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Mother Tongue!
The Neglected Resource for English Language Teaching And Learning
Ravi Bhushan, Ph.D.

Abstract

The role of mother tongue in teaching and learning of English has been discussed in literature. The influence of mother tongue is proved both positive and negative in teaching and learning of English. A learner's L1 is an important determinant of Second Language Acquisition. The L1 is a resource which learners use both consciously and subconsciously to help them arrange and re-arrange the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can. When and how L1 is put to use depends on Linguistic, Psychological and Sociolinguistics factors. Perhaps the influence of L1 is most evident in L2 phonology. Second language acquisition is a developmental process; L1 can be a contributing factor to it.

The cultural features connected with L1 use can be put to good effect when teaching L2. While attempting a writing task in any examination in which a sample writing task may be like writing an article for an international student magazine describing 'a festival or celebration in your country,' or similar topics that refer to their own cultural backgrounds, learners quite often resort to the knowledge of L1 to overcome their difficulty with English equivalents (e.g. Eid ul Fitr, Holi, etc.). This can be used as an opportunity to exploit L1 for L2 practice.

Introduction

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Mother Tongue! The Neglected Resource for English Language Teaching And Learning

This paper makes an attempt to understand the role of L1 in the teaching and learning of English in the background of various socio-cultural factors.

The use of mother tongue, while teaching and learning English, has been an issue of debate. Most teachers feel that the use of L1 should be minimized, and they feel guilty if they use it a lot. When challenged they find it difficult to say why. Against the use of L1 is the general assumption that English should be learned through English, just as you learn your mother tongue using your mother tongue. But the idea that the learner should learn English like a native speaker does, or tries to 'think in English', is an inappropriate and unachievable aim.

A Reasonable Goal

English is a world 'lingua franca', and what we should be aiming for today is to make our learners into speakers of their own language who are also fully competent speakers of English. And a dangerous side-effect of banishing L1 from the English classroom is the implication that somehow the learners' mother tongue is inferior, or 'doesn't count', thus discriminating against the learners' linguistic identity.

The only really valid argument, in my opinion, in favor of minimizing (not banishing) L1 use is that over-use of L1 lessens the time available for English use in the classroom. Obviously, we want our students to have maximum exposure to English in our classes. But this means limiting L1 use, not banishing it altogether.

Insisting on keeping English only as the medium to learn English, even when students don't understand what is being said, may lead to discouragement and frustration of the learners. We shall use English as long as the students understand it well enough to get the message, and insist on their using it as long as they can get their message across. Otherwise, allow L1 use.

Some Purposes of L1 in Learning L2

Some purposes of L1 use might be: for explaining difficult grammar, for giving instructions which might not be understood in English, for checking comprehension, and for saving time which can then be used for communicative work in English etc. Now, the question is how to decide when to use English and when to use L1? It's essentially a question of professional judgment.

Many times during a lesson, we need to ask ourselves: should I insist on English here, or should I use mother tongue? It's necessarily a split-second decision. The answer will depend essentially on how easy or difficult the message will be to convey and understand in English. The solution of saying things in English and then translating into L1,

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incidentally, is not a solution at all. Students learn very quickly that they don't need to listen to the English as the mother-tongue version is coming up, and this strategy simply gets them used to ignoring the English. This is not to say there is no place for translation: I think there is.

There is no rule that you should never use L1 in English classes; nor, on the other hand, is there any excuse for using L1 most of the time. Like many other teaching strategies, the use of L1 involves rapid decision-making: is it worth switching to L1 at this point? Or would it be better to stay with English? Can mother-tongue(s) be used in a multi-lingual classroom? When, if ever, can translation be useful in the English classroom? What is the place of L1 in explaining vocabulary? Is it useful to compare/contrast L1 and English? Can L1 help error-correction? Can/should L1 be used in classroom management?

An Undesirable Effect of Banishing L1 from L2 Classroom

A dangerous side-effect of banishing L1 from the English classroom is the implication that somehow the learners' mother tongue is inferior or doesn't count. This needn't necessarily be the case if the teacher makes learners aware that the reason for not using L1 is to give them greater exposure to the target language and thus help them improve, and that it is not done to denigrate their own language. After all, unless learners take courses in a target language community outside their home countries, they will be surrounded by their mother tongue anyway: the language classroom can thus be their opportunity to escape from the mother tongue influences that may be an inhibition to learning.

Secondly, the whole issue of using L1 in the classroom, in fact applies to only those teachers who are proficient in the learners' mother tongue. Explaining grammar, for example, is often a complex linguistic operation which some teachers who do not share the learners' mother tongue may not feel competent to do accurately. I think, essentially, we have to examine or re-examine the reasons for not using L1 in the classroom and decide whether they remain valid or not.

Mother Tongue Only Movement

I think it's worth examining the recent history of the 'mother tongue only movement'. When the prevalent belief was that "native speaker teacher is the best", this view of only using mother tongue supported the fact that more often than not the teacher didn't speak the language of the students they were teaching, therefore they had no choice but to use English only. From that grew a theory that has only recently been discredited to an extent and a more flexible view of "it depends on the context" has come along to replace it.

On English Only Efforts

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Caution needs to be used when urging 'English Only' as sometimes this can negate the students' right to speak their own language amongst their peers if that is appropriate - they are not just students in the classroom, they are also people. The inevitable role of translation needs to be considered. It is totally normal and in a sense, impossible to control, that translation plays an important role in language learning. I do not mean the grammar-translation method; I mean the natural role of translation in communication. I find this very convincing and cannot see why negotiating in and out of English and the mother tongue of the students should not be a healthy addition to other activities and one that provides emotional and linguistic support to the process.

As I wrote above, caution and discretion should be used in using translation so that the use of translation does not become the primary form of teaching, which would result in students assuming that "they don't need to listen to the English as the mother-tongue version is coming up."

The Problems of Thinking in English

Working with teenagers, one has to be practical and encourage students to use more L2 during the lessons, especially if we are talking about mixed ability classes. Another point which has come up is the issue of 'thinking in English': how far it is achievable, and how far it is desirable.

To begin with, what we need to do is teach them to speak English as well as possible. What goes on in their minds (what language they're thinking in) is not directly accessible to us and, so, we can't have much influence over this process immediately. Long term continued use of English in a variety of situations may help the process of thinking in English. In addition to the length of exposure, age also may be a factor in this cognitive process. However, we also notice that most learners (particularly older ones) will continue to think in mother tongue to some extent. Think about counting - which language do you use?

The Reasons for Not Using L1

Let's look carefully at the reasons for not using L1 and see how valid they are. A justifiable reason is in order to maximize the exposure of students to L2, and engagement with it. Other reasons - such as 'let's teach them the same way they learned their first language' - seem to me a bit not directly relevant, given the fact that, in a school-learning situation, there's no way we can give them the exposure, motivation and number of caregivers which a child has when learning his/her mother tongue. Anyhow someone learning a first language is usually exposed to that language only. Even in cases where there is simultaneous acquisition of two or more languages, children have no possibility of using any language other than to which they are exposed.

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The point about a teacher who doesn't know the students' mother tongue very well is, of course, quite valid; it's obviously difficult to explain something in a language you don't know very well. But this argument avoids the main issue, which is, given a situation where the teacher and students share a language other than English. How far should this language be used in English lessons, and for what purpose?

Although there are some valid reasons for using L1 in the classroom, it is often resorted to when teachers worry that their learners won't understand. (Often the teachers, who are not adequately proficient in English, resort to this unfortunate situation.) I think we should trust our learners more and give them the chance to experiment. Have you experienced the situation when you as a teacher tend to be more benevolent as regards mistakes students make and they notice that and ask you with a scowling look on their faces why you don't correct every single mistake they make, this being their response to a stereotypical image of a teacher in their learning experience? Our not correcting them is very often seen as our negligence, not as our wish not to impede communication.

Create Conditions of Belonging

I think that the most important thing a teacher can do in the classroom is to create the conditions in which the learner feels that s/he belongs. Part of that includes understanding that in learning a foreign/second language we are doing more than simply absorbing a body of knowledge. We are, in fact dealing with our student's sense of identity. As any one who has learnt another language realizes speaking it involves more than just remembering a bunch of rules and words but quite often adopting a new, perhaps alien identity. I found that this is particularly true of adult learners, whose sense of self has fully developed. As a result I think that using L1 in the classroom lessens that sense of shock and possible rejection.

Conditions for the Use of L1

In our own classrooms, we should prefer, possibly hesitant, error-full English contributions on the part of students over utterly correct, but limited sentences, interwoven with L1. They need to resort to L1 occasionally: and it's up to us to make sure that they only do this when they cannot possibly manage in English. I think the same basic rule goes for us: only to use L1 when there is no way we can get them to understand through English. Or, when doing it in English would be so long and boring and frustrating that it would actually save time for English use to do it in L1. There is no need to feel guilty when using the L1. It is a point of professional judgment, and this is especially so when the teacher is not able to convey ideas in L2.

A point to consider, when deciding to make use of L1 or not, is the reason it is being used, or rather its role in the classroom, and it has to be said that various kinds of lessons,

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each based on assumptions about what education and teaching are about, and what kind of L2 language we want our learners to end up with determine different answers to this. There seems to be a simple idea of L1 appearing almost willy-nilly in the classroom.

However two trends that appear are

- i. The idea of translating difficult words and parts of any text teachers are working with into L1 where spending time on them would be a waste of effort and confusing, and
- ii. The teacher using L1 to give instructions or explanations of the procedure(s) of the lesson and its rationale, so that lesson's aims and objectives are clear and achievable.

Teachers may judge when to use each of the above and might like to think about the kinds of lessons each is likely to appear in.

There is a third use I'd like teachers to consider.

- iii. How about actually incorporating texts written in L1 into the L2 lesson?

Exploitation of L1 in this way could be meaningful and bring strategies learners use into the limelight. It could bring out differences between the two languages and as such help overcome kinds of fossilization that can occur because of other kinds of teaching where the differences are so great that the difference does not lend itself to learners making the kinds of mental adjustments that are required.

We must all have experienced times when the depth of what learners have to do cognitively cannot be overcome. The adoption of such a technique, though, does return us to the idea/discussion of what kind of L2 are learners aiming for and how perfect do we want them to become. As mentioned above, using L1 allows students to compare and contrast English with the language they know best.

Various course books now encourage students to translate model sentences into their own language as a means to study form and meaning. Cognitive processing makes learning active and more memorable. Whether to use L1 or not also depends on the aim of the activity and language skill being practiced.

Loop-input Activity

Divide the group of participants into four groups and give each group one of the four texts. The groups work collaboratively to translate their text into mother tongue. Once

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this is complete, they pass their translated text to another group who must translate it back into English. Again, they pass on their translated text to another group who will translate it back into mother tongue, do it one more time, so that everyone has seen all four texts.

Follow-up activities could include:

1. Comparing the various versions of each text and discussing problems or difficulties that arose.
2. Discussion of the value of the activity that they were involved in.
3. Discussion of the content of the four texts, etc.

Of course, if you want to focus more on the cultural/political issues, you could use (or write) different texts.

On Translation

Translation helps us to understand better the influence of one language on the other, and to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed. And, because translation involves contrast, it enables us to explore the potential of both languages – their strengths and weaknesses. Translation is a natural and necessary activity. If translation is going on outside the classroom - in offices, banks, factories, shops, and airports, etc., then why not inside the classroom?

Language competence is a two-way, not a one-way system. We need to be able to communicate both ways: into and from the foreign language. Understandably, textbooks place great emphasis on competence in the foreign language. Yet little guidance is given on how to communicate back into the mother tongue, as many professionals need to do in their daily work. Translation is ideally suited for practicing this vital skill.

Back-translation Class Activity

In this kind of activity, before they tackle the task of translation, students talk about the topic to generate vocabulary and language they could find in the text. In small groups students translate the text into L1. Groups swap their L1 translations and retranslate them into L2. Then the original and the L2 versions are contrasted and discussed: Have any important ideas been lost? Does this loss affect the meaning of the text? Have words been changed and are these changes important? Have any sentence structure alterations affected the meaning of the text? After the discussion, students can work together to make more appropriate changes.

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The text should not be too long, too complex or too distant from students' ESP knowledge. Translation can be valuable if it is tailored in such a way that it is a practical, learner-focused and process-based (not product-based) activity including all students and all stages of the process. It gives students time to plan, think, discuss, evaluate and edit their work. It also allows teachers to pin-point errors stemming from L1. A good way of making L2 utterances comprehensible to learners is by inserting comprehensible L1 items here and there that would not have been understood had they been in English.

L1 should be used if/when it assists learning, and not because a teacher doesn't know L2. The 'lingua franca' approach implies bilingualism, which in its turn legitimizes L1 use side by side (though not necessarily mixed), with L2. Create your own 'Class Companion'. Learners find L1 equivalents for new vocabulary items learnt via L2. They then make a wall chart or use a notebook to create a class glossary which can be used for reference throughout the term. They can compare their own work with what they find in the companion.

A similar thing can be done with grammar presentation and practice. New structures are taught avoiding explicit rule explanation in L1. Learners then discuss and /or write what they have understood about the new structure in L1. They compare this with what they find in the companion. This gives learners a little more autonomy in that they can navigate their own routes to meaning rather than relying on something too prescriptive.

Cultural Features

The cultural features connected with L1 use can be put to good effect when teaching L2. While attempting a writing task in any examination in which a sample writing task may be like writing an article for an international student magazine describing a festival or celebration in your country' or similar topics that refer to their own cultural backgrounds, learners quite often resort to the knowledge of L1 to overcome the difficulty of English equivalent (e.g. Eid ul Fitr, Holi, etc.).

This can be used as an opportunity to exploit L1 for L2 practice. First, the learners transcribe the item into L1 script and then they write a brief description of what it is in English. There are a whole range of culturally bound items which you can get your students to explain in L2. Code switching is a universal phenomenon especially in IT, ICT and business. I think that all of us use the word computer, hardware, software, CD, floppy disk, cash flow, mergers, email account, provider, servers etc because these are the words not easily translated into L1 because they perfectly pinpoint the meaning in just one word and any effort to translate them into L1 is done in vain. So here are some ideas to integrate both L1 and L2 in ways that encourage learning.

Play-Telephone Activity

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Give a short passage in English, either spoken or written to a student. They then translate it into their own language and then pass it on to the next student. This student then translates it into English and then passes onto the next person in line who translates it into their own language and so forth until the message ends up back at the beginning with the teacher. You could then discuss what happened to the message and the changed meaning.

Use Comic Strips Activity

The basic idea is to get students to attempt to translate the humor in comic strips. Are the obstacles cultural, linguistic or is there something else? Then ask them to translate a cartoon or comic from their own language into English. If possible compare their examples with other official translations. Is it faithful to the original? Is it still funny? Can it be improved? Watch a short part of a film on DVD without sound but with the subtitles in the students own language.

The students then translate into English the dialogue, utterance. This could be done by students working on their own at first. Then they get into groups and compare their versions and agree on a common translation. The students then watch the film (with or without English subtitles, depending on the level) and discuss why their versions are different. Is it a matter of right and wrong? Or are there other matters at issue such as the inability to translate between languages without losing some of the original meaning? In this particular activity a badly translated movie is just as useful as a well translated one.

There are two problems which concern me, One is that when you legitimize the use of L1, there will be teachers who over-use it (use it when it does not enhance learning, just because it's an easy option or because they feel more comfortable using it). And then the whole lesson slips into an L1 based interaction which leads to less learning of L2. The other is that if you de-legitimize the use of L1, teachers will just feel they shouldn't be using it at all, and either simply don't (in which case some valuable learning opportunities will be missed and some learners will get frustrated and demotivated), or do, in a hit-and-miss manner without any clear rationale of why and when, and feel guilty about it.

The use of L1 in teaching and learning L2 must be critically analyzed with out resorting to over-simplification ('it's always good' or 'it's always bad') and one should try to make careful decisions about when and why it is justifiable and productive. L1 could be used for error correction too, e.g. a student says in English 'I play football yesterday'. The teacher must respond with a literal translation into L1 and should ask was that really what student wanted to say?' The L1 version makes the error very obvious, and the student immediately corrects himself/ herself. There are lots of ways of correcting, of course (recast, repetition with rising inflection, meta-linguistic explanation, elicitation, etc.)

The Use of Target Language

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We should be using the target language in class in order to maximize the learners' exposure to and engagement with it, even if this results in occasional confusion and lack of understanding. There are times, even in an 'English-only' class when, a quick translation or elicitation of an L1 concept can be helpful.

I think both approaches are acceptable: I personally tend towards the second but it's a question of teacher's personality and inclination, the type of class and teaching goals, rather than being 'right' or 'wrong'. L1 can be used to teach learning skills, to talk about the target language and culture, to explain why it's worth learning. Experience suggests that it should be determined by the age group of the learner as well as the purpose of learning L2.

In a class with students less than 10 years old, where imitation plays an important role, only L2 may be the best way of ensuring that L2 is taught and learnt. However, if we are in a class where the average age is above 15, I think only the teacher should use L1 but the learner should be allowed to use both till he/she finds himself/herself in a comfortable position vis-à-vis the learner group. No ideal time frame can be fixed for this.

The purpose of learning would be crucial in determining the motivation level. As in the Indian context, motivation is at a very low level, using only L2 may retard the process rather than facilitate it. I think the use of mother tongue depends on the level and background of the learners.

To Conclude

Using L1 in the ESL classroom has long been considered an important issue among researchers. Some of them believe that use of L1 develops the L2 learning process and emphasizes its systematic, cautious and restricted inclusion into the classroom practice. The L1, when used, has been primarily for purposes of translation, explanation or classroom management. It is hypothesized that learners' knowledge of L1 can be used as a scaffolding device to enable the learning of an L2. L1 can be used as a resource to teach L2, develop vocabulary, enable reading capabilities, for punctuation rules, emphasizing grammatical differences across two languages etc. It does not use the aid of simple translation of words in the new language but uses a cross-referencing method that can be learnt by a teacher who teaches all the subjects in a village school, a common scenario in a country like India. In all these, however, it should be ensured that the class does not look for translation all the time and for all items taught.

Further Reading List

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