

The Use of the Mother Tongue and Translation in Foreign Language Instruction

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Abstract. The writer has observed that some EFL Saudi Teachers abuse or overuse the mother tongue and translation in the course of their work, whilst others still maintain that the mother tongue and translation have no place in foreign language instruction. In the light of this problem, the writer endeavours to review and discuss the arguments for and against the use of the mother tongue and translation in the foreign language classroom, in an attempt to indicate that there is nothing wrong with this as long as the teacher knows when and how to use them. The writer then provides some general guidelines for the proper use of the mother tongue and translation in foreign language instruction.

Introduction

Since the attack on the Grammar Translation method, the use of the mother tongue (henceforth, MT) and translation (henceforth, T) in foreign language (henceforth, FL) instruction had been a controversial topic. Green points out that this topic "... usually generates heat more than light" [1, p. 217]. However, it is the contention of this writer that the MT and T, if used properly can be highly important and useful instructional tools in the teaching of FL.

It has been the observation of this writer, based on years of direct involvement as a teacher, consultant, and researcher in teaching English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) in Saudi Arabia, that some EFL teachers in the Saudi public schools abuse or overuse the MT and T in the course of their work. Yet some others still maintain that the use of MT and T has no place in the EFL classroom. Both situations are extreme and questionable. Hence, in an attempt to arrive at some general guidelines for the proper use of MT and T, the present paper will review and discuss some of the main points of the arguments for and against this use. It is hoped that this paper will contribute, in the end, to the improvement of the teaching and learning of EFL in Saudi Arabia and in other comparable situations.

Definition of Terms

In the context of this paper “the use of the MT and T” refers to utilizing them as instructional tools for the purpose of facilitating teaching and learning the FL when the teacher and the students speak the same MT.

“Translation” in the present paper does not mean the advanced skill of rendering a given text from one language into another, but it is what Hammerly calls “natural translation” and defines as “... the much simpler activity of providing across-language conceptual equivalents of everyday sentences ...” [2, p. 312].

The Case against the Use of MT and T

The argument against the use of the MT and T in the FL classroom is mainly based on the behavioristic psychological theory and, specifically on the views of one of its best know proponents, namely B.F. Skinner [3]. This argument can be summarized in the following main points:

- 1) Language is a behavior and language learning is a habit formation process; therefore, FL learning is like acquiring a new set of habits. Thus any reference to or use of the old habits, i.e. the MT, will results in or enhance interference in the new habits, i.e. the FL.
- 2) FL is best attained by analogy and through an inductive approach. As a result, any reference to the MT, or its use during the process of learning a foreign language, will hinder the learner’s direct and unconscious thinking in that foreign language.
- 3) The precise meanings of many of the FL words, expressions, and sentences can be understood and learnt only through the use of the FL itself because they are culturally exclusive to that language. Consequently, the translation of these words, expressions, or sentences will distract the FL learner from understanding their true and precise meanings.

Adhering to these principles and other minor ones, some FL methods and approaches either explicitly or implicitly have banned or warned against the use of the MT and T: for example, the Direct method, the Audio-lingual method, the Total Physical Response method, and the Silent Way method.

Moreover, there are also some FL teaching specialists who reject the use of the MT and T. For example, Bolitho argues that it is difficult for the novice teacher to decide when to use or not to use the MT; therefore, his students will find him inconsistent in his use of the FL [4, p. 110]. He adds that no matter how long and tedious

the explanation of the meaning of a FL word by the direct method is, the satisfaction of understanding it is greater and its effect is permanent [4, p. 111]. Bolitho goes on to argue that if the FL teacher uses the MT in the classroom, his students will lose the will and motivation to learn and communicate in the FL [4, p. 112]. He points out that the association between a word or a phrase and its meaning might be exclusive to the culture of the FL [4, p. 113]. He finally concludes that translation should be used as an end and not as a means [4, p. 114].

The Case for the Use of the MT and T

The theoretical basis for advocating the use of the MT and T lies in the Cognitive Learning theory and the Generative-Transformational linguistic theory. An important concept in the cognitive learning theory is meaningful learning. Ausubel, a proponent of this theory, states: "The acquisition of large bodies of knowledge is simply impossible in the absence of meaningful learning" [5, p. 61]. Cognitive psychologists maintain that the learner's mind is not a *tabula rasa* as the behavioristic theory claims, but it is an active agent in the learning process. The mind processes the information introduced to it. For good and effective learning, this information has to be meaningful. The learner first comprehends the information; then he organizes it into meaningful blocks, which he relates to information that is already available in his cognitive structure.

FL learning, like any other type of learning, will proceed in the way described above. The learner will have to understand the FL elements and messages first so that he can learn them effectively. He will also have to rely on his prior knowledge of language, which is his MT, and relate to it his FL learning to help facilitate his own learning. Thus the FL learner is heavily dependent on his MT at the beginning. Ellis (1985) after a thorough review of the research on the role of MT in FL acquisition, concludes:

The L1 [First Language] is a source of knowledge which learners will use both consciously and subconsciously to help them shift the L2 [Second Language] data in the input and to perform as best as they can in the L2 ... if the SLA [Second Language Acquisition] is viewed as a development process then the L1 can be viewed as contributing factor to this development, which in the course of time, as the learner's proficiency grows, will become less powerful" [6, p. 40].

Chomsky, the founder of the Generative-Transformational linguistic theory, criticizes Skinner's view of language learning. He minimizes the idea that language learning is merely habit formation and process of imitation and reinforcement. He maintains that a child is born with an innate ability to acquire language namely, a language acquisition device (LAD) through which the child applies a set of universal grammatical rules to the language he is attempting the learn [7;8, pp. 26-58]. The

child goes through some processes of hypothesis testing and developmental stages to transform his innate knowledge into the surface structure of his MT [9].

Although second language acquisition research has not confirmed the absolute equality of first and second language acquisition, similar processes seem to act in both kinds of learning [6, pp. 64-68]. Hence, one can conclude that the cognitive view of second language acquisition does not rule out a contribution from the first language. Taylor maintains that the use of the MT by the beginning language learner is one way of demonstrating a psychological process of dependence on prior knowledge to facilitate the learning of the FL [10, pp. 391-399]. Sridhar indicates that the FL learner's MT can serve as one of the inputs into the process of hypothesis testing [11, pp. 85-90].

Evidently, the cognitive view of FL learning sees the use of MT and T by the learner in the initial stages as a strategy to facilitate his own learning and use of the FL until sufficient knowledge has been acquired enough to be able to do without MT and T. Thus interference is regarded as an aid to the learner rather than an obstacle.

The Doctrine of Compromise

The influence of the Cognitive Learning theory of FL has led some FL methodologies and approaches to allow use of the MT in the FL teaching: for example, Cognitive-code Learning, the Community Language Learning, and the Suggestopedia method.

"The Doctrine of Compromise" in the use of MT and T seems to be the trend among the FL specialists who allow the use of MT and T [4, p. 217]. For example, Taylor states: "We realise that you cannot just make blanket statements like all translation is bad" [12, p. 56]. Wilkins believes there is no need to insist on the total banishment of all use of the mother-tongue from the classroom [19, p. 83] and Finocchairo thinks translation is of greater value when both the FL teacher and his students speak the same native language [14, p. 160].

Finocchairo [14, pp. 160-162], French [15, pp. 140-142], Green [1, pp. 217-223], Taylor [12, pp. 56-65], Secherer [16, pp. 108-229] and Widdowson [17, p. 18] see nothing wrong in the use of MT and T as long as the FL teacher knows when and how to use them.

In addition to that, there is some experimental research that confirms the advantages of the use of the MT and T. For example, Dodson [18], Mishima [19], Lim [20, pp. 66-76] and Sastri [21, pp. 24-28] found from their experiments that the FL instruction that included the use of MT and T was more effective than the one that used the target language alone.

Some Guidelines for the Proper Use of the MT and T

The following guidelines are only some of the more important ones that have been suggested for the use of the MT and T in FL instruction:

1. The use of the MT and T is allowable when the FL teacher feels that it is inevitable as a result of a breakdown in communication with the students, especially in the case of beginners. Taylor warns that such a breakdown "... often comes to a dumbshow, because the pupils just don't hear the language being taught" [12, p. 56].

2. We do not always know what goes on the FL learner's mind while he is learning a FL. For example, when only visual aids and a monolingual method of FL instruction are used in the beginning stages of learning a FL, the learner might have to rely on guesswork which sometimes produces confusion and uncertainty; therefore, we can avoid all of that by using the MT and T to reassure ourselves and the student that the material imparted to him is well understood. Wilkins explains:

.... there are occasions, even in the initial teaching of meaning itself, when we will want to use translation, perhaps because the use of the linguistic and non-linguistic context of the target language will lead to confusion and ambiguity Where it is important that explanations and instructions should be understood quite unambiguously, there is no reason why they should not be given in the mother-tongue [13, p. 85].

Hammerly conducted an experiment to investigate FL learners' accuracy in interpreting FL words taught to them through pictures. He found that 25% to 60% of his experiment subjects who were learning French and Russian as a FL misinterpreted or were not sure of their interpretation of five pictures which depicted concrete objects [22, pp. 119-125].

Moreover, Brown gives this account of a personal experience of learning Japanese in a "total immersion" course where the teacher insisted on avoiding the students' MT:

But the insistence on avoiding the first language sometimes seems to lead to a great waste of time and to problems children [learning their first language], for some reason, seem not to have. One long morning my teacher tried to put across three *vrbs*, *kimasu*, *yukimasu*, and *kaerimasu*, with the aid of paper and pencil drawings of pathways and persons and loci, and by much moving of herself and of me — uncomprehendingly passive as a patient in a hospital. But I could not grasp the concept. I feel Mr. Berlitz would have suffered no great dishonor if she had said to me that the concepts in question sometimes go by the names *come*, *go*, and *return* [23, p. 5].

3. It has already been established that as the FL knowledge develops, one's reliance on the MT weakens. Hence, the use of the MT and T should be progressively abandoned. Wilkins advises that:

.... one would insist that once the learner's competence has progressed to a level where the foreign language itself can be understood clearly, there will be no need to use the mother-tongue [13, p. 83].

4. Word for word translation is rejected. Taylor insists that it should be done at the utterance level [12, p. 57]. Widdowson explains that when translating at the utterance level:

“ the learner would recognize that acts of communication, like identification, description, instruction and so on, are expressed in the foreign language in one way and in his own language in another. He would; therefore, equate two sentences with reference to their use in communication [17, p. 18].

5. Rivers et al. confirm that the use of MT and T is:

“ useful for clarifying the meaning of certain abstract concepts, some functional words and logical connectives, and some idiomatic expressions which context alone does not illuminate [24, p. 327].

6. Mukattash reports that 23% of the errors of adult Arabic speakers in English is due to interference from Arabic [25]. Hammerly suggests:

The best way to make interference disappear is to learn different responses in the presences of the cause of the interference, that is, in the presence of the native language [2, p. 316].

Hence contrast and comparison, at the meaning level, between the FL and the MT in the areas of the interference errors should help in eliminating them.

7. As one of three principles that he set for the use of the MT and T, Taylor states: “..... all translation into the learner's mother tongue must be given after the new linguistic material has been presented [12, p. 57].

Conclusion

The main FL teacher's task is to facilitate learning. Stern states:

.... We interpret language teaching widely so as to include all activities intended to bring about language learning. Having made this clear, it would be pedantic always to speak of teaching and learning [26, p. 21).

Hence, some of the strategies that are used by the FL learners to facilitate their own learning such as the use of the MT and T, can be sometimes exploited by their teachers as teaching techniques for the same purpose.

Finally, it is hoped that this paper has shed some light, with little or no heat at all, on the topic of the use of MT and T and provided a better understanding of it.

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استخدام اللغة الأم والترجمة في تدريس اللغة الأجنبية

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ملخص البحث. لاحظ الباحث أن بعض مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المدارس السعودية يكثرون من استعمال اللغة الأم (العربية) والترجمة أو يسيئون استخدامها أثناء تدريسهم، بينما هناك آخرون مازالوا يؤمنون بأن اللغة الأم والترجمة ليس لهما مكان في تدريس اللغات الأجنبية، وفي ضوء تلك المشكلة يسعى هذا البحث لاستعراض ومناقشة الآراء التي تؤيد أو ترفض استخدام اللغة الأم والترجمة في عملية تعليم اللغات الأجنبية. ويحاول البحث الإشارة إلى أنه ليس هناك ما يمنع من استخدام اللغة الأم والترجمة طالما أن المدرس يعرف متى وكيف يستخدمها. وبعد ذلك يطرح البحث بعض الإرشادات العامة لاستخدام الصحيح للغة الأم والترجمة في تدريس اللغات الأجنبية.