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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Overcoming first-Language interference in Task-Based Group Work among Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) asks learners to use English to complete real tasks, often in small groups. In countries where students share one mother tongue, such as Uzbekistan, learners often switch to that language during group work. This article explains why this happens, looks at what researchers say about it, and suggests practical ways for teachers to help intermediate learners keep using English without banning the first language (L1) completely.

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1. Introduction

Modern language teaching puts learners at the center of the lesson. In task-based group work, students solve a problem, plan an event or complete a text together, and English is the tool they use. The idea is simple: the more learners use the language for real communication, the better they learn it.

In practice, teachers often see something different. When students share the same mother tongue, they start discussing the task in that language and use English only for the final answer. Many teachers worry about this. Storch and Aldosari (2010, p. 355) describe this concern: learners may use their first language instead of the second language during group activities.

Intermediate learners are an interesting group. They already know enough English to talk about simple topics, but not enough to express complex ideas quickly. When a task becomes difficult, the L1 feels like the easiest way out. This article therefore asks three questions:

1. Why do intermediate learners use their L1 in group work?

2. Is L1 use always harmful?

3. How can teachers reduce unnecessary L1 interference?

2. What is first-language interference?

First-language interference means that a learner's mother tongue influences their use of the new language. It appears in two main ways. The first is language-level interference, such as word order, grammar or vocabulary copied from the mother tongue (for example, translating word by word). The second is behavioral, meaning learners switch to the mother tongue during a task. This article focuses mostly on the second type, because it is the main problem in group work.

3. Why do learners switch to their L1?

Researchers have found that learners switch for several reasons. Some are practical and some are psychological.

3.1 Task difficulty. Storch and Aldosari (2010) studied 15 pairs of Arabic-speaking EFL learners. They found that the amount of L1 depended more on the type of task than on the learners' proficiency pairing, and that overall L1 use was modest. This means the way a teacher designs the task matters a lot.

3.2 Missing vocabulary. When intermediate learners cannot find an English word, they quickly use the L1 word so the group can continue. In this case the L1 helps the work move forward instead of stopping it.

3.3 Task management. Learners also use the L1 to decide who will speak, who will write and how much time is left. Carless (2008), who studied the use of the mother tongue in task-based classrooms, found that students often used it for this kind of organization. His work suggests that using the L1 does not always mean learners are lazy or off task.

3.4 Comfort and group identity. In a group of friends, speaking the shared language feels natural. Speaking English with a classmate who speaks the same L1 can feel strange or embarrassing. Many teachers see this clearly in lower-confidence groups.

4. Is L1 use really a problem? What researchers say

The old view was that the L1 should be avoided completely. Today, researchers hold a more balanced view.

Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo (2009) studied oral interaction in task-based EFL learning. They argued that the L1 can work as a cognitive tool. Learners use it to think through a problem, understand the task and help each other. In their view, a small amount of L1 can support English learning instead of blocking it.

Carless (2008) takes a similar but careful position. He explains that the teacher's aim to give students as much English as possible is a good one, but it does not have to conflict with some use of the first language. The real question is how much L1 is used, and for what purpose.

Storch and Aldosari (2010) reached a related conclusion. Their learners used the L1 only modestly, and often for useful purposes. The L1 itself was not the main problem. The real danger appears when the L1 replaces the target language for the whole task, because then learners lose speaking practice, which is the main reason for doing group work.

5. Practical ways to reduce L1 interference

Based on the research above, teachers can try the following strategies with intermediate learners.

5.1 Choose tasks carefully. Because task type strongly affects L1 use (Storch & Aldosari, 2010), teachers should choose tasks with a clear outcome, a clear English product (such as a short presentation or a written plan) and a topic learners can handle. Tasks that are too hard push learners toward the L1.

5.2 Pre-teach useful language. Before the task, give students a short list of phrases for common needs. Examples are "What do you think?", "Let's start with...", "How do you say... in English?", "Can you repeat that?" and "I agree / I don't agree because...". With these phrases, learners can manage the task in English instead of switching.

5.3 Give roles. Assign roles such as leader, secretary, timekeeper and reporter. The timekeeper can be responsible for reminding the group to use English. Clear roles reduce confusion and the need to organize in the L1.

5.4 Allow planned, limited L1 use. Since researchers see some value in the L1 (Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009; Carless, 2008), a teacher can allow it in the planning stage, for example to brainstorm ideas, but require English in the speaking and reporting stages. This is realistic and avoids the frustration of a total ban.

5.5 Use monitoring and feedback. The teacher can walk around, listen quietly and note examples of both good English use and L1 overuse. After the task, the class can discuss the notes. This builds learners' awareness without public criticism.

5.6 Reward English use. Simple tools such as group points for using English, or a "language champion" award, motivate students and make English the normal language of the group.

5.7 Build a supportive atmosphere. Learners switch partly because they fear mistakes. If the teacher accepts mistakes as part of learning, students will feel safer speaking English with classmates.

6. Discussion

The findings above show that first-language interference in group work is not a simple case of "good" versus "bad." It is a normal part of learning a language in a classroom where everyone shares the same mother tongue. Intermediate learners are especially likely to use it, because they are in the middle of their development. They have enough English to try, but not always enough to succeed without help.

Teachers should therefore ask a more useful question than "How can I stop the L1?" The better question is "When does the L1 help, and when does it stop learning?" If students use a short L1 phrase to clarify an instruction and then return to English, this is probably helpful. If they discuss the whole task in the L1 and speak English only at the end, the purpose of the task is lost. The strategies in Section 5 aim at this balance: planning, support, roles, feedback and motivation.

7. Conclusion

First-language interference in task-based group work is common among intermediate EFL learners. It comes from task difficulty, vocabulary gaps, the need to organize the work, and the comfort of the shared language.

Research by Storch and Aldosari (2010), Carless (2008) and Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo (2009) shows that a small, purposeful use of the L1 can support learning, but that overuse reduces the amount of English practice. Teachers can reduce harmful interference by choosing suitable tasks, teaching useful phrases, assigning roles, giving feedback and rewarding English use. With these steps, group work can stay what it is meant to be: real communication in English.

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