

# Attitudes among Korean university students of Swedish as a Foreign Language regarding the use of L1 in the L2 classroom

Ander, Johan

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## 1. Introduction

Working as a foreign language teacher one is faced with many different methods in teaching approaches and we must evaluate ourselves and the methods we have decided to apply in our everyday practical work. One such debate regarding foreign language teaching is whether or not to use a strict monolingual approach where the teacher will use only the target language (L2) during classes from day one. In it's extreme form it would also include the

students when the foreign language teacher enforces an L2-only policy for discussions, questions, explanations and testing. This has traditionally been the dominating method for the past century and is still endorsed by many language teachers. (Schweers, 1999) (Brooks-Lewis, 2009) (Ford, 2009) (Kim, 2009) (Roberts Auerbach, 1993)

However a lot of research conducted in the latest decades have suggested that perhaps the bilingual approach is a more effective method of teaching foreign languages. (Cook, 1999) (Weschler, 1997) (Roberts Auerbach, 1993) (Miles, 2004) The bilingual approach recognizes the usefulness of allowing a limited use of the students' first language (L1) during L2-classes for example for clarification, comprehension checks and creating a better understanding and relationship between the teacher and students. (Schweers, 1999) (Meyer, 2008)

Related research has primarily been focusing on the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) and this paper aims to apply the available research on a new setting, namely the case of Swedish language teaching in Korea. It is of course important to remember that English teaching and Swedish teaching are different perhaps mostly so because in the case of English many students do possess a certain degree of prior knowledge while practically all students who start learning Swedish in Korea start from scratch. However this of course does not apply to the higher levels included in this survey.

The Swedish language is taught at only one location in Korea which is the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul where the author of this paper has been working since 2009 as the currently only native Swedish language teacher in the country. As such I have a unique position to apply this research on the Korean students of the Swedish language. In my role as a native Swedish teacher I have come across this particular question and thus gained interest in how I could improve my teaching with regards to language use. How much Korean (L1) vs. Swedish (L2) should I use in class for the optimal learning, understanding and communication for the students?

## 2. Aim and research questions

The purpose of this paper is to apply related research in the field of foreign language teaching related to the bilingual L2-classroom approach on the case of Swedish language teaching in Korea at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Previous research have suggested that the bilingual approach would be a more effective and favorable method than the traditionally upheld monolingual approach. (Cianflone, 2009) (Meyer, 2008) (Miles, 2004) (Schweers, 1999) (Pica, 1994) (Brooks-Lewis, 2009) (Weschler, 1997) (Cook, 1999) (Roberts Auerbach, 1993) (Kang, 2008) (Nation, 2003) (Scott et al, 2008) (Ford, 2009) (von Dietze, 2007) (Forman, 2005) This is also something that I have found during my practical work. When I first started teaching Swedish I adopted a close to monolingual approach with an almost exclusive use of the L2 in the classroom. Soon enough I was forced to revise this approach when I noticed that most of my students had difficulties to follow my classes and common misunderstandings led me to start using Korean, the L1, to explain again and/or check for comprehension. The aim of this paper is to find out what the attitudes are among the Korean students of the Swedish language and if the results of previous research conducted mainly in the sphere of English language teaching is applicable in this case. The main research questions are thus:

1. What are the attitudes toward the use of Korean (L1) in the Swedish (L2) language classroom among students at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies?
2. How does the result of the above question compare to previous research?
3. What practical implications can we draw from the results of this study?

### **3. Method**

The method used to answer the first question as stated above will be by using a questionnaire among the students of the Swedish language at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. The questions chosen were based on a questionnaire that was originally used in a study by Prodromou (2000) and has since frequently been used in similar studies. By using an established form of questionnaire it will allow this study to be easily compared with related research on other case studies.

The students are asked to answer in which situations they think the use of Korean is appropriate in the Swedish language classroom. To further facilitate comparisons their answers will be presented separately according to their language proficiency level, i.e. Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced. In this case the Beginner category refers to first year students, Intermediate to second year students and Advanced to third year students.

### **4. Discourse**

A number of similar studies have previously been carried out in different cases. One was a study among Greek students (of which the questionnaire for this study was based) where the students expressed strong support for the teacher's knowledge in their L1 but that it should only be used in limited situations in the L2 classroom. (Prodromou, 2000)

Studies in Japan have found that Japanese students strongly supported both the knowledge and use by the teacher of their L1 while most of the native teachers on the other hand were reluctant to L1 use and mostly employed a strict L2-only policy in the classroom. (Ford, 2009) It has also been suggested in other studies that many teachers actually don't know exactly how much

they do use L1 and that students' preference for L1 use by the teacher is related to their proficiency level. (Edstrom, 2009) (Miles, 2004)

A study in Korea found that native English teachers generally preferred the L2-only policy while Korean English teachers on the other hand tended to use L1 too much in the classroom. However the students were positive to the use of L1 and particularly weaker students thought they became more dependent on stronger students when they couldn't understand and communicate well with the teacher. (Kim, 2009) In Korean primary schools the L2-only approach is most often recommended for English classes but in reality studies have shown that this is not always followed by the teachers. (Kang, 2008)

Other studies have shown that not allowing the use of L1 among students may inhibit collaborative interaction at the same time as it's important to keep a balance as to not overuse the L1 at the expense of L2-input. (Scott, 2008)

A study was carried out among Spanish speaking learners of English in the United States that showed a strong support for the use of Spanish in the classes since the students thought it was helpful for better understanding and being more comfortable in the classroom. (Schweers, 1999)

Among the studies I have found only one stands out in that the students, even though a clear majority favored an L2-teacher who could speak their L1, did not show a strong support for the use of L1 in the L2-classroom. This study was among Iranian students of the English language. (Nazary, 2008)

## **5. Data**

The survey was carried out in April and May 2013 among the students of the Department of Scandinavian Languages at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul. A total of 81 students, all of them majoring in Swedish, answered the questionnaire of which 40 students were at the Beginner level,

29 Intermediate and 12 Advanced. The questions asked and their answers are as follows. The numbers represent the amount of students who answered favorably to the questions (i.e. in support of Korean (L1) use).

Questions	Beginner n: 40	Intermediate n: 29	Advanced n: 12	Total n: 81
1. Do you prefer if the native Swedish teacher can speak Korean?	38 (95,0%)	29 (100%)	12 (100%)	79 (97,5%)
2. Do you think the teacher should use Korean in class?	35 (87,5%)	25 (86,2%)	7 (58,3%)	67 (82,7%)
3. Do you think the students should use Korean in class?	28 (70,0%)	18 (62,0%)	2 (16,6%)	48 (59,2%)
4. In what situations do you think Korean should be used in class?				
a. To explain new vocabulary	34 (85,0%)	23 (79,3%)	9 (75,0%)	66 (81,4%)
b. To explain grammar	37 (92,5%)	26 (89,6%)	9 (75,0%)	72 (88,8%)
c. To explain differences between Swedish and Korean	37 (92,5%)	27 (93,1%)	10 (83,3%)	74 (91,3%)
d. When the teacher gives instructions	27 (67,5%)	14 (48,2%)	2 (16,6%)	43 (53,0%)
e. When students talk in pairs or groups	8 (20,0%)	6 (20,6%)	0 (0,0%)	14 (17,2%)
f. To ask the teacher questions	36 (90,0%)	21 (72,4%)	4 (33,3%)	61 (75,3%)
g. To translate Korean words to Swedish	28 (70,0%)	16 (55,1%)	7 (58,3%)	51 (62,9%)
h. To translate a Swedish text to	39 (97,5%)	27 (93,1%)	12 (100%)	78 (96,2%)

Korean				
i. In exams, for example translation tasks in tests	35 (87,5%)	21 (72,4%)	5 (41,6%)	61 (75,3%)
j. To check for comprehension	33 (82,5%)	22 (75,8%)	8 (66,6%)	63 (77,7%)

Looking at the table above we can see that for the most part a clear majority of the students did support the use of Korean in the Swedish language classroom. Almost all of the students preferred a native Swedish teacher who is bilingual and knows Korean and a clear majority also thought the teacher should use Korean in class while only a slight majority thought that the students themselves should use Korean in class.

For the first questions we can not see any significant difference between students of different levels while the support for the teacher's use of Korean is much lower among the Advanced students and drops to very low support of student use of Korean compared with the Beginner and Intermediate students.

A majority of the students were in favor of using Korean for all of the classroom situations mentioned above with the exception of when students talk in pairs or groups. And except for teacher instructions the support for Korean use in these situations was in very high numbers.

The Advanced students stand out in being less supportive of Korean use in most situations with only a minority supportive of Korean use for teacher instructions, asking the teacher questions and the use of Korean in exams. In addition none of the Advanced students thought they should use Korean when talking in pairs or groups.

## 6. Results and conclusions

Going back to the initial research questions we can see above what the attitudes toward the use of L1 in the L2 classroom among the Korean students of the Swedish language are. The results of the questionnaire suggests that indeed there is a clear support for the use of L1 and specifically by the teacher who almost all of the students thought should have knowledge in their L1. Research have suggested that an L2 teacher who can speak the students' L1 can create a less stressful and relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and foster a more communicative relationship and mutual understanding between teacher and students. (Forman, 2005) (von Dietze, 2007) Furthermore it has been argued that a teacher who him or herself has studied the students' L1 has a much better understanding for the difficulties faced by the students and why they make the mistakes that they do. (Roberts Auerbach, 1993) (Cook, 1999) Indeed it makes sense that it will become easier to be a teacher if you first have been a learner. Perhaps this can be a possible explanation for the students overwhelming support for a native teacher knowledgeable in Korean. Of course one must not forget that student support for using the L1 does not automatically mean that it is a good idea. As mentioned there is a possibility that overuse of the L1 can create a too comfortable situation for students where they thus become more dependent on the teacher and always rely on the ability to ask and be helped in their L1 instead of making the effort required to use the L2.

The results of the questionnaire further suggests that the use of L1 is warranted but should be adjusted to specific situations in the classroom. There needs to be a balance of L1 and L2 use with the goal of maximizing the L2-input at the same time as not wasting too much time explaining grammar, differences between the L1 and L2 and such that is more efficiently explained by using L1 to ensure that all of the students understand. This will in turn save time for qualitative practice of the L2 without unnecessary

misunderstandings. The answers given above by the students can be used as a basis for the teacher on when to consider using L1 and when to avoid it. Since I teach mainly conversation classes it is of vital importance that the students do get a maximum amount of L2 practice and when practicing dialogues or having role play in class I am still enforcing a strict L2-only policy, but before we start I make sure that everyone has clearly understood the exercise by letting the students have a chance to ask me in Korean if they have any questions and I might explain the task again in Korean if there still remains confusion or misunderstandings. I have personally found this approach useful and most effective and as it seems, so do the students.

The questionnaire also suggests that the amount of L1 to be used in the classroom should follow the proficiency level of the students with a more extensive use for the lower levels and successively decreasing the use of L1 in favor of the L2 as the students become more advanced. It seems natural that students that have acquired an above basic level is more in need of time dedicated to L2-input than students in the process of learning a new language from scratch. This requires flexibility on the part of the teacher. Also as previous research has suggested this study shows that the ability to speak and understand the students' L1 perhaps should be a more important factor to consider for native language teachers. As such we can conclude that the L1 can be given a lot more space for the beginner level and much less so for the advanced level students.

Exactly to what percentages the L1 could be used in each level is of course difficult to assess perhaps we need to conduct more in depth research to find a more detailed scale that could be useful for language teachers. Even though I am convinced that the L1 does have a role in the L2 classroom it is probably wise to at least make sure that the L2 is the main language used more than half the class time, especially with regards to conversation and pronunciation classes. Perhaps the L1 can be of even higher importance to be

used in classes dealing with grammar and writing since those disciplines generally require more explanation and specific understanding. In the end it will be a practical issue to be solved by every individual teacher bearing in mind the needs and wishes of the students as well as the teacher's personal experience regarding the efficiency of his or her teachings. The results of this survey merely serves an indicator to when and how much the L1 should be allowed in the L2 classroom.

Another interesting aspect that this paper fails to investigate is the use of English (L3) in the L2 classroom. Many native teachers of foreign languages who are not knowledgeable in their students' L1 replace that with an L3, which most often is English. Further research can go in to more detail on the differences in student attitudes as well as efficiency in using an L3 that is more familiar than the L2 for the students instead of the L1. If the teacher is more proficient in English, for example, it might be more beneficial to use that than an insufficient Korean. A factor to consider here is also the proximity of languages where English and Swedish are closely related and therefore more easily compared than for example Korean and Swedish. Though, for this to be truly efficient it is needed that the students have a high level of proficiency in the L3. This study however leaves that question be as a suggestion for future research.

This study has more or less confirmed and reinforced previous and recent research on this topic and at the same time expanded the field by including Swedish language education while most of these studies are based on English as a foreign language (EFL).

There are of course a few more shortcomings of the study. The number of students surveyed is limited mainly by the fact that there are not many students of the Swedish language in Korea. However it could be interesting to expand the focus group for this research and include students of several foreign languages in order to make more broad generalizations. For a larger

study of this sort the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies could be an ideal place to start since it is a university focusing specifically on foreign language education. For such a future study it would also be possible to include teachers and perhaps see how many native teachers do possess knowledge of their students' L1 and how many of them that do use it in the classroom and, if so, how. It would also be possible to compare if the students' attitudes alter according to their own teacher's policy regarding L1 use. For this study the teacher perspective was completely omitted mainly because of a very small selection being available.

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<국문요약>

## L2 교실에서 L1을 사용할 때 스웨덴어를 전공하는 한국인 대학생들의 생각

안 요 한

외국어를 가르칠 때는 어떠한 방법이 가장 효과적인 것에 대한 다양한 토론이 있다. 그 중에 가르치면서 학생들의 모국어(L1) 함께 사용할 것인가 배우는 언어만(L2) 사용할 것인가에 있다.

일반적으로 외국어를 가르칠 때에는 학생들에게 L2만 사용해왔다. 하지만 최근 연구에 의하면 선생님들이 L1도 함께 사용해주면 학생들에게 더 효과가 있다고 한다.

본 논문은 스웨덴어를 공부하는 한국인 대학생들이 어떠한 생각을 하는지에 대해 알아본 것이다. 학생 81명에서 설문조사를 하고 수준 별로 초급, 중급, 고급으로 나누었다.

그 결과 거의 모든 학생들의 생각은 선생님이 한국어를 할 줄 안다면 스웨덴어를 배우는데 있어 더 쉽게 이해할 수 있다고 생각했다. 초급학생들은 고급학생들보다 선생님이 수업할 때 한국어를 더 많이 사용해주길 원하고 찬성했다. 왜냐하면 초급 학생들에게는 새로운 언어를 만나면 추가설명이 많이 필요하다고 생각하고 고급학생들은 스웨덴어를 많이 연습하는 시간이 중요하다고 생각한다. 모든 레벨의 학생들은 대부분 스웨덴어를 배우는데 있어서 한국어를 조금씩은 사용해 주는 것을 원했다. 그렇기 때문에 외국어를 가르치는 선생님들은 L2만이 아닌 L1도 가끔씩 사용하는 것이 학생들에게 도움을 주는 방법인 것 같다.

**Key Words: Swedish as a Foreign Language, L1/L2 use, Teaching Swedish.**

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성명: Ander, Johan

소속: Assistant Professor, Department of Scandinavian Languages Hankuk University  
of Foreign Studies 107 Imun-ro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 130-791, Korea

전화번호: +82-10-6501-6625

E-mail: ander.johan@hotmail.com

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