

**Mother Tongue Use in
English as a Foreign
Language Classroom
Context**

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The presentation will highlight some new foundations made in the native language that may well be an advantage for the s/fl learner. How exactly can it hinder or more axactly faster or foster the target language learning? Tow hat extent? How can we make use of this advantage to help the learner speed up his target language learning?

Three main point of activity will be tackled:

- 1. Is the mother-tongue use a facilitation of S/EL learning?*
- 2. If so, which language is to be used in the Algerian EFL university classrooms? French? Arabic? Berber ? and why?*
- 3. How is it used? and to what extent For which purpose ?*

Introduction

This paper will highlight some new foundations made in the Native Language (NL) acquisition that may well be an advantage for second (L₂)/Foreign Language (FL) learning. How exactly can it hinder or more exactly foster the Target Language (TL)? To what extent? How can we make use of this advantage to help the learner speed up his TL learning?

Three main points of activity will be tackled:

- 1- Is the MT use a facilitator of L₂ / FL Learning and why?
- 2- If so, which language is to be used in the Algerian EFL university classrooms, French, Arabic, Berber and why?
- 3- How is it used and to what extent, for which purpose?

When one deals with this hot-burning issue of the Mother Tongue (MT) use in an L2 teaching context, another related fertile question is the one of whether there are similarities or differences between First Language Acquisition (L₁A) and Second Language Learning (SLL).

The processes of L1A and SLL are radically different for a variety of reasons:

1. The age of the learner.
2. The number of hours spent in acquiring a first language is longer and so different from the time spent in SLL.
3. The environmental factors contribute to two different learning situations i.e. "Home-made language versus school-made language".

One factor rarely discussed in comparing First and Second Language Acquisitions (SLA) is the previous knowledge of another language in SLA and yet this seems to account for the crucial differences between the two incidences. In fact, the presence of a Previous Language Knowledge (PLK) can even be accounted for in some issues in third and fourth language learning as well. This paper will explore the impact of a Previous Language Knowledge on L₂ / FL learning in terms of the processes as well as products of learning.

Research findings from different sources agree that there are certain differences between a child's acquisition of his L₁ and the way he learns his L₂ (Ausubel, 1964; McNamara, 1975; Dodson 1981, 1985; Major, 1992; Lining, 1996). It seems illogical to compare the L₁A of a child with the SLL of an adult. This involves drawing direct global conclusions about the two learning processes but with different age-groups-children and adults-having different levels of motivation under different environmental situations.

Differences. L₁A / L₂L.

One of the primary differences between L₁A and SLL lies with the core issue of motivation. The degree of motivation in L₁A is

greater when compared to that in FL Learning. There are a variety of reasons that urge humans to acquire their L₁. Humans are considered to be essentially social beings with a desire to communicate, and complex thinkers who require language to organise their own thoughts.

These theories cannot be refuted, but are they relevant to FL Learning as they are to L₁ Acquisition? Arguably, a speaker of a S/F Language can organise many of his thoughts in his own language. Many people learn a SL solely for interest's sake.

Therefore, motivation in L₁A is higher because in so doing, the child is going to fulfil his linguistic and non linguistic urgent needs. It is an urgent need to acquire a First language. While in L₂ learning, motivation is lower when contrasted with L₁A learners. The individual has at his disposal his own MT to fulfil his urgent needs.

“The older learner is at a totally different level of maturation at the time of learning his L₂. He operates with a different matrix because he always refers to his mother tongue or preferred language to satisfy his linguistic and non-linguistic needs” (Dodson, 1983).

All first language learners achieve a certain level of competence in a language. This is not true of all SL learners. The crucial question is whether a SL learner can achieve the same level of competence as a first language learner. This difference has been thoroughly explained by the “critical period”, but in essence, the difference lies in the fact that there is knowledge of a previous language. This explains that the equilingual is very rare, and the difficulty to reach a native-like proficiency in a S/FL is attributed to the idea of transfer from one language to another. Transfer either positive or negative, overgeneralization or interference, are directly the results of the effects of L₁ on L₂ knowledge. The crucial question that draws our attention is how to make use of the positive transfer to help the learners combat the negative one, mainly if we take into consideration that

“Transfer may affect acquisition without the learner even being aware of it, and indeed even despite some attempts on his behalf to combat them” (Andrea Hill, 1999)

It would be logical to compare L₁A and L₂ Language of the same child, at the same age, with the same or equal exposure to both languages, under the same motivational and environmental circumstances. In other words, one should take the Bilingual child learning his two languages rather than the monoglot child in his sole L₁A as a model. It is worth mentioning that the legitimate similarities between L₁ and L₂L if considered cautiously would help us draw some constructive conclusions about SL/FL Learning/Teaching. What we are heading at is that the notions of interference, positive or negative transfer and even interlanguage are in fact our sea-marks to assert that there is an undeniable truth of a Previous Language Knowledge that will be abbreviated to PLK.

This sulphurous question has been tackled, as early as 1980, by Dodson who argued that a true replication of natural language acquisition is not possible for the simple reason that the older individual has at his disposal his native language or “Preferred Language” to which he refers when learning an additional language.

One of the most provocative studies is the one presented in 1964 by the cognitive psychologist Ausubel who listed the differences between the two learning processes of L₁A and L₂L. He warned that the native language of the learner is not just an interfering factor; it can facilitate L₂L. This is an undeniable truth if one considers in broad terms the positive transfer and negative transfer widely accounted for by Selinker, 1990.

Implications for Teaching EFL in the Algerian Classroom:

The triggering and giant question is about the MT use in the classroom. Is it a facilitator of L₂ Learning? How positively does it affect the Target Language Learning (TLL)? For which purpose? If ever it is used, which language is to be used in the Algerian University classrooms, French or Arabic, and how should we use it?

Should we use the MT in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teaching? Some teachers may argue that the MT use in the classroom would hinder the students' ability to think in the FL. This argument implies that the comers to English language learning should make an absolute abstraction of their previous knowledge of whatever languages they already learnt, a process that is in fact very rarely possible.

Another implication of equal importance is that English language teachers should also make an absolute abstraction of their students' linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds, in other words, adult learners are taken as a tabulae-rasae which is supposed to grasp the language of exposure, in this case English. The Direct Methodists regarded this as a poor teaching and thus banned it from their classrooms. It was and it is widely regarded as a taboo method because of the whole revolution against the grammar translation-method that has not guided the S/FL learners to be communicatively competent. The reason is that this traditional method insisted on grammar and translation teaching rather on communication teaching. In addition, most of the time allocated to the language session was undertaken in the students' MT. In fact the two extremes ought to be avoided in a classroom situation.

Is the MT a facilitator of learning? If so, for which purpose?

In 1980, Carl Dodson, Professor of Education at the U. College of Wales carried out experiments in Wales, Japan, Canada, Sri-lanka, West Germany, New Zealand and India. The experiments were to discover the most efficient way of acquiring and retaining the meaning of new words, new concepts, and new sentences in classroom L₂/FL learning. The study revealed that the best results in terms of speed and quality were reached when the MT equivalent to a new FL word is given by the teacher. The MT equivalent is provided by the teacher as a meaning-conveyor. It facilitates the meaning acquisition of the FL word. It is acquired in less time and quickly retained by the learners who would later use it with greater efficiency and accuracy. It has no detrimental effects on the subsequent learning strategies undertaken in the classroom.

Which Language is to be used in the Algerian Classroom Arabic or French?

One might argue that neither of them is the MT of our students. If we consider the time and the nature of exposure that has been allocated to the learning of Arabic and the one to French, the first is much longer than the later.

Dodson (1980, 1982) used the term “Preferred Language” (PL) rather than MT to refer to competence or ease of use in one of the languages learnt. This term has nothing to do with the desire of bilinguals to use one or the other of the languages. It is a “neutral psychological term” that indicates an individual’s stronger language or Dominant Language (DL). It is the language in which one feels more at home, more at ease on a greater number of occasions in one language rather in the other. A language becomes a preferred one due to the number of contacts or exposure with it. If one follows this notion, Arabic is the PL of the majority of our students learning English because of the time of exposure longer than the one for French.

It is highly important to remind that one of the principles in language teaching is to move with the learners from the known to the unknown. However, some of our teachers, here and elsewhere, provide the French equivalents to the English vocabulary. That entails moving with the learners from one unknown to another unknown word for example explaining the word “intuition” by “l’intuition” remains vague and fuzzy in the mind of the learner. The author’s own experience with this word in the Linguistics module was to provide the equivalent in Arabic / الحدس /, and the feedback was that the students replied with smiling faces that they have studied this notion or concept previously in Philosophy. The teacher is presumably a knower of Arabic. In this situation, the teacher helps his students to enhance their knowledge of the new FL concept and so to move from the known to the unknown. Bearing in mind the PLK of the learners, the MT equivalent is used to bridge the gap between the two languages. The idea remains to build up on what has already been grasped.

Conclusion

The MT or dominant language equivalent-in this case Arabic-when provided by the teacher as a meaning-conveyor fulfils the following purposes:

- 1- It saves time.
- 2- The learner moves from the known to the unknown.
- 3- The new concept will be used with great ease and accuracy.
- 4- The new EFL lexical item is immediately reinforced by means of repetition and use.
- 5- The EFL learner will learn how to switch from one language to another with great ease.
- 6- Most importantly, he will keep the two languages apart.

Instead of the MT use-being a hindrance (problems of interference), the preferred language can be used as a point of reference, of departure, as a token for meaning acquisition. It is a tool for FL attainment. The best results in terms of speed and retention are guaranteed. The method serves as a language-bridge between L₁ and L₂ learning. In sum, this view suggests that to learn a FL effectively, one has to be given an instrument for cancelling the habit of subconscious translation into and from English by a conscious translation or MT equivalent supplied by the teacher, so that one can form a new "Language Center" in his/her brain while learning a FL.

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