

## ***Mother Tongue in the English Language Classroom: A Case of One School***

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The present study explores the role of the mother tongue in the English language classroom through a survey conducted among 498 students and 10 teachers at one school in China. It aims to investigate (1) whether Chinese is still being used, and if yes, to what extent and for what purposes, (2) the attitudes of both teachers and students towards the use of Chinese, and (3) the actual and potential functions of Chinese in English classes. The results of this study indicate that Chinese was still quite extensively adopted in the English language classroom, and that both the teachers and the students responded positively to a reasonable use of the mother tongue, especially for pedagogical purposes. In addition, both similarities and disparities in opinions were found within and between the two parties of participants, in regards with their mutual use of Chinese and the functions of the mother tongue.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed a rocky history of the mother tongue use in the second/foreign language teaching and learning profession. Tied up with varying theoretical perspectives and teaching methods/approaches, the mother tongue in the second/foreign language classroom has weathered stages from thriving through to dismissal and back to acceptance again, with the justification of versus the objection to its use serving as the two ends of the pendulum swing.

Adopting the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom has basically been criticized as one source of errors and negative transfer on the part of learners (e.g., George, 1972; Krashen, 1981; Lado, 1964; Perdue, 1993). George (1972), for example, pointed out that using the mother tongue supported the idea of 'substitutability', thus favoring interference, and should be avoided in language teaching. Krashen (1981) argued that the use of the mother tongue should be kept to a minimum because learning a foreign language basically followed the same route as that of mother tongue acquisition. Perdue (1993) claimed that adopting the mother tongue could train its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences, and such training was exceptionally resistant to restructuring in a foreign language.

At the same time, the use of the mother tongue has been argued as an efficient, humanistic and flexible way of foreign language teaching, and the rejection of it in principle has been questioned from time to time (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Dodson, 1967; Nation, 1990; Nunan & Lamb, 1996). For example, adopting the mother tongue has been regarded as a strategy that can save time by clarifying what has to be done (Atkinson, 1987), offer opportunities for individual study regardless of the level (Harbord, 1992), help raise language awareness of the inevitable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language (Py, 1996), improve conceptual clarity and flexibility of thinking (Brooks & Donato, 1994 quoted in Turbull & Arnett, 2002), and lessen the learners' anxiety for more comprehensible input (Stibbard, 1998).

More recently, Swain and Lapkin (2000) studied the use of the L1 by French immersion students. They argued that students' use of the L1 was not for naught, and that the access to the L1 input possibly enabled students to accomplish their tasks more successfully. Therefore, it would be possible to extend the argument that teachers could facilitate student learning by making the L1 available to them. Cook (2001) contended that the long-held tradition of discouraging the integration of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom had sharply limited the possibilities of language teaching. He

thought that code switching was a natural phenomenon for those speakers who shared two languages, and therefore, L1 deserved a place in the TL classroom. He argued that teachers should use L1 and TL concurrently to create authentic learning environments, especially when teaching in the TL was too difficult or time-consuming for the learner to process and understand. Turbull (2001) also agreed that L1 could be used judiciously to help facilitate the intake process, allowing input to more readily become intake. He contended that the teacher's use of the L1 provided an enhanced form of input that was more salient thus easier for the learner to process, and consequently resulted in a greater understanding of the TL. Therefore, it could be an efficient practice to use L1 to help ensure students' understanding of a particular grammatical concept or vocabulary term.

A judicious use of the mother tongue in the second/foreign language classroom is also supported by the findings of a number of empirical studies that investigated the use of the mother tongue while learners were engaged in L2 writing tasks (e.g., Anton & Dicamilla, 1998; Wang & Wen, 2002; Woodall, 2002). Anton and Dicamilla's (1998) data demonstrated the critical importance of the L1 as a psychological tool which enabled learners to perform three important functions: to provide each other with scaffold help, to establish and maintain inter-subjectivity, and to externalize one's inner speech during cognitively difficult activities. Woodall (2002) took language families into consideration while investigating the use of L1 in L2 writing. He found that less proficient L2 learners switched to their L1s more frequently than more advanced learners, and that longer periods of L1 use were related to higher quality of L2 texts. Wang and Wen (2002) also found an overall use of L1 in the writing processes of Chinese EFL learners at tertiary level. The think-aloud protocols revealed that these students were more likely to rely on the mother tongue when managing the writing processes and generating ideas.

The studies of Cohen (1994), Villami and de Guerrero (1996), and Swain and Lapkin (2000) focused on the use of the first language in immersion programs. Cohen (1994) found that his subjects would shift to their native

language as soon as they had some conceptual difficulty, suggesting that students made use of the L1 to develop an understanding of the content of the task. Villami and de Guerrero (1996) found that the L1 was an essential tool for deriving meaning from text, retrieving language from memory, exploring and expanding content, guiding their actions through the task, and maintaining dialogue. Swain and Lapkin's (2000) data revealed that students' use of the L1 during collaborative tasks occurred for three primary reasons, i.e., increasing efficiency, focusing attention, and facilitating interpersonal interactions.

Schweers (1999), Bao (1998), Tang (2000) and He (2001) investigated the role of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms. Schweers (1999) surveyed some students and teachers in a Spanish context to investigate their attitudes toward using Spanish in the English classroom. He found that the majority of the students and the teachers agreed that Spanish should be used. Bao (1998), after observing two senior secondary-school classes in China, found that students preferred their teachers to speak the mother tongue in English classes so that they could better understand what the teachers said, and that the teachers, as a result, spent most of class time talking in the mother tongue. Tang (2000), in an empirical study of some English reading classes at tertiary level, discovered that the mother tongue was indeed employed by the majority of teachers mainly for pedagogical purposes, and that both the teachers and the students responded positively toward some use of the mother tongue in the English classroom. He (2001) observed 35 classes at 11 tertiary institutes in the east, north and northwest of China and found that only 10% of College English teachers used English exclusively throughout the lessons.

Whereas the people who advocated TL only in the foreign language classroom were typically those native speakers of English who had no capability of FL learners' mother tongue, a review of the literature suggests that the previous studies, although having made significant contributions to the re-recognition of the positive role of the mother tongue, are limited in some ways. First, many of them are not data based. They are, to a great extent, reconfirming the role that the mother tongue could and should play in the

foreign language classroom (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Nation, 1990; Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Stibbard, 1998). Secondly, many of the previous studies are either small-scaled classroom observations (e.g., Bao, 1998; Tang, 2000) or do not take the role of the mother tongue as the only focus of the study (e.g., He, 2001; Woodall, 2002). And thirdly, most previous studies are restricted to immersion programs (e.g., Cohen 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Villami & de Guerrero, 1996), tertiary classrooms (e.g., He, 2001; Tang, 2000; Wang & Wen, 2002), or senior-secondary classrooms (e.g., Bao, 1998). Consequently, research gaps have been left for studies into junior-secondary-school students on a larger scale.

Motivated by such limitations, this study attempts to investigate the role and functions of the mother tongue in junior-secondary English classes in China. It aims at answering the following questions:

- (1) Is Chinese, the mother tongue, still being used in the English classroom, and if yes, to what extent and for what purposes?
- (2) What are the attitudes of both teachers and students towards the use of the mother tongue?
- (3) What are the actual and potential functions of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants were 498 students and 10 teachers. The students were 240 boys and 258 girls averaged 14 years old at one junior secondary school in one city of China. They were learners with a low English level since most of them had studied English for only two or three years. The teachers were English teachers at the school with their teaching experiences ranging from 5 years to 15 years. Averaged 27.6 years old, six of them held bachelor degrees and four of them were English diploma holders.

### **Instruments**

Two questionnaires were developed for this survey. One was for students' use and the other was for teachers' use. Each questionnaire was made up of two parts including 20 items, 10 investigating teacher's use of the mother tongue, and 10 investigating students' use of the mother tongue. Among the 10 questions in each part, seven of them were five-point-scaled questions, while three were questions followed by six choices, of which the students could check one or more. In order to avoid any possible misunderstanding of the text of the questionnaires, they were both designed and administered in Chinese.

### **Data Collection**

To validate the questionnaires, a pilot study was conducted on 10 students and one teacher before the actual survey started. After these participants completed the questionnaires, they were interviewed for the purpose of checking the content of questions, the way that questions were raised, the choices of answers, etc. Some adjustments were made according to the feedback of the pilot-study participants.

Two weeks later, the modified questionnaire for students' use was distributed to 510 students in 10 randomly selected classes. All the questionnaires were collected and 498 were found valid. The modified questionnaire for teachers' use was distributed to 10 English teachers. All of their questionnaires were collected and found valid.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analysis, Chi-square tests and correlation analysis were conducted on the data using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Frequencies, percentages, mean values and standard deviations were computed to capture the participants' responses and attitudes towards the use

of the mother tongue, and their perceptions on the functions of the mother tongue. Chi-square tests were performed to determine whether there were significant differences in the frequencies. Correlation analysis was conducted to find out the relationship between perceptions regarding the students' use of the mother tongue and those regarding the teachers' use of the mother tongue.

## RESULTS

### The Students' Responses

#### *The Use of Chinese in English Classes*

The results of this survey show that Chinese was rather extensively employed in English classes. As Table 1 illustrates, cumulatively, 99% of the student participants confirmed the use of Chinese by their teachers to different extents ( $\chi^2=606.317$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and 98% of them responded that they themselves used Chinese in English classes ( $\chi^2=368.767$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
**The Use of Chinese in English Classes**

	<i>Does your English teacher use Chinese in English classes?</i>		<i>Do you use Chinese in English classes?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Never	5	1.0	10	2.0
Seldom	196	39.4	153	30.7
Sometimes	266	53.4	234	47.0
Frequently	28	5.6	89	17.9
Exclusively	3	.6	12	2.4

A gap was also revealed in Table 1 between the extent to which Chinese is adopted by teachers and that by students ( $\chi^2>13.3$ ;  $p<.001$ ). While 20.3% of the students responded that they themselves either often or always used

Chinese in English classes, many fewer of them (6.2%) noted the frequent or constant use of Chinese by their teachers ( $r=-.011$ ;  $p=.81$ ).

*Attitudes towards the Use of Chinese in English Classes*

The majority of the student participants in this study indicated their positive attitudes in general towards the use of the mother tongue by their teachers and by themselves. Table 2 shows that, out of the 498 students, 92.7% of them considered that the use of Chinese by English teachers would be welcome to different degrees ( $\chi^2=427.582$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and 79.9% of them thought that they themselves could use Chinese in English classes ( $\chi^2=334.651$ ,  $p<.001$ ). It is worth noting, at the same time, that the gap between percentages (92.7 vs.79.6) and the results of chi-square tests ( $\chi^2>13.3$ ;  $p<.001$ ) revealed a significant difference between the students' perceptions of the use of Chinese by themselves as opposed to by their teachers. They agreed more strongly with their teacher's use of Chinese than their own use of Chinese in English class ( $r=-.012$ ;  $p=.791$ ).

However, in contrast with the above overwhelming consent to using Chinese in English classes, more students provided negative answers when responding whether they like such a practice or not. As shown by the details in Table 3, over one third of the students responded that they did not like the adoption of Chinese in English classes either by the teachers ( $\chi^2=293.827$ ,  $p<.001$ ) or by themselves ( $\chi^2=336.960$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Also, a disparity in the students' emotional responses is indicated by the differences in percentages (33.7 vs. 37.3) and the results of chi-square tests ( $\chi^2>13.3$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Only 14% of them positively indicated that they liked to use Chinese in English classes, 7.9% fewer than those (21.9%) who expressed their obvious liking of the adoption of the Chinese by teachers ( $r=.12$ ;  $p=.007$ ).

**TABLE 2**  
**Students' Agreement or Disagreement on Using Chinese in English Classes**

	<i>Do you agree or disagree if your teacher uses Chinese in English classes?</i>		<i>Do you agree or disagree if you use Chinese in English classes?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	5	1.0	15	3.0
Disagree	31	6.2	85	17.1
Neutral	167	33.5	217	43.6
Agree	247	49.6	168	33.7
Strongly agree	48	9.6	13	2.6

**TABLE 3**  
**Students' Likes or Dislikes of Using Chinese in English Classes**

	<i>Do you like the use of Chinese by your teacher in English classes?</i>		<i>Do you like the use of Chinese by yourself in English classes?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	30	6.0	48	9.6
Not so much	138	27.7	138	27.7
Somewhat	221	44.4	242	48.6
Quite	100	20.1	55	11.0
Very much	9	1.8	15	3.0

#### *Whether or Not Chinese Provides Help for English Studies*

To most students in this study, the use of the mother tongue could provide help for their English studies to different extents. As Table 4 shows, a great majority (82.2%) of the students recognized the helpfulness of their teacher's use of Chinese ( $\chi^2=282.341$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and more than half (67.3%) of them thought that their own use of Chinese benefited their English studies ( $\chi^2=211.498$ ;  $p<.001$ ). The difference in percentages and the Chi-square test results indicate that while the student participants acknowledged the helpfulness in general of the mother tongue, they perceived that the teacher's adoption of Chinese provided more help for English studies than their own use of Chinese ( $r=.42$ ;  $p=.345$ ).

**TABLE 4**  
**Students' Opinion on Whether or Not Chinese Provides Help in English Classes**

	<i>When your teacher uses Chinese in English classes, does it provide help for your English studies?</i>		<i>When you yourself use Chinese in English classes, does it provide help for your English studies?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
None	13	2.6	33	6.6
Little	76	15.3	130	26.1
Some	188	37.8	194	39.0
Quite much	188	37.8	121	24.3
A lot	33	6.6	20	4.0

**TABLE 5**  
**Students' Opinion on the Communicative Help of Chinese in English Classes**

	<i>When your teacher uses Chinese in English classes, does it help you to understand better?</i>		<i>When you yourself use Chinese in English classes, does it help you to express yourself more clearly?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Never	17	3.4	25	5.0
Seldom	103	20.7	129	25.9
Sometimes	340	68.3	297	59.6
Often	31	6.2	30	6.0
Always	7	1.4	17	3.4

**TABLE 6**  
**Students' Opinions on the Psychological Help of Chinese in English Classes**

	<i>When your teacher uses Chinese in English classes, do you have a sense of relaxation?</i>		<i>When you yourself use Chinese in English classes, do you have a sense of relaxation?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Never	0	0.0	17	3.4
Seldom	31	6.2	55	11.0
Sometimes	237	47.6	302	60.6
Often	184	36.9	94	18.9
Always	46	9.2	30	6.0

Tables 5 and 6 reveal more specific help that Chinese could provide. Most students found that using Chinese in English classes could help them, to different degrees, to understand better ( $\chi^2=572.924$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and express themselves more clearly ( $\chi^2=782.201$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and that they would have a sense of psychological relaxation when they heard ( $\chi^2=249.807$ ,  $p<.001$ ) or spoke ( $\chi^2=548.727$ ,  $p<.001$ ) Chinese in English classes. Again, more students responded that the teacher's adoption of Chinese could provide more communicative and psychological help for their English studies than when they themselves used Chinese ( $r=-.07$ ,  $p=.116$  for questions in Table 5;  $r=-.084$ ,  $p=.061$  for questions in Table 6).

#### *Functions of Chinese in English Classes*

The results in Table 7 suggest that, the students' responses varied in regards to the situations when Chinese was adopted by their teachers ( $\chi^2=173.800$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and by themselves ( $\chi^2=310.592$ ,  $p<.001$ ). In addition to their consistent report of the frequent use of Chinese in teaching and learning grammar, they noted that Chinese was more often adopted by teachers when teaching new words, raising and answering questions, teaching texts and doing exercises, and by students when they learned texts, did exercises and conducted discussions ( $r=.597$ ;  $p<.001$ ).

**TABLE 7**  
**Students' Responses of the Actual Functions of Chinese in English Classes**

	<i>When your teacher uses Chinese in English class, in what situation(s) does he usually do so?</i>		<i>When you yourself use Chinese in English class, in what situation(s) do you usually do so?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Teaching/learning new words	319	64.1	171	34.3
Teaching/learning grammar	392	78.8	351	70.5
Teaching/learning texts	189	37.9	259	52
Doing exercises	201	40.4	314	63.1
Raising & answering questions	113	22.7	75	15.1
Conducting discussion	95	19.1	166	33.3

As to the potential functions of the mother tongue, most students responded that Chinese should be used to teach and learn grammar, conforming to their responses in Table 7 above. As illustrated in Table 8, 83.5% of the students indicated their hope for their teachers to use Chinese in grammar teaching ( $\chi^2=135.132$ ,  $p<.001$ ). 60.1% of them hoped to use Chinese themselves when they learned grammar ( $\chi^2=458.193$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Besides, most of them responded that Chinese could be used by the teacher (rather than the students) when teaching new words, and by students (rather than the teacher) when they conducted discussions in class ( $r=.563$ ;  $p<.001$ ).

**TABLE 8**  
**Students' Responses of the Potential Functions of Chinese in English Classes**

	<i>In what situation(s) would you hope your teacher to use Chinese in English classes?</i>		<i>In what situation(s) would you hope to use Chinese yourself in English classes?</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Teaching/learning new words	416	83.5	299	60.1
Teaching/learning grammar	264	53	292	58.6
Teaching/learning texts	223	44.9	211	42.4
Doing exercises	171	34.3	179	36
Raising & answering questions	83	16.7	151	30.3
Conducting discussion	40	8.0	115	23.2

Furthermore, a comparison of Table 7 and Table 8 indicates inconsistencies in students' responses regarding the situations in which Chinese was presently and could potentially be used. Whereas more students noted that they used Chinese in actual practice to learn texts, to do exercises and to conduct discussions, they hoped that teachers would use more Chinese in these situations.

## The Teachers' Responses

### *Their Own Use of Chinese in English Classes*

Compared with the students' responses, the teachers in this survey shared

more similar views on the role of Chinese in English classes. Table 9 demonstrates their overall positive attitudes towards their own use of Chinese. As most students did, most teachers noted that they used Chinese to different degrees, although most of them indicated their dislike of using Chinese. The majority of them responded that the use of Chinese could provide help by improving students' understanding and letting them feel more relaxed. In

**TABLE 9**  
**Teachers' Responses towards Their Own Use of Chinese in English Classes**

Questions	Answers	Frequency	Mean	SD
<i>Do you use Chinese in English classes?</i>	Seldom	4	2.80	.79
	Sometimes	4		
	Frequently	2		
<i>Do you agree or disagree that you use Chinese in English classes?</i>	Neutral	2	3.80	.42
	Agree	8		
<i>Do you like the use of Chinese by yourself in English classes?</i>	Not at all	4	1.80	.79
	Not so much	4		
	Somewhat	2		
<i>When you use Chinese in English classes, do your students have a sense of relaxation?</i>	Seldom	3	2.70	.48
	Sometimes	7		
<i>When you use Chinese in English classes, does it provide help for your students' English studies?</i>	Some	1	3.90	.32
	Quite much	9		
<i>When you use Chinese in English classes, does it help your students understand better?</i>	Sometimes	7	3.40	.70
	Often	2		
	Always	1		
<i>When you use Chinese in English classes, in what situation(s) do you usually do so?</i>	Teaching grammar	10	None	None
	Teaching texts	2		
	Doing exercises	6		
	Conducting discussion	1		
<i>In what situation(s) would you hope to use Chinese in English classes?</i>	Teaching grammar	10	None	None
	Doing exercises	3		
	Conducting discussion	2		

addition, all of the teachers confirmed their adoption of Chinese when teaching grammar and hoped to continue such practice. But fewer of them hoped to use Chinese when doing exercises, even though over half of them confirmed their current practice of doing so.

*Students' Use of Chinese in English Classes*

When it comes to the students' use of Chinese, the teachers showed similar attitudes. From Table 10, it can be noted that most of them did not like their students' use of Chinese, but they expressed their tolerance of such practice,

**TABLE 10**  
**Teachers' Responses of Students' Use of Chinese in English Classes**

Questions	Answers	Frequency	Mean	SD
<i>Do your students use Chinese in English classes?</i>	Seldom	3	2.80	.63
	Sometimes	6		
	Frequently	1		
<i>Do you agree or disagree that your students use Chinese in English classes?</i>	Disagree	1	3.10	.57
	Neutral	2		
	Agree	7		
<i>Do you like the use of Chinese by your students in English classes?</i>	Not at all	4	1.60	.52
	Not so much	6		
<i>When your students use Chinese in English classes, does it provide help for their English studies?</i>	Some	9	3.10	.32
	Quite much	1		
<i>When your students use Chinese in English classes, does it help them to express themselves more clearly?</i>	Sometimes	1	4.00	.47
	Often	8		
	Always	1		
<i>When your students use Chinese in English classes, do they have a sense of relaxation?</i>	Often	10	4.00	.00
<i>When your students use Chinese in English classes, in what situation(s) do they usually do so?</i>	Learning new words	2	None	None
	Learning grammar	8		
	Doing exercises	7		
	Conducting discussion	3		
<i>In what situation(s) would you hope your students to use Chinese in English classes?</i>	Learning grammar	9	None	None
	Learning texts	6		

and admitted that Chinese was helpful for students' English studies. All of the teachers thought that the students would have a sense of relaxation and understand better if Chinese was used. Most of them shared the view that Chinese was used and could potentially be used by students when learning new words, grammar and text, and when doing exercises.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Extensive Adoption of the Mother Tongue**

Similar to the findings of Schweers (1999), Tang (2000), and He (2001), the results of this study indicate that both the teachers and the students confirmed their mutual and extensive adoption of Chinese (Tables 1, 9 & 10), and responded positively to the use of the mother tongue in teaching and learning English (Tables 4, 9 & 10). These shared opinions provide further evidence for the notion that although the mother tongue has been peripheral in theoretical circles of the language teaching and learning profession, it has been retained in the second/foreign language classroom, and is being extensively used in many countries of the world.

First of all, using the mother tongue could be the teacher's own choice to ensure their teaching results since it can compensate for students' deficiencies in the target language. In China, for example, given the circumstances that not all the students have sufficient linguistic proficiency, it is suggested by the National Syllabus for Middle School English that secondary-school teachers make an appropriate use of Chinese. According to Yu (1990), the majority of secondary schools in China are still using Chinese as the language of instruction in English classes, because teaching in English, though highly recommended, is considered difficult to carry out. Given this reality, it could be understood that the teacher participants in this study, though using a great amount of English in classroom, believed that the judicious use of the mother tongue would be helpful and beneficial for

English language teaching and learning.

Secondly, using the mother tongue could be students' preferred strategy. While using the mother tongue has been found helpful to lessen students' cognitive burden (Cook, 2001) and relieve their anxiety (Stibbard, 1998), empirical evidence has shown that the adoption of the mother tongue enables students to understand better and help them express what they intend to convey (See Bao, 1998; Cook, 2001; Macro, 1997). Psychologically, the mother tongue is a constant reference point in the minds of the learners (Rao, 1996), and "learners will inevitably even unconsciously attempt to equate a target language structure or lexical item with its closest or most common correlation in the mother tongue regardless of whether or not the teachers offer or permit translation" (Harbord, 1992, p. 352). It is then a natural tendency for students to refer things to the mother tongue, especially when they have not acquired adequate L2 proficiency. Teachers, as a result, have to revert to the mother tongue sometimes to enhance the quality of input for a larger quantity of intake on the part of the learner.

Thirdly, the help that the mother tongue can actually provide could be another factor resulting in the common employment of the mother tongue. Whereas the use of the mother tongue has been argued as helpful in building solidarity (Pennington & Balla, 1998), sharpening learners' language awareness (Harbord, 1992), transferring L1 competence to L2 (Cummins & Swain, 1986), and developing learning strategies (Atkinson, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 2000), the present study has found that, in the eyes of the participants, the mother tongue could not only facilitate communication (cf. Harbord, 1992) in English classes but also relieve students' anxiety by allowing them to have a sense of relaxation (cf. Stibbard, 1998). Given all these merits of the mother tongue, it deserves a sensible role, in the second/ foreign language classroom.

### **Using the Mother Tongue to Teach and Learn Grammar**

Notably, all the teachers and the overwhelming majority of the students in

this study shared the view that the mother tongue is being and can potentially be adopted to teach and learn grammar, being in agreement with Tang's (2000) findings but with much higher percentages.

The unique nature of grammar teaching and learning could account for such a phenomenon. Different from the teaching of new words or explaining texts, the teaching of grammar could hardly be supplemented with realia or paralinguage when students have difficulties in understanding. Very often, it involves using terms and metalanguage that are probably beyond the language repertoire of learners, and sometimes of teachers. So if teaching grammar completely in English, even proficient teachers will have to utilize more class time to explain, which itself may result in more confusion among students. But by reverting to the mother tongue, teachers can more easily convey their intended meaning and thus prevent students from having comprehension problems. This conforms to Cook's (2001) suggestion that teachers should use the L1 when "the cost of the TL is too great" — whenever it is too difficult or time-consuming for the students to process and understand the TL (p. 418). This could also explain why Macaro (1997) found that teachers were not enthusiastic about explaining grammar in the L2 and why all the six teachers in Polio and Duff's (1994) study used the L1 in teaching grammar.

As to the gap in percentages, it could be due to differences in the importance of grammar for learners at different levels. For the junior-secondary students in this study who had only studied English for a couple of years, to familiarize themselves with the grammatical system of English made up a fundamental and important part of their studies. But for the English-major students at the tertiary level in Tang's (2000) study, they had mastered a sound knowledge of grammar after studying English for about ten years. For these students, it was no longer important or necessary to spend much class time on grammar.

### **Disparities in the Attitudes towards the Use of the Mother Tongue**

Inconsistency has been found in the attitudes towards the use of the mother

tongue. As is illustrated in Tables 2, 3, 9 and 10, while both the teachers and the students quite strongly agreed that Chinese could be adopted in English classes, they responded that they did not like the practice very much. Similarly, Tang (2000) found that although the participants in her studies approved of some use of the mother tongue in the English classroom, their responses would suggest that its use should be limited.

This suggests that the belief that immersing oneself in the TL is the most effective way to learn a language has not changed much over time. It could also be related to the particular situation of English language teaching and learning in the Chinese context. Since English is taught as a foreign language in China, being different from the settings described by Schweers (1999) and Turnbull (2000), the chances of exposure to English out of class are rather small. Accordingly, both teachers and students would value maximum in-class input in English. On the one hand, they find the mother tongue useful and a necessity sometimes in class since students cannot learn if they cannot understand. On the other hand, they are very concerned about the exclusive use of English since both quality and quantity of input are critical to language learning. Such a dilemma could also be found in Macro's (1997) study, in which some students thought it was always desirable to use the TL but more students responded that it was necessary for teachers to use the L1 for their better understanding.

### **More Positive Perception on Teachers' Use of the Mother Tongue**

By comparison, the participants in this study tended to be more positive towards teachers' use of the mother tongue. Both the teachers (Tables 9 & 10) and the students (Table 2) agreed more strongly with teachers' use of the mother tongue than that of students. They liked teachers' use of the mother tongue better (Tables 3, 9 & 10), and noted greater help from teachers' use of the mother tongue (Tables 4, 9 & 10).

The dominant role of the teacher in a large class, as well as tight teaching schedules and tasks probably lead to such a gap in attitudes. It has been noted

that the teaching of English in Mainland China, though at the transitional phase from the transmission of knowledge to the development of language skills (Wang, 2001), is still teacher-centered, textbook-centered, grammar-centered and vocabulary-centered (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). While teachers are required by the national syllabus to finish the textbooks within the given period of time and have little time left for interactive activities, the large class sizes (often with 50 and sometimes 70 or more students) are often regarded as a barrier to interaction in the classroom which contributes to a listening-oriented culture of learning in the Chinese context (Wang, 2001). As a result, students are normally controlled by the teacher's instruction and thus put into a situation of passive learning. They tend to regard teachers as models and sources of knowledge and, to a great extent, are used to memorizing, imitating and repeating what is taught. They consider group learning as a negative learning style (Melton, 1990) and prefer to "listen and remember" in class most of the time (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001).

### **Mismatches on the Functions of the Mother Tongue**

Tang (2000) mentioned in her findings that teachers perceived the functions of the mother tongue differently from students. Similarly, the results of this study indicate some mismatched responses regarding the functions of the mother tongue. As illustrated in Tables 8, 9 and 10, whereas most students hoped to use Chinese in doing exercises themselves, and indicated their hope of using Chinese by teachers to teach new words, to explain the text, and to raise and answer questions, none of the teachers thought so.

Such mismatches suggest that teachers might fail to fully realize the needs of students concerning the use of the mother tongue, and accordingly raise the issue of when the mother tongue should be used. Atkinson (1987) once discussed nine situations when the mother tongue was used to elicit language, give instruction, check for sense, etc. Cook (2001) described several scenarios in which teachers should consider introducing the L1 into their

pedagogy, such as when explaining grammar, organizing tasks, disciplining students and implementing tests. Turnbull (2001) contended that using the L1 to help students understand a particular grammatical concept or vocabulary term could be an efficient practice. It has to be noted, however, that these suggestions aim at L2 learners in general and have not taken particular contexts into consideration.

So in what situations can the mother tongue be appropriately used in a particular context? How can teachers meet students' needs when adopting the mother tongue? These are not questions that can be settled by simply following suggestions in general. To make the best use of the mother tongue in a particular setting, harmonization is needed among factors such as linguistic proficiency, course requirements and students' motivation. Teachers should not only analyze students' needs, but also make dynamic modifications if necessary according to students' learning difficulties and their needs of using the mother tongue.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the role of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom based on a survey conducted at one junior secondary school. It has been found that Chinese was still quite extensively adopted in the English language classroom, that both the teachers and the students responded positively to a reasonable use of the mother tongue, and that teachers' use of the mother tongue were perceived more helpful for English studies. Also, both teachers and students agreed upon that the mother tongue should be used to teach and learn grammar, even though their opinions mismatched on the use of the mother tongue for some other pedagogical purposes.

The present study was limited in several ways. First, it was restricted to junior secondary students at one school. It would be necessary to extend further research to more students in other settings for a clearer picture of the role that the mother tongue plays and might reasonably play in the classroom.

Second, the source of data was limited to questionnaires. It would be advisable to triangulate questionnaire with other methods such as interviews and classroom observations for a more in-depth study to explore the reasons of the current state of affairs.

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