

# L1 as a tool for providing corrective feedback

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**Abstract:** This article delves into the controversial practice of utilizing a student's first language (L1) as a teaching resource in second language (L2) learning environments. Initially, strategies such as code-switching/code-mixing and translanguaging were considered signs of poor linguistic ability. There was a strong push towards using only the target language in foreign language education, aiming to limit the first language's interference and foster a deeper immersion in the new language. However, later research has shown the benefits of incorporating the first language in bilingual education and language learning processes. It's argued that a student's knowledge in their native language can actually support their comprehension of a second language, suggesting that transferring certain linguistic or conceptual knowledge from L1 to L2 can be advantageous. This perspective encourages the strategic use of this knowledge transfer in teaching methods. Moreover, the text points to positive results from various studies on the positive impact of L1 usage in L2 classrooms. These insights pave the way for further exploration into the application of the first language in adult English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly regarding providing corrective feedback.

**Keywords:** code-switching/mixing (CS/CM); teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL); translanguaging; corrective feedback (CF)

## 1. Introduction

Using L1 as an instructional tool in L2 classrooms has been controversial in language education. As Howatt (1984) points out, some L1-based bilingual practices, such as code-switch/code-mixing (CS/CM) and translanguaging, were considered a sign of language deficiency. Howatt (1984) also mentions that English-only was the ideal path for foreign language education because omitting L1 could reduce interference and allow learners to immerse themselves in the target language. In contrast, research has also shown the benefits of CS in bilingual classes and language acquisition, with Cummins' (Spooner, 2017) linguistic interdependence theory being one of the most influential on the topic. This theory explains how L1 academic knowledge can help L2 comprehension. The fundamental insight is that if learners are sufficiently exposed to and motivated to learn other languages, some linguistic or conceptual components in their L1 can be transferred to their L2. Cummins emphasized the need for educators to promote, not prohibit, such transfer during instruction based on these beliefs. Moreover, other scholars' (Gwyn et al., 2012; Saruwatashi, 2020; Spooner, 2017) investigation of the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom has generated positive outcomes. Based on this perspective of L1 use, this essay will further explore the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, particularly within the context of adult ESL/EFL teaching, specialized in providing corrective feedback

(CF).

## **2. Literature review**

In recent decades, scholars (Edstrom, 2006; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Ito, 2017; Karagianni, 2016) have researched the forms of feedback in second language classrooms from multiple dimensions. From the dimension of language use, native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) usually have different principles and beliefs in the target language, which has appeared to the CFs that they give to students. For example, NS usually neglects some phonological errors students have in CF because of their insensitivity to specific phonological errors in learners' utterances. In other words, it indicates the shortcomings of target-language-only CF. From the dimension of feedback forms, Ito (2017) has mentioned that explicit feedback is more effective than implicit recasting in classroom settings.

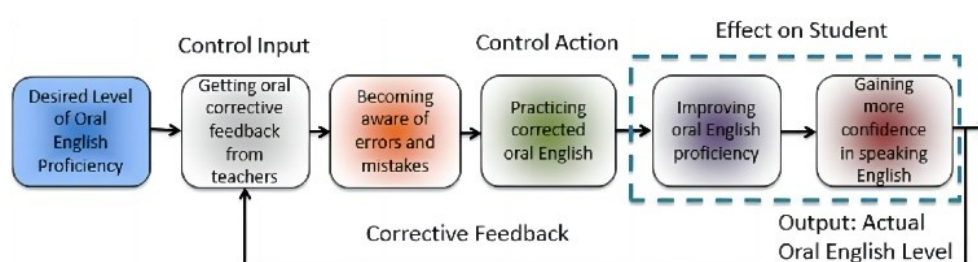
Unfortunately, when reviewing the previous scholars about providing CF, one of the most significant issues is that research on feedback in English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms mainly focus on the form of feedback, the subject of feedback, and the characteristics of feedback content. At the same time, the specific language teachers use in feedback is rarely mentioned, mainly because using two languages in second language teaching has been controversial (Edstrom, 2006). Karagianni (2016) pointed out that people who attach importance to target language input believe that second language and first language acquisition methods are similar and that the use of the first language in a second language classroom will interfere with second language acquisition. In other words, teachers should maximize the use of the target language to provide students with a target language environment and valuable language input (Ellis et al., 2017; Krashen, 1981; Kim, 2010; Macaro, 1997). In contrast, people who attach importance to the input of their mother tongue believe that the relationship between the mother tongue and second language is complementary rather than antagonistic (Cook, 2001; Turnbull, 2001). To be specific, Kim (2010) has discussed the role of the mother tongue in teachers' feedback from the perspective of socio-cultural activity theory and pointed out that as a language tool, the mother tongue can regulate teachers' corrective feedback.

Furthermore, the Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1990) holds that only the noticed feedback can be absorbed by the learner and regarded as an effective acquisition process. Therefore, students who are accustomed to their L1 for a long time may notice L1 CF first compared with the target language version. According to Long's (Karagianni, 2016) Interactional Theory, learners need to get feedback through interaction with teachers to acquire language. As English is a second language, students may not fully understand the teacher's English feedback, and the input of English feedback alone may limit L2 learning. In addition, according to the Counterbalance Hypothesis proposed by Lyster and Mori (2006), only by combining the form-based approach with the meaning-oriented approach can the effectiveness of feedback teaching be enhanced, thus promoting the teaching of the target language. Therefore, based on previous scholars' findings and my teaching experience, I will mainly discuss how L1 has played a role in providing corrective

feedback in my teaching site. Based on my teaching recordings and filed notes, I have found that using L1 to provide corrective feedback could support students' L2 in the phonological and promote language development at the meaning level.

### Theoretical framework

To explore the function of the first language (L1) as corrective feedback, this research utilizes Lee's (2018) Integrated Corrective Feedback Loop (CFL) as its analytical foundation. In the **Figure 1** below, the CFL model precisely outlines how corrective feedback (CF) affects the endeavors of advanced adult ESL learners to enhance their spoken English abilities within a course context. It also delineates the manner in which students employ self-directed practice to bolster the effects of CF.



**Figure 1.** Integrated corrective feedback loop (Lee, 2018).

Initially, a student's proficiency level is determined through a diagnostic test or interview. These results guide an instructor or program coordinator in setting a target oral English proficiency level for the student. For example, a student demonstrating basic English skills might be assigned to a beginner class to ensure they receive tailored instruction and feedback. Next, based on the student's real spoken English abilities, the instructor offers specific corrective feedback on errors. This feedback helps the student recognize their mistakes and formulate plans for improvement. Subsequently, the student engages in targeted practice of the corrected aspects of their English, impacting both their language skills and their feelings about speaking English. The model is built on the premise that consistent application of these practices will lead to positive outcomes.

As the student notices improvements in their oral English and gains confidence, these two developments feed into each other. Enhanced confidence encourages further efforts to improve oral English skills. When a student achieves or surpasses the expected level of oral English proficiency, the corrective feedback loop concludes if the instructor deems the new level satisfactory. If not, more corrective feedback is provided, and the student revisits earlier steps to address errors. This cycle might evoke a spectrum of emotions in the student, such as frustration or motivation, which then re-enter the feedback loop for further refinement.

Finally, the instructor evaluates the student's improved oral English to offer additional feedback. This allows the student to accurately assess their progress. This ongoing cycle of feedback and improvement constitutes a closed-loop feedback control process, aimed at steadily advancing the student's oral English proficiency.

Combined with the literature review and research questions, this study mainly focuses on two research questions:

How L1 play as a CF in L2 oral classroom?

How efficient of using L1 as CF?

### **3. Research method**

#### **Site selection and participants**

The study focuses on the teaching context of a U.S. Chinese Catholic Church. However, the course will now be offered through Zoom due to the pandemic. It is a two-and-a-half-hour Sunday program, and I have taught the program for a year, which is about 120 h in total. Furthermore, there is no prescribed curriculum, so the instruction is subjective. In other words, the instructor is accountable for the educational environment and accompanying materials, such as textbooks and PowerPoint presentations. Additionally, because this is a single-session teaching course, the instructor must prepare much more before the session.

According to conversations with the director during the application interview, the course aims to assist Chinese immigrants with difficulty communicating in everyday English. In other words, the course primarily focuses on developing students' Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which refers to the language talents required daily and face-to-face social contact (Baker, 2006). BICS include, but are not limited to, playground language, telephone language, and language used in interpersonal interactions. Therefore, the language used in social interactions is contextual, which fulfills students' daily life needs.

As a language course offered by the church freely, it has ten students who attend class regularly. They are primarily senior citizens and Chinese immigrants (see **Table 1**). Additionally, they speak Mandarin or Cantonese as a first language, although those who can communicate well in Cantonese can also communicate in Mandarin. Apart from their first language, they have diverse dialect language backgrounds due to the various place they originally from. In other words, although they have shared first language background, their various dialect is still an aspect that might influence their L2. Concerning their motivations/goals for studying L2, they wish to gain essential L2-based social communication, as most of them struggle with daily tasks such as shopping and bank account opening. The following language levels are suitable according to the Qualitative characteristics of spoken language usage (CEFR 3.3): They are transitioning from beginner to intermediate level, which may be quantified in terms of range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. Students are at the A2 level, defined as "using simple sentence patterns with memorized phrases, groups of a few words, and formulations to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations." However, their accuracy remains at A1, defined as "demonstrating only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorized repertoire." In addition, they are at the A2 level of fluency, which is characterized as "making oneself intelligible in extremely brief statements, despite the presence of pauses, false starts, and reformulation." Likewise, their interpersonal abilities and coherence are at the A2 level, described as "Can respond to simple statements and queries." Can indicate whether he/she is following but is seldom able to grasp sufficiently to continue the topic independently," and "Can link groups of words using simple connectors such

as “and,” “but,” and “because.” Student demographics are as follows:

**Table 1.** Participant information.

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	First Language	Language Proficiency
Student A	Female	35–40	China	Mandarin	A2
Student B	Female	35–40	China	Mandarin/Cantonese	A2
Student C	Male	40–45	China	Mandarin	A1–A2
Student D	Male	40–45	China	Mandarin	A2
Student E	Female	55–60	China	Mandarin	A2
Student F	Female	55–60	China	Mandarin	A2
Student G	Male	35–40	China	Mandarin	A2
Student H	Male	35–40	China	Mandarin/Cantonese	A2
Student I	Female	40–45	China	Mandarin/Cantonese	A2

With the semester going on, students regard L1 as a shelter, which means L1 helps them study the language and can potentially reduce their affective filter. For example, in an assignment, students were required to answer in three to four phrases on a specific topic. Initially, students B and F were afraid and refused to respond. Under such circumstances, I gave them an example first and used L1 for translanguaging and encouraging. After that, they were willing to share their answers, looked more relaxed, and even participated enthusiastically when communications were in the L1.

In the teaching environment, feedback usually refers to the information sent back to students about their performance to promote further learning (Asari, 2019; Ur, 1996). In addition, corrective feedback can help students understand the strengths and weaknesses of their output and find problems in time to improve their language ability. In these three, I will mainly discuss how L1 has played a role in providing corrective feedback in community language teaching sites, specializing in oral corrective feedback for students’ fundamental communicative competence, including pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and word choice.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. L2-based CF as a control group

It is important to note that students’ language learning backgrounds need to be more systematic. Most L2 words and sentences they know are from their daily life. Moreover, the site’s goal is to provide English classes for students to instruct them on some “survival oral English skills,” which are usually based on daily topics to provide common use vocabulary, phrases, and sentences (Top-down philosophy) to teach L2. Before teaching this site, I was the class observer and observed the previous instructor’s class, who was continuously teaching students The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Based on my observation, teaching IPA could confuse them and not have good outcomes. Given my observation and the goal of the learning site, a more effective way of teaching survival English is to take a top-down approach. I mainly focus on students’ meaningful oral outputs when using that

approach, especially at the sentence level. When mistakes and errors are detected, such as pronunciation, word choice, and sentence structure, I usually give them corrective feedback and make their language output acceptable and understandable enough. Under such a condition, I gradually realized that how to give oral corrective feedback has become another potential challenge. At the beginning of the class, I tried to give them target language-based feedback, but the consequence could have been better. Below is an example of a failed corrective feedback (CF) when correcting student A's stress issue:

- 1) Me: A, how do I pronounce this word (activate)?
- 2) Student A: Activate (stress on the second syllable)
- 3) Me: Almost there, but here are some stress issues. Activate.
- 4) Student A: (feeling confused) activate (still wrong).
- 5) Me: Stress on the first syllable and activate.
- 6) Student A: teacher, what is the meaning of syllable?

The corrective feedback happens in lines 3 and 5 from the conversation, but the student needs help understanding what information I want to deliver to him. Also, during the process of providing corrective feedback, an issue happens that students have a problem with the word (syllable) in feedback, which causes students not only to have trouble understanding the teacher's CF but also to be more confused with the new word. What is worse, such familiar issues happened so frequently that they have influenced students' class performance. Under such circumstances, I explored whether using L1 to provide corrective feedback might be more effective. Therefore, the core of my argument in this theme is how L1 will effectively provide CF that will elicit learner uptake and promote repair.

#### **4.2. L1-based CF in the phonological level**

The CF I mainly deliver to my students is their classroom pronunciation, intonation, and word stress. Based on the previous research, I compared Chinese and English to give them corrective feedback. The dialogue below concerns the implementations of L1 CF at the phonological level, which happens to correct students' pronunciation issues in the /th/ sound. The transcriptions are as follows (L1 are presented as italics):

- 1) Me: Now, let us quickly check out the vocabulary we learned before. A, how to pronounce this word? (pointing at "within").
- 2) A: within (/z/).
- 3) Me: almost there. It is "within" (/th/).
- 4) A: (repeat) within (/z/).
- 5) Me: imagine the Chinese pinyin "z," but move your tongue out and use your teeth to bite it softly.
- 6) A: (try again) /th/
- 7) Me: correct! Now put them together!
- 8) A: within /th/
- 9) Me: perfect!

During the conversation, I switched my CF mode from L2-based at the beginning to L1-based, which are both explicit CF, so it indirectly formed a

comparison and contrast between the two kinds of CF. In the beginning, when I used the target language to correct a student's error in the /th/ sound, I realized that A seems did not get the point of pronouncing the interdental sound (line1–4) since it is usually hard for students who do not study IPA systematically to recognize those details. Because of that, I started searching for some similar sounds in L1. Based on such logic, I asked A to pronounce the pinyin “z” and gradually switch the place of the tongue from postalveolar to interdental, from /z/ to /th/ (line 5). Student A immediately understands the difference and switches pronouncing when giving students the explicit Chinese CF in line 5. The conversation shows that Chinese CF influences students' pronunciation to improve their sound accuracy.

### **4.3. L1-based CF in the sentence and discourse level**

At the sentence and discourse level, the CF I mainly deliver to students happens during the in-class oral quiz. One of the most frequent methods I use to assess students is translating sentences from Chinese to English. When students have their answers with errors, I usually give them explicit feedback for correction. The transcriptions below were from the November class I taught students about holiday conversations. The transcriptions are as follows:

- 1) Me: ok, now, let me ask you guys. How to say “how are you going to celebrate Christmas?” E, you go first.
- 2) Student E: What are you doing? Christmas?
- 3) Me: Mmmmm, not enough. Let us analyze it step by step. Is there any similar way to express that question in Chinese? C, try it.
- 4) Student C: ni da suan zen me guo sheng dan jie: how will you celebrate Christmas?
- 5) Me: Good! So, how do I translate “ni,” “da suan,” “zen me,” and “guo” into English?
- 6) Student E: “ni” is “you,” “zen me” is “how” ... I do not know how to say “guo” and “da suan” in English.
- 7) Me: That is fine; you have done an excellent job. Do we have any synonyms for “da suan” and “guo”? Try to sub them.
- 8) Student C: “ji hua” and “qing zhu”?
- 9) Me: Wonderful! So how do you express them in English?
- 10) Student C: “Going to do,” “Celebrate.”
- 11) Me: Good! Now, we have all the keywords that we need. E, try it again. Do not forget the word order in wh-questions.
- 12) Student E: How are you going to celebrate Christmas?
- 13) Me: Almost there! However, “do” in “going to do” refers to all the verbs, so we do not need that. Also, we need a be-verb in front of “you.” Others do not give him any hint.
- 1) Student E: How ... are ... you ... going to ... celebrate ... Christmas?
- 2) Me: good! One more time!
- 3) Student E: How are you going to celebrate Christmas?
- 4) Me: perfect!

From the transcription, L1 has done a solid job of correcting feedback at the

meaning and discourse level. In the beginning, E had some trouble with expressing the given sentence. In such a situation, I asked him to figure out the Chinese synonyms for the keywords he needed, the first round of L1 CF, to ensure that those keywords were correct enough (lines 1–9). After clarifying all the keywords, I asked E to combine them and reminded him not to forget the word order, which guaranteed that E would not put “how” into other positions. After that, within my expectations, he forgot to add the be-verb and remove “do,” so I directly told him the wrong part for correction. Finally, after the rounds of CF, he made the correct sentence. In the transcription, L1 is also used for meaning negotiations when students have expression issues. Under that environment, I used L1 to tell students to find similar L1 expressions and then translate those keywords, which helped the student clarify the sentence’s meaning and the keywords he needed. Then, L1 is continuously used to give CF when students have word order or structural issues. Through the rounds of L1 CF, the student finally generated the correct sentence, which directly exhibited the advantage of using L1 to provide CF at the meaning level.

## **5. Conclusion**

Although ESL/EFL students strive to create an L2-based language environment for study, their L1 remains dominant. This study specifically illustrated the use of L1 as a tool for providing corrective feedback. The findings indicate that L1 as corrective feedback (CF) can help students correct their pronunciations and improve their language accuracy at the phonological level. At the meaning level, L1 as CF can assist students in negotiating sentence meanings and generating English sentences, thereby improving their language fluency. From class observations, the effect of Chinese feedback on students’ L2 oral practice focus was notable, underscoring the significant role of using L1 for providing corrective feedback. Overall, data from the teaching site suggest that the proper use of L1 can enhance students’ target language proficiency and class performance.

Moreover, quantitative data collected from pre-tests and post-tests revealed significant improvements in students’ pronunciation, intonation, and sentence structure. Qualitative feedback from students also indicated increased confidence and reduced anxiety when speaking in L2, attributed to the supportive role of L1-based corrective feedback. These findings highlight that strategic use of L1 can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment, particularly for beginner-level adult learners.

## **6. Discussion**

Maximizing student class performance and improving their language proficiency remains one of the biggest challenges due to the dominance of L1 in the learning environment. This study chose a Chinese-speaking English site to explore the possibility of using L1 to aid in improving students’ L2 proficiency. However, considering the limited teaching duration and class range, the research findings are specific to this teaching site and may require further examination over a more extended teaching period and with more data. Additionally, given the students’ language level (beginner) and age (adults), the effectiveness of using L1 as CF may



not be applicable to students at higher language levels or different age groups. Future research should expand on these findings by including multiple teaching sites with diverse student populations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of L1 use in L2 classrooms. Longitudinal studies tracking students' progress over time would help assess the sustained benefits of L1-based corrective feedback. Moreover, it is essential to develop a balanced approach to avoid over-reliance on L1, by setting clear guidelines for strategic L1 use and gradually increasing L2 use as proficiency improves.

Additionally, incorporating a detailed analysis of individual learner profiles and tailoring feedback methods to individual needs would enhance the study's relevance and applicability. This could include case studies on different learner types to understand how various factors such as age, proficiency level, and learning styles impact the effectiveness of L1-based corrective feedback. Finally, exploring the implications for teacher training and curriculum development could provide valuable insights into how best to integrate L1 in a way that supports L2 acquisition without hindering it. In conclusion, while this study demonstrates the potential benefits of using L1 as a tool for corrective feedback in ESL/EFL classrooms, further research is necessary to generalize these findings across different contexts and learner demographics. By addressing these areas, educators can better understand how to utilize L1 effectively to enhance L2 learning outcomes.

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