

# On the Use of Mother Tongue in the English Language Classroom

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## I . Introduction

There are arguments pro and con regarding the use of the mother tongue in the classroom in the world of English language teaching. At present, however, it would seem to be true, in general, that the role of the mother tongue is a topic which is often ignored, or rather the avoidance of the mother tongue is recommended in discussions of methodology and in teacher training. The idea of underestimating or avoiding the mother tongue in language teaching dates from around the turn of the century, with the appearance of the direct method. Atkinson (1987 : 242), however, feels that the reasons for this lack of attention are principally ones which do not bear much scrutiny, and identifies four which are particularly influential :

- (1) The association of translation with the grammar/translation method, which is even today often treated either as a joke ('Remember how we learned languages at school?') or as the whipping boy of EFL. But I feel that the worst excesses of the direct method in its 1960s form should serve as a reminder that its total rejection of translation and all that it implied was clearly a case in which the baby was indeed thrown out with the bathwater.
- (2) A backwash effect whereby native speakers, who often enjoy a disproportionate degree of status in language-teaching institutions, have often themselves been trained in an environment where the trainer (also a native speaker and perhaps a monoglot) focuses mainly or exclusively on the relatively unrepresentative situation of a native speaker teaching a multi-lingual class in Britain or the USA.
- (3) The recent influence of Krashen (1981 and passim) and his associates (for example, Burt and Dulay 1975 and passim) whose theories have promoted the ideas that 'learning' (as opposed to 'acquisition') is of little value and that transfer has only a minor role to play.
- (4) The truism that you can only learn English by speaking English. This is axiomatic ; however, it does not necessarily follow that English should therefore always be the only language used in every classroom. My intention is to argue that at early levels a ratio of about 5 per cent native language to about 95 per cent target language may be more

profitable.

It seems that although the mother tongue is not a suitable basis for a methodology, it has, at all levels, a variety of roles to play which are at present consistently undervalued, and that to exclude the mother tongue in a monolingual classroom is almost certainly to teach with less than maximum efficiency.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the validity of the use of mother tongue in the English language classroom, especially in the Japanese context, referring often to Atkinson's position.

## II. Atkinson's arguments for using the mother tongue

### 1. Some general advantages of mother-tongue use

Atkinson (1987: 242-243), in his discussion of mother tongue use in EFL, offers three reasons for allowing limited L1 use in the classroom:

#### (1) A learner-preferred strategy

Translation techniques form a part of the preferred learning strategies of most learners in most places. If learners are given the opportunity, they will choose to translate without encouragement from the teacher.

#### (2) A humanistic approach

To allow students to say what they really want to say sometimes is surely a valuable 'humanistic' element in the classroom. Clearly once it is established what the learners *want* to say, the teacher can then encourage them to find a way of expressing their meaning in English or, if necessary, help out.

#### (3) An efficient use of time

Techniques involving use of the mother tongue can be very efficient as regards the amount of time needed to achieve a specific aim, if only because in general, such techniques need the help of only a blackboard. And assuming that the teacher (especially the hard-pressed teacher) either shares the native language of the students or has sufficient competence in it, many of the techniques involve little preparation.

### 2. Some uses of the mother tongue

Over a period of ten months of teaching monolingual classes, principally students who have had between 0 and 200 hours of English, Atkinson (1987: 243-246) has exploited the mother tongue on an experimental basis for various purposes, and describes the principal techniques and activities which he has found useful. What follows is a summary of his description:

#### (1) Eliciting language (all levels)

'How do you say X in English?', for example, can often be less time-consuming and can involve less potential ambiguity than other methods of eliciting such as visuals,

mime, 'creating a need', etc.

(2) Checking comprehension (all levels)

The mother tongue can be used to check comprehension of the concept behind a structure, e.g. 'How do you say "I've been waiting for ten minutes" in Spanish?'. This technique encourages students to develop the ability to distinguish between 'structural, semantic and pragmatic' equivalence. The mother tongue can also be used to check comprehension of a listening or reading text. For example, a comprehension task which does involve production, but presented in the students' mother tongue, can sometimes probe comprehension more effectively than many types of non-linguistic tasks designed to avoid the problem of recoding in the target language.

(3) Giving instructions (early levels)

For example, many communicative interaction activities for early level students, while very useful in themselves, can be rather complicated to set up. In some cases a satisfactory compromise is perhaps to give the instructions in the target language and ask for their repetition in the students' language in order to ensure that everyone fully understands what to do.

(4) Co-operation among learners

Students, in pairs or groups, compare their answers to grammatical exercises, comprehension tasks etc. in their own language (early level). This activity does not involve the added burden, over and above understanding the structure, of following the metalanguage used to explain it. Furthermore, in case the most lucid explanation or the clearest inductive presentation by the teacher fails for some students, a mother tongue explanation by a peer who has understood may well succeed.

(5) Discussions of classroom methodology (early levels)

It is clearly in the interest of all concerned that the teacher be aware of the students' reactions to what takes place in the classroom, and learners have a right to express their views on this as clearly as possible. For this reason discussions of methodology at early levels are best conducted either in a mixture of both languages or exclusively in the students' mother tongue.

(6) Presentation and reinforcement of language (mainly early levels)

An exercise involving translation into the target language of a paragraph or set of sentences which highlight a recently taught language item can provide useful reinforcement of structural, conceptual, and sociolinguistic differences between the native and target languages. This activity is not, of course, 'communicative', but its aim is to improve accuracy. Therefore it cannot in any way 'replace' a sufficient number of fluency activities in the classroom; it could, however, complete them.

(7) Checking for sense

Translation, by the student, into the native language of incoherent or nonsensical discourse which he or she has produced in the target language. It is useful to encourage students to do a quick mental translation of a composition or gap-fill exercise as a checking technique to ensure that they have written nothing which would be nonsensical in both languages.

#### (8) Testing

The use of the mother tongue can help to maximize the validity and reliability of many types of tests. There is undoubtedly a sense in which it is true that translation is 'the supreme test of knowledge of two languages' (Cunningham 1929) . So the use of mother tongue has considerable application in testing.

#### (9) Development of useful learning strategies

Translation can be used to promote guessing strategies. For example, guessing true cognates, an exercise which involves translation of a group of words, some 'known' false cognates and some 'unknown' true cognates, both revives previously learned items and gives students the satisfaction of expanding their vocabulary 'by themselves'. Another related activity consists of exercise in which students, on the basis of their (ever increasing) knowledge of patterns of affixes in English, make informed guesses as to correct translations of lexical items. The exercises help students to develop confidence in guessing, and actual work done on affixes increases their chances of guessing correctly outside the classroom. Using translation as a basis for this type of exercise, rather than tasks such as 'make negative nouns from the following words', is more motivating and gives students a greater sense of accomplishment.

### 3. Dangers of overuse

It is obvious that in any situation excessive dependency on the mother tongue is to be avoided. Otherwise, Atkinson (1987 : 246) warns, some or all of the following problems may ensure :

- (1) The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not 'really' understood any item of language until it has been translated.
- (2) The teacher and/or the students fail to observe distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation.
- (3) Students speak to the teacher in the mother tongue as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean.
- (4) Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom it is crucial that they use only English.

### III. Discussion

The difference between ESL and EFL in English language teaching is greater than we suppose. Generally it can be said that EFL situations need more aid of the mother tongue in English language teaching than ESL ones, since in EFL situations students have few opportunities to be exposed to English outside the classroom and so in the classroom English is a strange language which new students know nothing about.

As is clear from Atkinson's arguments above, Atkinson argues generally in favor of L1 use. This might give EFL teachers such as Japanese ones some hints to help them reconsider or improve their way of using L1 in the classroom. However, it goes without saying that translation is never the objective of English language teaching, as is often seen in the Japanese classrooms. The use of the mother tongue, as Harbord (1992 : 352) points out, should be argued from whether or not it facilitates (1) teacher-student communication, (2) teacher-student rapport, and (3) learning. All the techniques and activities suggested in Chapter II by Atkinson can be included in one of these three :

#### 1. Using L1 to facilitate teacher-student communication

The first use of L1 to facilitate teacher-student communication would be for discussions of classroom methodology. The use of L1 for this is necessary not only to provide a humanistic element in the classroom as Atkinson points out, but also to acquaint students with what and how they are going to learn, and to interest them in a new approach. If students don't know what and how to learn or are unfamiliar with the new approach, the teacher who will not give an explanation in L1 may cause considerable student anxiety or demotivation. However, it would be profitable for the students at intermediate level or higher to give an explanation in both L1 and L2, or, if possible, in L2 only.

The second use would be for explaining the meaning of a grammatical item at the time of presentation. Grammar explanation is an integral part of most language courses, and so should ideally be conducted in English. But, in reality, L2 explanation is too complicated, and most often, teachers resort to L1 to explain grammar, especially when a correlate structure does not exist in L1. Harbord (1992 : 353) asserts that this is due to *inadequate training in alternative L2 strategies*. However, recent theories of internal models of interlanguage indicate that students sometimes induce wrong rules, even if adequate training in L2 strategies is successfully made and grammar explanation is well conducted in English. In order to avoid incorrect deductions and ensure complete understanding, L1 use to some extent would be unavoidable.

The third one would be for giving instructions for a task. Giving instructions for a task in L2 could be one of the most genuine opportunities for teacher-student

communication in the classroom and an important source of language for student acquisition. But the problem is that there are many communicative interaction activities for early level students that can be difficult to set up in English. Therefore, in order to organize complicated communicative interaction activities and at the same time to ensure students' understanding, as Atkinson suggests, the process of giving the instructions in L2 and asking for their repetition in L1 is by all means necessary.

Another use of L1 would be for checking comprehension. This can be applied to a structure, a word, or a listening or reading text. Especially, L1 use for checking comprehension of a structure, e.g. 'How do you say "I've been waiting for ten minutes" in (L1) ?' encourages students, as Atkinson points out, to develop the ability to distinguish between 'structural, semantic and pragmatic' equivalence, and besides, saves time which is one of Atkinson's principal arguments in favor of using L1.

L1 also can be used in checking for meaning and testing. Students at the early or intermediate levels sometimes produce incoherent or nonsensical sentences caused by excessive concentration on form at the expense of meaning and context. In such cases they cannot see that what they have produced doesn't make sense. In order to make students realize this, it seems very useful to encourage them to do a quick mental translation. As for testing, it will be argued that translation is unreliable as a testing technique since it does not evaluate the student's performance in a 'real' linguistic activity. In my opinion, if students perform well on a translation exercise, the content of which adequately probes their structural and communicative competence in the target language, this would demonstrate an ability to use the language in a 'real' situation to some extent.

On the other hand, we have to admit that there is a case where L1 use for checking comprehension might lead students to misunderstand: especially in the case of a word translation, e.g. 'How do you say X in English?'. It may give students the impression that word-for-word translation is a useful technique or that every L2 word corresponds to every L1 word exactly. It would seem advisable to use an alternative L2 strategy wherever possible. Some effective target language strategies (despite a somewhat dismissive treatment by Atkinson) are, as Harbord says (1992: 354), visual prompts, mime, and evoking situational context to create a need for the item in question (for eliciting), together with paraphrase, definition, and multiple exemplification.

The final use of L1 would be for cooperation among learners. In this category the following strategies are possible: L1 explanations by students to peers who have not understood; giving individual help to a weaker student, e.g. during individual or pair work; and student-student comparison or discussion of work done. The first and second strategies are certainly behaviors that are in most cases likely to occur without

encouragement from the teacher. Harbord (1992 : 354) expresses his concern that by focusing on certain students as weak and therefore deserving of special treatment, the first and second strategies may consolidate a class hierarchy which has a negative effect on those weaker students by reinforcing their reliance on the mother tongue. It is true that teachers should take his concern into account, but teachers should also know that there is a more positive effect than a negative one on weaker students: if there is cooperation among students to help each other understand better, student pleasure at understanding well would outweigh the negative effect. The third strategy (asking students to compare or discuss their work) is an extremely valuable activity that fosters both student cooperation and independent thinking. The advantages of such activities are so great that at lower levels it would be more beneficial to allow students to do this thoroughly in L1 than to do it superficially in L2 or not at all.

### 2. Using L1 to facilitate teacher-student rapport

This is also a major category since it is a factor which concerns lowering students' affective filter. Lowering students' anxiety and achieving a good teacher-student rapport are very desirable aims, would certainly enhance the effectiveness of language learning, and therefore should be greatly encouraged. Usually, chatting in L1 before the start of the lesson to reduce student anxiety or telling jokes in L1 is often conducted in the classroom. But Harbord (1992 : 354) warns that when many effective L2 strategies are available to the teacher, the advantage of L1 use for this purpose would seem to be outweighed by the potential danger, although he does not make clear what the potential danger is. Besides, he suggests that alternative strategies might include telling simple jokes or chatting to the students in L2 before the lesson or during breaks, and being prepared to reveal as much personal information about oneself as one asks of the students. Needless to say, his suggestion is an ideal and every effort should be made to realize that ideal. However, the problem is that there are certainly some students in the classroom who cannot understand even a simple joke in English or despise English itself. To such students, a simple joke in English might be a burden or, sometimes, a confidence-losing or loneliness-raising factor especially when he finds other students laughing at hearing the joke. When teachers find some students don't understand what they are saying, they should speak in L1 or in both L1 and L2. What is most important in achieving teacher-student rapport in the classroom would be to reveal the teacher's eagerness to have students understand by any means what he/she is saying, using every possible means including L1 use.

### 3. Using L1 to facilitate learning of L2

The final category will be concerned principally with the following two: (1) provoking discussing and speculation or developing clarity of speaking and writing in L2

through the exploration of ideas in L1, and (2) the evaluation of strategies which aim specifically at aiding L2 acquisition through comparison with L1. The strategies in the first group are effective when the process of learning a foreign language is presented 'not as the acquisition of new knowledge and experience, but as an extension or alternative realization of what the learner already knows' (Widdowson, 1979: 111). L2 learners have already acquired knowledge and experience about their life. Seen from linguistic ecology, it is natural that all that one has acquired in the process of L1 acquisition transfers to L2 learning. Then, why not make use of that, although it may cause a risk of overgeneralization etc.? Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992: 183-215) elaborately examined English compositions written by 48 Japanese university students, and their findings suggest that the use of the first language enables many students to explore ideas fully on their own intellectual and cognitive levels and that those whose second-language skills are so limited as to impede discovery of meaning through second-language writing can benefit from invention and exploration of ideas in their first language, especially in the prewriting and planning stages.

The strategies in the second group function quite differently. They have two purposes: the first is to make students realize the hazards of translation and teach them to exercise a conscious check on the validity of their unconscious translation; and the second is to teach them ways of working towards what Widdowson (1978: 18) refers to as 'translation.....at the level of use' (i.e. transferring meaning into L2) rather than the word-for-word translation that occurs when the learner's unconscious need to make assumptions and correlations between languages is ignored. One of the strategies in this area would be, as Duff (1989: 51) recommends, the use of exercises involving the translation of single words or phrases in context. Whereas translation out of context encourages students to translate word for word, translation within a specific context, by contrast, makes them more fully aware of the problems of single-word translation. If we use L1 effectively, it will help students to understand that what works in their mother tongue may not work in English. Harbord (1992: 355) suggests that one experimental technique of a similar nature is to give students a text in the mother tongue with selected words or phrases in English, and says that this may serve as a vocabulary pre-teaching exercise or equally as a revision activity.

#### IV. Conclusion

The point I would like to make in this discussion on the rights and wrongs of using the mother tongue is that translation, and indeed use of the mother tongue generally, should be employed in such a way as to help students increase their awareness of the inevitable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language that occurs



during any type of language acquisition. In this sense, word-for-word or sentence-for-sentence translation out of context as is often seen in the Japanese classrooms of English language teaching should be avoided. However, we also have to admit that there are cases in which sentence translation has the effect of checking comprehension, since a sentence, such as 'He fell victim to his passion', would not be understood (at least by Japanese students) without the translation, even if the meaning of every word is clear. Therefore, teachers would be required to be aware of when, how and why to use L1, that is to say, the proper use of L1.

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