

ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Abstract

A revival of interest to using a mother tongue in the English classroom is stipulated by necessity to improve language accuracy, fluency and clarity.

This paper aims at examining students' perceptions of the use of mother tongue and translation in various linguistic situations. The activities that help raise learners' awareness of the language use are described.

The findings demonstrate that all learners need a support of mother tongue in English classes, but the amount of the native language needed depends on students' proficiency in English. The statistical significance of the research results was computed by employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

Introduction

The state-of-the-art teaching of languages is based on the communicative method which emphasizes the teaching English through English. However, the idea of abandoning the native tongue is too stressful to many learners, who need a sense of security in the experience of learning a foreign language.

In the past, the prevalence of grammar-translation method led to the extraordinary phenomenon: students were unable to speak fluently after having studied the language for a long time. This led to the idea that all use of the mother tongue in the language classroom should be avoided (Harmer, 2001:131). Translation has been thought as uncommunicative, boring, pointless, difficult, and irrelevant.

Recently there has been a revival of interest to translation due to the shift of its emphasis - to using a mother tongue as a resource for the promotion of language learning. Translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility (Ross, 2000:61).

Therefore, the use of mother tongue and translation can serve as a tool for improving language skills.

The goals of this paper are, firstly, to examine students' perceptions of the use of mother tongue and translation in learning English, and secondly, to describe the activities which raise learners' awareness of language use. Comparison between the first language L1 and the second language L2 through translation might help learners activate language usage and serve as a tool to improve English.

Research methods employ the survey of students' perceptions of the amount of mother tongue they need in acquisition of a foreign language at tertiary level and mental translation in various class activities.

Mother tongue and translation in English Language Teaching

It is necessary to discriminate between the teaching of translation as a vocational skill and the use of the mother tongue in the teaching situation as an aid to language learning. The need for some translation in language learning is usually supported by non-native teachers. Native teachers of English argue that foreign language learning needs as much exposure to the L2 as possible during precious classroom time, and any usage of the L1 or translation is a waste of time.

In the past, most methods in L2 language pedagogy dictated that L1 should be prohibited in the classroom. Communicative approaches to language learning in the 1970s and 1980s considered the use of the L1 as undesirable. However, recently the attitude to mother tongue and translation in language classes has undergone a positive change.

Translation is sometimes referred to as the fifth language skill alongside the other four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. 'Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate

and advanced level: in the advanced or final stage of language teaching, translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers' (Ross, 2000:63).

Mother tongue has potentially both positive and negative consequences: it may serve social and cognitive functions (Carless, 2008:331). It is claimed that students working in groups do not have to speak English all the time. Use of mother tongue relates to learner identity. Negative impact of mother tongue use is that too much reliance on the L1 may undermine the interaction in English.

However good the students are at comprehending authentic reading or listening materials, the majority keeps mentally translating from L2 into L1 and vice versa. This fact makes teachers of foreign languages aware of the importance of translation in language classrooms.

Why do students use the mother tongue in class? According to J. Harmer (2001:131), a principal cause of the L1 use is required by the activity, if students are linguistically incapable of activating vocabulary for a chosen task. Another reason is that translation is a natural thing to do in language learning, and code-switching between languages is regarded as naturally developmental. The amount of L1 use by particular students may well have to do with differing learner styles and abilities.

Evidence from research into the crucial issue of the L1 use in classrooms around the world was analyzed by G. Mattioli (2004). For instance, L1 use in the Chinese classrooms offers evidence that L1 is a valuable tool for socio-cognitive processes in language learning. Another reason for L1 use in the classroom relates to the fostering of a positive affective environment. C. W. Schweers (1999:6) encourages teachers to insert the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic, provide a sense of security and validate the learners' experiences.

The real usefulness of translation in English classes lies in exploiting it in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in English and the student's mother tongue. According to N. J. Ross (2000), if students are aware of the differences, language interference (transfer) and intervention from their own language are likely to be reduced.

It is known that linguistic awareness can be either conscious or unconscious (Odlin, 1996). Cross-linguistic similarities and differences can produce positive transfer or negative transfer such as underproduction, overproduction, production errors, and misinterpretation. It should be emphasized that transfer is not always caused by the influence of native language.

Numerous studies indicated that both negative and positive transfer between the L1 and L2 was important for development of the interlanguage, the complex system of the learners' L2. Many teachers recognize that the L1 in the classroom is a positive representation of the interlanguage. The data on the interlanguage and language transfer show that it is highly probable that L2 learners will always think most often in their L1, even at the advanced level (Mahmoud, 2006:29). Moreover, translation in the L2 classroom offers a way to highlight similarities and differences between L1 and L2 forms. The translation is useful for L2 acquisition because, firstly, it uses authentic materials, secondly, it is interactive, thirdly, it is learner-centered, and finally it promotes learner autonomy (Mahmoud, 2006:30).

Regarding the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom, it is important to find out how students themselves feel about it. C. Schweers (1999:7) conducted research into this issue and found that a high percentage (88.7%) of the participants felt that mother tongue should be used in their English classes. Moreover, if learners of a second language are encouraged to ignore their native language, they might well feel their identity threatened. The formal study into the use of native language in our settings has shown that as many as 86% out of 110 respondents felt that a native language should be used in the classroom, particularly to explain difficult concepts (90%), introduce new material (57%), define new vocabulary (74%), explain the link between English and mother tongue (55%) (Janulevičienė, Kavaliauskienė, 2004:143). It is noteworthy that in teaching / learning English there has been a long-felt dissatisfaction, mainly on the students' part, about excluding or minimal use of translation in mastering complex issues. Learners constantly wanted to check the exact meanings of the occurring terms in their native language by consulting bilingual dictionaries or asking for teacher's explanations.

Native language use in the classroom can cause students to think that words and structures in English have a L1 correspondence, which does not always exist. Therefore, raising students' consciousness of the non-parallel nature of language is likely to allow learners to think comparatively. The important question is how to reach a balance of the L1 use in learning. It is suggested that four factors should be considered, namely, the students' previous experience, the students' level, the stage of the course, and the stage of the individual lesson (Harmer, 2001:132).

The weblog devoted to some plenary sessions of the IATEFL Conference, Aberdeen, 18-20 April 2007, summarizes the major ideas presented by a well known British linguist G. Cook (Cook, 2007 online):

'The most important statement was the fact that English teachers tend to take a monolingual approach thus neglecting the importance of translation in the process of teaching English. The ESL classroom cannot follow the motto "One nation, one people, one language", a somewhat overrated statement since it implies that a classroom is a state. Quite contrary to that, the L1, i.e. the mother tongue of the students, should by all means be acknowledged. The importance is highlighted even more by the fact that the students' culture is part of their language and by neglecting their language, the teacher, in a monolingual classroom, neglects their culture which leads to the danger of neglecting their identity as well. What is more, there is no valid database that could confirm the standpoint that the monolingual approach in teaching is the best one. The disregard of the students' mother tongue can in fact de-motivate the students and be counterproductive. Therefore, there is neither a scientific nor a pedagogic reason to exclude L1 from the teaching process. There are probably more reasons, utilitarian and political, to make the use of L1 quite valuable in the process of teaching English. The former reason implies that the students would be motivated to think more about appropriate equivalents in their own languages and the latter one, of course, emphasizes the importance of cultural diversities and tolerance among nations'.

Taking into account what has been mentioned, it is essential to update the research into the use of mother tongue and utility of translation. The results of teachers' voting on the use of mother tongue in the English classroom are presented on the BBC Teaching English website. There were 641 respondents in this research. There were 641 respondents in this research. The findings reveal the following: 21% of respondents use only English, 58% of respondents sometimes use mother tongue, 8% - frequently, 7% - most of the time, 6% - about half the time.

There is an opinion that 'rigidly eliminating or limiting the native language does not appear to guarantee better acquisition, nor does it foster the humanistic approach that recognizes learners' identities' (Mattioli, 2004:24). Translation as a teaching tool needs to take into account a number of different aspects, such as grammar, syntax, collocation and connotation. Uncritical use of translation may give learners insufficient, confusing or even inaccurate information about target language.

This paper aims, first, at rating contemporary students' perceptions of mental translation they employ in learning, and, second, at sharing the experiences of using translation in class activities. The implications of the use of the mother tongue in learning English for Specific Purposes are described.

Respondents and methods

The participants were the students specializing in Social Sciences at the University and studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP). There were 55 respondents aged 18 to 22 who were predominantly females at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The amount of time spent in L2 environment was 4 hours per week for 2 semesters, which amounts to about 130 hours of English instruction. In this study, a brief survey, which was designed in accordance with the accepted standards to surveys in Social Sciences (Dornyei, 2003 17-67), was administered to three groups of learners of different specializations. All the statements were rated on the Likert scale of five possible answers: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 - not sure, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree. The obtained data were statistically processed and interpreted.

Results

The data were obtained for the groups of students of three specializations: psychology, social work, and penitentiary law. The students were asked to rate 7 statements on the five-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 - not sure, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree). The survey statements are as follows: **1)** In ESP classes, I occasionally prefer to use my mother tongue; **2)** In writing activities, I

often mentally translate ideas from my mother tongue into English; **3)** While reading professional texts I use a bilingual dictionary to translate unknown words; **4)** In ESP vocabulary tests, it is easier for me to translate terms from English than into English; **5)** In listening activities, I often mentally translate what I hear; **6)** Making Power Point Presentations on ESP themes or giving individual talks, I prefer to look at my notes – I worry about my English; **7)** While speaking impromptu, I find it hard to recall some ESP terms.

The survey results are summarized in **Table 1**. Numbers 1 to 7 in Table 1 match the above statements. The high values of the Means, i.e. which equal or are above 4, indicate a strong or simple agreement with the statement. The Mean values around 3 point to learners' doubts, while values below 3 show learners' disagreement with the statement. The data show that all the students are quite positive about the use of the mother tongue in English classes, but the amount of it depends on learners' proficiency in English. The less proficient learners of penitentiary law (PN) specialization require more reference to mother tongue – the Mean values of this group to the statements 1, 3, and 5 are higher. Similarly, the students of social work (SW) specialization rated the statements 1, 2, 4, 5 more positively than the students of PS specialization, who are the most proficient out of three specializations. The students of psychology (PS) specialization generally prefer less code switching in the same linguistic situation – statements 1, 3, 5, and 7. Moreover, in certain cases the PS students are more negative to the use of mother tongue, e.g. the Mean values to the statements 2, 5, and 6 are between 2 and 3.

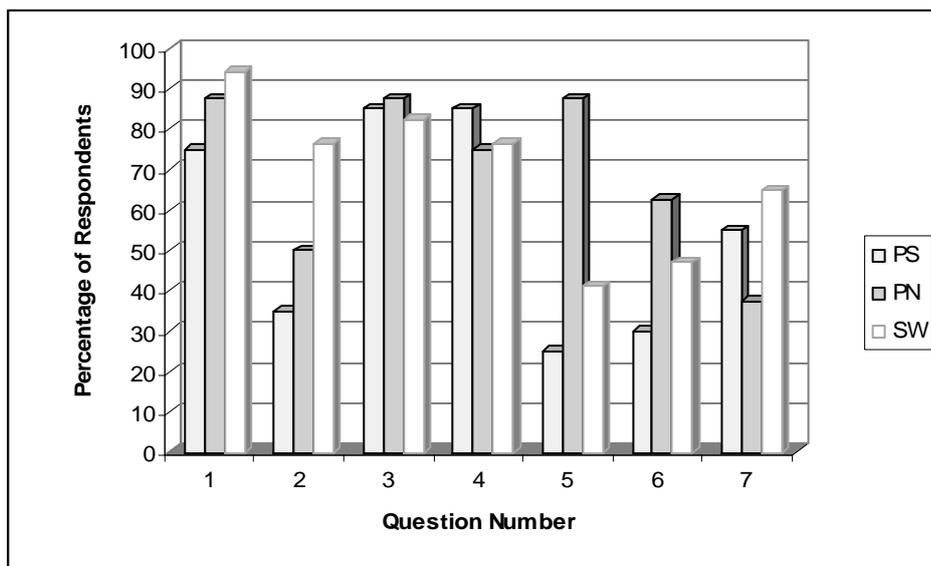
Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Two-Tailed Significance Levels computed for each statement and different groups. The number of respondents: Penitentiary (PN) specialization – 18 students, Psychology (PS) specialization – 20 students, Social Work (SW) specialization – 17 students.

Statement Number	Means	Standard Deviations	Two-tailed significance levels (<i>p</i>)
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	PN	PS	SW	PN	PS	SW	PN vs PS	PN vs SW	PS vs SW
1	4.25	3.65	4.31	0.66	0.96	0.57	0.070	0.819	0.014
2	3.50	3.20	4.13	0.87	0.93	0.97	0.424	0.118	0.006
3	4.13	4.00	4.06	0.60	0.71	0.94	0.640	0.842	0.822
4	4.00	4.45	4.50	0.71	0.74	0.97	0.145	0.158	0.864
5	4.00	2.60	3.19	0.87	1.11	1.08	0.001	0.054	0.112
6	3.38	3.40	3.69	0.86	0.86	0.89	0.945	0.409	0.327
7	3.38	2.60	3.50	1.22	1.11	1.14	0.130	0.809	0.021

This trend is quite obvious in **Chart 1**, where the results show the percentage of positive responses to each statement. The columns are arranged in groups of three: the 1st column represents the positive responses of the PS students, while the 2nd - of the PN students, and the 3rd - of the SW students. It is seen that responses to the 1st and 2nd statements are spread out from the lowest for the PS students to the highest for the SW students. The evaluations of the 3rd and 4th statements are almost leveled off. The most significance difference is observed in the evaluation of the 5th statement – the lowest by the PS students and the highest by the PN students, while the responses to the 6th and 7th statements do not differ significantly. Thus, the results demonstrate the importance of mother tongue in learning ESP. Two main differences in students' attitudes are, first, the amount of the mother tongue that the learners of different specialization need, and, second, the different linguistic situations for the use of the mother tongue.

Chart 1. Percentage of learners of each specialization who responded positively to the statements 1 to 7.



In social sciences, experimental data are analyzed using inferential statistics. Statistical computations allow drawing conclusions about the significance of research questions. Here it has been important to assess whether the difference between the Means and Standard Deviations in **Table 1** for various statements between the groups is significant or not. Statistical significance is the probability that a particular statistical result occurred by chance. The findings were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The computed ratios p show how significant the differences in the values of the Means are. According to learners' specializations, the ratios are labeled PN versus PS, PN versus SW, and PS versus SW and are shown in **Table 1** (columns 7, 8, and 9). It can be seen that p values are different for various statements. The interpretation of p values is as follows: values $p < 0.01$ indicate that there is no significant difference between the responses there, and the closer p values to unity, the differences between the responses are fewer. These results allow drawing a conclusion that, in spite of the small sample of respondents, the data are statistically significant and can be applied beyond the studied sample.

Research implications: translation activities in ESP classes

It is now generally accepted that language transfer, or cross-linguistic influence, does occur, but is a far more complex phenomenon than hitherto believed (Benson 2002:68). Transfer can be positive and facilitative, where the two languages are identical, or negative, when there are significant differences between two languages. Transfer may occur at all levels: phonology, syntax, lexis, and pragmatics. Raising learners' consciousness can be valuable: teachers can explicitly point out differences between L1 and L2. For this purpose translation may be useful, because it can be interactive, learner-centered, promotes learners' autonomy, and uses authentic materials (Mahmoud, 2006:30). With the English learners, we have used a number of activities that are beneficial for their linguistic development. Post-reading activities give students the opportunity to review, summarize, and react to a reading material through discussions in small or large groups. After having read a text as a homework assignment, students were encouraged to generate various comprehension exercises, such as multiple choice questions, true or false statements, general questions on the contents of the text. Learners' designed exercises were scrutinized in pairs or small groups. The activities of writing different types of summaries, e.g. restatement, descriptive summary or opinion essays, have also proved beneficial by allowing teachers to pin-point errors stemming from the mother tongue. However, checking written work increases teacher's load significantly and might be considered as a disadvantage. The most beneficial activity has been back-translation class activity. Selected texts for re-translation should not be too long or too linguistically complex, nor too distant from the knowledge of the student. Students in pairs translated different short passages from L2 into L1. Then pairs exchanged their translations, and different pairs translated the peers' passages back into L2. Finally the double translations L2 → L1 → L2 were examined and compared with the original texts. The ultimate analysis of re-translated texts by students and teacher's feedback allow to raise learners' awareness of vocabulary, grammar, style, and language transfer.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn. First, all the learners customarily rely on their mother tongue in learning English. Second, the amount of the native language that students need depends on their proficiency and linguistic situations. Third, the statistical processing of the research findings showed that the data are significant in spite of the small sample of recipients. Finally, the students' autonomously generated reading comprehension exercises, summary writing and back-translation activities help raise learners' awareness of differences between English and the mother tongue and facilitate linguistic development.

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