

L1 Use in the EFL Class and Contrastive Pragmatics: towards Appropriate Target Language Communicative Competence

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Abstract:

It is widely believed, within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, that an appropriate teaching of the communicative features of the target language involves a careful attention to pragmatics. However, the exploration of the latter dimension tends to be quite challenging because of two main reasons. First, students tend to be relevantly susceptible to significant dependence on L1 communicative norms hindering, therefore, the development of their pragmatic skills when using the target language for conversational ends. Second, effective instruction in English language pragmatics demands some reference to L1 norms for comparative ends within a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach which strictly restricts the use of students' Mother Tongue in the classroom. The aim of the present paper is to shed light on the double-edged impact of EFL learners' L1 communicative rules on the development of their target language pragmatic skills in relation to the very controversial linguistic debate as whether or not some Mother Tongue use is allowed in the EFL class.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Target Language, EFL, Pragmatics, Contrastive Pragmatics, Communicative Competence.

1. Introduction:

For many EFL teachers, the controversial question as whether or not the use of the students' Mother Tongue is allowed in their classrooms continues to draw undivided attention. However, when it comes to pedagogical contexts where focus is on the teaching of the pragmatic functions of the target language, the debate over L1 role is of a much greater significance. This is because for some practitioners, the use of students' Mother Tongue is not welcome in the communicative language classes, since it is believed to generate occasional misinterpretations of English language pragmatic rules. For others, however, it has a significant role in helping learners develop appropriate target language pragmatic skills through inter-language

comparison and translation. This paper then explores the very disadvantages and advantages of L1 use in the foreign language class, and in particular its impact on the development of the target language pragmatic competence. A brief review of Krashen's and Swain's 'Comprehensible Input/output' hypotheses is presented before tackling the notion of language proficiency and pragmatic competence. The theoretical analysis concludes with a reconsideration of the role of the Mother Tongue in relation to contrastive pragmatics.

2. L1 Use and the 'Comprehensible Input/ Output' Hypotheses:

Due to the very nature of the EFL class where the time allotted to the practice of the TL is quite derisory in so many foreign language learning contexts, many researchers urge for a total avoidance of L1 use in the classroom. Krashen (1981) with his 'Comprehensible Input' hypothesis claims that for effective learning to take place, students need to receive input through the target language and not their mother tongue. Proponents of the latter orientation like Chaudron (1988) and Ellis (1984) qualify the target language use as a rich and valuable input (Wharton, 2007).

In the same line of thoughts, the importance of concentrated target language use in the classroom has been highlighted by Swain (1985) and his 'Comprehensible Output' hypothesis (Wharton, 2007). A better acquisition of the target language is favoured by its active use in negotiating meaning and producing comprehensible output (ibid). Wharton (2007: 6) suggests that:

"Instead of resorting to their L1, students should adjust their output to make it comprehensible to their interlocutor. If the student uses their L1 then nothing is negotiated and therefore little learning has taken place".

From another parameter, Richards & Schmidt (2002), in their definition of the Comprehensible Output hypothesis, point that:

*"...when learners have to make efforts to ensure that their messages are communicated (**pushed output**) this puts them in a better position to notice the gap between their productions and those of proficient speakers, fostering acquisition."*

Richards & Schmidt (2002: 379)

Both Krashen's and Swain's hypotheses then prioritise full target language use in the classroom, and stand to reason the fact that providing input or negotiating meaning in classroom interaction using the students' mother tongue would minimize chances for effective learning to happen.

3. Target Language Proficiency and Pragmatic Competence:

It is agreed that target language communicative competence cannot be attained without efficient pragmatic skills; grammatical knowledge alone does not suffice. Pragmatic rules are basically concerned with the very relationship between language use, context and meaning inference in addition to the different speech acts that speakers perform while using language in specific conversational situations. Therefore, the ability of effectively holding successful communication depends not only on knowing the rules of grammar; but also on actual awareness of the pragmatic features of the language being used. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1997) developing students' grammatical knowledge cannot lead to a *corresponding level of pragmatic development* (Eslami-Rasekh , 2005).

Pragmatic awareness covers, as a whole, linguistic and cultural issues. As a matter of facts, introducing instructions related to the two latter mentioned parameters in the EFL class can help students better understand the communicative functions of the target language within different socio-cultural contexts. As put forward by Koike (2010):

An interesting part of a language class is observing learners' reactions when they become aware of differences in sociocultural norms, which are what guide pragmatic expression and interpretation. Metapragmatic discussion centers on the linguistic level, while discussion on sociocultural norms focus on societal norms that operate as the basis for the linguistic expression.

Koike (2010:3)

However, such practice makes it quite inevitable for EFL teachers to be confronted with a certain need for reconsidering the role that students' L1 may play in relation to the concern mentioned above.

Therefore, a “*to be or not to be- question*”, then, revolves around whether or not some L1 use should be allowed in an EFL class strictly guided by the CLT doctrine, knowing that appropriate pragmatic competence scaffolding requires some attention to contrastive pragmatics. This latter, with its core comparative principle, explores differences and similarities of the linguistic features and use of both L1 and the target language.

4. L1 use in the EFL Classroom and Contrastive Pragmatics:

The controversial issue of L1 use in the EFL classroom is more significant when it comes to the context of pragmatics and foreign language teaching. On the one hand, some practitioners point that L1 should be avoided in the classroom because of its negative impact on the development of students’ communicative proficiency. On the other hand, recent research points to the effectiveness of the use of the mother tongue in the EFL class. The arguments given, as far as the negative influence of L1 is concerned, are supported by comprehensible input/output considerations. i.e. learners cannot attain language proficiency because of ineffective and insufficient exposure to the TL. This is in addition to the interference of L1 which eventually leads to bad habits formation mainly inappropriate transfer of Mother Tongue pragmatic rules into English (Chavarría and Bonany, 2006).

However, Baiget et al (1998) praise the usefulness of L1 as being a means to effective scaffolding for more target language proficiency. Within the same context, Wharton (2007) suggests that numerous researchers (Nunan: 1999, Carter: 1987, Brown: 2000, Dornyei: 1995, Holliday: 1994), point that the mother tongue has a positive role to play in learning the target language. In fact, some proponents of the latter idea state that it seems quite inevitable that learners use their native language in the class. In this context, Kavaliauskienė (2009) refers to Harmer (2001) who points that learners may have recourse to their L1 in some activities where they encounter particular difficulties related to vocabulary activation. Furthermore, translating into one’s mother tongue is thought to be a natural strategy to adopt when learning a foreign language. It is this translation process which is reported to be an effective way to promote better understanding of the target language linguistic and communicative features.

Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate and advanced level: in the advanced or final stage of language

teaching, translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers.

Ross (2000:63) in Kavaliauskienė (2009: 03)

In the same line of thoughts, Green (1970) in Wharton (2007) reports an actual interest among teachers in India in calling for the teaching of translation and allowing students' L1 in the classroom as part of a *workable teaching method*. Another advantage of employing the mother tongue in the EFL class is highlighted by Kavaliauskienė (2009) who echoes Schweers' (1999) assumption that allowing students to use their native language may help them feel secure, and thus create a psychologically relaxed and dynamic classroom atmosphere.

In the same respect, Kavaliauskienė (2009) asserts that translation in the English class can serve as an effective strategy to better understand how the target language operates. Comparing, then, a variety of English linguistic features with those of the students' mother tongue, through the translation process, is more likely to reduce L1 negative transfer into the target language (Kavaliauskienė (2009) after Ross (2000)). The same concern is pointed to by Chavarría and Bonany (2006) who call for introducing reflection on contrastive pragmatics which stresses on exploring differences and similarities of the target language aspects and those of students' L1. The benefits of such practice are highlighted as follows:

- a) The development of socio-pragmatic competence is a key factor in the process of learning a language.*
- b) The L1 can be used in order to scaffold learners' development of a second or a foreign language (henceforth FL).*
- c) Raising language awareness and promoting explicit knowledge about language can contribute to the development of language learners' proficiency.*
- d) Developing intercultural awareness is essential for learners to become good communicators in a foreign language, able to handle communicative exchanges with*

*native and non-native users of English
smoothly and effectively.*

Chavarría and Bonany (2006: 134)

Another proponent of L1 use in the EFL class is Holthouse (2006) who, teaching English at a Japanese University, observes that eliminating the mother tongue from the English classroom is unjustifiable.

Thankfully, we are not 'blank slates' though. We are able to draw on our existing knowledge as a point of comparison, rather than having to learn to understand the world and everything in it all over again. Although there may be significant differences between the structures of the learner's L1 and L2, at least the MT provides something to work with.

Holthouse (2006: 28)

The usefulness of making comparisons as to particular features of both foreign language and the mother tongue is stressed by Swan (1985) who maintains that:

In fact, if we did not keep making correspondences between foreign language items and mother tongue items, we would never learn foreign languages at all.

Swan (1985: 85) in Holthouse (2006: 28)

For Baiget, Cots, Irún and Llurda (1998) the use of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom is of a significant benefit. Such pedagogic stance is based on a number of assumptions put forward as follows:

- a) The L1 as a facilitating element in group work, where emphasis is laid on the final product rather than the process.*
- b) Strategic use of the L1 as an element that helps to create a friendly, relaxed atmosphere for learners who feel anxious or lost when asked to perform in the FL.*
- c) The L1 as a cost-effective means to solve comprehension problems.*
- d) The L1 as a means to promote learners' motivation and interest.*

e) The L1 as a stepping stone into potentially difficult contents (e.g. textual or cultural aspects).

f) The L1 as a resource that allows learners to monitor their own learning.

Baiget et al (1998: 3) in Chavarría and Bonany (2006: 136)

Within the same context of the matter in hand, Butzkamm (2003) supports the very idea that any foreign language learning activity is, to a large extent, facilitated by some reference to the mother tongue. In fact, his assertion tends to portray L1 use as a quite natural process and prerequisite for better understanding of the target language features and use. In this, Butzkamm (2003) writes:

Don't we all know it in our bones: when we encounter a new piece of language, we want to know straight away and without further ado what it means precisely, so that we can put it to use immediately, work with it and make the most of it? Isn't it only the "experts" who tell us that the slow struggle for comprehension with a teacher miming and arm-waving and drawing little stick-figures on the board is preferable? Or are we content with inaccurate guessing and prepared to wait perhaps for weeks until the penny drops? Let us do what comes naturally - it is all so blindingly obvious.

Butzkamm (2003: 31)

Butzkamm (2003), then, presents a theory stressing the fact that through L1 individuals have learnt to think, communicate and understand not only their native language grammar but also the grammar of the other languages. Butzkamm's theory summarizes the drastic usefulness of the mother tongue as being a *master key* for foreign languages learning.

The inevitability of using L1 by foreign language students is pointed to by Khati (2011) who echoes Dawson (2010) when he asserts that while it might be possible to prevent our students from using their native language in the classroom, it is quite impossible to prevent their brains from referring to it. Any processing activity of the new language, then, is done by consulting the mother tongue knowledge. Khati (2011) delineates the significance of L1 in second language learning in relation to the learners' psychological dimension. In this respect, he highlights

Hopkins' (1988) claim that: *if the learner of a second language is encouraged to ignore his/her native language, he/ she might well feel identity threatened*. Khati (2011: 44)

5. Conclusion:

To conclude, the validity of using L1 for target language communicative ends seems to gain escalating attention. It is true that optimum EFL learning outcomes are favoured by sufficient exposure to the target language. Yet, it has been proved that instructing students not to use their mother tongue in the classroom may render the learning activity a tricky task. The occasional use of L1 on the part of our EFL students, then, is not to be considered as an unwelcomed guest to our communication classrooms, especially if we are to improve their pragmatic competence. Meaningful activities within a conversational context where focus is on the analysis of how L1 pragmatic standards, like intonation or speech acts realization, differ from those of English language may help better harness students' target language pragmatic knowledge and competence. This is in addition to the psycholinguistic evidence that strongly supports the idea that any new language learning activity is a complicated task that needs solid scaffolding the reinforcement of which is guaranteed by continuous reference to the mother tongue. Having the above discussion at hand, it seems that it is not a cautious formulation to call for a drastic rethinking of the role that L1 can actually play in improving EFL communicative abilities.

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