Literature Review on the role of mother tongue in learning and teaching English for Specific Purposes

PhD. Xhemaili, Mirvan

High Lector, Language Center, South East European University, Tetovo, Macedonia: m.xhemaili@seeu.edu.mk

Previous Studies

The development of the field of study 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESP) was as a result of the acknowledgment of the importance of the purpose and needs of language learners. There are many peculiarities found within the English language that have led to a growing interest from researchers who strive to make it possible to distinguish English for Tourism, English for Law and Business English among others. Linguists have observed that since languages are constantly subjected to change due to its flaccid state, one cannot exclusively claim that they speak perfect English or any other language as of that (Choroleeva K, 2012). Even a native speaker cannot be considered to perfectly know his/her mother tongue. The foreign language of choice for most Albanian students is English. The students do not solely want to understand how a language functions or merely know how it compares stylistically with other learned languages. The learners are interested in learning the functions of the language because it is an aspect of professional and social acceptance and it also is a self-actualization aspect. However, even after investing ample time and effort in learning a foreign language, it has been noted that students usually have inhibitions when it comes to expressing themselves in the foreign language. They still use their native language when speaking or writing. This can be blamed on the methodology that most students use when acquiring a foreign language. Instead of learning for oral communication, they learn to gain reading proficiency in a foreign language or for the sake of being scholarly (Dralo A, 2012).

The Role of Language Transfer in Second Language Acquisition

Language transfer affects speakers or writers either positively or negatively depending on the relevant unit structure of both their native and acquired languages. Most learners apply knowledge from their native language to the second language and this transfer can result in both positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when the meaning of items that are transferred is in line with the native speakers' notion of acceptability. Negative transfer occurs when the opposite happens resulting in errors. Negative transfer happens at a greater scale when the difference between two languages is big. The similarities and dissimilarities in word meanings and word forms affect how quickly a learner can acquire a foreign language (Odlin T, 1989: 77).

The method used in teaching foreign languages in most educational institutions is Grammar Translation. The major characteristics of Grammar Translations are:

The target language is taught in mother tongue and there is little active use of the language

Most of the vocabulary is taught in the form of isolated lists of words

Learners are given long elaborate explanations of the complexities of grammar

Difficult texts are learnt to be read early

The exercise given to students is mostly that of translating disconnected sentences from the target language into mother tongue and vise-versa.

Little to no attention is given to how words should be pronounced (Dralo A, 2012).

The importance of language transfer in learning a second language has over the last few decades been revaluated severally.

The foundation of ESP is not a familiar subject-matter concepts and lexis. For learners to succeed, they need to be proficient in reading and writing. Arguments, on how much one's mother tongue affects his/her acquisition of a new language, have risen and a divide has been created between groups that are for monolingualism in the classroom and those that are against it. Butzkamm (2003.5) as cited in Suntharesan V's research paper 'Role of Mother Tongue in Teaching English to Tamil Students' remarked, " The international dominance of English native speakers who find absolution in the dogma of monolingualism when they cannot understand the language of their pupils, together with the cheaper mass production of strictly English-speaking in the Anglo-American mother country, constitutes one of the reasons behind the sanctification of, and the demand for, monolingualism in the classroom." Here, Butzkamm supports the use of first language in the classroom as it is a useful tool which can be used to explain difficult grammar. L1 can also be used when giving instructions which learners might not be able to understand in English, and for checking understanding, especially when using complex contexts (Suntharesan V, 2012).

The use of the first language provides students with a sense of security that enables them to learn with ease and in comfort. Mother tongue serves social and cognitive functions in that students who work in groups will discuss in their native language. This allows them to relate and have a sense of identity. Language transfer or translation is an involuntary thing done by language learners. Using L1 in cases where students are incapable of activating vocabulary proves useful in their learning, and gives them the comfort to read difficult texts in the second language. With texts that require higher proficiency, learners are advised to first read the text in their first language, then in the second language to better understand the concept (Suntharesan V, 2012).

The influence of a learner's native language in making the acquisition of a second language easy or difficult varies depending on factors that will be analyzed in this study. Many learners need a sense of security when learning a foreign language. It is challenging for them to completely abandon their native tongue despite the communicative methods that emphasize that a foreign language (FL) be taught,

and learnt through the foreign language. The idea of ceasing the usage of mother tongue in the language classroom was brought by the odd phenomenon where after studying a foreign language (FL) for a long time through grammar-translation; students were still unable to fluently speak in the language. In the 1970s and 1980s, challenges to assumptions about the importance of transfer arose. This was due to claims made by Fries (1952) and Lado (1957) about the existence of cross-linguistic differences. The two stated that the differences in cross-linguistic differences in the acquisition of second language could be defined by contrastive analysis (Torrijos R, 2009).

Two different versions of the contrastive analysis hypothesis (C.A) have since risen: C.A. a priori and C.A a posteriori. The former is also known as the predictive or strong version while the latter is known as the weak or explanatory version. C.A a priori is the point to point analysis of syntactic, phonological, morphological and other subsystems of both languages learnt. This hypothesis suggests that with the similarities between both languages, a student will easily acquire a foreign language but with the differences, acquiring it will be harder. C.A a posteriori concentrates more on error analysis. Most errors occur due to the strategies that students use to acquire a foreign language thus linguists and teachers should pay more attention to what learners actually do than concentrating on their assumptions of what the student will do (Torrijos R, 2009).

Most semantic errors made by learners occur due to overgeneralization of the target language, strategies of learning the second language, language transfer, transfer of training and strategies of second language communication.

Translation is important at the intermediate and advanced level, and is also referred to as the fifth language skill alongside listening, speaking, reading and writing which are the four basic skills. Translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 gives room for understanding between strangers and is an important social skill. Teachers of foreign languages are aware of the importance of translation in language classrooms since all students, whether good or bad at comprehending reading or listening materials, mentally translate the material from L2 to L1 and the other way around (Odlin T, 1989. It is difficult for students to directly think in the foreign language while writing since translation from FL to L1 in their minds is inevitable. Learners of a second language rely on the structure of their native language to produce utterances in the target language, and this can either be helpful or contrary. Their use of mother tongue tends to influence their learning of a foreign language both positively and negatively.

The influence of a student's native language, on how easy or difficult acquiring a foreign language is, all lies in the process through which learners of the foreign language go through while learning. Some learners may acquire native-like proficiency in more than one foreign language learnt, while others fail to achieve the same proficiency in a foreign language as they do in their native language. Learners acquire a second language by using the knowledge they already have of their native language. They use general learning strategies and universal properties of language. These universal properties enable them to internalize the second language. The student is able to construct a transitional system that reflects to his/her current knowledge (interlanguage) of the foreign language. Students also acquire a foreign language through using existing knowledge that enables them to cope with communication difficulties.

Students draw on their background experiences and prior knowledge of their native language to acquire a second language. They use structures from their first language that are similar to the second language and experiment with this new language. An inter-language, which consists of the learner's existing knowledge of the second language, is thus created. The learner is in the end able to overcome communication breakdowns by using what they already know (Garza). However, it has also been viewed that as much as mother tongue can support a learner's use of a foreign language's vocabulary, it can also fail to support or hinder their ability especially when trying to construct complex words and expressions.

Languages differ in not only the forms used for meanings, but also in the meanings themselves. For example, the alleged computer translation of "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" into Russian and back is "the vodka is all right, but the meat is bad," (Swan M, 2008). This shows that different languages have different meanings for certain words. A word in a certain language may have several equivalents in another language. However, a relative exact fit in meanings can be found in words relating to concepts that are steadfastly grounded in physical reality. Japanese speakers have different lexicon for talking about dressing unlike English speakers who use only one lexicon 'put on for' dressing. In English, the verb 'put on' is used for all clothing from headgear to shoes while in Japanese, different verbs are used for upper body garments, lower body garments and even shoes (Clark, 1993).

There are a number of notions that try to explain how students acquire the second language. They include the behaviorist view, the cognitive view, the critical period hypothesis and the natural order hypothesis.

2.3 The behaviorist view

This theory argues that foreign language learners imitate what they hear and develop habits in the foreign language through routine practice. Learners relate what they already know in their native language to the second language. A positive transfer that occurs is due to the similarities between the first language and the second language, but a negative transfer is also likely to occur due to differences and difficulties in the languages. In real life situations, this type of imitation does not help learners because they are constantly required to form sentences they have not seen or used before other than just utter a word.

In Language classes, the basic structure of learning is a syllabus consisting of a finite pre-practiced number of sentences. In real-life situations, these sentences are not enough to carry on conversations (Tripod, 2001).

2. 4 The Cognitive view

This theory suggests that foreign language learners creatively use their cognition skills to figure out the foreign language individually. Leaners construct their own rules according to the patterns they notice and make amendments where necessary. This approach

enables students to learn from their mistakes since the role they are able to actively know first-hand how the language works. Learning like this, however, becomes faulty because some of the assumptions students make about the foreign language are based on their first language.

2. 5 The critical period hypothesis

This hypothesis argues that after a certain period in one's life, acquiring a language becomes almost impossible. One should learn the language during this period, supposedly before puberty, because that is when the brain is still developing. After puberty, the brain is already fully developed thus making learning the language a difficult task. The evidence in favor of this theory is that of "Genie" who since the age of two years, up until thirteen years, had received little language interaction. After being rescued from the conditions of extreme neglect she was found living in, she was able to learn some vocabulary. However, she was not able to grasp the entire language. It has been argued that this though may just be due to her having an overall low IQ even though; many people have been able to master a foreign language even after puberty. The only thing they have not been able to overcome is their accents.

2.6 The natural order hypothesis

This hypothesis asserts that the acquisition of a foreign language occurs in a predictable universal order. Studies have shown learners of English as a second or foreign language make the same mistakes regardless of their linguistic backgrounds. These errors are related to those made by young children when learning their first languages. This theory has been criticized by linguists even though they only have general knowledge of a limited number of languages. Also, the studies that have been made consist of only a few grammatical errors and with all the languages that exist in the world, only a low percentage of them be studied thoroughly (Tripod, 2001).

Without the human capacity of understanding language, reading would not be possible. Five basic components found across languages have been identified. They include syntax, morphology, phonology, pragmatics and semantics. The acquisition of language progresses across these components with increasing capacity, refinement, usage and understanding. Each of these components defines the development of one's language skills.

Certain similarities and differences between languages influence grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation acquisition based on the five components mentioned above. Phonology deals with the structure of speech within a language. The different variations in speech structure determine how a word is uttered. These sounds that make up a language are known as phonemes. Knowing the morphology of a language is critical to the development of vocabulary since 'morphemes,' which are the base words, reflect the smallest building blocks for understanding. Syntax studies how basic meaningful units are combined to create a sentence. Every language has its own syntax, the rules of its grammar, when grouping words together for communication purposes. These rules allow for acceptable and non-acceptable sentence structures. The ways in which a language expresses meanings is known as semantics. Semantics enables one to understand that someone who is "bubbly" is not made up of bubbles. This is because semantics goes beyond the literal meaning thus making it differ in every language. It is culture-dependent and therefore causes difficulties for people who are not native speakers or even native speakers coming from a different culture. The ways in which members of a community achieve their goals using language is referred to as pragmatics. How one interacts with a child is different from how he interacts with an adult, and or his parents. The formality in speech differs when one is interacting with an employer and when having a conversation with friends. The essence of pragmatics is to understand the style to use and when to use it.

The stages through which language learners progress through to acquire the language is the same; the only thing that differs is the amount of time individual students spend at a particular stage. There are five stages involved in acquiring a foreign language: The pre-production stage, the early production stage, the speech emergence stage, the intermediate fluency stage and the advanced fluency stage (Haynes J, 1998-2005).

The pre-production stage is also known as the silent period. This stage consists of learners who may have up to 500 English words in their vocabulary, but are not speaking yet. Other students, however, 'parrot' what they hear. Students at this level listen attentively, can copy words, can respond to visuals and pictures and can understand and repeat gestures and movements. Repetition of words at this stage is necessary to allow comprehension.

The early production stage is where students develop a receptive and active finite vocabulary. Students are able to use two-word phrases and can also use short memorized chunks that are not always correct. The speech emergence stage is the period where students have developed vocabulary of about 3,000 words and are able to form sentences and phrases for communication. Here, learners are able to ask questions and initiate short conversations in the foreign language.

Intermediate fluency stage is the stage where learners have vocabulary of active words and can use more complex sentences when speaking and even writing. Opinions and thoughts can be shared, and group discussions are held with much ease. This level allows learners to use strategies from their first language to learn the contents in the foreign language. Their writing has many errors as they try to master the complexity of the foreign language's grammar and structure. At the advanced fluency stage, students achieve cognitive proficiency in the foreign language and are almost as fluent as natives.

Universal learning and second language learning implies that the foreign language learner incorporates the principles of a first language grammar in judging whether a sentence is grammatically correct. The learner might have acquired universal grammar either directly or indirectly through their native language. When cognitive and situational factors are ruled out, it is argued that learning a foreign language is like learning the first language due to discrepancies that have been caused either accidentally or necessarily in the different situations. The learner's mind (minus cognitive and situational factors) also makes learning a foreign language the same as learning L1. This brings about the difference in the amount of time taken by individual students in the same class to learn a language. Adult foreign language

learners can distinguish between grammatically correct and incorrect sentences thus demonstrating that they had access to Universal Grammar called the Right Roof Constraint. This principle shows that elements moved in the sentence must not cross certain boundaries (Cook V, 1985). However, Universal Grammar might be cut off from the L2 leaner. As seen above, the Critical Theory Hypothesis, CPH, argues that the limits for acquiring L1 is between ages two and twelve – when the child's brain is too immature and after it has become too inflexible. This means that, after a certain age, a learner's accessibility to the principles and parameters of Universal Grammar are limited or not directly accessible. CPH is concerned with cognitive and physical maturation, which acquisition does not take into account, thus making it hard to draw a clear line between CPH and how it affects L2 learning.

Mother tongue, which is a mediator, allows for the easy acquisition of a foreign language. Chomsky (1969) has queried the importance of L1 as a mediator though stating that although the acquisition of another language is relatively easy in the presence of some available language, a serious problem is entrenched in it. If the values of parameters were the same in the first and foreign languages, then mediation would be successful (Chomsky, 1969).

The acquisition of L2 is affected by individual differences, which are a learner's level of achievement, and his/her rate of development. Certain aspects such as variables relating to cognitive thinking and social human characteristics also hinder the acquisition of a second language. It is important for learners to interact and converse with native speakers in L2 in order to be able to successfully master the language. A great deal of how mother tongue influences grammar can be seen in translated abstracts. A study conducted by Benavides M and Adolfo G. found that during correction and drafting of texts translated into English from 80 Spanish abstracts, relevant mistakes that affected the meaning of the content in the writings were found. Negative transfers from mother tongue were found to interfere in non-professional translations. Different points of view have been used when analyzing mother tongue interference in writing English. Without knowledge of key differences between languages, then learners erroneously use words and sentences. These errors are highly influenced by their mother tongue (Benavides M and Adolfo G).

Most translations from L1 to L2 do not consider the meaning and context aspects. Such are semantics and sociolinguistics. Instead, they focus primarily on the grammar related areas and elements related to language form. Learners consciously or unconsciously depend on their mother tongue structures, discourse, words and other aspects due to the safety and comfort that arises from them. They tend to forget the inaccuracy and vagueness alongside imprecise meanings. The author's intention is contrary to the results produced, which gives this procedure an opposite effect (Camilleri, 2004). If an abstract in L1 exhibits proper language, but the translation to L2 is vague and erroneous, the information conveyed becomes obstructed and the audience intended to receive the message does not fully get it. This problem arises due to pragmatism which determines the formality levels and word use. In order to express the real importance of the work carried out, correct words must be used to convey the information (Ezpeleta & Garcia, 2008). Vocabulary is important because in the lack of a correct word in a sentence, communication breaks down.

The manner in which the second language vocabulary is learnt, remembered in later use and how learners compensate for lacking knowledge by trying to construct complex verbal terms is influenced by their mother tongue. Inevitable errors that occur in a learner's vocabulary are due to mapping the second language vocabulary onto their mother tongue. A learner's hypothesis about transferability determines how much mother tongue helps or hinders language learning.

Since all ESP learners customarily rely on their mother tongue, the amount of first language that learners require depends on their proficiency and linguistic situations. Although one can conclusively say that translations from L2 to L1 in a learner's mind assists greatly in language development, many learners end up misinterpreting word meanings when writing a text in the foreign language because they end up using words that do not have the same meaning when compared to that of the original language. Vocabulary errors have been made by not only learners, but also professional authors who acquired English as a second language. When writing, high deficiencies have been seen and this is because their education in languages, which are based on traditional linguistic aspects and its disciplines, do not contribute to improving translations. L1 has a diverse role in affecting second language acquisition. Language learners have strong linguistic and communicative foundations in their native language that help them through the process of acquiring a second language. They transfer forms and meanings while attempting to read, speak or write the second language. They try to understand what is being said in a foreign language by transferring directly from L2 to L1. The cultural, academic and linguistic needs of a learner should not be dismissed and errors should be allowed in order to do away with the fear that hinders learning.

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