Action Research

- **Researcher:** Facundo Pignanelli
- **School:** Instituto Nuestra Señora del Carmen
- **Course**: 4to A
- **Description of Context**: Students have been studying English since first form and some students also attend an English Institute after school hours. They use English when asked to do so, but when asking questions of their own or discussing something with their classmates, they resort to their L1. Despite this, they all seem to understand when given instructions in English by the teacher and they can work on their own with almost no input from the teacher.

1. **Area of Concern**

   Students use of L2 outside a particular given task (such as to communicate among them or when talking with the teacher about a topic outside of the scope of the class).

2. **Problem Identification**

   The students don't use L2 for any other purpose than solving the task presented by the teacher, they resort to L1 for any real communicative purpose, even when interacting with the teacher.

3. **Preliminary Investigation**

   The students only seem to use L2 for solving activities. If they are discussing an activity among themselves, they will use L1 almost exclusively, apart from using specific vocabulary from the activity. When they are discussing a topic with the teacher that is outside of the scope of the activity or theme of the class, they also resort to L1 even though the teacher replies in L2. When specifically asked to use L2 instead of L1 the majority of the students are able to do so, given their L2 competency, so they are able to use L2 for communication purposes, but are not doing so.

4. **Hypothesis**

   The non-use of L2 by the students except when asked to do so, might stem from the fact that they are not being able to realize the communicative use of the language, but rather that they are approaching English as a series of activities to be resolved. If given properly space, time and encouragement, students will be able to realize the communicative purpose of the language and start incorporating it on other aspects outside of solving a specific activity.

5. **Literature Review**

   On '***L2 learners' use of communication strategies as affected by the task type***' the author suggests, based on data collection and analysis, that there is a direct correlation between the task type assigned to a student and the communication strategies they will use in order to successfully solve it. Specifically, 'free-conversation' activities had a greater effect on the type of CS used, also depending on if the activity was between the student and the teacher or between students.

   '***Promoting L2 Metalanguage in the ESL Classroom***' is a research paper that found that Japanese students of English show different attitudes when it comes to L2 for 'transactional purposes. On the one hand, it found that by the use of the technique of peer monitoring, intermediate students were successfully guided into using L2 outside of task solving, an area in where previously they were more prone to default to L1. On the other hand, the paper suggests that using this technique with lower-level students could cause adverse effects as they are not capable of fully utilizing this kind of interaction at this stage and suggest working on task metalanguage instead.

   '***Student Uses of the First Language for L2 Classroom Interactions***' proposes the idea that while teachers can use certain tools to limit the use of L1 in the classroom, these may make little to no impact on the students use of L2 for interactions and that there may not be real pedagogical value in making students use L2 for communication that is irrelevant to the class as a whole

(such as interactions between to classmates that are talking about a topic not related to the class at hand).

'Developing effective L2 communication strategies abroad and at home' deals with L2 learning outside the classroom but its findings are nonetheless useful for this project. The paper concludes that when L2 learners engage in activities that are not 'language-oriented' (such as leisure activities) they benefit more from those kinds of interactions in order to develop effective CS use.

'Bringing real-life language use into EFL classrooms' proposes several of the points made by the last paper but takes them into the classroom context. The article suggests that when given the space and time to do so, learners enjoy using the L2 for non-language-oriented tasks, especially when it is unplanned classroom communication (i.e., communication situations that go outside the scope of the topic of the class). It also suggests that teacher can take advantage of these situations, specially by the use of humorous play, to raise metalinguistic awareness and fluency and that they should foster them to happen, even to the detriment of solving language-oriented tasks.

Finally, ***'Willingness to Communicate and Second Language Proficiency: A Correlational Study'*** attempts to answer the question that if there is a correlation between the students L2 level and their willingness to communicate in L2. The paper found a 'weak to moderate correlation' between the proficiency of the student and their willingness to use it, suggesting that self-confidence plays a bigger role than actual L2 level.

6. **Action Plan**

When	Action Plan	Method of Data Collection
Week 1: 10/08	**Oral Activity** I will ask the students to take part of a small debate related to the topic of the class, without giving them indications to use L1 or L2 to participate with the idea of taking note of the	**Experiencing: Passive observation and checklist** I will keep a record of the number of students that answered in L1 and L2.

	percentage of students that used L1 and the students that used L2. While I will be taking part on the debate, I won't actively influence the students to either answer in L1 or L2 (I will answer to them using the same L they used to communicate to me, so as to establish a baseline). The debate will be carried out with the whole classroom.	

Note: The day before I was to deliver this lesson, I was notified that there would be an *Acto Instituticional* that would cut short my class to just one hour compared to the usual two, that's why these activities were significantly modified from what I handed in the original project, as I readjusted the whole lesson plan from what I had in mind. Also, some further modifications to the lesson plan for other reasons, changed some of the activities.

Week 2: 17/08	**Oral Activity** The students will watch a video about friendship between men and women, and then they will get together into two groups to form a debate, each group preparing a different side. They were asked to use L2 explicitly during the debate, but not during the preparation time.	**Experiencing: Passive observation** I will take special note of any L2 use outside task solving, if any (as this is really the data point I'm interested in).
Week 3: 24/08	**Reading Activity** I will ask students to read a text from the activity book and after that I will ask them to discuss its content with their desk partner. I won't direct them to use L1 or L2.	**Experiencing: Active Participation** I will directly influence the behaviour of the students by using L1 for all communicative functions and monitoring if there is any changes on their use of L2.
Week 4: 31/08	**Listening Activity** The students will watch a video that is spoken only in L2. After that, I will ask students to discuss the contents of the video.	**Experiencing: Active Participation and checklist** This time, I will be influencing the student's behaviour by answering in L2 even when they use L1 to communicate with me or other students. I will only use L1 even if strictly necessary as to not hinder comprehension.

		I will keep a record to compare the results of W1 to see if there was any change in L2 use, specially to see if the students that used L1 on W1 have now switched to L2 or not.
Week 5: 07/09	**Language-Focused Activities** I will be giving students a set of language-focused activities (complete with the correct option, fill in the gaps, etc) about the topics of the class. I will ask them to solve them together with their desk partner. I will explicitly ask them to use L2.	**Experiencing: Passive observation** I will pay attention to the use of L1 and L2 when the students are working alone vs when I go through the desks to monitor them.
Week 6: 05/10	**Closure** As this is the end of the unit, the teacher and the students will have a chat about the contents of the unit and what they have learned. This closure will be designed to take less time that what it remains for the class and the teacher will tell students that there is some time remaining and will chat with them about other topics in a seemly free fashion.	**Experiencing: Active Participation** I want to see if students use L2 more when they perceive that they are not being actively monitored (i.e., solving a specific task) for L2 use and how much they resolve to L1 in those instances.
Through the whole Project	**Communication** During the whole 6 weeks, I will be carrying out specific instances of 'spontaneous communication' outside the scope of the actual topic of the class. In these different instances, I will vary my use of L1 and L2 to monitor how the students react to my changes.	**Experiencing: Active Participation** I will pay attention to the use of L1 and L2 during these instances.

7. Data Report

As I was collecting data, some clear trends emerged that became more apparent as the time went by.

The data for week 1, shows that most students used L2 to some degree inside the context of the informal debate, but it was limited to keywords and short

phrases. Out of the 10 students present, all of them resorted to L1 at some point and only a small group of three used L2 for a majority of the time. That is to say, 70% of the students used L1 over L2 on a general level. However, the use of specific vocabulary relating to the topic of the class was 100% in English, with two specific students that did not use L2 at all except for these keywords.

These patterns remained true in week two, where this aforementioned group of three students used L2 extensively, the general trend was that students used L2 for keywords and short sentences and those 2 students who used L1 almost exclusively during the preparation for the debate. When it was time to debate, however, the students switched to L2 to their best of their ability – i.e., students resorted to L1 when their handling of L2 was not enough to convey the message they wanted to share – and even that duo of students showed more use of L2, albeit they seemed more nervous than their peers and kept their contributions to a minimum.

The trend of use of L2 for keywords was maintained during week three, but I was more intrigued by the reaction of the students to my use of L1. I was expecting that the group of three students would continue to use L2 even though I was not using L2 extensively and that the rest of the students would fall back to L1 more often. What the data found, is that that group of students dropped L2 usage just like their classmates did, and it was only increased when I started using more L2 accordingly.

During week four, my almost exclusive use of L2 showed the same effect but in reverse. Students used, on average, L2 more than they did in in the previous week, although again, this was only until they hit a barrier on their handling of L2. The students did not attempt to take risks with the language, going back to L1 when they could not express their ideas using L2 with confidence.

Research for week five could not be carried out due to time constraints. I ran out of time, and I could not re-schedule the data collection for another week because I had to carry on with the internship. However, the findings I expected

to arrive from that week, could be found across the whole project so I do not think that the hypothesis validation was hindered by this situation.

The most compelling data point that I collected was during week six and during the isolated communication instances and provide much of my basis for the conclusion of this research project. When students were not under the assumption that they were being actively monitored and evaluated on it, two clear trends emerged: The students that already used L2 extensively and those who used it for keywords and short sentences, increased even more their L2 usage and took more risks by experimenting with the language more often and with more liberty, although they still used L1 at some point. On the contrary, the students who were not confident in their L2 abilities switched directly to L1 for production but seemed to follow the conversation with their peers that were using L2, showing that their L2 competence is at least good enough for receptive uses.

8. <u>Analysis, interpretation, and conclusion</u>

The hypothesis of this project was that students do not use L2 because they don't see a communicative use to it and see it more as a series of task-solving activities and that if given the proper space to do so, they would use the L2 for communicative purposes.

After collecting and reviewing data for 6 weeks, I attest that the data seems to partially go against my initial hypothesis. Therefore, I think that some modification and expansion to the original statement is needed, as it left some key-factors out of the table.

The data suggest that students do see the communicative value of L2, but there is a clear distinction between communicative situations that arise from an activity and those that do not. In the first case, students did use L2 even if not asked to do so, but they limited themselves to key-words and short sentences only. When the scope of the communication activity surpassed the specific topic, the students went back to L1 almost immediately, even though the

teacher continued to use L2 exclusively. In contrast, on communicative situations that were purely communicative, the students used L2 more and did so more creatively on average, however, students will always resort to L1 at some point and that it is pointless for teachers to try to make them use L2 exclusively. All students resorted to L1 at some point during all types of activities and communicative situations, indicating that some point, the value proposition of keep using L2 is reversed, and they switch to L1. I believe that may be caused by several factors, and that the students might be influenced by one or a combination of them:

a. The students with higher L2 competence notice that their peers with less L2 competence are not understanding their message well enough and thus the purpose of communication is not achieved, and they go back to L1.

b. Students reach a 'cognitive ceiling' where they might be able to use L2 to convey their message, but they choose to go back to L1 as it is less cognitive demanding and faster to use L1 to express their message to their peers. As all students have native competence of L1 is just easier to use L1 instead of using L2.

c. Students with a low confidence in their L2 capabilities switch to L1 whenever they can as a sort of 'face-saving' technique. They are so not confident in their L2 level that they will resort to L1, out of being afraid of being ridiculed by their peers, even when this particular group does not exhibit this type of behaviour. This might also be related to other factors that affect learning in general, and not just L2 learning.

d. Students are wary of the fact that they are being evaluated. The students showed more use of L2 and a more creative use of it on situations they perceived were not part of an evaluation. This shows that students might limit their L2 to sentences they have a high percentage of confidence in them being grammatically correct, and discard those that they may do not feel as confident in, thus resulting in that switch to L1.

Thus, my initial hypothesis is wrong on the notion that students do indeed see a communicative use for L2, but that it is just easier to resort to L1. This leads me to form several new hypotheses:

a. Students see the communicative use of L2, but they don't need another language to communicate with their peers, as they all already master L1. Therefore, L2 in a classroom setting where all students share the same L1 will always be confined to specific task-solving development. There will always be a point where that 'cognitive ceiling' is reached, and the students resort to L1, even if they know that they should be using L2.

b. There is an absolute and evident value to communication-type tasks that are not explicitly defined to be part of an evaluation, as students use more L2 on that setting, and more importantly, students have a more creative use of L2.

c. Inhibition seems to be a very important factor affecting the use of L2. Students with lower levels of confidence in L2 avoid its use in order to save themselves from embarrassment and the failure of an explicit evaluation. It seems that students follow this logic: *You can't fail an evaluation if you don't use L2 and you cannot be embarrassed by it if you never use it.* This severely affects learning as students seem to just 'give up' in their L2 competence development.

d. The use of L2 by the teacher does have an affect in the students' use of L2 but it is not the only factor that comes into play when they negotiate their use of L2 over L1. The cognitive ceiling and their confidence in their abilities is more important. However, teachers should keep their L1 at a minimum, so as to provide students with some encouragement to use L2

e. It is pointless for a teacher to ask students to use L2 exclusively during a task-solving situation, as the cognitive load posed by the solving of the task clashes with the cognitive celling the students seem to have, and they resort to L1 almost immediately. If students use L2 for keywords and relevant vocabulary, but not for communication outside the task, it still has an inherent learning value.

Where my hypothesis was correct, as evidenced by the data, is on the second notion. Students will use more L2 and use it more creatively if they are given the proper space. This space should be perceived by them as not being an evaluation instance and it should go beyond the specific themes and vocabulary of the class, but it can be built upon them. The data suggest that activities like debates where students have to work on a specific theme, but they are less restricted in the way they convey the message will lead to more meaningful learning compared to task-solving activities.

Furthermore, the biggest takeaway of this project is that L2 classrooms need and should create an actual use for L2 communication, by designing spaces and propositions where students have a real need to use L2. Further research should be done on this area as to what approaches work best, but I think that approaches like communication with native L2 speakers, poetic uses of the language and others could result in meaningful L2 use for the students.

9. Reflection on my role as researcher

I think that this experience was very enriching as it allowed me to see the issue from a very analytical standpoint and interpret the data in order to see what it actually meant. I am a very inquisitive person and I always like to ask why things are the thing they are and what causes them to be that way. I really liked having the opportunity to focus on a particular issue and break it into chunks so as to be able to analyse it. Research is something I will totally do during my career, as I find it very interesting and valuable, maybe even someday I will publish a research paper to share my findings with the whole teaching community.

10. Appendixes

a. Journal Entries

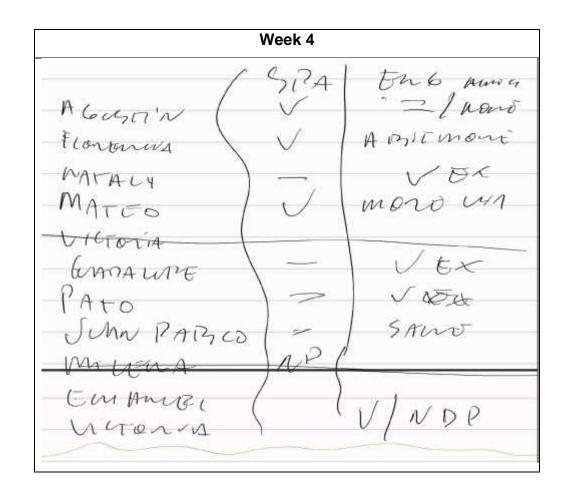| **Week 1** |
| --- |
| The activity went pretty well. Most of the students used the vocabulary of the unit in English although there was a group of 3 students that used English a lot more than the others. There were also some students who avoided using English as much as they could. I think its because they are not confident on their level. I should focus on them. |
| **Week 2** |
| Again, the activity went without any major hiccups. The GG group used English a whole lot more, as expected. The other students used more Spanish but in general it went okay. I tried to nudge A and M to use more English, but they were clearly nervous and didn't participate a lot during the debate. However, during preparation time they used more English than their counterparts. Based on what A told me, I can confirm that he doesn't think that he has a good English level and neither does M. |
| **Week 3** |
| Between them, the English use was limited to keywords as in before, except by GG. The students responded to my use of Spanish by dropping use of L2 almost immediately, even the GGs. When I used L2 again, they acted accordingly in average. Pat mentioned my overuse of Spanish, so I explained to her why it was. |
| **Week 4** |
| I am impressed by the fact that the sts used L2 more on this class, and I think it is because I used more L2 and thus that encouraged them when compared to last week. |
| **Week 5** |
| The focus on lexis went for longer than I expected so I did not have time for the activities so I could not do this week of research. The activities were sent as homework as I needed them done to continue my internship. |

Week 6
Students used English more than other weeks, and they were more experimental on their use, but still they still switched to Spanish at some points like in order class. I think the reason is because they can't use English as 'quick' as they can use Spanish and since they all speak Spanish is just easier to use Spanish.

b. **Data Collection Evidence**

Week 1

Week 4

11. Bibliography

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