

Comparing learners' first and second languages in the classroom: is it useful?

What this research was about and why it is important

Second language (L2) teachers are often discouraged from using or referring to a learner's first language (L1) in the classroom, partly out of fear that learners will underuse the L2 as a result. Previous research has indicated the potential benefits of highlighting and comparing specific aspects, or features, of both languages during L2 instruction. This study recorded the use of specifically designed language comparison activities in the L2 classroom, as well as teacher and learner reactions to the tasks. The study also recorded any unprompted references to the other language in both L1 and L2 classes. The feasibility of adapting teaching strategies in both classes to encourage language comparison was assessed. The study showed that comparing the languages in L2 classes did not lead to overuse of the L1 and that the activities were well-received by learners and teachers. Unprompted references to the other language were, however, rare. Formal teacher training may be required to encourage this.

What the researchers did

- Learners were 48 beginner learners of English as a second language (ESL), aged between 9 and 10 years.
- To ensure no group was already more proficient than another, learners were tested on their ability in English and French at the start of the study.
- L1 French and L2 English lessons were filmed to observe whether the teachers made reference to the other language during their teaching and to identify opportunities for usefully making cross-language comparisons.
- Based on the outcomes of the observation, the authors designed 11 language comparison activities.
- The learners completed the language comparison activities over 6 months during their intensive L2 English classes. These activities aimed to encourage learners to compare features of their first and second languages (e.g. use of possessive pronouns, cognates, word formation).
- The learners completed learning journals, which included questions to explore their ability to make comparisons between the two languages, to help the researchers assess the impact of the activities.
- At the end of the study, the teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of using cross-language comparisons in their lessons.

What the researchers found

- The observation of the L1 and L2 classes indicated that there were few instances of the teachers referring to the other language during their lessons. Instances where comparisons were made tended to focus on cognates.
- However, the researchers identified many opportunities in both classes when comparison could be made (e.g. verb endings, question formation, punctuation, word building etc).
- Designing and using language comparison activities in the classroom was feasible.
- Learners showed no signs of overusing French in ESL classrooms as a result of the activities and were able to make insightful comparisons between the two languages.
- The L2 teacher noted her learners' enjoyment of the activities, the confidence it gave her learners and that the learners knew when and how to use their L1 appropriately in the L2 classroom.
- However, providing the language comparison activities did not guarantee that they would be used. Both teachers also noted that activities and comparisons were limited to the languages with which they were familiar and that there was not always time to spend on language comparison work.

Things to consider

- This pilot study investigated the perceptions of the teachers and learners exposed to the language comparison activities. The effectiveness of this approach on specific learning outcomes was not measured, however. Therefore, we do not know how beneficial these activities were for the learners' language development.
- The L1 French teacher in particular struggled to draw comparisons with English in the classroom, in part due to lack of familiarity with English. Teachers, who are less proficient in either the L1 or L2 may require additional training (e.g. in specific differences between the languages), so that they are still able to use this approach.
- Despite initially expressing positive attitudes towards the use of cross-language comparisons, there were few instances of the teachers building this into their regular practice, suggesting further support may be required to ensure the strategy is followed more often.