

Using the mother tongue to promote noticing: translation as a way of scaffolding learner language – Vincent Ferrer

Abstract: With the emergence of research into the role of form-focused instruction, teacher-researchers have begun to acknowledge the mother tongue as a legitimate tool with the potential to facilitate learning mainly in accuracy-based tasks. This article reports on the findings from a comparative study of teachers', teacher educators' and students' perceptions carried out in Spain. The participants give their views on the desirability of, at times, providing learners with the English translation of what they are trying and finding difficult to say as a way of scaffolding or aiding their output. Results suggest that such scaffolding may be conducive to noticing on the part of the learners of the gap existing between their current inner grammar and the target grammar.

Introduction

The mother tongue in Second Language Acquisition has taken different swings depending on which theoretical framework was in vogue at any one particular time. While direct methods in the first half of the twentieth century saw no place whatsoever for the first language (L1) in the classroom, the grammar-translation method used the mother tongue so extensively and at the expense of target language (L2) practice that, even today, translation is in many instances regarded as an illegitimate practice because of its associations with this method. In the fifties and sixties Behaviourist and Contrastive Analysis proponents saw the first language as central in language learning but mainly as a source of interference with the development of habits in L2. In the sixties Chomsky's *innatist* views downplayed the centrality of the mother tongue but considered it interfered with the learner's *inner* Language Acquisition Device. In the seventies Interlanguage Theory also assigned a negative effect to the first language in that it may interfere or disrupt a naturally predetermined acquisition process. Advocates of the Monitor Model saw no place for L1 use in the classroom but asserted that L1 subject-matter instruction can facilitate L2 acquisition in making L2 input more comprehensible. In the early eighties Interactionists, primarily concerned with *negotiation of meaning*, assigned no apparent role to the use of L1 and early communicative language teaching in the mid eighties tended to adopt an English-only approach to language teaching. It was with the emergence of studies on the role of form-focused instruction that more positive attitudes towards the pedagogic use of the mother tongue started to appear.

Form-focused instruction research

Early communicative language learning, with its focus almost entirely on meaning, began to be contested by studies on the role of form-focused instruction and explicit language knowledge. Some believed that 'learners who receive formal instruction generally outperform those who do not' (Ellis 1990:13). Studies suggested that 'instruction that focuses primarily on meaning but allows for a focus on form within meaningful contexts works best' (Lightbown and Spada 1999). In addition, longitudinal studies of second language immersion programmes revealed that although in the early stages students did as well as those receiving some type of formal instruction, in the longer run they did not reach the accuracy levels that the latter did. These findings represented a clear challenge to Krashen's input hypothesis.

Willis (1996) presents a reformulation of early task-based models of language teaching and warns of the possibility of learner language fossilising if at some stage in the lesson learners are not made aware of form. Thus, according to many, form-focused instruction 'speeds up learning in the long term and helps to prevent the kind of grammatical fossilisation found in adult naturalistic learners' (Ellis 1990:68).

The increased awareness of the facilitative role of formal instruction in meaning-based classroom environments led some teacher-researchers to look at ways in which L1 in the classroom, in so far as it may contribute to explicit knowledge of the target language, may be beneficial. It is within this context that the use of the first language began to be reassessed.

Thus, in contrast to previous theories and schools of thought, the first language was beginning to be envisaged by some as a potential aid to second language acquisition and its place in classroom methodology to be acknowledged.

The research

In 2002 I carried out research into the potentially facilitative role of the mother tongue in the monolingual classroom. The research examined the perceptions of students, teachers and teacher educators in light of acquisition theories and related research and views. The study, set primarily within my own teaching/learning environment, an EFL school in Spain, looked critically at such a role with regards to a number of classroom situations. One of those situations was *aiding production*, particularly the scaffolding of learners' production of language via translation. Both questionnaires and interviews were employed as data-gathering instruments. The rest of this article reports on the findings obtained.

The research: questionnaires

Learners were divided into three proficiency groups: beginner, intermediate and advanced. They were then given a multiple-choice questionnaire and instructed to tick those answers that they thought best represented their views. They were allowed to choose more than one answer and space was provided for alternative responses of their own.

Students were asked whether they find it helpful when they do not know how to say something in L2 and then the teacher provides a translation of what they are trying to say.

The majority went for a *yes* answer in all three level groups. Beginners said that a) I notice how to express certain things in English (26 out of 34) and b) I feel more confident to hold longer conversations (10). Intermediate learners show a similar response: 24 (out of 37) favour rationale 'a' and 12 rationale 'b'. A significant percentage of advanced students answered also in the affirmative: eight (out of 17) agree with rationale 'a' and four with 'b'. Those students who prefer no L1 in this classroom situation, a minority at beginner and intermediate levels, but more significant at advanced, give the following reasons: c) it's better if the teacher uses only English to help me say things better (seven advanced students) and d) translation does not prevent me from making the same mistakes in future (one advanced student).

Teachers were divided in their answers: 14 out of 35 answered positively whereas 16 gave *no* as an answer. Some of the ones who do use L1 do it to *clarify misunderstandings or to point out the possible cause of communication breakdown*.

The majority of the teacher educators, on the other hand, appear to go along with the students with 18 (out of 32) favouring L1 use, three giving 'sometimes' for an answer and nine seeing no place for it. Some of their reasons were *Yes, to reformulate and contrast, or, one of the few areas where use of L1 is really helpful - translating the content of L1 chunks can help learners realise the pitfalls of word-level translation, but, too much of this and the learner starts to rely on translation rather than work out meaning from context*.

The research: interviews

Interestingly, *only* three of the nine teachers I interviewed went along with the majority of the students' responses. Two do not address the issue directly and the rest (4) express their disagreement with the approach arguing that *the teacher should model the correct way to say it (in English), reformulation until understanding! - if not, self-correction and then peer correction!* The trend of their responses seems to run parallel to that in the questionnaires.

The teacher educators, seven in total, were presented with the following double question: *When a student is trying to express something and gets stuck and they don't know how to say it in English would you give them the English translation of that particular something they are trying to say?* and *Do you think this situation may present the learner with opportunities for noticing the gap between his inner grammar and the target grammar and eventually internalise that grammar?*

Here are some of their views: *Sometimes, using my knowledge of L1, I know what students want to say and I might point out that the way they are trying to say it is the Spanish way and that in English you say it another way*, comments Roger Nicholson, teacher educator and tutor at Universitat Autònoma in Barcelona. Jenny Johnson, Head of the teacher training department at International House (IH) Barcelona argues that *that is what happens all the time. Students are constantly trying to put in English what they are thinking in Spanish. So, I would help them, in an indirect way, if it came from the students. Absolutely (with reference to Lightbown's quote –see below-). And if there is a gap, how can they say it without the teacher's intervention? It has to be done. That's teaching*. Karl Kalinski, teacher trainer at IH Barcelona adds that *it would seem absurd, although none of this is cast in stone, if you know what the student is trying to say and he knows you know ... (to deny him the translation). If the student is motivated enough to want to say something then you have done your job. What could be more significant than what the student is trying to say? So, yes absolutely (in reference to noticing)*. Finally Scott Thornbury, well-known teacher educator and materials writer, has this to say: *Yes, absolutely and you've got a methodology based around this principle, CLL (Community Language Learning), and that seems to be perfectly legitimate too. At the early stages of learning I would certainly use L1 to scaffold learners' production of language. So, you tell me what you want to say in Spanish and here's how you say it in English. Again, I would be weaning students off that language until they should be able to paraphrase what they want to say. I think it's a very legitimate activity. And also having the students translate an English text into Spanish,*

then you hide the original text and they translate it back into English. This two-way translation is a useful technique and then you've got the two texts to compare, which provides opportunities for gap-noticing. Of course there are dangers inherent in translation, particularly false friends, word by word translation etc. But the students can be trained to avoid these dangers as opposed to the old-style idea of interference, meaning that no translation is allowed because it might encourage the appearance of mistakes. On the contrary. It seems to me it's best to take things head-on rather than wait until the mistakes occur, which they inevitably will.

From another perspective Roger Hunt, highly experienced teacher trainer at IH Barcelona comments that *I don't think translation is really necessary. What the teacher needs to do is indicate to the student how meaning should have been expressed, shape student output, again everything CAN be done in English*, while Lynn Durrant, Director of Young Learners Teacher Training also at IH warns of the pitfalls of translation arguing that *what I have a tendency more to do is not necessarily offer an immediate translation but get the student to work out another way to say it. Giving them an immediate translation may be counterproductive, as (that way) we are not teaching them to be autonomous. If anything, I would use translation to stop a student feeling frustrated but then I would use it as a teaching tool to move further in English.*

It is interesting that both Roger Nicholson and Karl Kalinski talk about using *your knowledge of L1*, as opposed to using L1 productively. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that to use L1 in the classroom does not necessarily mean to actually speak it. You can make reference to it but do all the talking in English. I recently taught a class of Italian students and even though my Italian is limited to a few words, when discussing language form and use with students I would often ask: "Is this the same in Italian?" We would then engage in a discussion of how Italian and English differ, with the students doing the explaining, which I believe not only raised their awareness of the way English *works*, but also made for a very fruitful and meaningful speaking activity.

At a general level these findings reveal that both students and teacher trainers tend to look favourably upon a *judicious* use of L1 to scaffold learners' language production and move discourse further. The high percentage of students, even advanced ones, who claim they notice how to say things better under these circumstances is thought-provoking. The teacher educators also, despite some disagreement, generally acknowledge the role of *noticing* in the process. The literature, although not directly (see below), appears to support such views. Teachers, on the other hand, are more sceptical of the usefulness of this strategy and tend to argue for alternative English-only approaches.

Other views

Bolitho (1983:238) points out that:

At some stage in your language teaching you have to allow the learners to say what they want to say, and if they are going to do this, you are going to have to allow them sometimes to use their mother tongue

Atkinson (1987) and Harbord (1992) present similar views.

My own belief is that it would seem absurd when a student is trying to say something and they do not know the English way to say it, and the teacher knows what they are trying to say, not to offer a translation and thus deny them the opportunity to *notice* how their intended meaning is realised in the target language. This situation would present the teacher with an opportunity to equip the learner with explicit knowledge of L2. Batstone (1994:40) states that 'learners do not just have to see new language, they have to look, to notice, so that they can really begin to take it in'. When input is taken in and internalised it is referred to as *intake*. The intake of grammar as a result of learners paying conscious attention to input is known as *noticing*.

Thornbury (2001:36) gives two basic conditions for language learning to take place:

- Learners must pay attention to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to.
- Learners must *notice the gap*, i.e. they must make comparisons between the current state of their knowledge, as realised in their output, and the target language system, available as input.

Batstone adds that 'to be noticeable language has to be significant to the learner'. As Karl Kalinski rightly points out above 'What could be more significant to the learner than what he is trying to say?' And if they cannot find the way to say it, would it not be perfectly legitimate to provide them with the English translation so that they *notice* how meaning is realised into form and maybe compare how the target structure differs from or coincides with the L1 structure? Noticing, Batstone argues, is essential for language proceduralisation. Through noticing and re-noticing (when students come across further instances of the language that has been made explicit/noticeable to them) learners start taking grammar in (intake), which prompts a progressive restructuring of their inner grammar (interlanguage), until knowledge becomes proceduralised and it can be quickly and efficiently activated in language use (acquisition).

Lightbown (1991:209), in a study on the effects of formal instruction on L2 learning, found that learning appeared to be optimal in 'those situations in which the students knew what they wanted to say and the teacher's intervention made clear to them there was a particular way to say it'.

Classroom methodology may therefore need to (re)consider the role of the mother tongue in such teacher interventions. That is not to say that paraphrasing or reformulation have no place in these kinds of interactions. Their place is as legitimate in promoting noticing as the approach suggested here, and I would say, such skills are vital to push learners' communicative competence further. Again, *judicious use* is the key word. Teachers need to be aware that this option exists and not feel afraid to use it. After all, if such a high percentage of students express their conviction that *they notice how to express certain things in English* when a translation of what they find hard to say is provided, who am I to say I know better and they are wrong? With the advent of the Communicative Approach and humanistic views of learning/teaching, is it not a generally held belief that we need to take learners' views into account and that their learning styles and preferences should be acknowledged?

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