THE ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract. The article is dedicated to the study of various researchers' viewpoints on the importance of both using and avoiding L1 in English language classroom and explores the advantages of using mother tongue in ELT.

Keywords: target language, L1 interference, vocabulary in context, word-for-word translations, communicative technique, structural differences, limited corpus, interaction, language acquisition.

РОЛЬ РОДНОГО ЯЗЫКА НА УРОКАХ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

Аннотация. Статья посвящена изучению точек зрения различных исследователей на важность как использования, так и избегания L1 на уроках английского языка, а также исследует преимущества использования родного языка в ELT.

Ключевые слова: целевой язык, интерференция L1, лексика в контексте, дословный перевод, коммуникативная техника, структурные различия, ограниченный корпус, взаимодействие, овладение языком.

Many English language teachers go to great lengths to avoid the use of their students' mother tongue in the classroom. Nunan (1999: 158) describes a situation where an EFL teacher in China imposed fines on his students when they spoke Cantonese in the classroom. The effect, unsurprisingly, was that the students just fell silent. The teacher got his wish of no Cantonese, but ironically he did not get any English from his students either!

Harbord (1992: 350) contends that the "strategy of mother tongue avoidance" in ELT can be explained by the emergence of two major trends: • The growth of ELT as a casual career for young travelers visiting Europe, which necessitated the use of English only in the classroom. • The development of a "British-based teacher training movement", which aimed at providing guidance to English teachers working with multilingual classes.

Even with many teachers avoiding the students' L1, it can work its way into the English language classroom in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons. What follows is not an exhaustive list but is meant to highlight some of the major ways the students' L1 is represented in the language classroom. They have been divided into three broad categories: (1) providing L1 equivalents of English words and expressions; (2) using L1 to focus on language in use; (3) using L1 for classroom interaction.

Providing L1 equivalents of English words and expressions Atkinson (1987: 243) recommends techniques using L1 equivalents for "eliciting language" and "checking for comprehension". Eliciting language can be done by both teacher and student, often in the form of "How do you say _____ in English?" According to Atkinson (1987: 243), checking for comprehension using questions like "How do you say 'I've been waiting for 10 minutes' in Spanish?" is "often more foolproof and quicker than more 'inductive' checking techniques." But is quicker necessarily better? What implications does this have for SLA?

Using L1 equivalents alongside L2 words is also seen as a useful approach to memorizing new vocabulary (Carter 1987: 153). Although most teachers prefer to teach vocabulary in context, Seibert (1930/ 1945) (quoted in Carter 1987: 168) found that providing paired lists with

L1 equivalents was the superior approach. Of course many teachers would discount such a statement, claiming that vocabulary should not be learned out of context, especially with L1 pairings (Cook 1991, summarized in Willis 1997: 138). The L1 may also be used as cues for English pattern practice (Green 1970: 218). Such practice is reminiscent of the Audio Lingual Method, but some believe that its limited use may still have a place within a broader communicative approach (Willis 1990: 73). Pattern practice alone is not enough to acquire a language and using the students' L1 would likely be seen as an even less favorable technique by most English teachers.

Using L1 to focus on language in use Explaining grammar usage and meaning in the students' L1 goes far beyond the single word or short phrase translation into an extended explanation by the teacher. This is indicative of the grammar translation method and still a technique that many students, especially at the early levels, want and many teachers, especially non-native speakers, provide. This deductive approach to teaching grammar flies in the face of contemporary SLA research extolling inductive learning techniques.

Green (1970: 218) also described the translation of sentences as a way to exemplify specific grammar points and vocabulary. This technique, which is characteristic of the grammar translation method, is often criticized for ignoring context and meaning and encouraging word-for-word translations.

Titford (1983: 53) used a technique which he called "spoof translation" with his advanced students. He provided students with a glaringly erroneous translation in hopes that they would shift their focus away from the individual lexical items and look at the "clearly un-English" syntax. This type of activity can be seen as a consciousness raising experience, allowing students to discover what can and cannot work in English and warning students to be weary of word-for-word translations.

Going beyond the sentence-level translation, Atkinson (1987: 244) refers to the translation of longer passages as "presentation and reinforcement of language". He claims that when students translate from their mother tongue into English, they can focus on accuracy and notice the key structural differences between the two texts. Atkinson (1987: 244) suggests that this kind of activity is best suited for early levels and asserts that, although it is not communicative on its own, it can be used to complement fluency activities.

Titford (1983), Baynham (1983), Edge (1986), Tudor (1987), Heltai (1989) and Eadie (1999), all propose the use of "back translation". Back translation goes beyond grammatical analysis and typically involves pairs of students translating two different authentic English texts into their mother tongue, switching texts and translating 'back' to English, then comparing the originals. The comparisons and analyses lead to further discussion about what "works" in English. These specific studies will be reviewed in depth in the section entitled 'translation as a communicative technique'.

Using L1 for classroom interaction Atkinson (1987: 243) suggests that "at very low levels" communicative activities can be quite troublesome to set up, so using the students' mother tongue to give instructions is warranted. However, utilizing the mother tongue in this way effectively removes a chance for real communication between the teacher and students, albeit using classroom specific communication. Harbord (1992: 353) also takes exception with Atkinson's point, calling it "counter-productive". Most teachers would agree that if the task is too complicated to explain then it's not worth doing, or at least an alternative introduction to the

task is needed. Harbord (1992: 353) recommends that teachers could possibly make an activity out of the instructions themselves!

Another use of the mother tongue involves learners communicating with one another about a task. This can take the form of comparing answers, explaining grammatical structures within the task (Atkinson 1987: 243) or as Eldridge (1996: 306) observed in his 10 classroom, using the mother tongue to comment, evaluate and discuss the task at hand. According to SLA research, this use of the L1 would eliminate the negotiation of meaning between classmates and would therefore offer very little to the learning process. Eldridge (1996: 305) noted another interesting use of the mother tongue in regards to "floor-holding". He hypothesizes that the "native code … may function as a kind of stopgap, while the (target code) is being retrieved." Of course, this may be unavoidable at early levels, but students should be made aware of the available communication strategies involving English "stopgaps", such as "Umm", "Let me see", or "Just a minute". Atkinson (1987: 244) suggests using the students' L1 to "discuss classroom methodology", especially at early levels. He reasons that students have a right to know what they are doing in the classroom and why they are doing it. This can be seen as particularly useful if the teacher wants to introduce some new communicative type activity involving pair or group work that is unfamiliar to the students (Willis 1997: 135). Many students have only ever been taught in a traditional teacher-fronted English language classroom, so there is a potential risk that they will not accept change easily without an explanation.

Advantages of using the mother tongue

As can be seen from the analysis on mother tongue use in the classroom, some instances are helpful to the learning process and may be accepted by most, while other uses are detrimental and should be avoided. The three main advantages often cited (Atkinson 1987) for using the students' L1 in the classroom are presented below.

Atkinson (1987: 242) agrees with Bolitho (1983) that permitting students to use their L1 brings a "valuable 'humanistic' element" into the language classroom, allowing students to express themselves clearly and effectively. The assumption here is that once students have expressed what they want to say in their L1 then the teacher can help them articulate 11 it in English. This may seem acceptable at first but we need to ask ourselves, how much learning is lost when students resort to their mother tongue to express themselves? Atkinson (1987: 245) goes on to seemingly contradict himself when he adds that "students need to be encouraged to develop communication strategies" and "need to be made aware of how much they in fact can do with the limited corpus of language they possess." So, should students struggle to communicate with their limited English or should they resign themselves to using their L1?

Harvard psychologist Roger Brown (1973) (cited in Richards and Rodgers 2001: 13) expressed his annoyance in watching a teacher try to explain new vocabulary through elaborate "verbal gymnastics" when in his opinion, "translation would have been a much more efficient technique." As the anecdote suggests, translation, or mother tongue use, is often encouraged as an efficient, time-saving technique; supported by many ELT professionals (Green 1970, Atkinson 1987, Tudor 1987).

Many instances of L1 use are associated with the need to save time, but as Harbord (1992: 355) points out, saving time is not an effective use of translation or the mother tongue in general. He quotes Duff (1989) in saying that:

The mother tongue should be used to provoke discussion and speculation, to develop clarity and flexibility of thinking, and to help us increase our own and our students' awareness of the inevitable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language that occurs during any type of language acquisition.

Thinking along these lines, the following section details six selected research studies which have attempted to incorporate the mother tongue into a more communicative approach.

Using the students' L1 in the classroom to save time or to make life easier for the students and/ or teachers is not an effective or beneficial technique for SLA. This does not however mean that the mother tongue has no place in the language classroom. The students bring with them a thorough understanding of their L1 which they will inevitably draw upon in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Using the students' L1 to raise students' awareness about the similarities and differences between the two languages and helping them to discover different ways to express themselves in the TL can be a powerful technique in the learning process; a technique that should not be discarded so quickly.

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