**FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION AND THE USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE**

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***Abstract***

**The paper investigates the possible roles the mother tongue may have in a foreign language classroom both as a tool for effective language teaching and as a linguistic resource that supports language learning. The use of the mother tongue to teach an additional language was long considered professionally inappropriate which was in line with the traditional monolingual approach to language instruction. In the light of more recent linguistic proposals regarding language teaching, the paper lists some of the ways in which the mother tongue is now believed to facilitate and support successful language learning. These refer to more efficient learning of new vocabulary as well as target language grammatical concepts. Just as abundant and unambiguous input in the target language is essential to language learning, judicious and principled use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching complements the process by making sure that the target language input remains clearly understood and easily related to the already existing linguistic concepts. When comprehension is ensured, students gain confidence and are much more willing to take their chances with the target language and use it more extensively, which is the most desirable output of every foreign language classroom.**

***Keywords:*bilingual approach, foreign language instruction, mother tongue, target language input, key word 5**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

In the late 19th century the Grammar Translation Method, the prevailing approach to foreign language instruction by then, was rejected and banned from the foreign language classroom as outdated and inadequate. Some of the main reasons for this were that it heavily relied on the use of the learners’ mother tongue for most of the class activities focused on translation between the target language and the mother tongue and because it insisted on the study of grammatical structures that appeared in the translation texts. The arguments that supported this shift of instructional approach were that word for word translation exercises do not help students actually use the target language and that an outcome of such an extensive grammar study was not to learn the language itself but rather about the target language. The new era that was about to set in strongly rejected any of the traditions of the Grammar Translation method which gradually led to the worldwide acceptance of the new set of instructional principles– the Direct Method. The Direct Method eventually evolved into a number of current monolingual approaches such as communicative language teaching, task based learning and teaching and content based language learning.

The main principle of language teaching has become monolingual thus denying any pedagogical value to the use of the mother tongue in a foreign language classroom. The strongest argument supporting the monolingual approach is the recognition of the abundant target language input as the essential ingredient in both first language acquisition as well as the acquisition of any other subsequent language or languages. Having in mind that in most foreign language learning contexts the foreign language teacher is the only source of the target language, teachers should not further reduce the already limited target language exposure that students have access to (Turnbull, 2001). Also, when the mother tongue is used in foreign language teaching the students are deprived of an important language learning process during which students are to rely solely on the target language input to try to comprehend what is going on in class (Ellis, 1994). Classroom activities should focus on simulation of real-life situations thus enabling students to use the target language more effectively outside the classroom. These kinds of activities are to enhance students’ fluency and speaking ability in general in marked contrast with the Grammar Translation Method where the focus is on grammatical accuracy and writing skills.

**2. THE MONOLINGUAL APPROACH to foreign language instruction**

The monolingual tradition in second/foreign language teaching and learning has set in firmly with its basic premise that the best way to teach an additional language is to use the target language itself as the medium of instruction. This view of language learning puts harsh criticism on the Grammar Translation Method which extensively used the mother tongue (L1) for giving immediate translation of new vocabulary and to discuss and explain conceptual problems as well as grammatical structures. Proponents of the monolingual principle maintain that the use of L1 for instructional puposes is pedagogically inappropriate because the students benefit most from merely being exposed to the target language (TL). Such views are mainly based on the nature of L1 acquisition which comes in on naturally by depending solely on the available L1 input. What follows is that maximized TL exposure through experiences students gain in class positively influences students’ achievements and proficiency in the TL.

Another anti-L1 argument to discourage its use in foreign language teaching is that an extensive use of L1 plays an inhibitive role in TL learning. This is predominantly seen in the interference between the two languages which results in the transfer of preferences and routines typical of L1 into the TL. This is believed to cause high levels of L1 dependency which of course negatively correlates with the TL proficiency. To avoid this, any and all L1 should be avoided in class. So, when students come across an unfamiliar word or concept they should not be given an L1 equivalent or explanation but are to be guided by the combination of TL vocabulary they are already familiar with and the new word(s) or different kinds of visual aids while they are trying to make sense of what is being said. The point is that the new language system is to be gradually built up intralingually without interference from L1 in the sense that new words and concepts should directly be related to the objects and situations and not to L1 linguistic representations in the brain. This implies that language proficiency is to be achieved by learning from context i.e. concrete usage events that lead to the emergence of a new language system.

All of the above mentioned about the nature of the monolingual principle is incorporated in the three main assumptions of this approach as put by Howatt (1984): (1) FL teaching should be done exclusiely in the FL; (2) translation between the MT and the TL should be avoided; and (3) in bilingual programs, the two languages should be kept separate. As it is obvious from these three instructional assumptions, the principle of monolingualism lays great importance on the use of the TL as a medium of instruction to the extent that any of the learning strategies that include L1 should be avoided. The goal is to try to replicate the circumstances under which children master their L1 (Yu, 2001). Simulation of L1 acquisition does not leave any space for L1 use but instead insists on maximized use of the TL which is believed to promote the development of listening and speaking skills in students. Another desirable output of the monolingual approach is inductive acquisition of grammatical knowledge instead of conscious memorization of grammatical rules insisted upon by the discredited Grammar Translation Method. The assumption relating to the total ban on the translation logically follows from the first assumption but also finds ground in the comparmentalized view of language under which L1 and foreign language(s) are separate linguistic structures in the brain and hence an additional language should develop independently without much interference from L1. The idea is that through promotion of extensive communacitave interaction in the target language and exposure to the target language input students should develop the ability to think in the TL without recoursing to their L1.

As outlined above, the monolingual instructional guidelines and their implementation in foreign language classrooms are to completely immerse the student in the target language environment. Even though this TL environment is artificially created and confined to foreign language classroom, its aim is to assist the student in developing linguistic competence that mirrors the way in which their L1 skills were developed. The crucial role in this process is granted to the abundant TL input which triggers acquisition. Students are motivated to learn and use the TL by the need to communicate and participate in classroom activities. Their motivation is also fueled by the immediate relevance of what they are learning because all the current major aprroaches to language learning focus on developing skills that can be used in real life situations shortly after instruction.

**2.1. Challenges to the monolingual instructional strategies**

The monolingual approach to language instruction has dominated foreign language classrooms around the world for more than a hundred years now, as is reflected in most major current approaches. Even though it was introduced back in the 19th century as an alternative to the Grammar Translation Method, some of its premises still remain valid, which is of no small importance given the accelerating pace of scientific progress. Namely, it has been continually confirmed that abundant and unambiguous input plays crucial role in linguistic development (Tomasello, 2003; Chomsky, 2005; Flege, 2009; Slabakova, 2013). Taking this into account, it makes perfect sense to apply the TL-only policy at all times. But, is this always the case?

It is true that input has been placed in the centre of scientific debates on what triggers language acquisition, but there are certain requirements regarding input quantity and quality that need to be fulfilled to allow for successful acquisition to take place. As maintained by two major theories of language acquisition, nativist (Chomsky, 2005) and usage-based theory of language (Tomaselo, 2003) linguistic input has to be not only available in large quantities but also has to be unambiguous and comprehensible. This second requirement of comprehensibility and unambiguity of the input is particularly difficult to meet when dealing with foreign language learners. For one reason, the vast majority of them are not small children and have far different needs regarding TL communicative skills they expect to learn that cannot be related to and learnt from the *here* and *now* type of context, which is the only context small children are familiar with. So, how can foreign language teachers use TL at all times and yet create a context of relevance to their students in which they are fully aware of the meaning of the input they are being exposed to?

There are several issues in foreign language learning that can be related to the lack of comprehension of the input. Most notably, if students cannot keep track of what is being said in class, a number of affective factors come into prominence. These include the feelings of fear and anxiety and also boredom and resistance to change when students find themselves immersed in the language environment they are not familiar with. When students fail to understand messages in the TL directed to them, foreign language teachers are encouraged to use different kinds of visual aids, mime, and alike but for most students such clues are just not enough. Apart from being time-consuming, which as already mentioned may lead to frustration or boredom, these instructional strategies may be confusing and mislead the understanding (Butzkamm, 2003). In order for language anxiety to be reduced, students need to feel certain that they clearly understand the meaning communicated to them. Precision of meaning is important for this to happen and rough explanation is not enough because only when students fully understand TL messages they hear, read or are expected to produce they feel assured and at the same time are ready to proceed with classroom activities. This kind of full comprehension is not always easily achieved with the exclusive use of the TL even with simple vocabulary items and the difficulties become somewhat greater when abstract concepts and grammatical structures are to be explained to students.

Another difficulty with the monolingual approach is that it ignores the fact that foreign language learners already have a language basis – a fully developed linguistic system of their mother tongue. This competence they posses makes them not only more linguistically skilled than children in their language learning years but they are also more socially developed and cognitively mature when introduced to a foreign language (Cook, 2001). Even though theorists and practitioners of the monolingual principle contend that the mother tongue use in classroom is bad practise and should be avoided because it opens the door to linguistic transfer and creates L1 dependency, is it really possible to just shut down this huge reservoir of linguistic knowledge and not allow it interfere in any way? It is now a well known fact that experience induces changes in the brain and, having this in mind, it is not reasonable to expect from language learners to behave as if they were linguistic tabulae rasae when struggling to find their way through the confusing environment of the new language. Even when the mother tongue is not being explicitly used in class and the students seem to easily follow the teacher’s instructions and learn the content presented to them, this does not mean that what is going on in their heads relies solely on their knowledge of the TL. Highly developed cognitive structures of foreign language learners (assuming that most of them are not small children) allow them to learn more effectively when they can relate the content of learning to the already established structure of knowledge. Now, when learning a new language, the most relatable knowledge the students already possess is their knowledge of the mother tongue. This implies that regardless of whether the teacher permits the use of the mother tongue, the students recourse to it in their minds in order to make connections between what they already know and what they are about to learn. It is extremely difficult to prevent this from happening because cognitive maturity of students requires such connections to be made to allow for meaningful learning to occur.

Another psycho-linguistic argument that contradicts the monolingual assumptions regarding the need to keep the mother tongue and the TL as far apart as possible is that the two languages are no longer considered to make distinct systems in the brain. In contrast with the compartmentalized language pedagogy, L1 and L2 are now considered to overlap in the sense that the two languages share the same cognitive competence which allows for skills, content and linguistic knowledge learnt in L1 to be easily transferred into L2. Even more, this is not a one-way relationship because the development of, for example, writing skills in L2 also strongly affects development of the related skills in L1. This interdependent nature of the relationship between the two languages is explained by Cummins (1981) and his Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis which suggests that even though languages have surface features such as pronunciation or fluency that are clearly separate, underlying these surface manifestations of language are proficiencies that are common across languages. What this means is that proficiencies involved in cognitively demanding tasks including literacy, content learning, abstract thinking or problem solving are essentially the same across languages and hence are expected to be transferred from one language to another. This transfer may refer to different kinds of cognitive strategies, conceptual knowledge, linguistic elements and pragmatic aspects of language use.

Going beyond the system overlap as proposed by Cummins (1981), more novel linguistic advances coming from the gradual integration of linguistic and psychological theory suggest that developing linguistic skills in a new language not only creates the relationship of interdependence between them but completely transforms the psycholinguistic system as a whole. Such views based on the dynamic systems theory insist on certain qualitative differences between the cognitive system of monolinguals and those of bilinguals and multilinguals (Jessner, 2006). It is proposed that the presence of two or more linguistic systems in the brain induces developmental changes affecting the entire psycholinguistic system which result in abilities and skills that are not comparable to monolingual competence in each language. As Cook (2001, p. 4) nicely puts it “a second language is not just adding rooms to your house by building on an extension at the back: it is rebuilding all the internal walls”. Such complex interaction of languages in bi- and multilingual mental functioning is believed to have a positive effect on the overall linguistic development which seriously calls into question the plausibility of monolingual instructional strategies that emphasize the importance of minimizing any possibility of two-way transfer across languages (Cummins, 2007).

**3. USING THE MOTHER TONGUE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

In the light of linguistic advances listed above, it is now clear that the mother tongue and any other additional language or languages are interwoven in many respects: phonological, syntactic, semantic and textual, and that they interact in both directions in the learning process as well as during the language use. The recognition that the development of foreign language competence involves cognitive, social and emotional factors equally related to the mother tongue, undermines any strong version of the monolingual principle that aims to inhibit the natural phenomenon of cross-language transfer. Accordingly, there is a growing body of linguistic proposals that appreciate the facilitative role of the mother tongue in foreign language learning and instruction.

**3.1. Comprehension of the input**

While the monolingual approach was shaped around the idea that target language input is what fuels successful language learning, at the same time it ignored the fact that the mother tongue can be used in a way that makes sure the TL input remains comprehensible and only as such an effective learning tool. The clarity and unambiguity of the input are important because without it affective filters rise which leads to frustration, insecurity and blocking of the target language. The use of the mother tongue for clarification purposes is an easy avenue to ensuring comprehension and lowering of the affective filters. This is particularly important in the early stages of language learning because beginners know nothing yet of the target language and exclusive use of the new language they are not familiar with may have a rather intimidating effect. A start that includes the mother tongue ensures a sense of security and provides the students with the opportunity to overbridge the gap between the unfamiliar and the familiar. If the meaning of the target language words is made clear via the mother tongue, students feel assured and are more willing to experiment and take risks with the target language. Apart from providing a sense of security, use of the mother tongue validates students’ prior experiences when short insertions in the mother tongue allow them to express their ideas more effectively (Schweers, 1999).

Even though giving immediate translation of words and phrases has been harshly rejected by the advocates of monolingual principles, for the beginner, becoming aware of the meaning inevitably invokes associations in the mother tongue. It is extremely difficult, if ever possible, to prevent such connections from being made which infers that translation is an inevitable part of foreign language learning regardless of teacher’s attitudes towards its use in class (Butzkamm, 2003). Instead of ignoring or trying to suppress this natural tendency, teachers should try to work along it and assist students in making this kind of associations because they are vital at the early stages until the foreign language items sink roots of their own. The role of the mother tongue in the process of foreign language development is to provide a sort of scaffolding which will gradually become redundant as students progress towards higher levels of foreign language proficiency.

**3.2. Communicative competences**

Implementation of the monolingual assumptions in foreign language classroom is to expose the learners to abundant TL input which is presented to them through actual communicative situations that simulate real-life events. The aim of these activities is to develop students’ communicative competence through dedication to pronunciation and fluency. Employing a strategy that promotes message-oriented communication definitely seems sensible but it also appears that the emphasis on “real”, authentic communication and the restriction on the use of the mother tongue are difficult to reconcile (Butzkamm, 2003). This point can be seen in oral or written tasks where students are required to say or write something about their background, personal interests or to describe an event from their lives or some other experience. Quite frequently they are in the need of a word or a phrase to express themselves in a way they find fit but instead of a brief interruption in the mother tongue that would help them go on, they get encouraged by the teacher to continue with their production relying on the vocabulary they are already familiar with. This leads to frustration because of the inability to express their original thoughts and ideas and students simply start inventing things instead. Another source of anxiety may be the fact that they realize the teacher is not at all interested in what they want to say but is only occupied with the grammatical correctness of the output. Instead of being constrained to express the messages they want by the total ban on the mother tongue they might be encouraged with short insertions in the mother tongue that would keep the conversation going. After all, students should not be anxious about foreign language production because of the constant fear of making a mistake but should be allowed to actively engage in message-oriented activities through which their communicative competence can be continually improved (Butzkamm, 2003).

**3.3. Mother tongue as a linguistic resource**

Apart from being used for clarification of new and confusing words and a sort of a “conversation lubricant”, the mother tongue can also function as a valuable resource of both linguistic and knowledge of the world. Foreign language learners already have fully developed linguistic competence in their mother tongue as well as multiple experiences and skills they have all acquired via and through the mother tongue including the ability to think, communicate and an intuitive understanding of grammar (Butzkamm, 2003). Instead of struggling to suppress what they already know of the language and the world, students should be encouraged to capitalise on the vast amount of skills and knowledge they have accumulated in their mother tongue.

As already said, it is classroom reality that cross-language associations are continually made in students’ minds and there is no reason to ignore them but rather aim to nurture this useful strategy and assist them in making it even more efficient (Cummins, 2007). If students spontaneously engage themselves in some sort of contrastive analysis by focusing on similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the target language, then there are good chances that the instruction focused on raising their metalinguistic awareness will make them more efficient language learners. It is now a well known fact that engaging prior understandings supports meaningful learning and in terms of foreign language learning the new is most effectively associated with the old by making lexical and syntactic parallels between the mother tongue and the target language. This can be done by drawing students’ attention to cognates, which may function as a means of deciphering the meaning of target language words or to grammatical structures that are formed and/or used in a similar way. Similarly, both literal and idiomatic translation can sometimes be an economical way of allowing the students to understand and see though grammatically complex or odd-sounding target language expressions without resorting to grammatical terminology (Butzkamm, 2003). This way, students simultaneously become aware of the message meaning as well as how the structure is formed. Also, the mother tongue can take a facilitative role in clarifying a concept or grammatical structure non-existing in students’ native language. It does not seem very reasonable to contend that a concept or structure meaning novel to students can ever be unambiguously explained without recourse to the mother tongue.

The potential of the mother tongue as a resource in foreign language learning is not limited to contrastive analysis of lexical and syntactic elements of language but also represents a reservoir of knowledge and skills related to reading and writing ability that can be transferred across languages. The possibility of the transfer of proficiency originally acquired in and through the mother tongue stems from the fact the languages present in the brain overlap in literacy-related skills and knowledge. This kind of system overlap is caused by the underlying proficiencies involved in cognitively demanding tasks which are, as already pointed, common across languages. Because of that, instruction that helps develop reading or writing skill in one language affects the development of a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency that affects the corresponding skill in the other language. Cummins (2007, p. 233) lists five major types of cross-linguistic transfer enabled by the relationship of interdependence across languages as follows: (1) transfer of conceptual elements (e.g. understanding the concept of photosynthesis); (2) transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g. strategies of visualizing, use of graphic organisers, mnemonic devices, vocabulary acquisition strategies, etc.); (3) transfer of pragmatic aspects of language use (willingness to take risks in communication through L2, ability to use paralinguistic features such as gestures to aid communication, etc.); (4) transfer of specific linguistic elements (knowledge of the meaning of *photo* in *photosynthesis*); and (5) transfer of the phonological awareness – the knowledge that words are composed of distinct sounds. The interdependent relationship of literacy skills between the mother tongue and the target language may significantly assist students in developing their overall linguistic competence which is a valuable benefit ignored by the monolingual principle.

As already mentioned in the previous section, an even more elaborate view of the presence of two or more languages in the brain is that they are not merely overlapping but are interwoven in multiple aspects. Under this view, it is suggested that cognitive systems of bi- and multilinguals cannot and should not be compared to those of monolinguals (Cook, 2007; Jessner, 2006). This puts foreign language instruction, the use of the mother tongue during the course of it, the expected outcomes of it and the very notion of foreign language user into a whole new perspective. To start with, monolingual instructional strategies aim to turn the foreign language learner into a monolingual native language speaker which is not very plausible to expect because the two speakers differ in many respects. With the foreign language learner, the mother tongue is always present and interacts with the other language whether this is visible or not. This interaction goes both ways during the learning process as well as during language use. Because of extensive experience with two languages, neural organisation of the bilingual brain is different than the one present in monolinguals and their entire psycholinguistic system is more complex. In this light, instructional approaches that ignore or suppress the mother tongue work against the natural phenomenon of language interaction and expect from the learner to imitate linguistic behaviour of the monolingual native speaker that they will never be. Accordingly, the standard of success of foreign language learners should be measured against the standard of L2 users in their own right with linguistic abilities that go beyond any monolingual speaker.

**4. CONCLUSION**

Despite the fact that the use of the mother tongue in foreign language classroom is presented throughout the paper as not only justified but even favourable at times, this does not mean that it should ever be used in the inconsiderate, lazy and time-consuming way. The native language must be used in a coordinated, judicious and principled fashion because if used excessively it may result in too much dependence on it, but in moderate doses it may significantly contribute and complement the process of language learning. Extensive exposure to the target language is without doubt vital in this complex and demanding task but this basic premise of success does not exclude the possibility of effective mother tongue use.

The role of the mother tongue is found to be facilitative in a number of classroom situations. These, as suggested, include giving instructions and explanations to avoid misunderstanding and incomprehension of new and confusing words, concepts and grammar structures and when the cost of exclusive target language use is too great. Short insertions in the mother tongue can help keep a foreign language conversation going or encourage students to participate in classroom activities more eagerly because it reduces language anxiety and builds self-confidence.

Involving with students in comparative analysis by pointing to similarities and difference between languages or by translation of structures or sentences, enhances linguistic awareness of students and provides them with an opportunity to understand the nature of language and how languages are structured. Through the process of learning how to recognize, understand and interpret particular language features and make cross-lingual connections between them, students become much more than competent language users – they also develop themselves cognitively, socially and culturally.

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