

The Tale of Two Tales: The Use of L1 in L2 Teaching

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on the role of mother tongue in foreign language classroom. During the last fifty years it has been an active area of debate to whether activate the mother tongue in foreign language teaching or not. In this research, it is suggested that foreign language learning might be supported by the functional use of mother tongue instead of dismissing it a priori. This article also makes the point that brief episodes of switching to mother tongue can function as a learning aid to improve the communicative competence of the foreign language learner and would also meet their needs to use L1.

Key Words

Mother tongue, Foreign Language Teaching, Competence, Context, Function.

I. Introduction

The use of mother tongue in foreign language classrooms resulted from one of the most long standing controversies in the history of language pedagogy: the role of L1 on L2 teaching. This doesn't mean that the debate is over. This issue is still discussed in current applications of modern language teaching today. Though most of the language teachers are completely against the use of mother tongue in language classrooms, if considered carefully, there are many ways and benefits to activate mother tongue in foreign language teaching.

However, this does not and should never mean that the native language of the speaker should be an important component and/or source for the foreign language classes, but when used appropriately and related to the aims and the objectives of the course (the functional use of L1), there can be no doubt that it will be easier to meet the program requirements. As Mackey (1965:107) states, "The learning of one language in childhood is an inevitable process; the learning of second language is a special accomplishment." It may not be appropriate to base L2 learning on the linguistic knowledge of L1, but L1 consciously or unconsciously provides the guidelines in L2 learning.

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Mother tongue support can be considered as a teaching strategy in foreign language teaching. Three effective ways to activate this strategy in foreign language teaching are:

1. Current applications of Grammar Translation Method in language teaching.
2. Practice through translation from and Into L2.
3. Comparison between L1/L2 (language and culture).

In terms of a literature review it may be quite beneficial to start with the principles and classroom applications of the grammar translation method, because there can be no doubt that the first step of activating mother tongue in language classes is to consider the applications of the Grammar Translation Method.

II. Current Applications of Grammar Translation Method in Language Teaching

Grammar Translation Method, known as the Prussian Method is one of the oldest methods used in language teaching. This method was also named as the "Classical Method" in the past, because it was first used to teach the classical languages like, Latin and Greek. The first purpose of this method was to help the students read and admire foreign language literature by the help of their native tongue. This method aimed to make students familiar with their native language and thus help them to speak and write in their native language better by studying the grammar of the target language.

A traditional language classroom, in which Grammar Translation Method was used, starts with a literary text in the target language since the fundamental purpose of learning a language was to be able to read its literature. As can be understood, in the grammar translation method, comprehension of the text was quite important. On the other hand, about the first language influence on second language word reading Wooley (1999:447) states, “. . . an enhanced understanding of basic processes in L2 will contribute to the building of a model of L2 reading that can stand independent of assumptions based on L1 models.” This explanation can be accepted as the current status of grammar translation method in reading skills. Now, most of the linguists and language teachers believe that enabling use of grammar translation method in reading comprehension exercises will result in failure in L2 production. However, in grammar translation method, after reading the text, the students were asked to translate it from the target language into their native language. At this step, the formal (structural) application of the native tongue was more important than the functional interpretation of the translation. Here, the teacher paid great attention to the accuracy in language use rather than the spoken communication in language. As Krashen (1987:128) mentions,

It can be claimed that grammar translation provides scraps of comprehensible input. The model sentences are usually understandable, but the focus is entirely on the form, and not on meaning. . . . students are forced to read word by word, and consequently rarely focus completely on the message. The sentences used in the exercises may be comprehensible, but here again, as in the model sentences, they are designed to focus the students on form.

The above lines of Krashen obviously reflect the structural focus of Grammar translation method. Though it helps students improve comprehension in the target language, if not carefully directed by the language teacher, as stated before, the students face a high affective filter which overemphasises the foreign language process.

In this respect there is no need to get into the details of grammar translation method since it is one of the most experienced approaches in time. However, what is more important is to consider the developments after Grammar Translation Method. This method was widely used in language classrooms after its birth. It was used as a tool to practice language items in terms of translation from L2 to L1.

III. Practice Through Translation From and Into L2

When talking about translation, most people think of it as a means of communication or a process of transferring meanings from one language to another. On the other hand, translation is also accepted as an activity confined to those who have already achieved an advanced level of language proficiency. However, from the point of view of the language teachers, it is not only a means of communication but also a tool that can help students to understand and use the target language more clearly and accurately. About this issue Calderado (1998) states, "Developing such skills in translation, students will be an important contribution to their performance as future translators with the proficiency that shall ensure their walking up the steps of the quality ladder." According to Calderado, translation enables us to learn a large number of expressions, being able to identify style markers and to get to know more about the language structure to improve students' performance. It is accepted that during the last two decades, the Communicative Approach has come to play a dominant role in language teaching. Although, several methods have been developed, they all seem to be influenced by the principles of the communicative approach. Communicative approach gave importance to the communicative competence of the learner rather than his core linguistic knowledge. Though most of the books written to teach English as a foreign language are influenced by the communicative approach, they still have some sections on

translation for several purposes. The following lines from Cook (1991:3) summarise the function of these two methods in language acquisition. According to him,

Teaching methods usually incorporate a view of L2 learning, whether implicitly or explicitly. Grammar translation teaching emphasises explanations of grammatical points because this fits in with its view that L2 learning is the acquisition of conscious knowledge. Communicative teaching methods make the students to talk to each other because they see L2 learning as growing out of communication.

It is important to remind that the purpose of the use of translation in the foreign language classroom is not the major or a minor aim but a tool to improve and promote success in language classes by the help of L1. Thus, L1 is used to clarify meaning, to check the understanding in a text or listening conversation, to interpret and clarify the new vocabulary, and to narrow the culture gap by the help of translation. Translation also provides the opportunity for the foreign language learner to detect his mistakes in certain minor areas the use of his native language. About this issue Larson (1984:5) in his book *Meaning-based Translation* claims, "We are familiar with the kind of mistakes non-native speakers of a language make. If analysed, these errors almost always reflect the lexical and the grammatical forms of the person's mother tongue." Thus, translation both provides opportunities to detect the errors in the target language and also in the native language of the speaker. In this respect the teacher can give importance to the teaching of the problem areas in the learner's native tongue as well. Moreover, about the L1 transfer in L2 comprehension and L2 production Ringbom (1992:85) mentions,

Transfer is defined as the influence of L1 based elements and L1 based procedures in understanding and producing L2 text. . . . What should be emphasized is that transfer is at least as important in comprehension as it is in production . . . Transfer should be seen in relation to the different demands that the four language skills make on the learner."

Shortly, as an addition, Ringbom once more points out the importance of information transfer that the learner unconsciously enables from L1 to L2 and its prominence in target language production.

By activating the use of mother tongue in language classes when needed and appropriately, the students will not feel lost, introvert and disoriented. How? Several examples can be given, like:

- a. The translation of 'isolated' words or phrases, idiomatic expressions, cultural expressions from L2 to L1 in written or spoken texts.
- b. To avoid dull memorisation of new vocabulary in target language, dictionaries are used. Dictionaries can lead to insight into the meaning and the use of words and can be a great reference for students who study texts in the target language. Moreover, a proper and careful use of the dictionaries both for self-study and in the classroom is also a skill that the foreign language learner should acquire.
- c. Text translation from L2 into L1 is another widely used technique in language teaching at different proficiency levels. It provides opportunities for the learners to examine the discourse functions of the texts closely, to discuss the structural and the functional aspects in two languages, to clarify meaning, and to experience more about the lexical and the syntactic features of the target language.
- d. Enabling teacher controlled translation exercises in the foreign language classes guide learners for conscious translation. In other words, the controlled translation exercises disable the development of language habits, like the tendency to translate every structure before performing a verbal action. In this way, the students learn to what extent they should use translation in their language classes, to what extent it is beneficial for their language proficiency and when not.
- e. Translation is also widely used by the academic staff and students at the universities. Paraphrasing and summarising are just two of the examples and applications which the university instructors refer for their academic studies to avoid plagiarism. Summarising and paraphrasing are two of the current applications of translation used actively by foreign language learners for developing writing skills. About the positive effects of first language on second language writing Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992:185-6) state, "Given the demanding of second language composing processes, composition researches and teachers have begun to acknowledge the positive role of first language in second language writing. Second language writers have been observed to employ their first language to get 'a strong impression and association for essays' and produce essays 'of better quality in terms of ideas, organisation and details' and to 'meaningfully link image to work.'" In the lines above, Kobayashi and Rinnert state the dominant role of L1 knowledge in L2 writing. L1, in this respect should be accepted as an important reference and guider for success in L2 writing. Perhaps, summarising and paraphrasing are just the two current applications of this explanation in modern language classes today.

To be brief, the main objective in applying these techniques and activities to language classrooms is to give support to foreign language learners to gain insight and experience in the target language. In this way the students also develop their comprehension as well. By

doing so, the learners do not only achieve these goals but also find the opportunity to learn more about the philosophy of foreign language. Thus, the student starts with a comparative study of the cultural component underlying the philosophy of the target language he is learning.

IV. Comparison Between L1/L2 (Language and Culture)

When considered carefully, the nature of translation depends on the basic principles of contrastive linguistics. You consciously or unconsciously transfer data from the target language into your native tongue during translation. Thus, neither the language teacher nor the learner should consider language independently but in relation to other previously known languages. The learners of a foreign language generally face up with the difficulty of understanding cultural clues in the target language. As appreciated, more teacher guidance is required in this case. In other words, translation at this stage acts as a cultural operator. About the cultural mediator role of translation Hewson and Martin (1991:135) state,

. . . the translation operator can never be secure in this position, and if he acquires competence, this competence is partly an ability to reflect and question his own role as a mediator. This means that he must be aware not just of developing language cultures, of developing translation practises, but also the changes brought about in his competence as a result of repeated translation operations. This last point is vital . . . for the teaching of translation, and the career of the translator - for the learner, it is important to see translation as a dynamic process. . . .

As Hewson and Martin suggest, translation is an active mediator which helps us to understand the culture of the target language enabling the use of the mother tongue in the language classroom. Several techniques are applicable in this area. These techniques are specifically intended to encourage learners to relate L2 to L1 cultures in a related discourse. Hence, the students need to study the discourse functions within texts as well as between source and target texts. The following illustrate some of these techniques:

- a. Students read and listen to the text in the target language. The teacher clarifies the cultural points in the native language to avoid misunderstanding and to broaden students' educational perspectives. The class with the teacher's guidance compares and/or contrasts the sociolinguistic and cultural features in their country/home and in the target language. The comparative and contrastive study of culture specific semiotic signs and symbols provide external relevance and can be given as good examples that always work for this case.

- b. Related to the first factor, interaction patterns can also be enabled. The students can role play a greeting, introduction or a farewell dialogue in both languages to better understand the foreign culture. This both provides the opportunity to practice spoken languages and enables the learners to master basic differences between the everyday applications of the socio-cultural life in L1 & L2. In this respect, the learners practise and comprehend different socio-cultural patterns through a set of bodily kinaesthetic activities without a loud translation, but indirectly. In other words, as they participate in this activity they become more aware of whether the socio-cultural patterns of varying contexts in L2 show discrepancy or parallelism in L1.

It is possible to give some more examples. The use of mother tongue through translation enables a better understanding of several concepts in the target language such as; letters in business, application letters, condolence, political news and events, news on TV, documentaries, radio broadcasts, science and technological references, etc.

V. Conclusion

In this paper it is suggested that in the foreign language classroom as and when required, certain amount of time can be allocated for the use of mother tongue to enable students ask certain questions, to clarify and verify what the sophisticated concepts in which the students are stuck in the target language and are unable to move further, to practice certain skills, to remove uncertainties and to narrow the cultural gap between L1 and L2. In this case, it is likely that in the various stages of the foreign language learning process, the use of native language in the language classrooms may be more appropriate and beneficial if it is controlled and referred when and/or where necessary. It is still argued that the use of mother tongue in the classrooms leaves no independent reference system in the target language and prevents the learner to achieve and live the foreign language as it is. Moreover it is widely agreed that the foreign language education based on the use of mother tongue does not lead to an efficient foreign language competence. However, the learners of a foreign language satisfy their needs by turning back into L1 by activating their native language from time to time. In such cases, techniques, to use mother the tongue as a reference system are of great importance for the students. Comparative and contrastive studies, text analysis, discourse analysis, translations for structural and functional purposes, the use of dictionaries, lexical, syntactic and semiotic studies through translation provide important opportunities for the language learners to transfer their literacy skills from L1 to L2. As Mallikamas (1997) mentions, ". . . translation material is authentic and can be of great variety. . . . since all styles and registers of both spoken and written language are relevant to translation, the students

will be exposed to a wide range of language input, not just make-up sentences of the variety normally presented in language textbooks. The reality of the language will help increase both the students' competence and their productive abilities."

All in all, from the teacher's point of view the issue is more complicated. Teachers still have doubts about giving place to mother tongue in foreign language classrooms. There has been a hot debate on this issue since grammar translation method was begun to be used by language teachers in 1940s. Thus, it can be said that teachers should appropriately and carefully apply, control and limit this strategy in their language classes. Activation of L1 in the language classroom can not be accepted as a technique or a learning style or should not be considered as a language component of the L2 curriculum. It is a limited chance to declare the suppressed desire to use L1 or acts like a pack of drain cleaner which enables the flow running. They should never forget that the purpose is not to expect students do perfect translations but should be to achieve the goals and the objectives of the course by the help of the mother tongue through translation at the correct time, where appropriate and makes sense.

VI. Questions for Further Research

The influence of mother tongue on L2 acquisition and production can be explained from a very limited perspective with language skills and classroom activities. Therefore, the theory of second language acquisition should be carefully studied considering the following questions.

1. How do the learners acquire implicit knowledge of L2 as a result of L1 input in the classroom?
2. To what extent form-focused instruction in L1 contribute to the acquisition of implicit knowledge in L2?
3. What individual learner factors influence the L2 acquisition? Is the knowledge of L1 a source or a risk factor for L2 learning?
4. How do bilingual speakers make use of their languages a source for learning another language? In what ways do they differ from second language learners?

There can be no doubt that the answers to these questions will lead to a better understanding of the mother tongue influence in foreign language learning.

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