

## A Research on the Role of the Mother Tongue in the Intensive English Class

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### Abstract

The present study explores the extensive employment of the mother tongue in the intensive English classes. Analyses indicates that far from being a detriment to the language learning and teaching in classes, appropriate use of mother tongue is affirmed by both teachers and students, whose response toward the investigation resemble each other.

**Key words:** Mother tongue; Intensive English class; English teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

With the proliferation of communication, the course of langue teaching and learning becomes one of the focuses of the whole society. Therefore how to teach and learn English efficiently remains the major task of all English teachers. Although the controversy over whether the mother tongue should be employed to exist, more and more researches show that Chinese was quite extensively adopted in the foreign language classrooms, and many teachers and students expressed their approval towards the use of mother tongue.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Those people who are against the employment of the mother tongue in foreign langue class point out that the use of the mother tongue will result in misleading and even faults. For example, Lado (1964) and Gatenby (1967) opposed the exercises of translating from the foreign langue into the mother tongue and believed that this kind of practice could not replace necessary language exercises and would lead to mistakes. Geogre (1972) also held the similar idea that the use of the mother tongue would make the students foster the habit of substituting with their mother tongue. Perdue (1993) said from a cognitive point of view that the use of the mother tongue would distract students' attention and thus block the restructuring of the foreign langue.

Those people who are for the employment of the mother tongue in foreign langue class think that it is very efficient, timesaving and flexible to adopt the mother tongue in foreign language class. They believe that the mother tongue will greatly raise conceptual clarity. For example, Atkinson (1987) had once concluded the nine advantages of the employment of the mother tongue in foreign langue class. Nation (1990) found that the prohibition of using the mother tongue would give more pressure on the students and thus produce bad influences on their learning. Also Py (1996) pointed out that using the mother tongue in foreign langue class ensured the interaction between the foreign language and the mother tongue and benefit the form of the students' langue cognition.

Apart from these, Nunan and Lamb (1996) were against the total prohibition of using the mother tongue and thought that beginners and learners of the similar langue background may consider using the mother tongue. Dornyei and Kormos (1998) analyzed the compensatory function of the mother tongue in foreign langue classrooms. Turbull (2001) also endorsed the idea of using the mother tongue. He thought the decisive factor of the achievements of foreign langue teaching is the intake of the langue not the input.

All the above researches contribute to the reinforcement of the mother tongue in foreign language class, but they also indicate limitations. Most of them are mainly the discussion on the role of the mother tongue, and they are not based on experiments. This study aims at discussing the use of the mother tongue in the intensive English class of English majors in universities. The major concerns of the present paper are: 1) The usage of the mother tongue in the intensive English class; 2) the responses of the subjects towards the usage of Chinese in class; 3) the actual function of Chinese in class.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Subjects

All the subjects of this research are 100 students and 5 teachers from Foreign Languages School, Jinan University. Among the subjects, 25 are male students and 75 are female ones. They have studied English for 7 years, and their average age is 19.3. The 5 teachers are all young teachers who have been teaching experiences of 2-11 years. Among them 4 teachers are graduates and 1 are postgraduates. All the participants are chosen by random sampling.

### 2.2 The Method of Survey

A survey was made through two questionnaires (see Discussion) among 100 English majors and 5 Chinese teachers of English in Jinan University. One of the questionnaires was designed for students and the other was designed for teachers. The students' questionnaire comprises seven questions and four open-ended questions and the teachers' questionnaire contains ten open-ended questions. All these served as the principal means for gathering the necessary data for this paper. Among those questions on the students' questionnaire three questions concern the current use of the mother tongue in the extensive English class, and the rest four are about the attitudes of the two kinds of subjects towards the employment of the mother tongue in the class. There are five choices to every question and the respondent must choose only one. The four open-ended questions concern the subjects' idea of under what kind of circumstances the mother tongue is and should be employed. On the teachers' questionnaire the questions can be grouped into two sections. One section concerns the teachers' ideas toward their own use of the mother tongue in the intensive English class, while the other section is about the teachers' attitudes to the students' employment of the mother tongue in class.

### 2.3 Data Collection

There was a pilot study conducted before the real survey in order to secure the validity and reliability of the questionnaires. The pilot study was conducted among 10 students and 2 teachers. The researcher discussed with them after they had finished the questionnaires and made

some revisions. Then the revised questionnaires were delivered to the students randomly chosen from 5 classes and 5 teachers. There were 98 copies of the answered-questionnaires from the students were valid and all the 5 from the teachers were acceptable.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis of the data was conducted after the data were collected. The researcher computed the frequency and percentage of the answers in order to shed some light on the current condition of the mother tongue in the English class and the participants' attitudes towards the use of the mother tongue.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The feedback was processed using mathematical and statistical analysis methods. This part is divided into two sections, the responses of the students and the teachers.

### 3.1 The Questionnaire for the Students and the Findings from Their Answers

The first result of the answers is that the majority of the students think the mother tongue is extensively used in their intensive English class. And most of them believe that the use of the mother tongue is helpful and useful to their learning.

**Table 1**  
Questionnaire and the Students' Answers

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Does your teacher use Chinese in the intensive English class?		
a. never	2	2.0
b. occasionally	32	32.6
c. sometimes	60	62.3
d. often	3	3.1
e. always	1	1.0
2. Do you agree with the use of the mother tongue?		
a. strongly disagree	3	3.1
b. disagree	7	7.3
c. all right	31	32.4
d. agree	52	53.0
e. strongly agree	5	4.2
3. Do you like the use of the mother tongue in the intensive English class?		
a. not at all	3	3.1
b. no	21	21.4
c. ok	49	50.0
d. yes	18	18.3
e. yes, very much	7	7.2
4. Do you yourself use Chinese in the intensive English class?		
a. never	2	2.0
b. occasionally	28	28.6
c. sometimes	47	47.9
d. often	17	17.9
e. always	4	3.6
5. Do you think it will help you for the teacher to use the mother tongue in class?		
a. no help at all	2	2.0
b. help a little	13	14.5
c. some help	39	39.1
d. help a lot	40	40.8
e. help greatly	4	3.6

To be continued

Continued

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
6. If the teacher uses Chinese in class, do you feel relaxed?		
a. never	0	0.0
b. occasionally	6	4.3
c. sometimes	47	47.9
d. often	31	32.4
e. always	12	15.4
7. Do you think it is easier for you to communicate with the teacher and classmates in Chinese in class?		
a. never	6	4.3
b. occasionally	28	28.6
c. sometimes	53	57.9
d. often	9	9.2
e. always	2	2.0

The response to Q1 shows that at present the mother tongue is widely used in the intensive English class. Totally there are 98% students justify the various employment of Chinese in their intensive English class. The answers to Q4 also indicate that 21.5% of the students

think they often or always use the mother tongue in their intensive English class, while only 4.1% of the students think their teachers often or always use Chinese in class. This indicates that there is discrepancy in the use of the mother tongue in class by the teachers and the students. The results of Q2 are satisfactory because the employment of the mother tongue is attractive to the students. Among them a considerable number of students (89.6%) are not against and even 57.2% of them agree with it. As to Q3, 75.5% of the respondents show their approval towards the use of the mother tongue. The responses to Q5, Q6 and Q7 indicate that generally speaking most students think the employment can help their understanding and learning of the foreign language. All the participants feel relaxed when the teacher is using the mother tongue to teach.

The results of the subjects to the open-ended questions show their ideas about how to use the mother tongue in the intensive English class.

**Table 2**  
**The Feedback of the Students About the Use of the Mother Tongue**

		Explain the new words	Explain the grammar	Explain the text	Asking questions	Discussion
1. When does your teacher use the mother tongue?	Frequency	61	72	33	21	21
	Percentage (%)	62.2	73.5	33.7	21.4	21.4
2. When do you use the mother tongue?	Frequency	31	79	47	13	31
	Percentage (%)	32.4	80.1	47.9	14.5	32.4
3. When do you prefer the teacher using Chinese?	Frequency	40	83	47	9	12
	Percentage (%)	40.8	84.7	47.9	9.2	15.4
4. When do you prefer yourself using Chinese?	Frequency	39	53	40	28	53
	Percentage (%)	39.1	57.9	40.8	28.6	57.9

A careful comparison of the data in Table 2 indicates that the students agree to use the mother tongue as to both teaching and learning of the “grammar”, the “text”, and the “discussion” in the intensive English class. Many students admit that they use more Chinese in class when doing the pre-reading and revision of the text and doing the discussion in class. At the same time the students hope the teacher also use the mother tongue under the above circumstances.

### 3.2 The Questionnaire for the Teachers and the Findings from Their Answers

Comparing with the responses of the students, the

teachers’ show great similarity. Table 3 indicates the teachers’ approval towards the use of the mother tongue. All the five teachers think that although they themselves do not prefer using the mother tongue in the intensive English, they all adopt Chinese but with different frequency. Most teachers believe that the employment of the mother tongue will help the students with their learning and understanding and make them feel relaxed. They also admit that when they are explaining the grammar they often use the mother tongue and they want to keep using the mother tongue.

**Table 3**  
**The Feedback of the Teachers Towards Their Own Use of the Mother Tongue in the Intensive English Class Teaching**

Questions	Answers (frequency)
Do you use Chinese in the practice of teaching in class?	Seldom (3); sometimes (1); Often (1)
Do you agree with using Chinese in the foreign language class?	All right (3); Agree (2)
Do you think it will help the students’ learning and understanding if you use Chinese?	Yes, some help (4); Yes, great help (1)
When do you use the mother tongue in the intensive class?	To explain the grammar (3); To explain the text (1); Discussion (1)
Which part do you hope to use Chinese to explain?	The grammar (4); The discussion (1)

Table 4 (the following) demonstrates the answers of the five teachers concerning the students' use of the mother tongue in the intensive English class. The teachers' feedback indicates that all the teachers do not like their students use the mother tongue in the intensive English class, but it also shows that they can accept their

students' employment of the mother tongue. All the five teachers think that if the students use Chinese in class, they will feel relaxed and they will understand the foreign language better. Most teachers think their students use more Chinese when doing the grammar and new words and hope their students keep doing this.

**Table 4**  
**The Feedback of the Teachers Towards Their Students' Employment of the Mother Tongue in the Intensive English Class**

Questions	Answers (frequency)
Do your students use the mother tongue in the intensive English class?	Seldom (2); sometimes (2); Often (1)
Do you like them using the mother tongue in class?	Not at all (2); No (3)
Do you think it is helpful for the students to use Chinese in class?	Some help (4); Great help (1)
When do your students use the mother tongue in class?	To learn new words (1); To learn grammar (3); Discussion (1)
Which part does you like your students use the mother tongue during their learning?	To learn the grammar (4); To learn the text (1)

The findings of the present study indicate that all the respondents affirm the extensive employment of the mother tongue in the intensive English class. The participants show their approval of using Chinese in class. There may be two reasons underlying this phenomenon. One is that the teachers are not able to use the foreign language completely in the intensive English class because of the limitation of their English level. The proliferation of the enrollment of the college urges the enlargement of the teaching staff. Therefore not all teachers are highly qualified to their jobs. So it is impossible to ask them to use the foreign language completely in the intensive English class. The mother tongue is inevitable. What's more, most of the teachers do not have the opportunity to go abroad and study, which is a very important way to foreignize their language. It is also very interesting to notice that the younger the teacher is, the more English he or she uses in their teaching practice. And the young teachers try to use the foreign language all the time in class, while the elder teachers use more Chinese comparatively. The other reason is the strategies of the students to learn the foreign language. Most students prefer comparing the foreign language with their mother tongue in their studying. Therefore most of them use Chinese consciously or subconsciously.

**CONCLUSION**

This study explores the role of the mother tongue in the teaching and studying practice of the foreign language. The respondents express their different opinions towards the functions and the role of the mother tongue. It should be noticed that the affirmation of the mother tongue in the intensive English class does not mean over-stress of the mother tongue. Too much dependency and total prohibition of the mother tongue should be avoided. Therefore it is reasonable to use the mother tongue properly in the

intensive English class. Then the mother tongue will play a helpful role in both the teaching and learning.

Because all the subjects coming from the same university and the number are very small, the results and conclusion may lack of generality and need further justification.

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