The Use of the Mother Tongue in FLL: The Case of Arabic in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

The present paper sheds light on the many advantages that can be drawn from the use of the mother tongue in foreign language learning in general and in the teaching of English in particular. Needless to recall, the use of the mother tongue had for a long time been considered as a 'bad thing' which could do harm to the language learning/teaching process. This view stemmed from the fact that, in an EFL classroom, everything should be done in the target language so as to give the learner maximum exposure to that language. Worse still, the 'never-translate-demonstrate' principle put forward by the direct method advocates had added, so to speak, fuel to the flames. Conversely, the recourse to translation, in our case the use of Arabic with all its different varieties, can be used as a cognitive strategy and a teaching technique by the learner and teacher to facilitate the learning and teaching process respectively. However, the paper tries to redraw a common sense area to decide where and/or where not to use the learners' mother tongue in English classes.

This paper is addressed to our foreign language teachers who have admitted to feeling guilty about the use of the mother tongue (henceforth L1) in their classroom; almost as if they were cheating. Straight away, I say to them, this is ridiculous, for translation, or the use of the mother tongue as a base for understanding and/or producing the target language can be a very effective way of conveying meaning. As Crystal (1989) notes, using L1 in foreign language classrooms can save valuable time that might otherwise be spent on a tortuous and largely unsuccessful explanation in English. For monolingual groups, i.e.

learners with a single linguistic background and culture, it is a valid approach to highlight danger of false friends and deceptive cognates. Yet, the issue in question has always been a bone of contention between foreign language teachers.

The use of the mother tongue in second and foreign language learning has been for a long time the subject of much discussion and a topic of heated debates among applied linguists in general and language teachers in particular. The use of the mother tongue in foreign language pedagogy dates back to the second half of the 19th century with the implementation on sound pedagogical principles of the grammar translation method in the teaching of living languages. It is worth noting that the grammar translation method, also called the classical method, dominated foreign language education for over a century and it still the most dominant method in many countries throughout the world.

However, the advent of recording devices coupled with the emergence of socio-linguistics, a hybrid discipline, part linguistics and part sociology, have both markedly influenced the field of language teaching methodology. However, the novel and important aspect of sociolinguistics has been the elaboration of the concept of *communicative competence*, i.e. the individual's achievement of appropriateness and effectiveness in his choice of language. In a rather practical way, communicative competence is what a person *'needs to*

know in order to communicate effectively in culturally significant situations' (Hymes 1974:75).

Communicative competence has undeniably had a significant effect on the promotion and development of language teaching, thereby giving birth to Communicative Language Teaching in which the use of the mother tongue is assigned no role, or to a lesser extent, is reduced to its strict minimum offering therefore the learner maximum exposure to the target language. Communicative Language Teaching can be a compromise solution between the grammar translation method with its heavy emphasis on the use of the mother tongue in the classroom and the direct method with its 'never-translate-demonstrate' principle.

Proponents of such an approach to language learning have failed to account for a number of factors. A reflection upon the factors in question forms the general lay-out of this paper and our analysis will be made with reference to Arabic in an EFL classroom. The term *Arabic*, however, will be used throughout this paper in its inclusive sense, i.e. to refer to Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth MSA) and Algerian dialectal Arabic. As the issue of L1 has recently been much more important than ever, the present paper strives to provide a framework relating to the effective uses of Arabic as a teaching technique for the teacher and a learning strategy for the learner at different levels in the teaching/learning process of English.

As for the French language, it is another issue, however, we have to talk it though very sketchily as it is, to some extent, part of the Algerian linguistic landscape. In this very specific context, many ELT teachers note that the pupils' poor command of the French language does not help much in explaining English words and structures as it used to be in the past. Apart from a knowledge of the Romance script, spelling and punctuation, most of our pupils' command of the French leaves a lot to be desired. They make this point clearer when they assert that the French language, because of its linguistic affinities with the English language, had contributed enormously and effectively in the development of the English Romance-origin words and consolidation of many aspects of the grammar of English. Arabic becomes a useful aid at the phonetic/phonological level.

At the phonetic/phonological level, as stated above, the Arabic language has its share in facilitating the learning/teaching process. As a matter of fact, it may help a lot in differentiating between sounds as it can be clearly illustrated with the 'th-letter combination' which is sometimes realized as [ذ], phonetically transcribed as [ð] and sometimes as [ث], transcribed phonetically as [θ] as in the words *'then'* and *'thin'* respectively. A comparative analysis between Arabic and English will reveal that the sound system of the two languages has much more in common than that of the French language. Another illustrative example of such evidence at the level of speech-sound similarities in the realizations in terms of allophones of the 't-sound' as alveolar or dental transcribed in script in Arabic as [ت] and [ط]

respectively. The [h] and [dʒ], written in Arabic as [ه] and [ج] respectively are additional illustrative examples of the extent to which Arabic may be a useful aid in consolidating an English-like pronunciation of the aforementioned speech-sounds.

The following table provides illustrative examples of the use of English/Arabic speech sounds:

English sound	Example	Arabic corresponding letter	Arabic script	Phonetic transcription
/ð/	then	[ذ]	ذن	/ðen/
/θ/	thin	[ث]	ثن	/θin/
/t/	Table	[ت]	تيبل	[teibl]
/ṭ/		[ط]	طيبل	[ṭeibl]
/h/	hit	[ه]	هت	
/dʒ/	George	[ج]	جورج	/dʒ:dʒ/

Worth noting also is that the sound system of Arabic can help clearly and precisely in differentiating between long and short vowels as well as diphthongs. For example, *eat* and *it* or *beat* and *bit* are made different in the way the i-sound is pronounced, whether long /iː / as in /I:t/ and /biːt/, or short /I / as in /it/ and /bit/. The long-short-I difference exists in Arabic as distinct scripts: اي and إ, therefore *eat* and *beat* can be transcribed in Arabic-script as 'ايت' and 'بيت' and *it* and *bit* as إت and بت respectively.

Likewise, the speech-sounds [ɒ] and [ɔ:] in *not* and *nought* are made different as follows: نت and نوت

respectively. As for diphthongs, the following table provides an exhaustive list of the English diphthongs transcribed in Arabic script:

Diphthong	Example	Arabic script
[eɪ]	Day	□دي□
[aɪ]	Die	□ضاي□
[ɔɪ]	Boy	□بوي□
[aʊ]	Now	□ناو□
[əʊ]	Show	□شو□
[ɪə]	Here	□هير□
[eə]	Care	□كر□
[ʊə]	Tour	□تو□ر□/□طور□

The use of the germination, or what is called in Arabic الشدة can be used in many instances to illustrate the stress function in the English language, i.e. uttering one syllable louder than the surrounding one(s). In English, there are two kinds of stress: *word stress* and *sentence stress*. In our specific context; the *word stress* is our main concern. The *word stress* occurs in words called *neutrals* used in isolation and serves to indicate their phonological structure, i.e. to indicate which syllable is stressed, as well as their grammatical function, i.e. to distinguish between verbs and nouns. The following table illustrates the contrastive function of the stress or the germination in neutrals:

Initial-stressed syllable (noun)		Final-stressed syllable (verb)	
'object	أبجكت	obj'ect	أبجكت
'control	كنترل	cont'rol	كنترول
'increase	إنكريز	incr'ease	إنكريز
'contact	كنتكت	con'tact	كنتكت
'contract	كنتركت	contr'act	كنترّكت

Likewise, the germination can perform the function of the word stress as regards compounds and phrasal verbs. Here are some examples that can be distinguished by means of germination in compounds:

Examples	Distinctive significance (in Arabic)
'blackboard	صبورة
black'board	لوح أسود
'blackbird	عصفور أسود
black'bird	غراب
'Whitehouse	البيت الأبيض
white'house	بيت ابيض

Here are some examples that can be distinguished by means of germination in phrasal verbs:

Examples	Distinctive significance (in Arabic)
'knock out	فـعـل
knock-'out	اسم
'take away	فـعـل
take-a'way	اسم
'stand by	فعل
stand-'by	اسم

Other applications of Arabic as an aid to facilitating the learning of English are the case of possessive adjectives and pronouns and personal pronouns (used as object), namely *his/her* and *his/hers* and *him/her* respectively. Both Arabic and English make a clear difference at the level of gender. However, in French additional information is expected to be added. Let's look at the following examples:

His book	كتابه	Son livre (à lui)
Her book	كتابها	Son livre (à elle)
It's his	نتاع	C'est le sien (à lui)
It's hers	نتاعها	C'est le sien (à elle)

I gave him a present أعطيته هدية Je lui ai offert un cadeau
(à lui)

I gave her a present أعطيتها هدية Je lui ai offert un cadeau
(à elle)

When necessary, teachers should raise their learners' awareness of the target language and point out the similarities and differences between English, Arabic and to some extent French. This comparative-contrastive approach to language learning is beneficial in several respects, namely to be aware of the structural differences between the languages, and that, for example, the word order in an English simple sentence follows the pattern:

Subject + Verb + Object = *John eats an apple*

The pattern used in French is structurally the same:

Subject + Verb + Object = *John mange une pomme.*

Whereas in Arabic, the pattern used is:

Verb + Subject + Object = يأكل جون تفاحة

In this way, the teacher is in a position to know which structures are difficult and possibly more importantly, which structures are easy and need little attention.

The English-Only-Policy, drawing on one of the fundamental principles of the Direct Method *"Never translate, demonstrate"* as well as on one of the characteristics of the Oral Approach *"The target language is the language of the classroom"*, needs to be reconsidered and re-examined. Though this dogma is now dying out, it is still perpetuated by some individual teachers in many classrooms. Our adherence and support to the use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms can be further backed up by the following quotation:

Foreign language learning cannot completely bypass the learners' first language, especially, in the early stages. Sensible use of the mother tongue, when possible, can speed up classroom management in terms of time and energy, and can make grammar and vocabulary explanations clearer and complete.

(Swan and Walter 1995:17)

In the same line of thought, as noted by Pachler *et. al*, 2001:85, *"excluding the students' L1 for the sake of maximizing students' exposure to the foreign language is not necessarily productive."* The English-Only-Policy, which is maximum exposure to the English language leads to quick learning, however, quick learning doesn't necessarily mean effective learning. The Grammar-Translation Method as its name implies, with its heavy emphasis on explicit formal grammar teaching and translation activities from the target language to L1 and vice versa, has produced excellent results, yielded high academic standards and proved very efficient on many aspects of language learning, not least knowledge about language.

Other useful applications are worth noting with respect to the use of Arabic in an EFL setting. It can be used as a time-saving technique, in the sense that it can provide a quick and accurate translation of an English word that might take several minutes for the teacher to explain even then there would be no guarantee that the explanation had been understood clearly. For example, what explanation can be given to explain the word *owl*, but to say [بومة] or

write it on the board. In such application and for the sake of avoiding an overuse of L1 which would eventually lead to an over-dependence on translation, teachers should not give a verbal translation of a particular word when asked but writes or invites a pupil to write on the board. This policy tends to limit excessive and systematic use of L1 in the classroom.

The use of L1 can also prove to be particularly effective with young learners, for example with middle-school pupils to check instructions and for general classroom management. Finally, some learners need the security of the mother tongue. They may be the type of learners who generally have recourse to Arabic as a learning strategy to relate concepts in English to their equivalents in Arabic. This deductive-type of learners believe that having the Arabic equivalent written down on a notepad is a far more efficient strategy of arriving at meaning than a constant process of working things out.

My conclusion would lead me to mention an old Chinese proverb which goes, *"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn"*. If our pupils are to learn a language, we should get them involved by doing it on a comparative-contrastive basis pointing out the similarities and differences between the English language and our L1. Arguably, all human languages, whatever their origin or family, have plenty of things in common. This confirms Chomsky's theory of linguistic universals. This is another way of saying that all languages share a Universal Grammar. In sum, then, the use of L1 in general and Arabic, in its inclusive sense, in our specific context, can have several useful applications in an EFL classroom.

Applications that ease the burden for the teacher and facilitate the teaching process in the form of teaching techniques and others that facilitate the learning process and ease the burden for the learner in the form of learning strategies.

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