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Adult Learners and the Use of L1 in the Foreign Language Classroom

Abstract: The aging population is a worldwide phenomenon. An increasing number of older adults are interested in learning languages but they often become disheartened because of strict rules imposed on them by language teachers blindly following the trend of “foreign language only.” For many decades following the end of Grammar Translation method, students’ mother tongue has been banned from language classrooms. Fortunately, however, this trend is beginning to shift giving place to more lenient approaches to teaching based on allowing and encouraging own-language use. Indeed, recent studies prove that there are a number of advantages resulting from permitting the use of translation, whereas it seems that there are hardly any real obstacles besides the ones existing as part of teachers’ own beliefs. Adults are not a homogeneous group and yet it is rarely acknowledged in studies on the use of mother tongue in language classrooms. As in case of any other age group, younger and older adults’ abilities, needs and learning preferences should also be taken into account to make their learning process more effective and more suitable. The aim of this article is to provide a foundation for future research on the adult learners and the use of their mother tongue in the classroom environment.

Keywords: aging population, older adults, classroom environments, use of native language, translation, teacher’s beliefs

1. Introduction

The primary objective of this article is to demonstrate that using students’ first language (L1) in the classroom facilitates the learning process of older adult learners. As practice shows the current tendencies in Second Language Acquisition studies are strongly rooted in the traditional methodologies such as Grammar Translation Method (GT). Despite the fact that the use of L1 in classrooms has been viewed as a negative approach to teaching ever since GT gave place to other methods which banned own-language use¹, the translation has never entirely disappeared (see Kerr

¹ The term defined by Hall & Cook as, “used in preference to ‘first language’ (L1), ‘native language’ or ‘mother tongue’, all of which seem unsatisfactory.” According to Hall & Cook, “in many language classrooms, the most common shared language of the learners is not the first or

2011). Moreover, even though teachers often use L1 in their lessons there has not been any teaching methodology created which would support it (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 4; Kerr 2011). Recently, this issue has been re-addressed and an increasing number of speeches, articles, and books were introduced in favour of the use of L1 (see Cook 2010; Vermes 2010; O’Keeffe 2011; Kerr 2011; Sampson 2012; Levine 2014). However, this topic has already been discussed as early as in 1980s (see Titford and Hieke 1985; Edge 1986; Atkinson 1987; Alexander 1987; Murphy 1988; Heltai 1989).

In his latest book, Cook (2010) notes that, “translating should be a major aim and means of language learning, and a major measure of success” (xv). Similarly, Kerr (2011) argues that predominance of native English speaker in the English teaching discourse “is beginning to shift” and claims that, “[w]ith a massive growth in English language teaching provision around the world and with a growing awareness of the global nature of English as a lingua franca, native-speakers are starting to lose their authority over both the language and methodologies for teaching it. The experiential knowledge base has shifted, with an unsurprising refocussing of interest on translation.”

A representative example of such change of focus is the research carried out by Hall and Cook (2013) — “Own-language Use In ELT: Exploring Global Practices and Attitudes.” The study includes the analysis of the use of L1 in the language classroom. Hall and Cook divided their research into various categories and present their finding based on 2,785 teachers working in 111 countries with students A1-A2+ (56.1%) and B1-C1 (43.9%). However, what is worth noticing is that the learners are divided into five age groups: 0–5 years old (1.2%), 6–11 (19.2%), 12–17 (35.6%), 18–23 (27.6%), and 24+ (16.4%). Crucially, though, despite the meticulous analysis of the learners and their needs the last group of students is treated as a whole, whereas in fact it is not less diverse than the previous groups. The question arises whether all the students above the age of 24 should be treated as one unanimous group, when numerous sources point out that it is not the case. There are many vital differences between younger and older adults concerning not only their learning preferences but also their needs and abilities (see Jaroszewska 2013a: 15–27). However, there is a scarcity of research about the second language acquisition and learning of older adults. Cox (2013) notes that this field still requires more attention as according to Singleton and Ryan “in Poland ... foreign languages are the third most popular field of study for older adults” (2004: 91).

native language of all students. ... Furthermore, the term ‘native language’ is imprecise — it mixes several criteria and can mean the language someone spoke in infancy, the language with which they identify, or the language they speak best; these are not always the same. Finally, ‘mother tongue’ is not only an emotive term but also inaccurate — for the obvious reason that many people’s mother tongue is not their mother’s mother tongue!” (2013: 7) However, in the following article the terms are used interchangeably.

2. Defining older adult learner

An older adult is defined differently by various scholars. Klimczuk enumerates the terms (based on the age group division provided by WHO) used in statistics as well as in political and social discourse and notes that there are four categories within the group of older adults: the age group 45–59 is described as *pre-old*, *middle-age*, *immobile age*, *non-mobility age*; 60–74 as *young-old*; 75–89 as *old-old*; whereas 90 years old and more as *oldest-old* or *longlife* (2012: 18). Such division, is by no means arbitrary and the age boundaries fluctuate due to social changes or personal differences (Jaroszewska 2013a).

Schultz & Elliot (2000: 108) notes that older adults are often classified as one group — e.g., Homstad (1987) categorises older adults as “over forty,” Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) and Patkowski (1982) include in this group learners over the age of 50; Brown (1985) concentrates on the age of 55 and more; whereas in a more recent study by Weinstein-Shran older adult is defined as a person from “40 to 65 years old” and more (1993: 1), while Wilson classifies older learners as “those above the age of seventy” (2008: 14). Similarly to the division suggested by Jaroszewska (2013a), for the purpose of this research, adult learners will be divided into two groups — younger adults (18–49) and older adults (50+), the division based on the courses offered by language schools and projects financed by EU, as that is where and how the subjects of this study learn English.

3. The role of mother tongue in the classroom

According to Cunningham (2000: 2), “[r]ecent articles argue that there is no reason why translation activities cannot be incorporated into a communicatively based lesson, [as] they promote different activities that suit the different goals and aims of students.” Indeed, the use of students’ L1 in the language classroom has many benefits as, “activities that involve some translation promote guessing strategies amongst students and help reduce the word-for-word translation that often occurs and which results in inappropriate L2 use” (Atkinson qtd. in Cunningham 2000: 3). Moreover, students are encouraged to use English as *lingua franca* and not try to achieve “native-speaker competence” (Murakami 2001: 2).

This tendency is closely linked to the intercultural aspect of learning languages. By trying to eliminate own-language use from the classrooms we are depriving students of the most powerful tool which allows them to “translat[e] between languages and cultures” (Kerr, 2011). Similarly, Murakami (2001) notes that, “people’s mother’s tongue plays a crucial role in establishing their identity; it should be neither neglected nor subordinated to any other language” (2001: 1). Indeed, in some contexts students may consider banning their L1 as culturally offensive. It is also natural

that especially lower-level learners feel more comfortable when they are allowed to check their comprehension using their mother tongue; therefore, allowing students to use their mother tongue “is likely to be authentic in the sense that it reflects the natural interplay of L1 and L2 which is inherent in second language acquisition” (Clanfield and Foord 2003: 1). However, not only the natural interplay between the two languages is emphasized in the process of code-switching but also the ability to express oneself more freely and more naturally while working with peers. Students can “help each other organize their ideas or choose a more precise lexical item to explain their thoughts to the class or the teacher ... [which] can become a vehicle for learning and enforcing language and vocabulary because students are drawing on each other’s knowledge” (Atkinson qtd. in Cunningham 2000: 3).

Indeed, there are numerous problems which may arise for the older adult learner of a foreign language, especially regarding the use of mother tongue in the classroom. There seem to be as many opinions concerning the matter as there are teachers, but the issue continues to be disregarded and has not, as yet, been discussed thoroughly from the student perspective. Therefore, it is crucial to support these various points of view with the analysis of students’ actual needs and expectations.

4. Research design

The following project incorporates two methods of obtaining the data — a short interview and a questionnaire, which seem to be the most reliable methods of procuring student feedback. Both the interview and the questionnaire complement one another: the interview allows setting the background for research subjects (providing basic information concerning students’ age, sex, occupation, reasons for studying the language and their learning background), whereas the questionnaire ensures more detailed feedback in relation to students use of L1 in the classroom, their needs, abilities and learning practices, to which they have been exposed while studying English (see Appendix 1). Both research instruments help to collect the data which will be later used in the following analysis.

4.1. Research aims

Students’ previous learning experiences and personal theories often influence their expectations of a language course. As a result students often demand from the teacher to shape the lesson in the way which is perceived by them as the most effective. It seems that one of such beliefs is the use of mother tongue. This study concentrates on older adults’ attitudes towards own-language use in the language classroom and on some differences between older and younger adult learners. Students often use their mother tongue in the classroom, but it is rarely because it is encouraged by the teacher, rather they refer to their L1 as they fail to comprehend

or try to build their confidence. Therefore, this study also aims to observe the reasons behind the use of their mother tongue from the students' perspective. The research also concentrates on the possible drawbacks of the use of L1. The following research questions are investigated to address the above mentioned issues:

1. Are there any differences in learning preferences regarding the use of L1 between the two age groups and what might be the reasons?
2. How do the students perceive the importance of the use of L1?
3. When, if at all, would they like to use their L1?
4. When do the students use their L1 in the lesson?
5. Does using L1 meet students' expectations of what the lesson should look like?
6. Do the students experience L1 interference and does it have an effect on their learning process?
7. Are there any possible drawbacks of using L1 in the language classroom?

The students were asked to answer the research questions connected to their learning preferences and personal beliefs as well as their previous learning practice. The results of the survey are presented below.

4.2. Participants

There were 41 subjects that altogether took part in the experiment; all of them were students of a language school. The data were collected during regular classes in February, August and October 2015. Students were exposed to different teaching techniques which allowed them to see how their mother tongue might be used in class in a meaningful way. Students were informed about the character of the survey and some of the results were discussed with them. The students were asked to fill in a questionnaire after the lesson to share their opinions and were later interviewed and asked questions. The same type of lesson was taught in 4 groups on 2 different levels with two different age groups — CEFR A1 and A2+ — younger adults (further referred to as YA, aged from 18 to 49) and older adults (OA 50+). The younger adult groups consisted of 8 men and 12 women, whereas the older adult of 3 men and 17 women. The youngest person was 18 and the oldest 83.

Table 1. Numbers and divisions of students in the groups

Group (level)	Men	Women	Total
YA A1 (beginner)	3	7	10
YA A2 (pre-intermediate)	5	5	10
OA A1 (beginner)	2	8	10
OA A2+ (pre-intermediate)	1	10	11
Total	11	30	41

4.2.1. Younger adults (18–49)

The biggest group comprised of 6 students and 2 PhD students. There were also 2 lawyers and 2 architects as well a teacher and a music teacher. The rest of the group was more diverse as it included a doctor, an IT specialist, a manager, a secretary, a babysitter and 1 person who decided not to reveal their professional background. Due to the variety of contexts in which the subjects were exposed to English it may be assumed that they should find translation and own-language use a useful skill helping them in real-life context.

Most of the students in this group were young people who needed English to find better jobs (6)², to communicate more effectively not only at work (3) but also in real life in order to feel more comfortable using English as *lingua franca* (2). The other subjects found it important to communicate online (1) and to use computers (2). Similarly to the older adult students, this group found English useful to travel abroad (2) and to get to know the target culture (1). The abilities to keep in touch with English speaking friends (1) and to move abroad (1) as well as understanding films and reading books (1) were also important motivating factors.

4.2.2. Older adults (50+)

The group of older adults was more diverse as their professions varied from accountants (3) and language teachers (2) to building contractors (1), journalists (1) and writers (1). There was also a nurse, a cashier, a lawyer, an architect, a manager, a secretary, as well as 4 pensioners and 3 people who decided not to reveal their professional backgrounds.

The majority of older adult students (7) found it necessary to learn English in order to communicate with their children and grandchildren who left the country and often live in ESE (English Speaking Environment) with their English-speaking partners, as well as to get to know the culture of the countries in which they live (3). Therefore, learning the language in order to communicate with their families has become a crucial element of their motivation, which can be classified as integrative. Another reason for learning was the willingness to socialise (3), to keep in touch with their English speaking friends (1), to participate in activities similar to the ones enjoyed by the younger members of their families (3) and to make sure that they still exercise their brains and are exposed to challenging and useful activities (1). Moreover, older adults found it difficult to use computers and browse the Internet (2) without the knowledge of English, which they also found useful to communicate at work (1)³.

² Information in the brackets reflects the number of students who participated in the research.

³ For the detailed analysis of Older Adult needs and reasons for learning languages see Jaroszevska (2013a).

4.3. The research instrument

The methods used to collect the data were an interview and the questionnaire based on the one designed by Hall & Cook (2013), which concentrates on global practices and attitudes to own-language use in ELT. This paper, however, examines the issue not from the perspective of an English teacher but that of a student. Moreover, as recent in-depth studies on the use of L1 have been based primarily on school-age students and adults (grouped together as “24+”), this study concentrates on both younger and older adult learners to highlight the differences between the two age groups concerning the need to resort to the mother tongue in the classroom.

5. Presentation and interpretation of the results

The questions of the survey were divided into three groups: first, asking about students’ preferences regarding the use of L1 in the classroom; second, concentrating on students’ experiences in relation to own-language use; third, aimed at obtaining feedback on students’ personal opinions connected to the benefits and potential drawbacks resulting from resorting to their mother tongue in the classroom environment.

I. The first group of results presented below illustrates students’ answers to the following question:

When would you like your L1 to be used in class?

1. To explain vocabulary
2. To give instructions
3. To explain grammar
4. To correct spoken errors
5. To explain when meanings in English are unclear
6. To give feedback on written work
7. To test and assess
8. To maintain discipline
9. To develop rapport

Adult learners’ beliefs and preferences regarding own-language use in the classroom environment vary according to their levels and ages. There seem to be more differences between the students of different ages than of different levels.

While answering the question of learning preferences regarding the use of L1 in the classroom both groups of YA A1 and A2+ had a much clearer idea of when they expect to be exposed to their mother tongue instead of English. The first group —YA A1 — believe that explaining grammar and vocabulary is rather important and therefore should be done “usually and often” (5 and 6 opinions, respectively), whereas giving feedback on written work and correcting spoken errors is treated as rather unnecessary (“never and rarely” 7 and 8 subjects). The most extreme results are presented, however in the answers concerning maintaining discipline and developing rapport — the YA A1 seem to have a negative attitude towards maintaining

discipline (“never and rarely” 7 opinions) but at the same time they are quite happy to devote some of the time in the lesson to develop rapport using their L1.

Similarly, YA A2+ are unequivocally against maintaining discipline using L1 (“never and rarely” 10 subjects), giving feedback on written work and correcting spoken errors (both — 9 subjects), but at the same time again they seem to agree to the use of L1 while developing rapport (5 positive comments — “usually and often”). This group of students also had the strongest opinion on the role of own-language use in explaining vocabulary and grammar — 7 and 9 subjects were against the idea. When it comes to explaining unclear meanings YA A2+ allow judicious use of their mother tongue and claim that it can be done “usually and often” (5 subjects). On the whole, younger adults seem to be more independent and do not mind facing the challenge of using L2 only, but they feel that L1 can be useful in some contexts. It should be highlighted, though, that the group YA A2+ is the most independent and has the strongest views about the use of L1 among all four groups. Indeed, they often seemed displeased with their peers who demanded some explanations in L1 and they expressed their strong belief that using L2 only is more authentic and they can learn more by being exposed to the target language at all times.

On the other hand, older adults were quite positive about the use of L1. Both OAA1 and OAA2+ would like to use L1 more frequently especially while explaining unclear meanings (“often and always” 6 and 5 subjects respectively). The most negative attitudes are expressed towards, once again maintaining discipline (5 and 7 negative comments) and giving feedback on written work which is viewed as unnecessary by 4 and 6 subjects in both groups. Developing rapport in L1 seems to be useful as it helps the older adults to socialize. On the whole, older adults are much more likely to use their L1 in the lesson and they would like their teachers to do that more often — many subjects chose answers “often and always” in support of explaining vocabulary or grammar (7 and 3 in both groups). Which is also worth pointing out, unlike in the group of younger adults where there are nearly no answers “always,” older adults were rather positive about the use of L1 and frequently chose this option (in nearly all the cases).

II. The following graphs reflect students’ experiences of the use of L1 in the language classroom and are answers to the question included below:

When do you use your L1 in class?

1. Check words in a bilingual dictionary
2. Compare English grammar to the grammar of your own language
3. Discuss tasks with your partner
4. Translate difficult grammar or lexis
5. Make sure you understand the instructions
6. Prepare for tasks and activities in your own language before switching to English
7. Ask questions
8. Ask for clarification

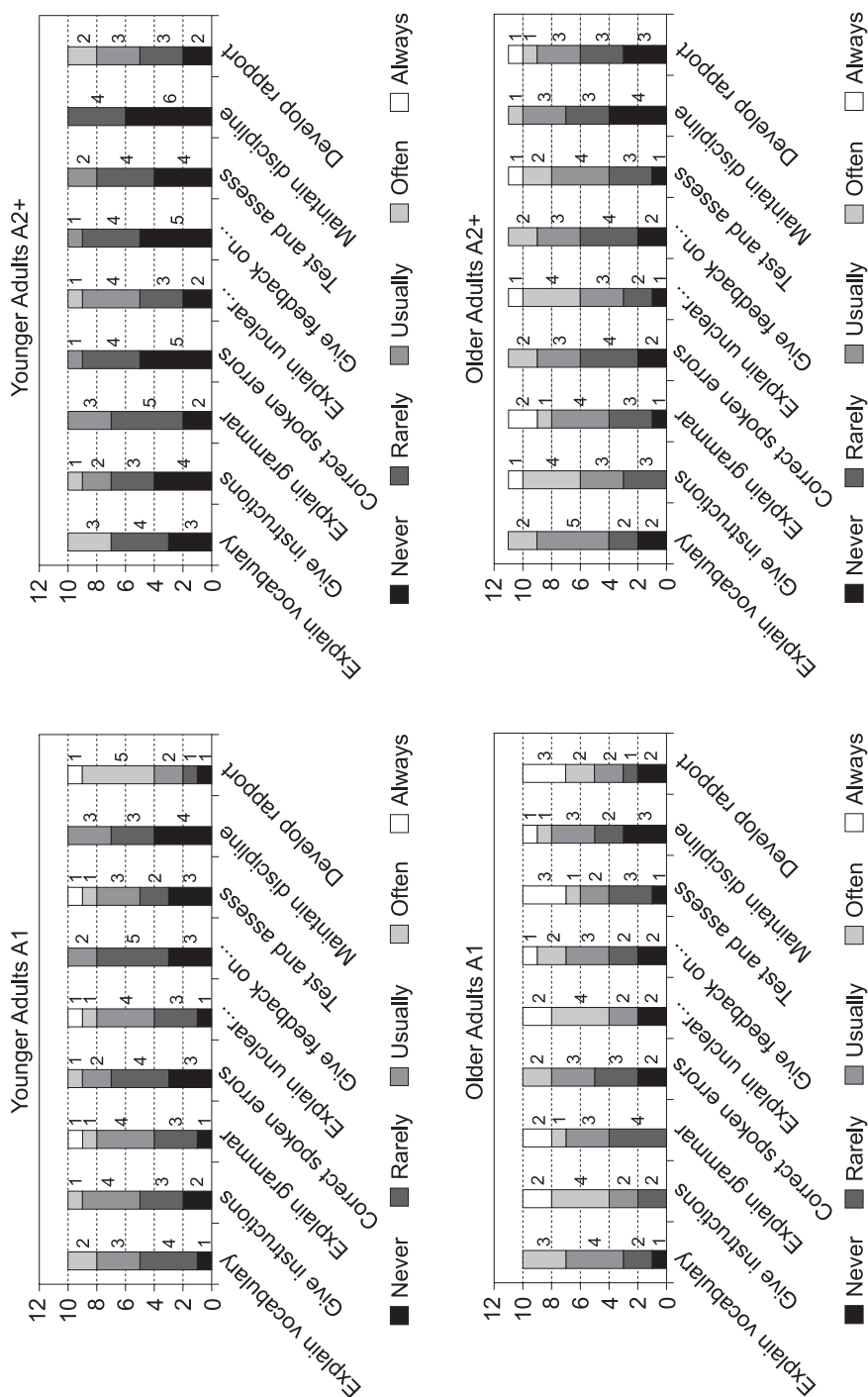


Figure 1. Adult learners' preferences regarding the use of L1

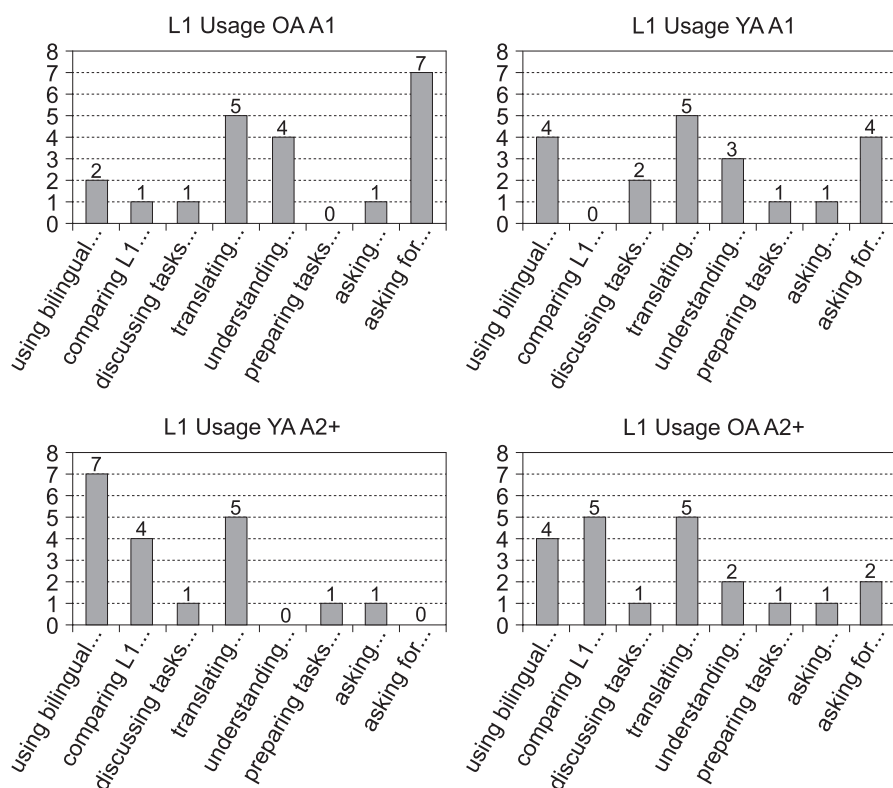


Figure 2. Adult learners' experience of using L1

The second part of the questionnaire, which is devoted to students' experience of using L1 in the classroom, once again, divided the students into two groups according to their ages. Which is interesting, younger adults seem to be more independent users of English and if necessary they prefer to resort to bilingual dictionaries as means of clarifying the meaning (20% and 37%), older adults ask for clarification in their L1 (33%) and translate grammar or lexis (24%), whereas YAA2+ avoid asking for clarification in their L1 at all (0%). Moreover, more advanced groups feel more comfortable with comparing L1 and L2 (21% and 24%), but the beginners either do not do that at all (YA 0%) or very rarely (OA 5%). There are also some similarities between the two age groups as all four groups decided that preparing tasks and asking questions is unnecessary (5%), which is on the contrary to what actually often takes place in the classroom. When it comes to understanding instructions the answers are very diverse — YA and OAA1 find it useful (15% and 19%), whereas A2+ groups either rather useful (9% OA) or completely unnecessary (0% YA).

III. Students' own opinions regarding the use of L1 are expressed in the third part of the questionnaire. The figures presented in the graphs below illustrate students' feedback to the following questions:

What is your opinion on the use of L1?

1. Does the use of L1 increase your learning capacity?
2. Does the use of L1 make you feel more confident?
3. Do you think that using L1 helps you to understand?
4. Do you find code-switching enjoyable?
5. Do you find code-switching practical?
6. Do you find code-switching useful in real-life context?
7. Do you think rehearsing your speeches in L1 is useful?

The final part of the questionnaire concentrates on students' opinions and personal beliefs regarding the use of L1. While looking at the graphs the first noticeable aspect is the difference in attitudes towards own-language use — younger adults often opted for the negative answers, whereas older adults frequently indicated that own-language use is an important factor in language learning. These findings seem to confirm what was observed during the experimental lessons and what has already been mentioned — younger adults prefer to be more independent language users and to be exposed to the target language at all times, at the same time older adults appreciate the support which is provided by their L1. Moreover, older adults more often chose the answer "I don't know," while subjects in the YA group are rather unanimous and certain of their opinions, hardly ever indicating that answer. At the same time A1 groups were more equivocal and decided to point to their uncertainty about the influence of L1 on their learning.

According to the respondents, older adults' confidence is significantly raised by own-language use, whereas younger adults rather pointed to the opposite effect. Similarly, both OA groups claim that using L1 increases their ability to comprehend, but YA A2+ did not provide any clear answer. Once again, YA A2+ differ from other groups in their attitudes towards practicality and usefulness — the subjects decided that they find the use of L1 neither helpful nor practical. The responses to the question referring to the usefulness of code-switching in real-life context also differ markedly. OAs believe that it may improve their ability to communicate, while YAs claim the opposite. Although the subjects are not always unanimous in their answers there are certain patterns which can easily be noticed. YAs welcome the challenges and seem to be more tolerant of ambiguity, whereas older adults feel much more comfortable when they are able to use their mother tongue. Figure 3. Adult learners' opinions on the use of L1.

6. Conclusions

The research presented in this article demonstrates a number of observations regarding the adult learners' perception of the use of L1 in the language classroom and concentrates on their previous learning experiences. It seems that there are many vital differences regarding own-language use between the two levels — A1

and A2+ — but also between the two age groups — younger and older adults. Despite the fact that the subjects were often inconsistent in their answers and their responses to the questionnaire not always corresponded to their attitudes towards the use of L1 that were observed during the experimental lessons, there are some regularities in their responses. Firstly, older adults seem to feel more comfortable when they are allowed to use their mother tongue and they believe that it facilitates their learning process. On the other hand, more advanced younger adults expect a rather limited own-language use so that they can be exposed to English at all times. At the same time, the subjects' need to resort to their mother tongue seems to decrease with level, but increase with age⁴.

However, there were also some drawbacks of the own-language use, which became visible during the experiment. Some students, especially in the OA A1 group started to avoid expressing themselves in English and, when provided with the opportunity, spent the majority of time using their mother tongue as an easier way of communication. The subjects gave up other methods of conveying meaning, e.g. coping or compensation devices like, e.g., reformulation, and overused their L1 in the lesson. In the YA A2+ group there was some tension between the students who wanted to use their mother tongue more often and the rest of the group who felt that they were wasting their time and could spend it more effectively by speaking English only.

The abovementioned issues should be taken into account especially while teaching older adult students as this age group shows considerable interest in the use of their mother tongue in the language classroom. Indeed, the use of translation and other techniques which incorporate students' L1 might become particularly beneficial for this group of learners and result in increasing their enjoyment by lowering the potential stress level. According to Dench and Regan (2000) there are many benefits of studying for older adult learners as their research shows that 80% of students reported a positive impact, 58% improved their enjoyment of life, 56% improved their self-confidence, 36% could cope better with everyday life (183). Both age groups can derive pleasure from studying and learn languages successfully but their abilities, preferences and opinions should be taken into account also while considering the use of L1 in the classroom.

⁴ It is worth pointing out that, despite the differences of opinion and learning preferences, both groups — younger and older adults — can become successful language users. Park (2000) notes that “[p]sychology has identified four main areas of cognition in which older adults differ from younger adults: sensory function, inhibitory control, working memory capacity (WMC), and processing speed” (qtd. in Cox 2013: 93). Whereas, McDaniel, Einstein and Jacoby (2008) add that the stereotype that “older adults are unable to remember new information can increase anxiety in an instructional context, thus further inhibiting performance” (qtd. in Cox 2013: 93). Moreover, older adult learners who take part in “intellectually engaging activities” are less likely to show any “cognitive change in their learning abilities, regardless of their level of education” (Hultsch 1998: 280), but studies of lexis and verbal abilities show that especially teachers and university professors surpass younger learners in their ability to learn new languages (Salthouse 1988).

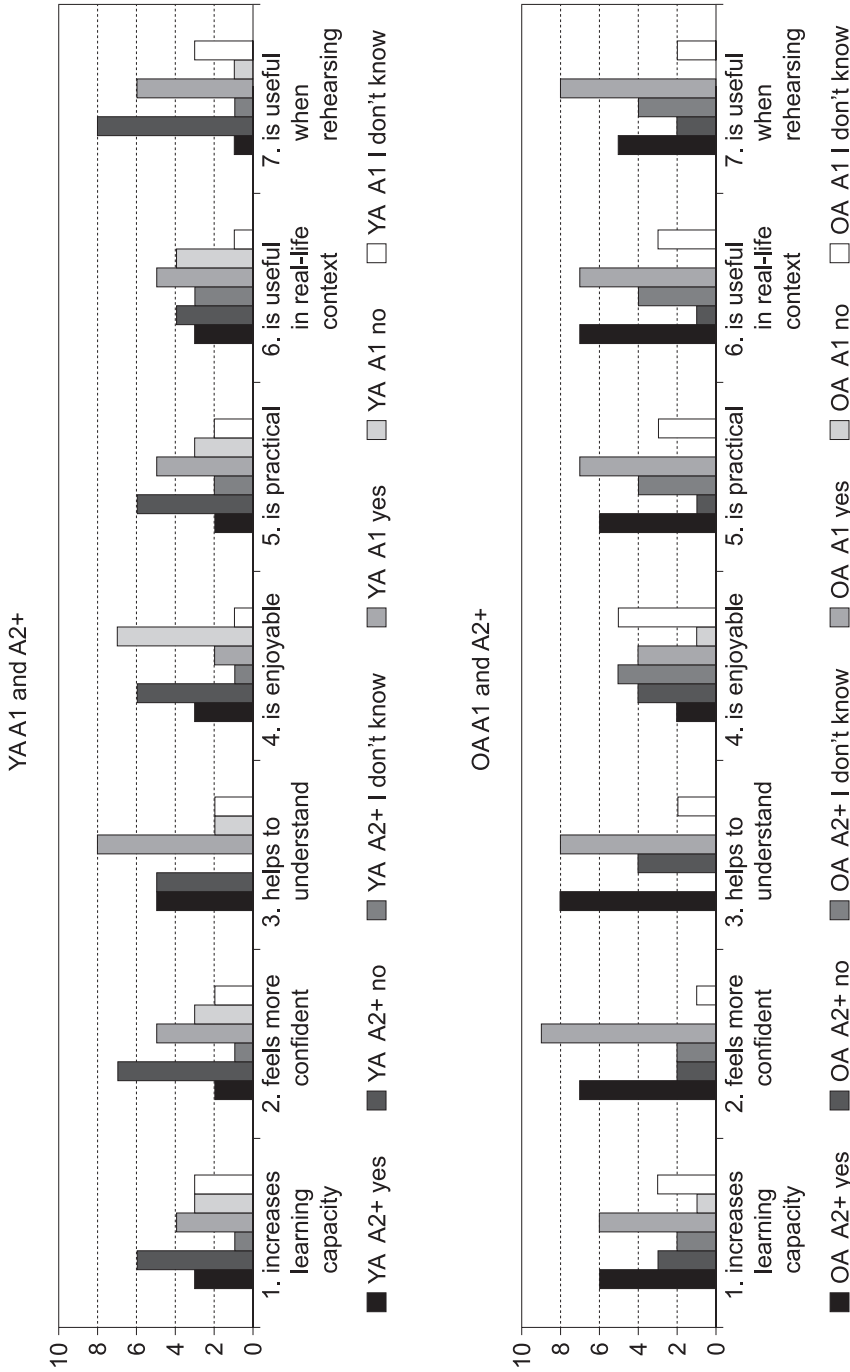


Figure 3. Adult learners' opinions on the use of L1

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Appendix 1

PART I — ABOUT YOU (an interview)

1. Age group:
18–49 50+
2. Sex:
Man Woman
3. Your English language level:
4. beginner pre-intermediate
5. Type of school in which you study English:
private public other (please specify)
6. What is your occupation?
7. How long have you been studying English for?
8. In which country do you study English?
9. What is your mother tongue?
10. Why do you study English?
11. How often do you use your L1 in class:
always/usually/often/rarely/never

PART II — ABOUT YOUR CLASSES (a questionnaire)

- I. When would you like your L1 to be used in class?
 1. To explain vocabulary
always/usually/often/rarely/never

2. To give instructions
always/usually/often/rarely/never
3. To explain grammar
always/usually/often/rarely/never
4. To correct spoken errors
always/usually/often/rarely/never
5. To explain when meanings in English are unclear
always/usually/often/rarely/never
6. To give feedback on written work
always/usually/often/rarely/never
7. To test and assess
always/usually/often/rarely/never
8. To maintain discipline
always/usually/often/rarely/never
9. To develop rapport
always/usually/often/rarely/never

II. When do you use your L1 in class?

1. Check words in a bilingual dictionary
always/usually/often/rarely/never
2. Compare English grammar to the grammar of your own language
always/usually/often/rarely/never
3. Discuss tasks with your partner
always/usually/often/rarely/never
4. Translate difficult grammar or lexis
always/usually/often/rarely/never
5. Prepare for tasks and activities in your own language before switching to

English

- always/usually/often/rarely/never
6. Make sure you understand the instructions
always/usually/often/rarely/never
7. Ask questions
always/usually/often/rarely/never
8. Ask for clarification
always/usually/often/rarely/never

III. What is your opinion on the use of L1?

1. Does the use of L1 increase your learning capacity?
yes/ no/ I don't know
2. Does the use of L1 make you feel more confident?
yes/ no/ I don't know
3. Do you think that using L1 helps you to understand?

yes/ no/ I don't know

4. Do you find code-switching enjoyable?

yes/ no/ I don't know

5. Do you find code-switching practical?

yes/ no/ I don't know

6. Do you find code-switching useful in real-life context?

yes/ no/ I don't know

7. Do you think rehearsing your speeches in L1 is useful?

yes/ no/ I don't know