

Should Foreign Language Teaching be Supported by Mother Tongue?

Müfit Şenel
mufitsenel@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to focus on the importance of mother tongue in foreign language classrooms. During the last two decades it has been an active area of debate to whether activate the mother tongue in foreign language teaching or not. In this research it is suggested that foreign language should be supported by mother tongue teaching instead of dismissing it a priori. This article also makes the point that brief episodes of switching to mother tongue can function as a learning aid to improve the communicative competence of the foreign language learner.

Key words: foreign language classroom, mother tongue, communicative competence

ÖZET

Bu yazı yabancı dil sınıflarında ana dilin önemini belirlemeyi hedeflemektedir. Yabancı dil sınıflarında ana dilin kullanılıp kullanılması tartışması son 20 yıldır etkinliğini sürdürmektedir. Bu araştırmada ana dili soyutlamaktansa, yabancı dil öğretiminin ana dille desteklenmesi gerektiği önerilmektedir. Ayrıca ana dilin kısa bölümler halinde kullanılmasının da yabancı dil öğrencisinin iletişimsel yetisini geliştirmesine yardımcı olacağına yine bu makalede değinilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: yabancı dil sınıfı, ana dil, iletişimsel yeti

1. Introduction

The use of mother tongue in foreign language classrooms resulted from one of the most longstanding controversies in the history of language pedagogy: the role of L1 on L2 teaching. This does not mean that the argument is over. This issue is still discussed. Though most of the language teachers are against the use of mother tongue in language classrooms, if considered carefully, there are many ways and benefits to activate mother tongue in foreign language teaching. For example, it can be a mean to activate shy or introvert students to take part in classroom activities especially in crowded classes in Turkey.

However, this does not mean that the native language of the speaker should be an important component and/or source for foreign language classes, but when used appropriately and related to the aims and the objectives of the course, there can be no doubt that it will be easier to meet the program requirements. As Mackey (1965:107) states that the learning of one language in childhood is an evitable process; the learning of second language is a special accomplishment. Thus, it may not be appropriate to base L2 learning on the linguistic knowledge of L1, but L1 consciously or unconsciously provides the guidelines in L2 learning.

Mother tongue support can be considered as a teaching strategy in foreign language teaching. There are three ways to activate this strategy in foreign language teaching. They are:

1. current applications of grammar translation method in language teaching
2. practice through translation from and into L2
3. comparison between L1 / L2

In terms of a literature review it may be quite beneficial to start with the principles and classroom applications of the grammar translation method (henceforth, GTM) because there can be no doubt that the first step of activating mother tongue in language classes is to consider the applications of the GTM.

2. Current Applications of Grammar Translation Method in Language Teaching

GTM known as the Prussian Method is one of the oldest methods used in language teaching. This method was also named as the classical Method in the past because it was first used to teach the classical languages like Latin and Greek. The first purpose of this method was to help the students read and admire foreign language literature by the help of their native language. This method aimed to make students familiar with their native language and thus help them to speak and write in their native language better by studying the grammar of the target language.

A traditional language classroom, in which GTM was used, starts with a literary text in the target language since the fundamental purpose of learning a language was to be able to read its literature. As can be understood, in the GTM, comprehension of the text was quite important. On the other hand, about the first language influence on second language word reading Wooley (1999:447) states, “.....an enhanced understanding of basic process in L2 will contribute to the building of a model of L2 reading that can stand independent of assumptions based on L1 models.” This explanation can be accepted as the current status of GTM in reading skills. Now, most of the linguists and language teachers believe that enabling use of GTM in reading comprehension exercises will result in failure in L2 production. However, in GTM, after reading the text, the students were asked to translate it from the target language into their native language. At this step, the formal (structural) application of the native tongue was more important than the functional interpretation of the translation. Here, the teacher paid great attention to the accuracy in language use rather than spoken communication in language. As Krashen (1987:128) mentions, “It can be claimed that grammar translation provides scraps of comprehensible input. The model sentences are usually understandable, but the focus is entirely on the form, and not on meaning ... students are forced to read word by word, and consequently rarely focus completely on the message. The sentences use in the exercises may be comprehensible, but here again, as in the model sentences; they are designed to focus the students on form.” The above lines of Krashen obviously reflect the structural focus of GTM. Though it helps students improve comprehension in the target language, if not carefully directed

by the language teacher, as stated before, the students face a high affective filter which overemphasizes the foreign language process.

In this respect, there is no need to go into details of GTM since it is one of the most experienced methods in time. However, what is more important is to consider the developments after GTM. This method was widely used in language classrooms after its birth. It was used as a tool to practice language items in terms of translation from L2 to L1.

3. Practice through Translation

When talking about translation, most people think of it as a means of communication or a process of transferring meanings from one language to another. On the other hand, translation is also accepted as an activity confined to those who have already achieved an advanced level of language proficiency. However, from the point of view of the language teachers, it is not only a means of communication but also a tool that can help students to understand and use the target language more clearly and accurately. About this issue Calderado(1998) states, “ developing such skills in translation, students will be an important contribution to their performance as future translators with the proficiency that shall ensure their walking up the steps of the quality ladder.” According to Calderado, translation enables us to learn a large number of expressions, being able to identify style markers and to get to know more about the language structure to improve students’ performance. It is accepted that during the last two decades, the Communicative Approach, has come to play a dominant role in language teaching. Although several methods have been developed, they all seem to be influenced by the principles of the Communicative Approach. Communicative Approach gave importance to the communicative competence of the learner rather than his core linguistic knowledge. Though most of the books written to teach English as a foreign language are influenced by the Communicative Approach, they still have some sections on translation for several purposes. The following lines from Cook (1991:3) summarize the function of these two methods in language acquisition. According to him, “teaching methods usually incorporate a view of L2 learning whether implicitly or explicitly. Grammar translation

teaching emphasizes explanations of grammatical points because this fits in with its view that L2 learning is the acquisition of conscious knowledge. Communicative teaching methods make the students to talk to each other because they see L2 learning as growing out of communication.”

It is important to remind that the purpose of the use of translation in the foreign language classroom is not the major aim but a tool to improve and promote success in language classes by the help of L1. Thus, L1 is used to clarify meaning, to check the understanding in a text or listening conversation, to interpret and clarify the new vocabulary, and to narrow the culture gap by the help of translation. Translation also provides the opportunity for the foreign language learner to detect his mistakes in the use of his native language. About this issue Larson (1984:5), in his book *Meaning-based Translation*, claims, “we are familiar with the kind of mistakes nonnative speakers of a language make. If analyzed, these errors almost always reflect the lexical and the grammatical forms of person’s mother tongue.” Thus, translation does not only provide opportunities to detect the errors in the target language, but also in the native language of the speaker as well. In this respect the teacher can also give importance to the teaching of the problematic areas in the learner’s native tongue. Moreover, about the L1 transfer in L2 comprehension and L2 production, as Ringbom (1992:85) mentions, “the transfer is defined as the influence of L1 based elements and L1 based procedures in understanding and producing L2 text... What should be emphasized is that transfer is at least as important in comprehension as it is in production....Transfer should be seen in relation to the different demands that the four language skills make on the learner.” Shortly, as an addition, Ringbom once more summarizes the importance of information transfer from L1 to L2 and its prominence in target language production. Activating the use of mother tongue in language classes appropriately, the students will not feel lost, introvert and disoriented. Several examples can be given as follows:

1. The translation of isolated words and phrases, idiomatic expressions, cultural expressions from L2 to L1 in written or spoken texts
2. To avoid dull memorization of new vocabulary in target language, dictionaries are used. Dictionaries can lead to insight into the meaning and the use of words and

can be a great reference for students who study texts in the target language. Moreover, a proper and careful use of the dictionaries both for self-study and in the classroom is also a skill that the foreign language learner should acquire.

3. Text translation from L2 into L1 is another widely used technique in language teaching. It provides opportunities for the learners to examine the texts closely, to discuss the structural and the functional differences in the two languages, to clarify meaning, and to experience more about the lexical and the syntactic features of the target language.
4. Enabling teacher controlled translation exercises in the foreign language classes guide learners for conscious translation. In other words, controlled translation exercises disable the development of language habits, like the tendency to translate every structure before performing a verbal action. In this way, the students learn to what extent they should use translation in their language classes and to what extent it is beneficial for their language proficiency.
5. Translation is also widely used by the academic staff and students at the universities. Paraphrasing and summarizing which the university instructors refer for their academic studies to avoid plagiarism. Summarizing and paraphrasing are two of the current applications of translation used actively by foreign language learners for developing writing skills. About the positive effects of first language on second language writing Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992:185-186) state, “ given the demanding of second language composing processes, composition researches and teachers have begun to acknowledge the positive role of first language in second language writing. Second language writers have been observed to employ their first language to get ‘a strong impression and association for essays’ and produce essays ‘of better quality in terms of ideas, organization and details and to ‘meaningfully link image to work.’ In the lines above, Kobayashi and Rinnert state the dominant role of L1 knowledge in L2 writing. L1, in this respect, should be accepted as an important reference and guider for success in L2 writing. Perhaps, summarizing and paraphrasing are the two current applications of this explanation in m modern language classes today.

To brief, the main objective in applying these techniques and activities to language classrooms is to give support to foreign language learners to gain insight and experience in the target language. In this way the students also develop their comprehension as well. By doing so, the learners do not only achieve these goals but also find the opportunity to learn more about the philosophy of foreign language. Thus, the student starts with a comparative study of the cultural component underlying the philosophy of the target language he is learning.

4. Comparison between L1 and L2 – Language and Culture

When considered carefully, the nature of translation depends on contrastive linguistics. You, consciously or unconsciously, transfer data from the target language into your native tongue during translation. Thus, neither the language teacher nor the learner should consider language independently but in relation to other previously known languages. The learners of a foreign language generally face up with the difficulty of understanding cultural clues in the target language. As appreciated, more teacher guidance is required in this case. In other words, translation acts as a cultural operator. About the cultural mediator role of translation, Hewson and Martin (1991:135) state that translation operator can never be secure in this position and if he acquires competence, this competence is partly an ability to reflect and question his own role as a mediator. This means that he must be aware not just of developing language cultures, of developing translation practices, but also the changes brought about in his competence as a result of repeated translation operations. This last point is vital ...for the teaching of translation, and the career of the translator – for the learner, it is important to see translation as a dynamic process...” As Hewson and Martin (1991) suggest, translation is an active mediator which helps us to understand the culture of the target language enabling the use of mother tongue in the language classroom. Several techniques are applicable in this area. These techniques are specifically intended to encourage learners to relate L2 to L1 cultures in a related discourse. Hence, the students need to study discourse functions within texts as well as between source and target texts. The following illustrate some of these techniques:

1. Students read and listen to the text in the target language. Teacher clarifies the cultural points in the native language to avoid misunderstanding and to broaden students' education. The class with the teacher's guidance compares and/or contrasts the sociolinguistic and cultural features in their country/home and in the target language.
2. Related to the first factor, interaction patterns can also be enabled. The students can role play a greeting, introduction or a farewell dialog in both languages to better understand the foreign culture. This also provides the opportunity to practice spoken languages well.

It is possible to give some more examples. The use of mother tongue through translation enables a better understanding of several concepts in the target language such as business letters, application letters, condolence, political news and events, news on TV, documentaries, radio broadcasts, science and technological references, etc.

5. Conclusion

In this paper it is suggested that in the foreign language classroom certain amount of time should be allocated for the use of mother tongue of the learners to enable them ask questions, to clarify and verify meanings, to practice skills-especially reading and speaking- to remove uncertainties, to overcome some psychological barriers of introvert and shy students, and to narrow the cultural gap between L1 and L2. In this case, it is likely that in the early stages of the foreign language learning process the use of native language in the language classrooms may be more appropriate and beneficial if it is controlled and referred when and/or where necessary. It is still argued that the use of mother tongue in the classrooms leaves no independent reference system in the target language and prevents the learner to achieve and live the foreign language as it is. Moreover, it is widely agreed that the foreign language education based on the use of mother tongue does not lead to an efficient foreign language competence. However, the learners of a foreign language satisfy their 'egos' by activating their native language. In such cases, techniques, to use mother tongue as a reference system are of great importance for the students. Comparative and contrastive studies, text analysis,

translations for structural and functional purposes, the use of dictionaries, lexical and syntactic studies through translation provide an important opportunity for the language learners to practice their mother tongue and to satisfy their egos. As Mallikamas (1997) mentions, “ ...translation material is authentic and can be of great variety....since all styles and registers of both spoken and written language are relevant to translation, the students will be exposed to a wide range of language input, not just make-up sentences of the variety normally presented in language textbooks. The reality of the language will help increase both the students’ competence and their productive abilities.”

All in all, from the teacher’s point of view the issue is more complicated. Teachers still do not know whether to give place to mother tongue in foreign language classrooms or not. There has been a hot debate on this issue since GTM was begun to be used by language teachers in 1940s. Thus, it can be said that teachers should carefully apply and control this teaching strategy in their language classes. They should never forget that the purpose is not to expect students do perfect translations but should be to achieve the goals and the objectives of the course by the help of the mother tongue through translation at the correct time when necessary.

References

- Calderado, S. D. (1998). Considerations on Teaching Translation. *Translation Journal*. vol.2,no.3 <http://accurapid.com/journal>
- Cook, V. (1991). *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*. London: Edward Arnold Pub.
- Hewson, L. and Martin Jacky. (1991). *Redefining Translation: The Variational Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Kobayashi, H. and Rinnert C. (1992). Effects of First Language on Second Language Writing: Translation versus Direct Composition. *Language Learning*. vol.42,no.2
- Krashen, D.S. (1987). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Pub.
- Larson, L.M. (1984). *Meaning-based Translation: A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence*. London: University Press of America.

Mackey, W. (1965). *Language Teaching Analysis*. London: Longman.

Mallikamas, P. (1997). Translation as a Language Teaching Technique. *Thai TESOL Bulletin*. vol.10,no.1.<http://www.thaitesol.org>

Ringbom, H. (1992). On L1 transfer in L2 Comprehension and L2 Production. *Language Learning*. vol.42,no.1.

Woolley, W. (1999). First Language Influences on Second Language Word Reading : All Roads Lead to Rome. *Language Learning*. vol.49,no.3.

Müfit Şenel is an Asst.Prof.Dr. at 19 Mayıs University, ELT Dept. He did his M.A. and PhD.studies in English Language Teaching at Hacettepe University. He has been teaching courses such as Teaching Languages to Young Learners,Approaches to ELT, Materials Adaptation and Evaluation, Methodology at 19 Mayıs University ELT Department for about 11 years. He is intersted in Psycholinguistics and Sociolinguistics as well.

