

# Language Choice in the Online EFL Classroom in China

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## Abstract:

The medium of instruction (MOI) in the language classroom is always under discussion. In China, parents from upper-class expect their children to receive an elite English education, that is why they send their children to schools where the teachers use English as the medium of instruction (EMI) and students are required to speak English in the school. However, most common students in China enter the public schools, which usually are taught by L1 (Chinese) as MOI in the course of language learning. Hence, which MOI language in the EFL classroom in China should be chosen deserves to be further discussed. This essay will investigate the recruitment requirements for online English teachers of six famous English training schools in China with particular consideration for each school's preference. By investigating the different preference of recruitment requirements, this article intends to show the relationship between the recruitment requirements for English teachers and the target students. After analysing previous studies and the findings, the results indicate that all these training school prefer teachers will proficiency oral English, though the imbalance of L1 and L2 exists in classrooms. Implications will be given for the use of L1 and L2 in China's online EFL classroom.

## Keywords:

Language Choice, MOI, Online Education, EFL Classroom, Chinese EFL Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Using L1 or L2 as MOI in L2/EFL learning classroom is a heated debate topic recently, and in order to investigate the effect of using L1 or L2 in the language classroom, many researchers conduct various researches. Some researchers believe that the use of L1 in the L2 learning process not only limited the opportunity for students to expose to L2 environment, but also it may impede the acquisition process of the target language [4]. Those who disapprove of using L1 in the process L2 teaching and learning also assert that L1 may cause misunderstanding when learning the target language because it is challenging to find appropriate meaning by one language to explain the other and vice versa [5]. Furthermore, Haryanto et al. [5] also claims that using L1 in the course of L2 learning is likely to lead to the negative transfer to the target language. Due to the reason that there are differences in language form between L1 and L2, so the negative transfer is happened frequently and affect

the acquisition of the target language. However, in Dulay and Burt's article (1973), the author has already conducted a case study to show that second language learners' make similar mistakes to those who learn as the first language when learning syntax. Hence, it may argue that the negative transfer of L1 and L2 form is not a persuasive limitation of using L1 in the L2 learning process.

In addition to those who avoid using L1 in the L2 teaching, most researchers contend that there need to have a balance of using L1 and L2 [2,9,7]. These researches discuss different aspects of language learning, which aims to find the most proper situation to achieve the balance of L1 and L2 use. For example, although Haryanto et al. [5] considers the teachers need to avoid using L1 in the L2 teaching process, in the further case study, the author also recognizes that the use of both L1 and L2 should be balanced in the classroom, and L1 teaching can be mainly involved in the learning of listening and speaking classroom [5]. This argument is similar to Sa'D and Qadermazi's [11]. The authors point out that judicious and limited use of the L1 in the classroom is a better teaching approach than to include or exclude it totally, although solely using L2 can have more benefits in improving students' speaking and listening skills. The main reason is that second language learner learns a language which is not native to the country in which they live, and therefore they can only be exposed to the target language in the classroom [4]. Apart from this, according to Kabir's article [7], the author asserts that the use of L1 in teaching L2 can provide scaffolding for students to some extent, which may help them to enhance L2 comprehension. Bozorgian and Fallahpour [2] also agree that L1 is an aid for teachers to convey meaning and improve students' understanding of L2. Moreover, in Mohebbi and Alavi's case study [10], the data reveals that teachers are used to using L1 to give individual help to learners and explain grammar. That is why some researchers believe that teachers need to transform the MOI based on the purpose of teaching and the needs of students [9,3].

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study investigates six famous online English training schools in China. This list includes New Oriental English School (XDF), LAIX, Education First (EF), TAL Education Group (TAL), 51Talk and VIPKID. Most of these schools are the listed company (except Education First and VIPKID), and they all provide online and offline English learning courses. The qualitative research method will be used when analysing data. This study will give a brief understanding of the requirements for potential teachers' essential English ability in each school, such as the major and the exact scores of some English qualification tests. Also, to discuss these general requirements published on the schools' official websites, this study will show the relationship between the specific requirements and the target students of each school. After discussing these recruitment requirements for English teachers, and the MOI language preference in different kinds of English training schools will be analysed.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Results

The recruitment requirements of each school are all found in the official recruitment website. Moreover, all the requirements face fresh graduates in 2020. Most requirements are written by Chinese, expect EF, which is a foreign company but has

many branches and a good reputation in China. Hence, the requirements written in Chinese will be translated into English if necessary.

Through searching for each recruitment websites, the first requirement is about the English ability for recruiters. All schools require the teachers to have at least the bachelor degree. Nevertheless, only two of them give a specific requirement for the undergraduate major. LAIX and EF direct their requirements for applicants whose “major is English, English Education, TESOL, Applied Linguistics or relevant area” (LAIX, Zhaopin; EF, Careers). Other schools have no limitation on the applicants’ major. Most schools only need the applicants to have a “solid English ability” (XDF, Zhaopin; TAL, Job) while LAIX and EF have more specific requirements, which require applicants have a certain score in the English tests they list in the websites and the teachers have to gain the required scores at least one of these tests. For example, “English with TEM 8/IELTS 7 or above” “TOEFL 90 or above” “BEC Higher Level” (LAIX, Zhaopin; EF, Careers). What is deserve to be mentioned is that TAL and XDF (IELTS teacher), except to have requirements in English ability, the website of these two schools also point out that the applicants need to have “standard mandarin, fluent and strong Chinese communication ability” (XDF, Zhaopin; TAL, Job). It is may not a standard requirement which is deliberately mentioned for English teachers in most English training schools.

However, 51 Talk [13] and VIPKID [18] have difference with the other school, as 51 Talk and VIPKID are the only two schools providing the course with English native-speaking teachers. Students would be taught by native speakers, and English is the only MOI in the class, which is the selling point of these two schools. In their official website, there are no clear items refer to the recruitment, but on the first page of the website, both of two schools show their native-speaking teachers are chosen by very strict requirement. For example, in the first page of VIPKID, it shows that “we have rigorous selection criteria for foreign teachers” and “all teachers are from North America with a bachelor degree and more than one-year teaching experience”. Advocating the immersion English learning context is the main feature of these two schools.

Apart from this, it is worth to be noticed that there are more than half requirements related to the English ability in each school. In the website of EF, the first three of the recruitment requirements are about the individual English background, such as “Bachelor Degree, plus a National Teacher Certificate or TEFL/CELTA certificate; Major in English, English Education, TESOL, Applied Linguistics or relevant area; Command excellent communicative skills in English with TEM8/IELTS7 or above” (EF, Careers). Similarly, the three-fifths requirement of XDF (IELTS teacher) are related to English competence, especially in the third requirement, which requires the teachers to have an excellent understanding of the IELTS question types. Both essential academic ability and English competence are necessary when applying to be a teacher in English training schools. Although in the interview part, the interviewer may exam the characters of each applicant whether suitable to be a teacher.

Finally, all these schools have requirements in recruiters’ communication skills and English competence, which also be considered as the fundamental ability of an English teacher.

### **3.2. Discussion**

The finding of this research reveals that there may be a balance of using L1 and L2 in some schools, such as XDF and TAL, which focus more on the English exam training for K12 students and other exam candidates. Hence, in their recruitment requirements, applicants need to have fluent and standard Mandarin communication skills, which can reflect that teachers may use L1 as the MOI for most of the class time. Because of the exam and knowledge-centred teaching mode, students do not need to have a native accent or fluent speaking skills. The primary responsibility for teachers in those English exam training school is to teach students how to pass exams. Therefore, the most important things in the teaching process are to ensure students have a good understanding of the English language structure, such as grammar rules and vocabulary. Using L1 is essential for this teaching purpose, and L1 is frequently used as MOI in English learning process, which is believed to be an effective way for enhancing students' language comprehension [12]. With a fluent Mandarin communication skill, teachers are likely to make sure that target grammar rules and vocabulary can be conveyed clearly to learners without misunderstanding. For K12 students, who are most at the beginning or intermedia English level, using L1 as MOI would be a better approach, since it may contribute for the building of solid English foundation, although students are more willing to be taught by L2 in the classroom [5,12]. All the ideas discussed above is for the paper-and-pen English exams. However, other types of exams, such as IELTS and TOEFL, which have speaking test, need to use more L2 as MOI in the classroom. When teaching speaking, L2 monolingual language teaching allows students to exposure to a target language environment and cultivate communication, although it is necessary for teachers to give feedback by using L1 [1].

Except for XDF and TAL, the target students of the other schools are those who simply intend to improve their English communication skills in order to get a promotion or other purpose unrelated to pass exams, such as LAIX and EF. The recruitment requirements of these two schools focus more on English speaking ability. These requirements may match the needs of their target students. By using English natively in the class, teachers are able to show their professional and create a language environment for students. Some students believe that when they are not allowed to express their opinions in L1, they might experience low self-esteem and fear [6]. However, it is noted that learners' only source exposure to the L2 maybe the classroom, guiding and encouraging students to the discussion by using English is one of the teachers' jobs. Therefore, because of the purpose of classes and the needs of target students, using L2 as MOI is essential.

Unlike the two schools talked above, although 51Talk and VIPKID are also English ability training school, the main feature of the two schools is native-speaking English teachers. It means that students are more likely to learn English in a native environment. In Li and Zhang's case study [8], the results show that students taught by native-speaking teachers have more improvement than those who not. This is why VIPKID has become a famous English learning platform for young learners. Parents believe that their children will have a native accent and can reduce the influence of spoon-feeding English education for primary or secondary school students. However, L2 as MOI has its weaknesses, especially for the beginners, because beginners are more likely to be anxiety if the teacher uses English only in the classroom, which may reduce the efficiency of learning.

The better approach is to balance the use of L1 and L2. Due to there are merits and weaknesses monolingual language teaching process, so teachers keep in mind that

choosing which language as MOI need to depend on students' proficiency levels and teaching purposes [7].

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, while there are many pieces of the research argue that the use of L1 in L2 learning classroom may hinder the improvement of L2 ability, it needs to involve L1 into the language teaching process. In this process, the teacher is required to make a balance between the use of L1 and L2. According to this study, because of the different target type of students, there is a little difference in recruitment requirements for English teachers. It is sensible for teachers to change the MOI according to the present needs of students, as well as the students' language proficiency.

There are some limitations in this study. This study only focuses on six schools which cannot make a general conclusion, so it may not reliability. There are only basic requirements for teachers in the requirement advertisement. However, some schools have a paper-and-pen test and micro-teaching if recruiters meet the requirements, so there are many influence factors for the final recruitment results and the ability of teachers. Therefore, in the future, how to use L1 and L2 in the classroom still deserves further research and discussion.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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