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The use of the mother tongue in language teaching

Lecture notes: Summary and commentary

Last modified 23 May 2009

These notes are both a summary and a commentary. There are several articles available on this subject, and I have chosen this one as a basis for classroom interaction. Ideally students should read this article in advance, and find other material before these notes are read and there is a class discussion. My comments are in *italics*.

Main reference: Butzkamm W 2003. We only learn language once. The role of the mother tongue in FL classrooms: death of a dogma. *Language learning journal Winter 200-3 No 28:29-39*. It is available free at <http://www.itmfl.org.uk/modules/teaching/1a/paper1a4.pdf> and www.fremdsprachendidaktik.rwth-aachen.de/Ww/programmatisches/pachl.html

Introduction

Most English teachers I know of have been taught to never use the L1 in the English classroom. There are good reasons for this, and we all know of lazy teachers who take the easy way out and frequently use L1. But we all know that, even in advanced classes, L1 is used. Even I, as a native speaker of English will use Arabic and French when I think necessary in my lectures. So the question becomes much more sophisticated than either L1. The question becomes how best to control and use L1 towards the higher goal of learning L2.

A. Why monolingualism?

1. p30, Monolingual English teachers
English only textbooks

2. Once started in Arabic, never go back

This is a justified fear. It reminds me of the 'slippery slope' argument, that once you start you will find it impossible to stop just like the first step onto the slippery slope leads to sliding right down the hill. This argument is also called the 'thin end of the wedge' argument, or the 'foot in the door' argument. In all these images, an initial first step is irreversible and leads to more steps along that path.

I like to compare this to the question of whether or not to drink alcohol. I grew up in a family where both parents were teetotal, that means, they would never knowingly drink alcoholic beverages. One of my grandparents had been a miner, in a lower class area of Britain. My father had experienced drunkenness at first hand. One day, his father realised that getting drunk was stupid, and from one week to the next totally changed. He restricted himself to a pint at the pub once a week. My parents also spent their professional lives helping delinquent teenagers. I heard many a sad tale, and almost always alcohol was a contributing factor. My father therefore used to say, "It is the first drink that makes you an alcoholic not the last". It is much easier to say 'no' totally, and from the beginning, than to exercise control and restrict the alcohol.

This illustration of alcoholic drink parallels the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. It is much easier to refuse the L1 totally than it is to control the use of L1. Butzkamm though is arguing for controlled principled use and argues that it can mean L2 is learned quicker.

3. Reactions against Latin style teaching methods
 - a. Lots of drills
 - b. Explanations in English
 - c. Lots of translation

B. Initial ideas to the contrary

1. The MT is the strongest ally - especially for adults.
2. Teaching realities
3. Good teachers when they try to learn another language use their MT
4. Bilingual techniques are found to be superior

Maxim 1: Build upon MT

1. Cannot switch off the MT
2. Translation/transfer will happen. NB, all this depends a lot upon the stage of the learning.
3. Work with it, not against it. Already know the concepts. MT as a scaffolding (*echaffaudage*).

This reminds me of a class I once taught - English for MA students of Sociology. I had totally mixed ability, from almost beginners to advanced students, and they wanted reading practice in Sociology. Therefore, based on an informal and quick needs analysis, in consultation with the head of the MA course and the students, I decided they needed to read English but summarise in French. My French was at least as good as most of the students, and anyway, I was checking content accuracy not French grammar. So I chose some speeches/lectures made by some famous Sociologists, we tried to discuss them first in English, then in French. The examination was similar - they received a ten paragraph speech and were required to summarise it in English or French, and use of a bilingual dictionary was permitted in the examination.

Maxim 2: Imitation and guessing techniques work poorly

I would add they also take a lot of time.

1. "pupils misunderstand more than their teachers realise" p30.
2. Such a method forces artificial text, which has been carefully sequenced and graded.

So, presenting a larger, authentic text, using the MT to explain large parts of it, and studying in detail only small parts of it, is possible once the MT is permitted. This is an important point. Often language teachers make the mistake of presenting only a short text. Yet short texts are notoriously difficult to understand because they lack the context, and the clues to content provided by that context.

Should we not be training people to use longer texts?

Longer texts are far more common in the real world, and are more likely to be authentic.

Use of the mother tongue, including machine translated text can mean that authentic longer texts are studied in the classroom, and the L2 used as a basis for gisting and summarising. Within the longer text, once the main ideas are grasped, there can be focus on the L2 for smaller parts.

Maxim 3: MT makes it easier to have a whole lesson in L2

1. Selective use of MT.
 - a. eg speed translation of new commands.
 - b. eg pupil MT, translated → pupils learn the language they obviously have a need for. Then the teacher can insist on L2 phrases.
 - c. Commonly called the ‘ sandwich technique’, MT-L2-MT. p32b, this is NOT bilingual wordlists, “since it includes the pragmatic aspects of meaning and can render emotional overtones.” The technique gives meaning in context.

Maxim 4: MT can promote authentic message oriented communication

1. Can keep a conversation going. Can enable more complicated communication, at the level needed, rather than restricting it because of inability in L2.
2. “The simple truth is that the call for “real” communication and the ban on MT are conflicting demands”.

My comment: at what level? Beginners and intermediate maybe.

3. There are often real T-P interactions in a classroom, handicapped by L2. Therefore three choices:
 - a. use MT
 - b. ignore the interaction
 - c. sandwich method.

Again, depends on the level and motivation of the class.

No comment on code-switching and diglossia!

4. Students confined to using the L2 they know, when asked to write personally, invent, and twist. This has several consequences
 - a. remoteness from the teacher, no longer seen as really interested in them
 - b. missed opportunity to develop real language.

Maxim 5: MT techniques allow teachers to use richer more authentic texts sooner.

1. Many interesting authentic texts available, which cannot be used because they are too difficult.
 - a. Bilingual texts
 - b. L2 versions of texts first read in L1.
2. Eg Scientific American exists also in French
Eg Many European documents are in French and English
3. Why not use Machine Translation into L1? Then read the original in English.

Maxim 6: Bilingual techniques mean difficult grammar need not be avoided - one simply translates and moves on.

1. Similar to Maxim 5
2. Can clarify grammar by literal MT translations eg “I you see”

Maxim 7: Associate the new with the old

1. Compare my old Latin teacher, who spent 30 minutes deriving English words from Latin roots.
2. Especially valid for related languages
3. Sometimes, it can mean L1 is improved.

Discussions of L2 can lead to improvements in L1. This is because describing L2 leads to greater awareness of what is actually happening in the first language. This is what my Latin teacher did - he would take each word in a vocabulary list and get us to see which English words and phrases were related. At times it meant we were learning more English, and we were certainly learning English word formation.

Maxim 8: Interference can only be reduced, not totally avoided

1. The author says that interference is “knowledge or skills that we do not yet possess”

I find this a very curious definition of interference. Taken to mean what it normally means - the effect of L1 hindering effective and accurate L2, the author is arguing I think that since interference cannot be totally avoided, and is often automatic and subconscious, that by careful use of L1, and by making explicit comparisons between L1 and L2, possibly this interference can be reduced. At this point, what is needed is a careful listing of what influences interference, and a point by point explanation of how to reduce each kind of interference. It is possible that in the long term the MT can be more than a handicap than a help, therefore, for the sake of long term goals, the MT must be minimal even in the early stanges of language learning.

Maxim 9: By not systematically using MT, it IS used, wrongly and harmfully

1. The reality is that MT is often used, and not in a planned systematic way.

Maxim 10: New L2 items need time to sink in

1. Using two codes in parallel, until MT drops out.

The problem is, will it ever drop out? At least those who insist on avoiding L1 completely never face this problem.

Relevant research

1. Natural bilingualism, both languages help each other out.
2. “The proper model for foreign language teaching should really have been not first-language acquisition but rather the natural acquisition of a second language”.

One of the major problems with this article is that several important dimensions are ignored.

1. *Beginners- intermediate- advanced*
2. *Age of the students*
3. *Purpose of learning English - the needs*
4. *Preferred learning styles*