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Own-language Activities

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1 Introduction

Why this book?

How to deal with mother tongue in an English class??

▶ No matter what nationality you are Mother tongue is always there interfering in our lessons.

▶ [Translating in the classroom] got so out of hand, that even I was looking up Spanish and (heaven forbid) writing translations on the board. After a few months of this, I realized that this has to stop and stop NOW.

▶ I work at a university prep school where using the mother tongue is forbidden but most of us use our mother tongue time to time as we feel the necessity of it.

▶ We treat the mother tongue as a problem because of the stupidity of our immersion methodology.

Figure 1.1: Blog postings at eltcommunity.com (2009–2010)

The use of the learner's own language in language teaching is a contentious issue. It is a topic that has been largely ignored in the most widely used teacher training manuals for English language teachers and on UK-based pre- and in-service training courses such as CELTA. (Early editions of some handbooks (Scrivener, 1994; Harmer, 1983) paid very little attention to the use of the students' own language in language classrooms. Both writers, however, have more recently made clear that they consider this an important issue.) It is also a topic which has featured very infrequently at ELT conferences in the last twenty-five years. Many language teaching organisations (from schools and school chains to language departments in colleges and universities) have policies banning the use of the mother tongue in language teaching classes.

There has been a steady stream of dissent (e.g. Bolitho, 1983; Atkinson, 1987; Prodromou, 2002), but, it seems, these voices have not been widely heard. At the same time, many teachers have continued to use the language that they share with their students. Research (Copland & Neokleous, 2011) tells us that many of these teachers under-report the amount of L1 they use in the class, suggesting that they do so with a sense of guilt. Luke Prodromou (2002, p. 5) has suggested that this guilt has cramped the potential of translation as a classroom resource.

Language teachers who use their mother tongue in the classroom, even teachers who write translations on the board, should be reassured. 2010 saw the publication of Guy Cook's award-winning *Translation in Language Teaching*. Critical reaction to the book has revealed an academic consensus on the role and use of the mother tongue. Such respected names as Vygotsky, Halliday and Widdowson were already on record as advocates of own-language use in learning another language.