

OVERUSING MOTHER TONGUE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This article focuses on the students' use of the mother tongue as well as the teachers' use of the mother tongue during the English classes. A number of dimensions are addressed: students' perspective on mother tongue use, teachers' perspective on mother tongue use, strategies for encouraging use of the target language and relevant implications for teaching methodology. The reliance on similarities between the language being learnt and the mother tongue can be both a help and a hindrance, and will often lead to correct 'guesses'. It can help the learner to get things right. I want to concentrate in this paper on providing solutions which have to overcome the overuse of the mother tongue. The conclusion calls for a balanced and flexible view of student use of the mother tongue.

Keywords: *mother tongue, communication, target language.*

1. INTRODUCTION

For many years, teaching English crosslingually, *i.e.* using the students' mother tongue (in monolingual classes) as a learning aid, was discredited in favour of an "English through English" (intralingual approach). However, there seems to have been a recent swing of the pendulum towards a more flexible proposal which still admits that the more English is used in the classroom, the better but considers L1 as an important teaching/learning tool. A good example of this is Mario Rinvoluceri who used to be an advocate of the Direct Method, but now thinks that the students' mother tongue has an important role to play in foreign language instruction. Thus, the foreign language teaching field is dynamic and the mother tongue can be a useful instrument in the communicative foreign language classroom. For instance, where English grammar is posing a conceptual difficulty, an illustration of a mother tongue equivalent can be helpful. Take the ways in which English uses present tense simple, for example. Linking examples of each use of the present tense with

the mother tongue equivalent can help learners understand how English works. If the use of the mother tongue proves to be helpful in the class then both the teacher and the students will benefit from this. However, the mother tongue should be used only in certain situations. It is a good idea to agree a policy on its use together with the students at the beginning of the school year and decide when and why mother tongue will be used and by whom.

When confronted with something new, whether it is a different kind of music, or just new information, it is a natural instinct to look for similarities with things that are familiar, to try and draw some comparison with what we already know. Consciously or unconsciously, we bring what we know to what we do not, making it impossible to learn anything entirely from scratch. This is certainly no less true when we set about learning a foreign language. In many cases teachers' explanations are in the students' mother tongue, a bilingual dictionary is consulted in the early stages, and even in the classroom using the most direct language-teaching methods, the learner will still, of necessity, conduct an internal dialogue or rationalisation in his native tongue. It is not possible to learn a foreign language without relying to some extent on your mother tongue, and the impulse to look for similarities and to draw conclusions based on them is as strong here as in any other learning context. This impulse will be stronger with the greater the incidence of apparent similarities. And the apparent similarities that exist between many of the languages of the world are innumerable. They are also in the eye of the beholder, since our individual perceptions of similarity are as individual as we are. In this respect, the overuse of the L1 in the L2 classroom might be prejudicial for the students' learning process.

There are, of course, many other influences at play when we learn a foreign language, but the influence that the mother tongue has on the language we produce when we use a foreign language has become a very important area of study for people interested in second language acquisition, language teaching, ELT publishing, and language in general and is usually referred to as 'Language Interference', 'Transfer', or 'Cross-linguistic influence'. It is suggested that the language produced by foreign learners is so unavoidably influenced, and even distorted, by the mother tongue of the learner that it should rather be termed an 'Interlanguage' since it will always be a blend of the foreign language and the mother tongue. The better the learner is at overcoming language interference, the more dilute that blend will be.

It is important for teachers to understand the errors their students make and to target their lessons to each student's individual needs. For the persons who come into contact with non-native speakers of English, whether in the course of business or simply when travelling, awareness of the kinds of mistakes that learners make and why they make them will help towards mutual understanding.

A glance at the long and complex development of the English language as we know it today and at the many linguistic and cultural incursions made into it over the centuries, coupled with its apparent eagerness to welcome words from other languages into its lexicon, goes some way towards explaining the vast number of traps awaiting the English learner. And when we consider the variety of different learners with different mother tongues, together with the variety of other forces at work in the language learning process, the task of defining, let alone analyzing, learner's interlanguage becomes a huge challenge.

2. APPROACHES TO THE USE OF L1 IN L2 CONTEXT. THE MONOLINGUAL APPROACH

It has been argued that learners acquire foreign languages following basically the same path they acquire their mother tongue. According to him, the use of the mother tongue in the learning

process should be minimized. In fact a lot of teachers believe that the L1 use in EFL classes must be discouraged because of many reasons:

- Use of L1 may become a habit that both learners and teachers may resort to whenever a difficulty is encountered.
- L1 may be sometimes misleading when learning the target language. In spite of the existence of universal governing language systems, languages differ more or less.
- When using L1 to teach EFL students, errors may emerge due to the L1 transfer. Examples of errors range from vocabulary to grammar. French learners for example may be misled by the similarity between the French word "actuellement" and the English word "actually". In spite of the similarity, the meaning of these vocabulary items differ. The French "actuellement" means "now" or "at the moment" while "actually" in English means "really". The Arab learners may also encounter difficulties related to the syntactic structures of sentences. In Arabic, the sentence structure is V-S-O while English sentences are built following the S-V-O structure.
- The use of L1 in EFL classes hinders the provision of enough comprehensible input, a prerequisite for acquiring any language.

The support for the monolingual approach to teaching can be summarized as follows:

1. The learning of an L2 should model the learning of an L1 (through maximizing the exposure to L2).
2. Successful learning involves the separation and distinction of L1 and L2.
3. Students should be shown the importance of the L2 through its continual use.

However, the monolingual approach is not without its criticisms. One of them is that exposure to language leads to learning; excluding students' L1 for the sake of maximizing students' exposure to L2 is not necessarily productive. In addition, Auerbach criticizes these tough exposures to the target language by calling them "all-or-nothing views", and adds: "acquiring a second language is to some extent contingent on the societally determined value attributed to the L1, which can be either reinforced or challenged inside the classroom" [1].

3. THE BILINGUAL APPROACH

The monolingual approach has been criticised by many teachers who find that the use of L1 in EFL classes is beneficial at various levels. EFL teachers working with monolingual students at lower levels of English proficiency find prohibition of the mother tongue to be practically impossible. So instead of looking at the students' native language and cultural background as inferior or a source of errors, they must be used as a tool to maximize foreign language learning. The mother tongue represents a powerful resource that can be used in a number of ways to enhance learning but it must always be used in a principled way. Sheelagh Deller and Mario Rinvolucri's book [2] *Using the Mother Tongue*, which provides practical L1 activities, shows that judicious use of L1 can maximize language learning.

The evidence suggests that some EFL teachers strongly believe that they should never use even a single word from the mother tongue in the classroom. These teachers are followers of the so-called 'Monolingual Approach', and others who are somehow skeptical about the use of L1 or use it wisely in their classes are the proponents of the 'Bilingual approach'. In addition to these two approaches, Nation [3] introduces another approach called a 'Balanced Approach'. He believes teachers need to show respect for learners' L1 and need to avoid doing things that make L1 seem inferior to English.

During its history, the bilingual approach gained support and validation from many scholars and research findings. Auerbach believes that "when the native language is used, practitioners, researchers, and learners consistently report positive results" [1]. In fact there has been a gradual move over the years away from the "English only" dogma that has long been a part of the British and American ELT movement.

4. JUDICIOUS USE OF L1 IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Using L1 is not the problem. The problem is when and how to use it. Before answering this question, it should be borne in mind that L1 use

must be considered "as a means to an end". The target language must be used where possible and L1 when necessary. Here are some examples of appropriate use of L1 in EFL classes.

- **Beginners**

The mother tongue can be probably more beneficial to beginners. As they progress in their learning the target language will take the lead.

- **L1 can be time-saving.**

Instead of going through long explanations in the target language, it is sometimes easier and more efficient to give a translation of a vocabulary item or an explanation of a grammar point. Imagine a teacher who wants to teach the word "car" to French students and starts by phrasing the explanation as follows "a car is a road vehicle with an engine, four wheels, and seats for a small number of people" while a simple translation of the word (or perhaps the use of visual aids) would be enough.

- **Comparison**

A comparison of English and the mother tongue can be a very enriching experience. In fact, discovering the similarities and differences of both languages can enhance acquisition. This comparison can be done at different levels:

- Vocabulary

- Exploring the nuances of vocabulary items in both languages
- Building bilingual (or even multilingual) semantic maps

- Grammar

- A comparison between L1 grammar and L2 grammar yields interesting results.
- This comparison will highlight the differences between the two languages. Teachers and learners may build on these differences to avoid negative transfer.
- The comparison also shows the similarities which will undoubtedly boost the internalization of L2 grammar.

- **Culture**

Language is a vehicle for cultural aspects. If teachers ban the use of the mother tongue, this underlies an ideological conception of L1

culture as being inferior. Alternatively, cultural differences and similarities can be highlighted to help learners accept and tolerate differences while at the same time preserve their cultural uniqueness. This can be done through various activities where L1 plays an important role.

- Proverbs

Students may be given a set of proverbs in the target language and be asked to find the corresponding ones in their mother tongue if they exist. If not they try to translate the proverbs into their language.

- Idiomatic Expressions

Again, finding the corresponding idioms or a translation of target language idioms might be very helpful to detect cultural differences or similarities

- Songs

The translation of lyrics from the students' favourite songs can be a pleasant experience.

- Jokes

Funny EFL activities can be built on jokes. Students may translate and tell or act jokes to create an environment where there is no stress.

- **Classroom management**

Management of conduct and discipline is sometimes hard to be done in the target language. For instance, if a serious problem emerges in the classroom, will the teacher really insist on an English-only policy when coping with it?

- **Grammar**

L1 can be of great help when teaching grammar. Translation exercises for example may be the perfect practice when there is a grammar point that is causing trouble to students.

- **Instructions**

Many failures in tests are due to learners lack of understanding of instructions. L1 can be used to redress this issue, helping students to understand what is exactly asked from them.

- **Rationale**

Students need to understand the rationale behind activities or methods. They should

understand what lies behind the methods the teacher is using. This can only be done at this level through their native language.

- **Errors**

The discussion of some recurring errors can be a helpful activity for the students. It is true that a lot of errors are caused by L1 transfer. French students, for example, say "I'm agree" instead of "I agree" which is an error due to L1 transfer (in French "Je suis d'accord".) A discussion in L1 of such errors will help students overcome these problems.

5. ROLE OF L1 IN TEACHING METHODOLOGY

EFL teachers manage the process of language instruction in their classrooms by exploring the students' L1. Here, the aim is to first categorize different language teaching methods and then discuss the role and the use of L1 in each of them briefly. A common classification of methods is: traditional, alternative and current communicative methods. In the field of English language teaching the traditional methods of teaching a language are: Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, and Audiolingual method. Examples of alternative methods are: Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, and Community Language Learning. Furthermore, communicative approaches are Communicative Language Teaching and Natural Approach. The grammar translation method known as "GTM" is the method in which nearly all phases of the lesson employ the use of students' L1 and translation techniques. As Celce-Murcia [4] believes, in GTM there is little use of the target language and instruction is given in the native language of the students. In addition, the process of evaluation occurs when students can translate the readings to the first language and if they knew enough to translate especially selected and prepared exercises from the first to the second language [5]. Applying translation was excessive when GTM was a common method in teaching English. A sudden and immediate removal of L1 from the classroom happened at the time of 'Reform Movement', when reformers believed that translation should be avoided,

although the native language could be used in order to explain new words or to check comprehension [6].

A haphazard use of the mother tongue may be an unwanted side-effect of monolingualism, often employed today by disaffected teachers [7]. A very concise description of L1 role in EFL context is presented by Larsen-Freeman [8]. She supports the role of the mother tongue in the classroom procedures and summarizes the role of L1 in various ELT methods:

- **Grammar Translation Method:** The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students' native language. The language that is used in the class is mostly the students' native language (p. 18).
- **Direct Method and Audiolingual Method:** The students' native language should not be used in the classroom because it is thought that it will interfere with the students' attempts to master the target language (p. 30 and 47).
- **Silent way:** The students' native language can, however, be used to give instructions when necessary, and to help a student improve his or her pronunciation. The native language is also used (at least at beginning levels of proficiency) during feedback sessions (p. 67).
- **Suggestopedia:** Native-language translation is used to make the meaning of the dialogue clear. The teacher also uses the native language in class when necessary. As the course proceeds, the teacher uses the native language less and less (p.83).
- **Community Language Learning:** Students' security is initially enhanced by using their native language. The purpose of L1 is to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Also, directions in class and sessions during which students express their feelings and are understood are conducted in their L1 (p.101-102).
- **Total Physical Response:** This method is usually introduced initially in the students' native language. After the introductory lesson, rarely would the native language be

used. Meaning is made clear through body movements (p. 115).

- **Communicative Language Teaching:** Judicious use of the students' native language is permitted in communicative language teaching (p. 132).

The students' native language has had a variety of functions nearly in all teaching methods except in Direct Method and Audiolingualism. Those methods had their theoretical underpinnings in 'structuralism' and assumed language learning to be a process of habit formation, without considering the students' affect, background knowledge and their linguistic abilities in L1.

6. SOLUTIONS OF OVERCOMING THE USAGE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Every language teacher at some point has felt guilty, puzzled and frustrated about their students' perceived overuse of their mother tongue in the classroom. In a monolingual context, that is to say where all students speak the same mother tongue (a classroom reality for the majority of language teachers), this perception can become quite a problem. The best way to deal with the problem (at least for some teachers) is to deny the students' use of the mother tongue and determine them to speak in English. There is nothing wrong with this strategy as far as it goes, but it rarely allows the teacher or the students a chance to understand why L1 was being used in the first place.

A more complete strategy however is to be proactive. This means that the teacher should actively control and influence how and when the mother tongue is used. He shouldn't waste time trying to eliminate the use of mother tongue completely from the classroom. Instead, he should concentrate on ways of exploiting and playing with L1. Decide when it might be beneficial to use L1 and why. The teacher should explain his choices to his students if he thinks that it would be helpful. If he can do this, his classes are likely to be more authentic in the sense that they reflect the natural interplay of L1 and L2 which is inherent in second language

acquisition. Here are some activities which involve the use of both L1 and L2 in EFL classes.

➤ 15 minute activities

Conversation Starters (pre-intermediate +)

Using mother tongue newspapers for conversation practice. Choose or get students to choose an article from today's newspaper and explain what it is about in English. Depending on the difficulty of the text this may generate vocabulary work as the students work on communicating key points of the text to the teacher. This is similar to (but usually more effective than) using pictures. The L1 text, like the picture is a fast way of stimulating ideas for conversation.

Dubbing (intermediate +)

Show students a clip of a popular mother tongue TV programme (e.g. a soap) and tell them they have been commissioned to dub it into English for BBC. With larger classes get students to work in teams. The best version gets the contract! The students can work on translating the script and taking on the roles of the actors and literally dubbing with TV sound off.

False friends word search / Crossword puzzle (intermediate +)

Prepare a series of sentences with a false friend in them. Write the sentence in English. Prepare a crossword puzzle with the correct words in English. Give the puzzle to the students and let them figure it out.

Shadow and a doubt (all levels)

Have the students rehearse a communicative activity (shadow) in mother tongue before attempting it in English and then afterwards compare. This can be a very effective way of challenging advanced learners, as it helps to raise specific awareness of the difference between their ability to express themselves in English and in the mother tongue (doubt).

➤ 10 minute activities

Sight translation (intermediate +)

Prepare a series of interesting quotations (for example, 10) on a piece of paper. Show them to the students one by one (using a videoprojector would work nicely, otherwise write them on the board or prepare a piece of paper that students look at little by little). Give the students

30 seconds to read it, then take it away. They must each individually write what they understood but in their own language. Compare translations afterwards.

Reverse translations (intermediate +)

Group A are given a short text in mother tongue to translate into English. Group B are given a similar length of text in English to translate into the mother tongue. Groups then give their translations to each other to be translated back into the original. Finally groups compare the originals with the translated version.

Interpreters (all levels)

This can be adapted to any oral pair work situation. The students work in groups of three (minimum). One person is the interviewer, and speaks only in English. The interviewee speaks only in L1. The interpreter works as a go-between, translating the interviewer's questions into L1 and the interviewee's answers back into English. *Variation:* Arrange a press conference, with several interviewers. The interviewee plays the role of a famous film star, politician etc. Teenagers especially like this activity and recognise the scenario from TV interviews with pop stars and sports personalities.

Restaurant role play (all levels)

Use a mother tongue menu so that natives have to explain the dishes to English speaking guests.

Translating pop songs (intermediate +)

The students translate the lyrics (or small sections of the lyrics) of their favourite songs into the mother tongue. Teenage magazines sometimes include songs with mother tongue translations so you can use these to do it the other way round as well.

➤ 5 minute activities

Broken telephone/Telegram (all levels)

Devise a sentence that might cause translation problems into the students' L1. Whisper it to the first student in English. The first student translates it into L1 and whispers it to the second student, who translates it back into English and whispers it to the third. Go round the class in the same way. At the end, compare the final English version with the original. *Variation:* Do the same exercise, but in writing.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The debate over the use of L1 in foreign language teaching hasn't been settled yet. On the one hand there are teachers who reject the use of L1 or fail to recognize any significant potential in it and on the other hand, there are those who massively overuse it. Both are abusing a resource of great importance. My view consists of using the target language as the medium of instruction when possible and switching to the mother tongue when it is really necessary. A rational and judicious use of L1 in EFL classes can only be advantageous. L1 use must be tuned up with effective target language teaching, taking into consideration the learners' mother tongue and cultural background and using them to the best of their interest.

Most important, we must remember that students' errors are a precious resource for the teacher, which inform him about the state of his pupils' interlanguage. This is why it is so important to avoid negative marking, where the student simply learns that if he makes an error he will lose points. The foreign language teacher should use the students' mother tongue only in certain situations, for example:

- When comparing English grammar with the mother tongue's grammar;

- Beginners will probably progress at a quicker pace if the use of the mother tongue is allowed in the classroom;
- Translation exercises may also be the perfect practice when there is a grammar point that is causing trouble to the students.

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