

The Role of the Mother Tongue and Translation in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Learning is a cumulative process that is shaped by past experiences. Language learning in particular puts in focus learners' level, age, and background. Thus, acquired habits from the mother tongue will be a point of departure which builds up new learned habits. So transfer from old to new situations is necessary in knowledge construction. It is then the aim of the current study to enquire the usefulness of transfer as a learning strategy in the mundane EFL practices. For instance, contrastive analysis assumed that the native language is the driving force of second language learning. Besides, several other views are provided as proofs on the germane role the native language and translation play in ELT courses. An emphasis on further research on the importance of the mother tongue in second language learning concludes the discussions in this article.

Keywords:

EFL - ELT - transfer - learning strategy - native language - translation.

استعمال اللغة الأم و دور الترجمة في تعليمية اللغة الانجليزية

الملخص

يعتبر التعليم عملية تراكمية لتجارب الماضي و تعليم اللغة على وجه خاص يسלט الضوء على سن المتعلم و مستواه التعليمي ومكتسباته القبلية على حد سواء. لهذا فان العادات المكتسبة من اللغة الأم تكون نقطة انطلاق لتعلم عادات جديدة. ضرورة تحويل الحالات القديمة إلى حالات جديدة في إطار البناء الفكري و اللغوي من الأمور البالغة الأهمية التي تجعل دراسة التحويل اللغوي كأداة لتعلم اللغات الأجنبية واللغة الانجليزية بالأخص هدف المقال الذي بين أيدينا. التحليل التقابلي على سبيل المثال يؤكد بان اللغة الأم محرك قوي في تعليمية اللغة الأجنبية، بالإضافة إلى إثباتات تطرحها الوثيقة لتأكيد الدور الفعال الذي تلعبه اللغة الأم و بالأخص العملية الترجمية في تعليمية اللغة الانجليزية، كذا و قد تطرقنا في نهاية المطاف إلى ضرورة البحث في هذا المجال لتسهيل العملية التعليمية التعلمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

تعليمية اللغة الأجنبية- التحويل- المهارة التعليمية- اللغة الأم - الترجمة

Le rôle de la langue maternelle et de la traduction dans les classes de l'apprentissage de l'Anglais langue étrangère

Résumé

L'apprentissage est un processus cumulatif façonné par les expériences passées. L'apprentissage des langues en particulier met l'accent sur le niveau, l'âge et les antécédents des apprenants. Ainsi, les habitudes acquises de la langue maternelle constitueront un point de départ qui construira de nouvelles habitudes apprises. Donc, le passage de l'ancienne à de nouvelles situations est nécessaire dans la construction du savoir. L'objectif de la présente étude est de déterminer l'utilité du transfert en tant que stratégie d'apprentissage dans les pratiques habituelles de l'EFL. Par exemple, l'analyse contrastive suppose que la langue maternelle est la force motrice de l'apprentissage d'une langue seconde. En outre, plusieurs autres points de vue sont fournis pour prouver le rôle apparent de la langue maternelle et de la traduction dans les cours d'ELT. L'accent mis sur la poursuite des recherches sur l'importance de la langue maternelle dans l'apprentissage de la langue seconde conclut les résultats de cet article.

Mots-clés:

EFL - ELT - transfert - stratégie d'apprentissage - langue maternelle - traduction

1. Introduction:

It goes without saying that the controversy of using the background knowledge and more particularly the mother tongue in learning another language dominates the field of language acquisition for decades. A debate thus sprung on a dividing line between opponents and exponents to the view. Many confess that a red card to the mother tongue must be shown claiming that it prevents learners from properly learning the language. To name but a few, the Audio-lingual method and the direct method occupy the top of the list. Yet and just as referring to Swan (1985) when he states that the student's mind is not a tabula rasa, supporters admittedly reckon that the role of the pre established habits is indispensable in EFL classes. Several studies have been conducted throughout the world to declare that the benefits of using L1 prevail over its disadvantages if used systematically. (AL-NOFAIE. H, 2010, JAN et al, 2014)

For a long time the field of language acquisition have encouraged the English-only approaches to foreign language teaching as the merely relevant method. In their classrooms teachers most often ban learners from using their shared language to avoid language interference and to ensure maximum exposure to the target language. The Communicative Language Teaching besides several other methods made L1 use a source of embarrassment to language learners. However, holding this view may evoke the idea of teacher centeredness while the current dogma calls for a total student's involvement in the course of knowledge construction i.e. student centeredness. Such pedagogy, thus, does not reveal the fact that in many countries such as Algeria where both teachers and students share the same language and cultural heritage that must intercede with the newly established habits in many ways requires the employment of the mother tongue to leverage and facilitate L2 teaching.

The Contrastive analysis hypothesis made the assumption that the native language is the theoretical foundation and pouring power for second language learning a universal acknowledgement. It is, therefore, assumed that the previously acquired practices and built up information would considerably stand as a point of departure in establishing new sets of habits. The use of L1 as the learners' preferred strategy calls for transfer and translation techniques to appear in the area. "In this sense the study of transfer" and translation "is coexistentive with the investigation of learning" (POSTMAN, 1971 cited in GASS: 109)

The current paper hopes to discuss the role of L1 and in particular translation and transfer in facilitating foreign language learning. Moreover, the fact that

the L1 is perceived as a curse that hinders communicative language learning lead the researcher to enquire the students' attitudes towards using their mother tongue Arabic in the course of learning English in high school and thereby to find out the extent to which such a statement is true.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

What are the students' expectations towards their English teachers?

What are the students' attitudes towards Arabic use in the EFL classroom?

To what extent do students think the use of Arabic is indispensable?

In what ways do they think that it is appropriate to use Arabic in their classrooms?

2. Against the mother tongue use in EFL classes

The current belief for language teaching in many countries necessitates a planned monolingual lesson. The L1 accordingly can be used only in emergency situations where pedagogical techniques for the mother tongue use in EFL classes are unfamiliar to teachers since the extolled direct method tenets call for its total rejection. Time and time again, the topic mother tongue brings out a feeling of guilt. Therefore, attempts to break the rules and legitimize its employment remain diffident. (Butzkamm, 2003).Habbord (1992) asserts that the real reason behind the avoidance of L1 use in English classes is mainly due to the spread of two major beliefs

1st The growth of ELT as a casual career for young travelers visiting Europe, which necessitated the use of English only in the classroom

2nd The development of a "British-based teacher training movement", which aimed at providing guidance to English teachers working with multilingual classes

The mother tongue role in the ELT, thereby, changed considerably based on the theories of the time being.

Stephen Krashen (1981), Chaudron (1988), and Ellis (1984) are thought to be the best opponents to the mother tongue use in EFL classrooms owing to the limited time available for students to study English. For instance, Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis is based on a belief that the foreign language input is indispensable in language learning and the more students are exposed to the target language the better learning occurs. Yet his view has been proven to be faulty and unfashionable. (Wharton 2007)

3. For mother tongue use in the classroom

All the praise that is heaped on the classical languages as an educational tool

is due in double measure to the mother tongue, which should more justly be called the ‘Mother of Languages’; every new language can only be established by comparison with it (Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, 1806 as cited in Butzkamm, 2003). The mother tongue sets the yardsticks to any other language learning as it provides a database to fostering the establishment of new habits and strategies.

Duff (1989 cited in, Wharton, 2007) contends that the role that the L1 plays can never be neglected in the field of foreign language acquisition in stating 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.

It is worth noting that Dodson’s (1967) presentation of a new bilingual method in his work *Language Teaching and the Bilingual Method* has broken every rule dominated the area. His method was based on a series of experiments showed a direct reaction against the ban of the L1. This method proved to be so superior to other monolingual techniques that it inspires many researchers. (Butzkamm, 2003)

Atkinson (1987 as cited in Harbord, 1992) provides three reasons for L1 use in ELT. First of all, the mother tongue is thought to be the learner’s preferred strategy especially for beginners and intermediate students. Translation and transfer are natural strategies and inevitable processes a student use to avoid some problems and therefore teachers should find systematic ways to employ them rather than struggling to keep them away. L1 is also perceived as a time saving technique when explaining certain aspects. Further, giving students chance to use their mother tongue is humanistic in that it helps them to express themselves clearly and fuel their motivation to learning while it allows them to involve in the process of language construction.

4. Discussion of the findings

a. Observation

Having attended several sessions in the school (Mehieddine Ben Mustapha El Rachidi), the researcher has observed that the teachers most of the time refuse using academic Arabic because they have a schedule to be respected and that they have to follow the inspector’s instructions especially with the pursued communicative method that requires target language exposure. But surprisingly

they use French to simplify some new words or to explain some grammatical aspects. Another point to be highlighted is that students are not skillful enough in French, the reason why they get lost in attaining handy learning strategies. One can admit that teachers tend to rely on French since it is closer to English and that it makes them more respected i.e. it creates a barrier between them and their students to well-manage their classes.

The methodology followed then calls for a total rejection of the mother tongue that is thought to prevent learning. The programme and the inspector thus are on the top of their list of priorities while learners are required to accept things as they are.

a. Student questionnaire

The study has showed that our participants make use of their mother tongue Arabic in an English class to indicate that they in general have positive attitude towards the L1. Around 52% of them believe that its use is appropriate in their class, yet 48% think that the teacher's use of Arabic is not appropriate. Conversely, the students feel less comfort while using Arabic in their interaction with the teacher. For instance, 20% state that they feel embarrassed to talk to their teacher in Arabic. This may reflect that in spite of the fact that L1 is welcomed in the English session, it is still perceived a sign of guilt and lack of skillfulness in the target language that is why most of them feel embarrassed. Moreover, they state that their teachers react negatively towards Arabic use.

Concerning the use of Arabic in the teaching-learning process, the study revealed that the majority of the students understand their lessons better when their teacher uses the L1. Yet for some its misuse and lack of its methodological integration prevents them from learning the target language. According to the questionnaire, 76% of them are in favor of Arabic believing that it gives them a sense of intimacy and a comfortable learning atmosphere. Further, they prefer the use of the mother tongue as a facilitating tool especially when the lesson is boring. Besides it helps them express the feelings and ideas that they cannot express in English.

Using a bilingual dictionary helps around 36% learn new vocabulary as they also recognize the differences between English and Arabic when translating. The latter is highly valued that learners call for teacher's interference to draw a clear cut distinction between both languages.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

One has to admit that if the "English only" classroom has got such support, it

is due basically to the failure of the grammar translation method and the requirement of the extolled communicative methodology. For this, Robert Weschler (1997) has created a new method that is a conglomeration of both the grammar translation method and the communicative method. This hybrid method is the *Functional Translation Method*. The glorified “comprehensible input” in communicative language learning, accordingly, can be developed only through mother tongue use especially when it comes to the explanation of abstract words, thoughts and ideas. He encourages the development and functional and semantic aspects rather than grammatical ones. Grammar in such method would be perceived as a means to an end but not an end in itself.

The main tenets of the functional translation method

1. To express one’s own ideas
2. To negotiate meaning and train for tolerance of ambiguity
3. To supply with useful language for communication
4. To promote fluency
5. To encourage experimentation rather than memorization

He has provided a set of systematic activities that enable a language learner to functionally negotiate meaning and employ his mother tongue and thereby creates a link between both languages.

1. A brainstorming session in Arabic is introduced to stimulate debate in a thoroughly chosen topic. Accordingly, English would be a waste of time if the teacher and in particular beginners does not employ the L1 directly. For Ellis (1990), the teachers and the teaching materials have to consider the learner’s needs rather than urging the student to adapt to them. The conversations and discussion of the content then will be recursive and bilingual allowing all participants to use code switching i.e. translation and positive transfer to learn the target language genuinely from and through L1.

2. The lost in translation technique

The teacher provides learners with pieces of papers each with a different English sentence on its top. Each student translates the sentence then folds the paper to show only the translation and passes it to the next one who will translate it into English and the process continues with translations back and forth between English and Arabic. Later on, one by one, students read the papers showing the different ways in which the meaning of the original sentence gets lost in translation. This way

the participants recognize the difference between L1 and L2 and consequently construct new information.

Using translation as a communicative technique

It is generally acknowledged that translators allow cross-cultural communication that is needed in all parts of the world nowadays. The indispensable role of Translation in foreign language learning especially in a multicultural globalised world is a sign of its revival, re-evaluation, and rehabilitation in ELT landscape (Leonardi 2010).

For Titford (1983, as cited in Wharton, 2007), “spoof translation” and “back translation”, two techniques available for EFL classes can be used as a problem solving exercise to raise students’ awareness by L1 and L2 comparison and contrast while translating and the communicative appropriateness in the L2 will increase considerably. Titford believes that such techniques would consolidate language and open the way to more communicative follow-up activities. The student is encouraged to look for the English way of saying something rather than translating word by word. Back translation also increase motivation, involvement, and responsibility. Edge (1986, as cited in Wharton, *ibid*) contends that learning a foreign language and translation are so interconnected that there is no clear reason why translation should not be used as a communicative strategy.

Using Translated First Language Literature

One of the most useful literatures is the translated first language literature; yet it gains little consideration. Such source has a number of advantages that can even prevail over that of any other language material. According to Ronald Gray (2000) a list of achievable benefits for language learners and teachers as well is afforded. To name but few, students can easily understand its cultural background and recognize the plot, characters, theme, etc that it is less threatening for them especially if they know the original version. It also enables them to easily transfer and carry over forms and meanings from and to the target language.

Moreover, such literature, if pedagogically selected, pushes the learner to read other works and consequently “provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. Reading a substantial and contextual body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language – the formation and function of sentences, the varieties of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas...a literary text can serve as an excellent prompt for oral work (Collie and Slater 1987, cited in Gray, 2000).

6. Conclusion

The students bring with them a considerable L1 background which they will inevitably draw upon in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Perhaps the most important aspect to be highlighted is that the mother tongue should not be used a facilitating and time saving tool but rather to provoke critical thinking and discussions. Thus, 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 target language can be a powerful technique in the learning process.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

What do you think of your teacher's use of Arabic in English classes?

Appropriate

Not appropriate

Do you feel comfortable when you talk to your teacher in Arabic?

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

What is his reaction, does he accept?

Yes

No

I can understand the lesson better if my teacher uses Arabic

Yes

No

I prefer my teacher to use Arabic if the lesson is boring

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

Arabic can help me to express my feelings and ideas that I cannot express in English

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

I prefer to ask my teacher questions in Arabic

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

I prefer to do an activity with my friend in Arabic

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

I understand new vocabulary only when I use a bilingual dictionary

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

The teacher should clarify the difficult activities in Arabic

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

English grammar should be explained in Arabic

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

New vocabulary should be translated into Arabic

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

Class instruction should be given in Arabic

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

It is of importance to explain the difference between English and Arabic

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

Using Arabic prevents me from learning English

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

What do you think of your level in English?

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What are the reasons that encourage you to teach in Arabic?

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What are the reasons that encourage you to avoid using Arabic in English classes?

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