

Using Translation in L2 Classes Re-thought

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ملخص:

اختلفت الآراء حول مسألة الطريقة الأمثل لتعليم وتعلّم اللغات الأجنبية، فمن الباحثين من يرى في استخدام اللغة الأم فائدة ويعتبر إيّاها قناة هامة لإيصال المعلومات إلى المتعلّم وتمكينه من فهم النصّ الأصلي، بينما لا يُحبّذ فريق آخر اللّجوء إلى اللغة الأم أو الترجمة مهما كانت المصاعب. إنّ ذلك حسب رأيهم قد يشكّل عائقا ما دامت اللغة الأجنبية نابعة من وسط حضاري وثقافي تُعبّر فيه الأفكار بشكل مختلف، وعليه بات من الضروري إعادة التفكير في استخدام الترجمة. فإنّ نصحنا بعدم اعتبارها أمرا "محرمًا" في تعليم وتعلّم لغة أجنبية ما، فكذلك لا نرى ضرورة الاعتماد عليها وسيطا أساسيا دون قيد أو شرط، فهي مهما كان تمثل مجالا آخر له أسسه وقواعده، ومن هذا المنطلق بات التفكير في حلول أخرى أمرا ضروريا. إنّ ما يحتاج إليه المتعلّم يتجاوز معرفة قواعد اللغة النحوية ونظامها الصوتي إلى مهارة أو كفاءة أخرى تتمثّل في القدرة على التعبير عن أفكاره بالطريقة التي تعود عليها ويفهمها ويتقبلها المستعمل الأصلي للغة الأجنبية.

Abstract:

The use of L1 in L2 classes has been a debatable issue among scholars. We try here to examine the divergent points of view concerning the use of L1 in teaching L2 students, and discuss the relevance of L1 as a medium to foreign language acquisition. Some teachers consider L1 as a facilitator which helps acquire L2. They argue that it enables both teachers and learners overcome the linguistic and extra-linguistic features that may constitute an important barrier in the learning process. Others believe that L2 must be a priority. It has to be "imposed" because learning hours are not sufficient in addition to the absence of an appropriate L2 environment. This means that learners' exposure to real situations is very limited. Thus the use of the mother tongue would worsen the situation.

Key terms: language acquisition, extra- linguistic features, learning process, mother tongue.

1. Defining Key terms:

I think it is important to define some key terms prior to any discussion of our topic whether we should approve or ban L1 in teaching L2. In fact, the difference between some concepts is not clear enough which may be a source of misunderstanding. In some other situations, the terms methods or approaches are used interchangeably and may lead to confusion.

1.1 Approach vs. Method:

Approach refers to the different theories about the nature of language learning, the way things are done in classrooms¹. It is the source of practices and principles in language teaching². We may talk about structural approach, communicative approach and so on.

Method refers to “the practical realization of an approach”³. It is reflected by a selection of classroom procedures and relevant teaching techniques. It includes classroom activities, the role of the teacher, and the teaching materials needed to achieve the final goal: implementing the syllabus.

¹) Harmer, J., *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, 3rd ed., Longman, p 62, 2001

²) Richards, J.C. & Rodgers, T.S., *Approaches and Methods in language Teaching*, Cambridge, C.U.P, p 20, 1987.

³) Harmer, op.cit. *Language Teaching* p. 78

Most of the time method is thought of as being developed and established by pedagogues. This may suggest that a teacher is not free since it does not take into account his/her creativity, or the fact that he/she may feel confident enough to develop¹ his/her own approach and methodology i.e. own strategies taking into consideration the classroom realities such as the type of learners and their level.

1.2 Acquisition vs. Learning:

Many consider *acquisition* and *learning* interchangeable terms though they represent two different concepts¹. The first takes place unconsciously whereas the second is conscious. Littlewood explains that acquisition is a subconscious activity which relies on Learner's innate mechanisms². This reminds us of Chomsky's *Language Acquisition Theory* (1975) according to which people are born with a language acquisition device (LAD) and possess a Universal Grammar (UG). This device makes them predisposed to learn any language.

On the contrary, learning is conscious. It is guided through structured courses including instructions and error correction. Vygotsky argues that language is learnt thanks to social interactions with the help of a teacher. Thus, he underlines the

¹) Krashen, S.D., *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, Pergamon, p. 11, 1982

²) Littlewood W., *Foreign and Second Language Learning : Language Acquisition Research and Its Implications for the Classroom*, C.U.P, 1984

importance of the communicative approach and the role of the teacher¹. For other scholars there is a clear separating line between the two concepts. Crystal maintains that acquisition occurs when a foreign language is 'picked up' unconsciously in natural learning situations. This is how an immigrant acquires the language of the host country even though he/she has never been in contact with it before. Learning, on the other hand, takes place in a classroom under the supervision of a teacher².

For us, the *learning process* comprises both acquisition and learning. Before studying a foreign language, a person has already learnt a mother tongue using both innate and conscious processes part of which can be reused for a new language.

2.Teaching Methodologies & the Use of L1 in L2 Classes:

The use of L1 in L2 classes has gone through three main steps:

- a- *The Grammar Translation Method* (GTM) which has been largely criticized. It is based on the unconditional use of L1. It has a very limited scope since it does not encourage creative output, nor encourage students to communicate through the foreign language.

¹) Vygotsky L., *Interaction Between Learning and Development of Children*, New York: Scientific American Books, pp. 34-40, 1978

² -Crystal, D., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge: C.U.P, 1987

- b- *The Post Reform Methods* considered as an alternative to the failure of the GT method. It bans L1 in L2 teaching and learning, and considers that the exposure of the learner to the *L2 only possibility* puts him in real situations and favors imitation and later creativity. Proponents of the Post Reform Methods justify their position by the fact that L1 acquisition takes place without resorting to another language. Thus, L2 can be acquired in the same way, without the help of L1.
- c- *The Pragmatic informed Positions* which represent a change of attitude from total unconditional use or complete opposition to *partial acceptance*. This position could be considered as a hybrid method which targets L2 with a limited use of L1. This change in position is reflected in many text books. The famous and successful Oxford **Headway** series use translation activities to compare L1 structures to those of L2, not for the sake of translation or explaining vocabulary via L1, but to evaluate and check the extent of assimilation. In France, the exercises instructions in English text books are written in French to make the learner feel confident at the beginning of an activity.

2.1 Using L1 in L2 classes: A Facilitator?

Using L1 in L2 classes does not mean we should encourage a return to the largely criticized Grammar Translation Method, nor transforming EFL classes into translation sessions. **Firstly**, translation is another distinct field with own methodologies. A would be translator is trained according to specific strategies requiring the mastery of both source and target languages. **Secondly**, using translation may prove useless since equivalence is not always possible even between two close languages such as French and English. **Thirdly**, there is also an important factor to take into account. The translation method presupposes that the learner masters L1. Is it always the case? It is obvious that using translation can become a two edge sword. Instead of being a facilitator, it changes into a distractor which makes the learner deviate from the real objective, the one of acquiring linguistic and communicative competence in the FL.

Professionals, I mean teachers or at least experienced ones, are conscious that there is no perfect method. They know that any method has its weaknesses and limitations. In addition, experience suggests that how to teach and what method to adopt are in fact imposed by classroom reality (-ies), by facts such as learners' needs and their socio-cultural context which differ from one person to another, and thus from one group of students to another. Therefore, a teacher should decide to teach differently making use of a pluralistic

approach. For example, combining the structural approach with the communicative one has proved fruitful.

2.2 Re-introducing translation in teaching L2: How and what for?

In this perspective, we should rethink about reintroducing translation or *conditional use of translation*, in such a way to guarantee appropriate and judicious results. On the one hand, it should help students learn easily and feel confident. On the other hand, it should not create dependency and generate cognitive laziness (spoon feeding). A teacher is defined as a facilitator which implies being both a resource and a prompter. Thus, his/her role is to encourage learners communicate in L2, make them understand that fluency comes first before accuracy. But since communicative competence depends on other competences (pragmatic, socio-linguistic, and socio-cultural), students may feel frustrated and discouraged if they do not possess the required knowledge and competency to act in given situations. This is how they lose frequency and the feeling of satisfaction, so important in the learning process. Sometimes the cause is a mere word or expression. The facilitator (the teacher) and why not a classmate may intervene and help. It takes perhaps time to explain an abstract term such as 'faith', and the explanation may lead to confusion, but a second is sufficient to 'whisper' it in L1. It is a suitable way to avoid breaking the rhythm of communication and making it boring. This may be true and

acceptable to a certain extent. Nonetheless, what learners need is in fact using the language in context, the way it is used and understood by native speakers.

3. Exposure to L2:

I have learnt from my teaching experience which lasted more than two decades in secondary school education, followed by ten years at university that even though students are able to get more than the average in different examinations, many of them encounter a difficulty to communicate in English. This is due to the fact that they have been taught the grammar, the morphology, and the phonology of the language without being really exposed to its use in context, the only way to foster their communicative competence and help them gain self-confidence.

Despite all the efforts in the classroom, learners' pragmatic competence remains insufficient and results in the misuse of L2. A very good example would be a situation where the learner uses (*excuse me*) instead of (*pardon*) when he/she wants the speaker to repeat something that he/she has not heard clearly. Yule describes such a situation as “*knowledge gap*” or “*pragmatic failure*” due to the many differences existing between L1 and L2 cultural knowledge ¹. In fact, failing to use the appropriate language may be

¹Yule, G., *Pragmatics*, Oxford, O.U.P, 1996

perceived by the interlocutor as a sign of ignorance which causes misunderstanding.

However, these disparities should not be thought of as an obstacle that hinders L2 learning. Nedar advises to raise learners' awareness about "the new cultural information to encourage them understand "how cultural aspects influence the native speakers' use of language" ¹.

Conclusion:

To sum up, using L1 in teaching L2 is not **a must**, it is rather a choice which needs to be re-thought and re-examined. Instead of considering it a "taboo" or a "sin", we should use it as a mediational tool. But we must keep in mind that our aim is to gain communicative competence in L2, and that translation is another field with its own characteristics. What teachers need more is to focus on pragmatic competence. Their role should not be limited to teaching grammar and lexis, but rather develop their students' communicative ability. This can be achieved through pair work and group work activities during which the learners are encouraged to use L2 in context i.e. in real situations. What is required is to shift from "spoon

¹Nedar B., "The Need for Intercultural and Socio-pragmatic Competence in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching" in Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intercultural Communication. Ed. By A.Bedmarek et and Witczak-Lisiecka, I. Poland: WSSM.PP 77-88, 2011

feeding” into providing students with opportunities to practice L2. It is the best way to ensure communicative appropriateness and efficiency.

خاتمة:

نستنتج مما سبق أنّ استعمال اللغة الأم في تعليم لغة أجنبية ليس ضرورة حتمية، بل هو خيار علينا إعادة التفكير فيه، وتفحصه من جميع جوانبه. لا يجب اعتباره من المحظورات. وما نوصي به هو الاعتماد عليه مثل أيّ وسيلة تقوم بدور الوسيط. ومع ذلك كلّه لا ينبغي أن يغيب عن أذهاننا أنّ الهدف المنشود هو بلوغ الكفاءة الاتصالية في اللغة الأجنبية وأنّ الترجمة مجال آخر له خصوصياته. أمّا الحديث عن تحقيق عملية اتّصالية مناسبة وناجحة فيقودنا إلى الانتقال من تلقين قواعد اللغة وتدعيم الرصيد من المفردات إلى الاهتمام أكثر بالجانب التداولي أي استخدام اللغة في سياقات مختلفة بطريقة يفهمها ويتقبلها المستخدم الأصلي للغة.