influenced the lecturers' decision was the existing teaching and evaluation practices. They argued that the use of L1 extensively in class was a result of the way they set out to evaluate students at the end of the course. One lecturer revealed the dilemma in the clash of theory and practice when he said, "It is probably the frame that we have set up; that is, the particular kind of assessment. If we want [students] to learn with a direct method through [teachers] speaking English directly, it might not fit the objective we have set. Something like this" (T5). The evaluation frame mentioned by the lecturer referred to the unit-by-unit-based kind of summative assessment, which did not allow flexibility for each lecturer to react to the particular

needs of their students, as they would be able to do with a formative assessment. Despite the freedom to decide the focus of each lesson, all the lecturers assigned to teach the same course had to follow the same progression of topics prescribed on the syllabus in order to be able to cover everything that students needed to know for tests that came in pre-determined intervals. According to the lecturers in this study, it would create a frustrating atmosphere for the lecturers and students if a teaching approach with an extensive L2 use, such as a direct method or a communicative approach, was used since it would require more time than they had. Hence, to the lecturers, the way they taught English was tied to the evaluation method they used and this could not be changed easily since it would require a lot to take down the traditional test-based pedagogical practice of the educational system in Thailand.

#### **4.2.3 Class size**

A big class size was said by the lecturers to be one of the first factors leading to the use of L1. When there were up to 80 students in class, the six lecturers found themselves teaching over-populated classrooms. Their concern was that using only English in class would discourage their students from participating in class activities. For instance, T5 explained he had to use Thai in his class because “There are so many students. To use—using English, for lecturers—it might be possible, but there won’t be interaction [between lecturers and students]. Because students won’t interact, it won’t help them to improve their English as it should naturally, because there are many students.” According to T5, interaction was important for English learning, but it did not need to be just in English. In other words, interaction between students and the lecturer or just among students, be it in Thai or English, would contribute to student learning. Like other lecturers, he believed that his use of Thai helped lighten the class atmosphere and make classroom interactions possible given the large class size.

#### **4.2.4 Mixed-ability classrooms**

All six lecturers gave a similar opinion regarding using L2 in mixed ability classrooms. For example, T4 said, “As for students with a low proficiency, using their mother tongue will help them understand the lesson because using English may make them feel worried or frustrated about their learning.” In line with T4’s opinion, the other lecturers were worried about the negative consequences of the use of L2 on the students with a low proficiency in English. At this university, some students, especially health science students, were usually very good at English in that they would be able to interact with lecturers in English without much trouble. Nevertheless, these students were in the minority at the university. They were often mixed into classes with other students. On this point, T5 commented, “If I get to teach good students, personally I think [the use of] Thai will decrease. I used to teach medical students, but what happened was that these medical students were in the same class with agricultural students. It is like this, so I can’t use [English extensively].” In brief, using only L2 in class would have been possible for students with good communicative English abilities and under the condition that they were separated from other students, but it was impractical due to the limited number of English lecturers.

#### **4.2.5 The students’ background**

The students in these classrooms were from relatively underprivileged backgrounds in Thailand, and their prior school education was among the worst provided in the

country, resulting in insufficient English proficiency to successfully undertake even the first course of English at the university. In such a context, lecturers' exclusive English use would not be appropriate for their learning. T3 claimed in an interview, "Students do not have enough knowledge about English for us to use only English." The six lecturers agreed that most of the newly enrolled students were distinctly below average, compared to the English abilities of first-year students at other universities in Thailand. Most of these students were from the province where the university was located or provinces nearby. Few were from other parts of Thailand. Rural schools in the region were still poorly equipped with resources, including well-trained English teachers. There were exceptional students in many schools, but those students would go to more prestigious universities. The six English lecturers, including even the junior lecturer in this study, had already noticed this characteristic in their classes and they had adjusted their practice by using a high proportion of Thai to fit the low English proficiency of the majority of their students.

#### **4.2.6 The practicality of L1**

Despite the disdainful attitudes on the role of L1 in L2 learning found in popular L2 acquisition theories, there are a number of scholars who point out the usefulness of L1 for the instruction of L2 (Atkinson, 1987; see also Cook, 2016). Likewise our lecturers found that L1 could be used to perform some of the most important functions of language use in English classes, namely lesson explanation. To explicate, T6 reflected on the function of Thai in his class. "Using the mother tongue is a very convenient method for explaining lessons. We don't need to bother using English" (T6). I should highlight the lecturer's reasoning that using English is something that can be bothersome or even impede their teaching. This reason might raise many eyebrows, but if T6's opinion is interpreted with other internal and external contexts of the classroom as previously discussed, it can be understood as reasonable. Using Thai for lesson explication both serves the learners' needs and respects curriculum constraints. This reason, however, does not explain why they used Thai so much, but the next one does.

#### **4.2.7 Lecturers' experiences of failed attempts to use more L2**

The lecturers' linguistic practice, and especially the choice of language, was partly informed by their past experiences trying to use English more in the classroom. Every lecturer in this study had an experience trying to use English as much as possible in the classroom. The results generally align with the account provided by T3: "I once taught a class for which I made a photocopy of two pages of the textbook to teach vocabulary. I spoke all in English. It was easy, but it turned out that the students withdrew, and some changed the class section. Ever since, I haven't taught in English." This experience, in addition, did not seem to depend on student proficiency, either. It happened, according to the lecturers, in all levels of classes, but with slightly different results. T3's case was severe, as students opted to withdraw or enroll in other lecturers' sections. In other cases with high proficiency students, when the lecturers used English extensively, they experienced low engagement from students. In the lecturers' experience, using L2 expansively put them at risk of losing students or reducing the effectiveness of their lessons. The gamble, they concluded, was not worth their efforts.

#### **4.2.8 Lecturers' own L2 learning experiences**

The lecturers' ethnolinguistic background as well as their own educational experiences also played a role in their explicit decision to use a significant amount of Thai to teach English. To quote T1, "I used my own background to help make the decision. Because I'm a Northerner like them and I have a background like Thai students who are not good [at English], whatever helped me when I learned, I would use to help [my students]." In addition to providing additional support for the lecturers' observations about the students' weak backgrounds in English as discussed above in section 4.2.5, T1 also brings up a new issue. According to T1, her experience as a Northerner herself, and having struggled through her English learning experience as she grew up until she became an English lecturer herself, has taught her valuable methods for learning the language. To T1 and, no doubt, to the other Thai EFL lecturers in this study who were successful English learners, the role of L1 was part of their success no matter what the theories say.

#### **4.2.9 Lecturers' speech style**

Many people in the Northeast codeswitch between their local languages and Thai in daily speech. Two of the lecturers in this study acknowledged that they transferred this multilingual practice into their classrooms. One was T5, who proudly identified himself as a Lao Isan speaker and admitted to mixing Lao Isan and Thai in his everyday language use as well as his classroom language use. Another lecturer, T2, said that codeswitching was his speech style both inside and outside the classroom. Indeed, in my observations of his classes (reported in more detail in Wongrak, 2017), I observed a higher frequency of the use of English in T2's classroom speech than in other lecturers' classrooms. Although it would be premature to assert that the way all the lecturers used their languages in class resembled the way they did outside class, at least we can say with confidence that this was true for some of the lecturers in this study.

### **5 Discussion**

This small scale study sought to examine the perspectives on L1 use in L2 instruction of Thai lecturers of English at a university in Northeast Thailand. The findings suggest that even though the lecturers were aware of the theoretical importance of the use of L2 for L2 acquisition in the classroom, their working position was mainly influenced by the contextual constraints of their classroom and other contexts beyond the immediate classroom. In this study, I therefore argue that these lecturers took a relational position on L1 use in L2 instruction to justify their linguistic practice, as they thought the results would be best for their students' English learning under their specific conditions, including the expectations of the curriculum. In this section, I will set out to detail this relational position and its implementation in language teaching and research.

The most important theoretical assumption that helps us categorize the perspectives and practices of the lecturers in this study as taking a relational position is that lecturers are not mere lay people unfamiliar with L2 acquisition theories, nor are they completely functionaries of the institution they work for (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990). The lecturers on the contrary are rational beings in the sense that they are capable of taking into account factors of significance to inform their linguistic practice in view of accomplishing their classroom duties successfully. Previous

studies have demonstrated that lecturers' agency regarding their own practice is at work in the prominence of L1 in some classrooms despite school rules or educational policies saying otherwise (Probyn, 2009; Tien, 2009). In fact, this agency was also evident in Macaro's (2001) work when the teacher who appeared to take a maximalist position with an exclusive L2 use mentality had to use L1 to help students understand the lesson. The Thai lecturers of English in this study were operating in a context without any explicit policy on the medium of instruction, leaving them the autonomy to consider theories, experiences, classroom-related contexts, curriculum policies as well as their personal habitual linguistic practice in making decisions about language use in the classroom. Their perceived internal and external classroom-specific contextual factors make their theoretical self-positioning on the use of L1 in L2 instruction a relational one.

A relational position acknowledges the crucial roles of teachers' agency and the situatedness of language teaching in different contexts. Macaro's virtual, maximal and optimal positions are each elucidated as more or less a fixed theoretical position upon which the teachers only reflect before and after their practice. Yonesaka's (2005) regression position describes a situation in which the teachers' limited linguistic abilities in L2 lead them to use L1. The word regression nevertheless suggests an emphasis on the theoretical importance of the role of L2 on L2 acquisition, stressing that the amount of L2 input in the classroom is the main factor for language learning success. These four positions do not explain the position that the lecturers here take. Although the six lecturers were aware of the theoretical benefit of L2 use in L2 learning, they did not take any of Macaro's positions—virtual, maximal or optimal. Instead, they all argued for the extensive use of L1 in their L2 classes. Likewise, they cannot be identified as having taken the regression position, since their use of L1 was not motivated by their L2 incompetence, but rather because they concluded that their substantial use of L1 was best for the students in their teaching context.

Macaro's positions as well as Yonesaka's proposed additional position help us understand why language teachers opt to use varying amounts of L1 in L2 instruction, and these positions are still observable in many teaching contexts. This study, however, leads me to suggest that we add a fifth position—the relational position—to our classification of possibilities. It would enable researchers to better explain the lecturers' decisions about their teaching practice and it would capture the complexity of the ways in which language teachers make them. An analysis of the practice of instructors taking a relational position would highlight the lecturers' agency while shedding light on the situated practice of their teaching in different contexts. Only when teachers' unique perceptions of the specific contexts they face inside and outside the classroom are understood can we justly recommend them more suitable, effective and context sensitive pedagogical practices as regards L1 use in L2 instruction.

## **6 Conclusion**

Elsewhere language teachers were found to be dismissive of L1 use in their L2 classrooms (Macaro, 2001, p.535). Analysis of interview data with the six Thai EFL lecturers in this study found otherwise: the lecturers drew on many different contextual observations as well as their experience in English teaching at a regional university in Northeast Thailand in their support for the use of L1 in their L2 classes.

This perspective leads us to postulate that they have taken a relational position, a contextually-sensitive self-positioning that has led them to rethink the use of L1 in L2 instruction. The relational position, if added to the continuum of perspectives on target language and first language use as found in the literature, would allow researchers to better examine teachers' linguistic practices in the classroom with attention to their agency and the situated nature of their teaching.

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