

A Research upon the Functioning of Mother Tongue in Learning and Teaching English: A Review

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Abstract – The use of mother tongue (L1) in foreign language classrooms is inevitable. In this paper, the functioning of it in various classes have been analyzed and discussed. We attempted to find out whether their mother tongue use changes according to different variables, for which functions they use it, whether they are aware of the amount and the functions, whether the instructors are satisfied with the amount of L1 they use, and whether their students are satisfied with it, and whether this satisfaction differs according to the amount used by their instructors.

The role of mother tongue in second language acquisition has been the subject of much debate and controversy. This paper reports on different views and methods in teaching English throughout the history and tries to find out what is the role of mother tongue in foreign language teaching. The practical part deals with a piece of research carried out in teaching environment using the audio and video recordings of teacher trainees and analyses teachers' usage of mother tongue in their own teaching. The paper suggests that a systematic use of target language and a minimal use of mother tongue in English language classroom may provide learners with explicit knowledge of the target language systems.

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INTRODUCTION

In the process of teaching a foreign language, the teacher's use of mother tongue can influence the learner's acquisition of the target language. Throughout the history of English language teaching and second language acquisition, the role of mother tongue has been an important issue. The various views are reflections on the methodological changes in English language teaching, which have in such way brought different perspectives on the role of mother tongue.

Generally, my own experience of first observing and then teaching English at a primary school proved overusage of Czech language in English lessons. What actually happened influenced the choice of theme for my paper. Generally, in lessons of English that I had a chance to observe, teachers used the mother tongue for all kinds of situations including giving instructions, doing translation or presenting foreign language structures.

This happened mainly because some of the teachers feel that the use of mother tongue has always an active and beneficial role to facilitate foreign language learning. However, contrary is the case as I will try to present in this paper. Moreover also my own

experience during the Clinical year practice confirmed my assumption of pupils' exposure to abundant mother tongue use in the classroom. After watching the first audio and video recording of my own teaching I realized that the mother tongue is used very often because of the temptation to facilitate the teacher's job but at the expense of pupils. This made me think about other reasons why the mother tongue was used and about ways how to reduce the abundant use of it.

The use of mother tongue (L1) has been an inevitable part of second or foreign language teaching in various contexts where both the teachers and the learners have the same mother tongue. Although it was strictly prohibited at different times according to different language teaching methods such as Direct Method and Audio-lingual Method, it is allowed in various methods and approaches such as Natural Approach, Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Learning, etc. Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that "the native language of the students is used in the classroom in order to enhance the security of the students, to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and to make the meanings of the target language words clear." Having various educational background, most teachers are uneasy about the use of mother tongue in the classes and cannot decide whether it is a good

idea to use it or not, or if it is going to be used, when, why and for what purposes.

In fact, the use of mother tongue may contribute to language learning process in various occasions in the learning-teaching process; however, the excessive use of it may result in too much dependence on it, which is less desired outcome. According to Tang (2002), moderate and judicious use of the mother tongue is helpful and can facilitate the learning and teaching of the target language. Schweers (1999) asserts that “starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English.” In various studies it has been reported that the use of L1 is used for different purposes in EFL or ESL classes: explaining the grammar, giving instructions, helping students/checking them, correcting the activities (Patel & Jain, 2008). Next, teachers use L1 for the purpose of motivating students, helping students cope with some problematic situations, explaining some grammatical patterns, explaining their ideas in writing composition or in oral work, and translating the reading passages. Moreover, using L1 helps maintain class discipline, build rapport and reduce social distance with students. According to Moghadam et al. (2012), teachers use code switching to check understanding, to clarify and to socialize. In addition, it is used to give the meaning of unknown vocabulary, which is found “economical and is a direct route to a word’s meaning. Atkinson (1987) focuses on time saving aspect of using L1 as well as the others; “a prompt ‘How do you say X in English?’ can often be less time consuming and can involve less potential ambiguity than other methods of eliciting such as visuals, mime, ‘creating a need’, etc.”.

However, the use of L1 should not be exaggerated because the more the students are exposed to the target language, the better they will learn it. Atkinson (1987) points out the danger of overuse of the mother tongue in language classes which will lead to the translation of most language items into L1. Nation (2003) warns that using the mother tongue in the classroom reduces the amount of input and the opportunity of practice. Furthermore, Cook (2001) points out the importance of modelling the target language and encouraging L2 use.

It is a fact that teachers may use the mother tongue in various situations for different purposes. Therefore, this study has attempted to discover all these issues by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. For this purpose we had some research questions as follows:

- How much mother tongue (L1) do the instructors use in the classes and in which situations, and are they aware of it?
- Is the instructors’ use of L1 affected by different variables?

- Level of class
- Content of the course (Writing, reading, core language, listening & speaking).
- Instructors’ educational background
- Instructors’ experience
- What are the beliefs of the instructors regarding the use of L1 in the foreign language classrooms?
- Are these beliefs and the applications in the classes consistent?
- Do these beliefs differ according to the instructor related variables?
 - Instructors’ experience.
 - Instructors’ educational background.
- Do these beliefs differ according to the content of the course?
- What are the beliefs of the students regarding the use of mother tongue in the foreign language classrooms?
 - Do these beliefs differ according to the target language levels of the students?
- Are the instructors satisfied with the amount of English they use in the classes, or do they want to use more or less than the present one?
- Are the students satisfied with the amount of English their instructors use in the class or do they expect their them to use more or less English than the present situation?

The issue of whether or not to use the mother-tongue (L1) in the English language (L2) classroom is complex. This article presents the results of a survey into student attitudes towards the use of L1 in class and some suggestions for using the L1 and its culture as a learning resource. As in any research field, terminology can often confuse the real issue. ‘Mother tongue’, ‘first language’ and ‘native language/tongue’, are essentially all the same though it is possible to argue that there are instances when they mean different things. Due to the specific nature of the subjects in this research experiment (all of them are Croatian) the aforementioned terms will be used interchangeably.

Majority of the students do not speak another language, and all consider Croatian as their first language native language and mother tongue. Proponents of an English only policy will collectively be known as the Monolingual Approach. Those advocating the use of L1 in the classroom will be known as the Bilingual Approach. The primary goal of this paper is to find evidence to support the theory that L1 can facilitate the learning of an L2, at least in this particular situation and to demonstrate that the use of L1 in the classroom does not hinder learning.

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 Rinvulcri 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 rationalization 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 nonnative 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.

THE ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN TEFL

Despite growing opposition to the English-only movement, its supporters remain steadfast in their determination to use English as the target language and the medium. There is some strong support for the Monolingual Approach to teaching in the literature and it could be summarized as follows:

1. The learning of an L2 should model the learning of an L1 (through maximum exposure to the 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

It is highly probable that the stigma of bilingualism in the ESL context originates from the zealous belief of the importance of English, and the disrespect shown towards other languages. English only has also come about through the blind acceptance of certain theories, which serve the interests of native speaking teachers (Weschler, 1997) However, there is now a belief by some that the use of L1 could be a positive resource for teachers and that considerable attention and research should be focused on it.

Professionals in second language acquisition have become increasingly aware of the role the mother tongue plays in the EFL classroom. Nunan and Lamb (1996), for example, contend that EFL teachers working with monolingual students at lower levels of English proficiency find prohibition of the mother tongue to be practically impossible. Dörnyei and Kormos (1998) find that the L1 is used by L2 learners as a communication strategy to compensate for deficiencies in the target language. Richard Miles (2004) advocates the view that much of the attempt to discredit the Monolingual Approach has focused on three points: it is impractical, native teachers are not necessarily the best teachers, and exposure alone is not sufficient for learning. He thinks that monolingual teaching can also create tension and a barrier between students and teachers, and there are many occasions when it is inappropriate or impossible. When something in a lesson is not being understood and is then clarified through the use of L1 that barrier and tension can be reduced or removed.

In his work Miles quotes Phillipson and his view that the Monolingual Approach supports the idea of the native teacher as being the ideal teacher. This is certainly not the case as being a native speaker does not necessarily mean that the teacher is more qualified or better at teaching.

Actually, non-native teachers are possibly better teachers as they themselves have gone through the process of learning an L2 (usually the L2 they are now

teaching), thereby acquiring for themselves, an insider's perspective on learning the language. By excluding these people and their knowledge from the learning process, we are wasting a valuable resource. In addition, the term 'native teacher' is problematic. There are many variations of English around the world and as to what constitutes an authentic native English speaker, is open to endless debate. Another problem with the Monolingual Approach is its belief that exposure to language leads to learning. Excluding the students' L1 for the sake of maximizing students' exposure to the L2 is not necessarily productive.

Obviously, the quantity of exposure is important, but other factors such as the quality of the text material, trained teachers, and sound methods of teaching are more important than the amount of exposure to English.

Humanistic views of teaching have speculated that students should be allowed to express themselves, and while they are still learning a language it is only natural that they will periodically slip back into their mother tongue, which is more comfortable for them. They will also naturally equate what they are learning with their L1 so trying to eliminate this process will only have negative consequences and impede learning.

The role of L1 in the TEFL classroom dramatically changes when you are working with people who all speak the same language. Not only will many of them have the same learning background and cultural experiences, but also you will find that they will make the same pronunciation errors and struggle with the same grammar challenges. This fact makes it easier to concentrate on several of their difficulties and do additional work in these areas without leaving other students out of the loop. In a situation like, this you may be able to save a great deal of time by translating a word or two. You may find yourself teaching a group of students at any level, whose previous English classes were given in L1. Here you may start out using L1 and gradually increase the use of English until your students have adjusted. In the very early stages of a beginner's class, you may find it useful to give instructions in the mother tongue or to discuss the effectiveness of a lesson or activity. In higher levels, you may still find using L1 to be a useful time saver in abstract vocabulary situation.

One of the main obstacles of having a monolingual group a teacher may face is shyness. Because they all speak the same language, they may be more self-conscious to speak to each other in English. Another problem is that they are likely to all make the same pronunciation mistakes, making it difficult for them to correct each other and possible for you to stop noticing their collective mistakes. Another challenge, especially with young learners, is to stop them from

chatting in their native tongue, when they should be practicing English.

USING THE MOTHER TONGUE JUDICIOUSLY

There is, of course, a need for caution in utilizing the MT in the EFL classroom. Atkinson (1987) acknowledges this by noting the potential for the following undesirable outcomes of overuse:

1. The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not 'really' understood any item of language until it has been translated.
2. The teacher and/or the students fail to observe the distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation.
3. Students speak to the teacher in the mother tongue as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean.
4. Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom it is essential that they use only English.

FUNCTIONING OF MOTHER TONGUE (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 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. 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.

A haphazard use of the mother tongue may be an unwanted side-effect of monolingualism, often employed today by disaffected teachers. A very concise description of L1 role in EFL context is presented by Larsen-Freeman. 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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.

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

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.

USE OF L1 IN L2 IMPACTS IN STUDENTS' LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

In general, regardless their ability about target language and how much time students dedicate in learning the target language, students need to practice different strategies which motivate them toward achieving the goal of learning. According to many researchers, Teachers' Code-Switching must necessarily be applied, but in a sufficient extent, in the right place and time, especially in cases students necessities.

Butzkamm summarizes the principles and advantages of using L1 as follows:

L1 use gives a sense of security and helps learners to be stress-free.

L1 is the greatest asset people bring to the task of FL learning.

A foreign language friendly atmosphere is best achieved through selective use of the L1.

The use of the L1 saves learners from a feeling of frustration they might have within their FL learning.

L1 techniques allow teachers to use a richer and more authentic text, which means more comprehensible input and faster acquisition, Butzkamm (2003). Learners do not appreciate Teachers' action by speaking only in target language, especially when they need to learn about the meaning of unfamiliar words, any grammar explanation and instructions for activities in the classroom. Therefore, the use of code-switching can be said to build a bridge from known to unknown and when used efficiently, can be considered as an important element in ESL/EFL teaching, Skiba (1997). When we speak about the connection of native language with target language, it may be suggested that a bridge from known (native language) to unknown (new foreign language content) is constructed in order to transfer the new content and meaning is made clear in this way as it is also

suggested by Cole: "a teacher can exploit students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of L2", Cole (1998).

CONCLUSION

It is a good idea for sure to use L2 most of the time; however, teachers should also know that they should not feel guilty while using L1 when it is really necessary and appropriate to do so. The situation might also be in the opposite way, that is, the teachers might be counting too much on L1, which provides less amount of target language input. In this study, we have found out that the instructors used L1 most for rapport building purposes, making the topic/meaning clear. Through this study, we hope that teachers will be able to see the circumstances in which the others use L1, and have better understanding regarding the role of L1 in their classes. This study may have an impact on teachers in terms of questioning their own L1 use, and being more aware of their own teaching. Teacher trainers may also make use of the present study while they are training the prospect teachers. They may explain that using the target language as much as possible should be the goal of every foreign language teacher, however, the use of the students' L1 might also be necessary from time to time, so it should not be a taboo for them. This study might create some awareness as to how much and for which functions some teachers feel the necessity of using L1 in their classes.

A further study that will look into the same dimensions with the present study may use longitudinal studies and a higher number of participants. Furthermore, the participants may be asked why exactly they used L1 in the situations directly after the recordings to find out the real reasons for it. Moreover, further study may look into the students' use of L1 in L2 classrooms, too. Finally, a further study might also look into the effects of the use of L1 on the success of the students.

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