



The Role of the Mother Tongue in Learning Foreign Languages- Current State of the Algerian Educational Institutions

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ملخص

من المدهش أن نتعامل مع هذا الموضوع في الوقت الذي نقوم فيه بدمج المؤسسات التعليمية الجزائرية ، وفقاً لخبرتنا التعليمية في مستويات التعليم المختلفة (المدارس المتوسطة ، المدارس الثانوية ، وأخيراً سياقات الجامعة) ، لقد تم تحذيرنا دائماً ببطاقة حمراء الاهتمام يعني المحظورات وممارسات الضلال. ومع ذلك ، تجدر الإشارة إلى أنه من خلال استخدام اللغة الأم التي تعلمنا التفكير فيها ، والتواصل واكتساب فهم قواعد اللغة البديهية ، والكلمات التي استخدمناها في سياقاتها المناسبة. لذا ، حان الوقت لإعادة النظر في الدور الذي تلعبه اللغة الأم في التعليم بشكل عام وفي تعلم وتدريس اللغات الأجنبية على وجه الخصوص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الأم ، دعم التعلم ، تعلم اللغات الأجنبية

Abstract

It is quite amazing to tackle such a topic while integrating the Algerian educational institutions as, according to our teaching experience in different education levels (intermediate schools, secondary schools, and finally University contexts), we have always been warned by a red card to our attention to mean prohibitions and misguiding practices. It is however, worth recalling that it is through using the mother tongue that we learnt to think, to communicate and acquired intuitive understandings of grammar, of words we used for their appropriate contexts. It is therefore, time to reconsider the role the mother tongue plays in education in general and in learning and teaching foreign languages in particular. The mother tongue is without any doubt a true and great asset teachers and learners bring to the practice of foreign languages learning providing thus a language learning support system mainly when this is related to teaching and learning EFL. We must put this reality in the front position, agreeing that most of the Algerian regions, especially the North part, considers French as a

mother tongue, a dilemma which needs to be thoroughly investigated and healed. We have, as an education community, to redress torts the mother tongue is used



to being the victim and thus prevailing thoughts about including re-thinking concepts of teaching and learning EFL methodologies.

Key words: Mother tongue, asset, learning support, foreign language learning

Background Issues

At the end of the 19th century, valuable reforms related the role of the mother tongue to only one field: grammar. It has been a great field of debates which focused on the methodological teaching process. Nowadays, as most of the world education institutions adopted bilingualism as a language teaching and learning foundation, the mother tongue hence, retrieved its pseudo-place as not fully engaged and implemented, it has been drawn when difficulties emerge and arise. In this sense Jeremy Harmer (2001: 132) points: *“There is little point in trying to stamp it out completely. The mother tongue is generally regarded as being an evasive manoeuvre which is only to be used in emergencies”*.

We do agree that even if the mother tongue has not been officially appointed as a guideline in education institutions, it can however regain its rank and operate constructively under the new banner of an adapted communicative approach to break the boundaries which hinder the EFL learners' progress and development in the communicative skills. In this direction, we, as educators and practitioners, ought to give sense to the role the mother tongue continuously plays especially when this is related to teaching and learning foreign languages.

We strongly believe that the feelings of guilt, timid attempts at legitimating and less cautious formulations are better be fought to pave the way to motivation, encouragement, and to higher cautious formulations. Furthermore, the mother tongue in the realm of education is thoroughly not a family secret, nor it is a skeleton in a cupboard, a taboo subject or a source of embarrassment. It is a real fact, the first communicative tool we used to express our joy, wound, ideas and needs.

Alternatively, we can look at the experience we have had with 3rd year students' levels when we were teaching African literature. We openly broke the rules; we took risks as we were urged to translate most of the nouns used in the literary texts and mainly the proverbs already translated for the original language to English. We also were forced to use the mother tongue to draw the difference between the “Igbo society” and the Algerian one. It is therefore, an alternative method which brought many benefits and understandings.



It is particularly revealing "Translating the text was good, lots of dictionary work." (McDonough, 2002: 405). When we learn a new language, we want to know directly and without further effort what it means precisely, so that we can put it to use immediately, work with it and make the most of it. The "experts" tell us that the slow struggle for comprehension with a teacher miming and arm-waving and drawing little stick-figures on the board is preferable. Most of the time, we content with inaccurate guessing as lessons go voiceless and tasteless; the lesson end feelings turn therefore sour, and teachers' heads down pulling their legs, hearts broken and evicted, beaten on a battle field.

There is however, the fact that when teaching and learning a foreign language, we only do teach and learn the language culture leaving far away the learners' mother tongue culture and its contribution to develop and progress the learners' skills and understanding. This situation, according to us is a kind of dominance "NEOCOLONIALISTIC Dogma" as claimed by Auerbach, (1993: 48). This simply constitutes one of the reasons to encourage and integrate the mother tongue in the classroom because; we have to admit that, even if we can banish the mother tongue from the classroom; we absolutely cannot banish it from the EFL learners' heads.

We have therefore, to restore it to its rightful place. The mother tongue is, for all education subjects, mainly foreign language lessons, and the learners' ally and should systematically be used.

According to our prior data collected randomly far from any structured interview or questionnaire, could reach some practical truths related to the topic mainly when this reflects the teachers-learners relationship in and out of the classroom. We therefore could notice that the teachers as instructors often used the mother tongue (L1) to communicate with students outside the class. They usually used L1 for rapport building purposes as making jokes, showing concern to the students, showing empathy, to explain difficult concepts or ideas, to talk about administrative information course policies, announcements, deadlines, to explain grammar rules, and to talk about the exams.

Rapport building to focalize on the concept, is one of the functions mentioned for which L1 is used in most of the studies done previously such as Schweers (1999), Saxena (2009), Al-Nofaie (2010), Bateman (2008). On the other hand, what the teachers revealed about the use of L1 in their classes was different from what they actually performed in their classrooms. They stated that



L1 was usually used for rapport building purposes (making jokes, showing concern to the students, showing empathy, as above-stated).

Unstructured data collection interviews and analysis

Although instructors had such beliefs regarding the L1 use, the actual use of L1 in the classrooms was different. According to our data collected from randomly questioned teachers presenting different level profiles as there were teachers from intermediate or middle schools, secondary schools and even from higher education mainly teachers of grammar with first year students, instructors used L1 to make the topic meaningful and clear enough by giving examples, explaining, making extra explanations, to present and explain the topic, to give feedback, to teach the meaning of new vocabulary, to translate sentences that the instructor utters or in the book, and to give and explain tasks or instructions.

They also pointed out that they switched into L1 when they realized the students did not understand the topic, tasks, or, presented item. For feedback, except one, all of the instructors claimed that they used L1 while giving feedback. 70% of the instructors stated that they directly used L1 for vocabulary teaching, but the others stated that they tried to explain the words in English, using aids, or acted out, or ultimately translated.

On the other hand, all of them pointed out that they used L1 to give homework in order to avoid students' complaint or any confusion among them. Greggio and Gil (2007), Morahan (2007), support this idea by pointing out that the key with teacher use of L1 is that it is used for clarification purposes, after an attempt has been made to communicate ideas in L2, and students still appear to be confused. They put that teachers exploit L1 to translate when students do not understand, to check understanding, to explain procedures, to give directions, to explain grammar and to manage the class.

As a matter of fact, we believe that every new taught and learned language is faced by an already existing mother tongue. Furthermore, all languages are rivals and competitors. They all must be used otherwise, they may be lost, and the mother tongue as a cognitive and pedagogical resource is very important for EFL learners' upwards. Statements can be drawn in relation to these points:

- The FL learner must build upon existing skills and knowledge acquired in and through the MT.



- MT aids make it easier to conduct whole lessons in the foreign language. Pupils gain confidence and, paradoxically, become less dependent on their MT.
- MT aids can promote more authentic, message-oriented communication than might be found in lessons where they are avoided.

The following instances taken from a further reading source witness the importance of the MT in foreign language classes and thus maintains the theory we advanced to consider it as any foreign language teaching and learning foundation.

When we had to write something about ourselves and someone asked for a particular word, she (the teacher) always said we should use the vocabulary we knew. After a while we just invented something because we knew that she was not at all interested in what we wrote but just in grammatical correctness. In my opinion, it was a pity because especially young pupils need to feel that the teacher is not only interested in their learning capacity but also in their personality and their interests. (Stephanie H.)

Now the teaching became more message-oriented. The pupils had to tell their neighbors what they had done during the week. Together with the teacher, I walked from student to student and helped them if they needed a word. The new words were written on the board, and repeated by the whole group afterwards. Both students and teachers enjoyed this very much and I received the honorary title of "walking dictionary". (Ursula N.)

The following cartoon neatly captures what a foreign language teacher's students have often observed, namely that teachers tend to give praise in the FL, but criticize pupils in the Mother tongue.

Notizen aus dem Lehrertag



von Wilhelm Nüchter

"It was a shame that she spoke German when she got really angry because we would have loved to learn to swear in French" (Sandra W.).

- MT techniques allow teachers to use richer, more authentic texts sooner. This means more comprehensible input and faster acquisition.
- We need to associate the new with the old. To exclude MT links would deprive us of the richest source for building cross-linguistic networks. No quarantine for MT cognates and related words.
- It is not possible to avoid interference, but it can be greatly reduced.

Relevant and Meaningful Supporting Conclusions

On the basis of the aforementioned discussions and illustrations and on the basis of Saunders' (1988) and Tracy's arguments (1996) who clearly said that languages can promote each other's development reciprocally, we therefore might advance that the use of the mother tongue while teaching and learning a foreign language, be a bilingual approach, is a key concept to supplement the teaching and learning materials and contents.



This could be also a ground of help and facilitation for both communication tools since this use would not only reach the linguistic assistance and thus more vocabulary items and grammatical and sentence/utterance correctness, but regain the potential of reassurance demonstrating the area where the FL learners feel stronger and creating clarity of meaning and conscious practice of the target foreign language.

Furthermore, the most important result that emerged from this study is to highlight the ability to learn a foreign language easily by looking at the mother tongue as the mother tongue skills in the phonological, syntactic, and semantic codes form the essential basis for FL learning. (Ganschow & Sparks, 2001:87). More, when considering the variety of practices including both the FL and the mother tongue, we feel a strong need to revamp the teaching techniques.

According to us, there are more ways of using the mother tongue which are particularly important as they are meant to accomplish different objectives in various teaching contexts. According to Deller & Rinvolucris (2002), there are more than a hundred teaching suggestions involving the use of the MT. Not to list them all, the most apparent ones are as follows:

- Since the teachers only ever use their mother- tongue, the technique gives the impression of being a monolingual (or a bi-monolingual) one; however, the learners are perfectly free to answer in their mother tongue throughout the first year, and only slowly grow into the second language (Petit, 1999).
- A teaching technique that uses the generative principle of language acquisition; a new form of bilingual structure exercise (bilingual cue drills, translation pattern practice; Butzkamm 1973; 2002b).
- Teaching the intelligent use of bilingual dictionaries first, and introducing monolingual dictionaries later (Thompson, 1987)
- Adult students prepare special topics in their MT before transferring to the FL. There were clear gains in precision and clarity, reports Tudor (1987).
- Translations of short passages into the MT can be turned into an imaginative and highly interactive exercise (Edge, 1986).

According to these suggestions, we have to bear in mind that the direct method is not obligatory with linguistically mixed classes. Moreover, for some continuity, teachers can integrate former learners to provide translations of excellent basic texts to use again and again. These translations are then given to



newcomers to help them digest the new material at home before it is dealt with in class. Thus, this strategy is a "linguistic informants-based" which brings motivation, confidence and practice.

Conclusion

The teaching of foreign languages has yet to reach a considerable position where answerable but underpinning questions can be solved convincingly by empirical studies. However, we strongly believe that the theory we defended on the merit and the serious consideration we owe to the MT within the EFL learning and teaching should be concrete and elaborated.

The evidence is now to call monolingual approaches into questionable truths and to open up new paths in teaching methodology and materials production. Hammerly (1991: 151) estimates that the judicious use of the MT in carefully crafted techniques "can be twice as efficient (i.e. reach the same level of second language proficiency in half the time), without any loss in effectiveness, as instruction that ignores the students' native language."

We ought to finally free our minds and behaviors of a fundamental misconception and re-establish the more than two-thousand-year-old productive alliance between the mother tongue and foreign languages - without repeating the mistakes that were made and raise the green card to allow comprehension waves get far into our education landscape shores.

To remind of a major principle in using moderately the mother tongue in the EFL classroom by both teachers and students can be beneficial in the language learning process and may even be necessary for increased comprehension and acceptance of the new language by the language learners. This use of L1 is for clarifying purposes and should not be the primary mode of communication by either the students or teacher(s) in such foreign language classrooms. Once an appropriate balance is achieved, the use of the mother tongue will not but enhances our EFL teaching and learning process.

So much so, this study may have an impact on teachers in terms of questioning their own L1 use, and being more aware of their own teaching. Teacher trainers may also make use of the present study while they are training the prospect teachers. They may explain that using the target language should be the main objective of every foreign language teacher. Nevertheless, the use of the



students' L1 might also occasionally be useful. Therefore it should not be a taboo for them too.

This study might create some awareness regarding the frequency and the functions some teachers feel the necessity to refer to the mother tongue in their classes. They might find some solutions which will lead to more target language communication in their classes.

We may end this study pointing out that a further study on the same dimensions may use some longitudinal studies and a higher number of participants with more varied situations and techniques to highlight new variables which may lead the teaching and learning communities towards more comprehensible principles.

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Biography

Dr Maouche Salima is a permanent lecturer at Abderrahmane Mira University, Bejaia, Department of English, specialized in applied linguistics and language teaching. She is a former head of the department of English and assistant Dean. She has been teaching at the university since 2008. Her research interests include: EFL teaching, ESP, and African Literature. Dr. Maouche Salima has supervised many master dissertations and doctorate theses ,in addition to her participation in the different national and international conferences