

ROLE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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A revival of interest in using a native language in the English classroom is caused by learners' needs of improving language accuracy and clarity. This paper aims at examining perceptions of the use of mother tongue and translation in various linguistic situations. The activities that help raise learners' awareness of language use are described. The findings demonstrate that all learners need support of mother tongue in English classes, but the amount of the native language needed depends on students' proficiency. The statistical significance of the research results was calculated by employing the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

Keywords: learning English for Specific Purposes, learners' perceptions, role of native language.

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Introduction

The state-of-the-art teaching of languages is based on the communicative method which emphasizes teaching English through English (Willis 1981). Still the idea of abandoning the native tongue is too stressful for many learners, who need a sense of security in the experience of learning a foreign language. In the past, the prevalence of grammar-translation method led to the extraordinary phenomenon: students were unable to speak fluently after having studied the language for a long time. For this reason, translation has been defined as "un-communicative, boring, pointless, difficult, and irrelevant" (Duff 1994). Recently there has been a revival of interest in translation due to the shift of its emphasis - to using a mother tongue as a resource for the promotion of language learning. Translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility (Duff 1994). Therefore, translation can serve as a tool for improving language skills.

The object of the research is the role of mother tongue in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The aims of the research are to investigate learners' attitudes to the use of mother tongue in learning ESP.

The methods of the research include designing an appropriate survey, its administration and analysis of the obtained responses.

The intended outcome: implications for language teachers on the use of native language in English teaching.

First, it is important to find out what the students' perceptions of the use of native language are and if a mental translation in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is relevant to learning and second, to describe the activities which raise learners' awareness of the second language use. It is assumed that comparing L1 and L2 through translation might help learners to activate language usage and serve as a tool to improve language skills.

Research methods employ the survey data of students' perceptions of the amount of mother tongue they need in acquisition of professional language at tertiary level and mental translation in various class activities.

Use of native language in teaching language

The use of the native language in the classroom settings can be an aid to language learning. The need for some translation in language learning is usually supported by non-native teachers. However, some native teachers of English argue that foreign language learning needs as much exposure to L2 as possible during precious classroom time, and any usage of L1 or translation is a waste of time. In the past, most methods in L2 language pedagogy dictated that L1 should be prohibited in the classroom. Communicative approaches to language learning in the 1970s and 1980s considered the use of L1 as undesirable. Recently the attitude to mother tongue and translation in language classes has undergone a positive change.

Translation is sometimes referred to as the fifth language skill alongside the other four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing): "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).

However good the students are at understanding authentic reading or listening materials, the majority keeps mentally translating from L2 into L1 and vice versa. This fact makes teachers of foreign languages aware of the importance of translation in language classrooms.

Why do students use their mother tongue in class? According to J. Harmer (2001), a principal cause of this L1 use is required by the activity, if students are linguistically incapable of activating vocabulary for chosen task. Another

reason is that translation is a natural thing to do in learning a language, and code-switching between L1 and L2 is regarded as naturally developmental. The amount of L1 use by particular students may well have to do with differing learner styles and abilities. "No one is in any doubt that students will use their L1 in class, whatever teachers say or do" (Harmer 2001).

Evidence from research into the crucial issue of L1 use in classrooms around the world is analyzed by G. Mattioli (2004). For instance, L1 use in the Chinese classrooms offers evidence that L1 is a valuable tool for socio-cognitive processes in language learning. Another reason for L1 use in the classroom relates to the fostering of a positive affective environment. W. C. Schweers (1999) encourages teachers to insert the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic, provide a sense of security and validate the learners' experiences.

The real usefulness of translation in English classes lies in exploiting it in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in English and the student's mother tongue. According to N. J. Ross (2000), if students are aware of the differences, language interference (transfer) and intervention from their own language are likely to be reduced.

Numerous studies indicated that both negative and positive transfer between L1 and L2 was important for development of the inter-language, the complex system of the learners' L2. Many teachers recognize that L1 in the classroom is a positive representation of inter-language. The data on inter-language and language transfer show that it is highly probable that L2 learners will always think most often in their L1, even at the advanced level (Mahmoud 2006). Moreover, translation in L2 classroom offers a way to highlight similarities and differences between L1 and L2 forms. The translation is useful for L2 acquisition because, firstly, it uses authentic materials, secondly, it is interactive, thirdly, it is learner-centered, and finally it promotes learner autonomy (Mahmoud 2006).

Regarding the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, it is important to find out how students

themselves feel about it. W. C. Schweers (1999) conducted research into this issue and found that a high percentage (88.7%) of the student participants felt that mother tongue should be used in their English classes. Moreover, if learners of a second language are encouraged to ignore their native language, they might well feel their identity threatened. One of us (Janulevičienė and Kavaliauskienė 2000, 2004) participated in research into the use of mother tongue and translation in ESP classes. Our data were close to the findings reported by C. Schweers. As many as 86% out of 110 respondents felt that the native language should be used in the classroom, particularly to explain difficult concepts (90%), introduce new material (57%) define new vocabulary (74%), explain the link between English and Lithuanian (55%). It is noteworthy that in teaching / learning ESP it has been a long-felt dissatisfaction, mainly on the students' part, about excluding or minimal use of translation in mastering complex issues. Learners constantly wished to check the exact meanings of the professional terms in their native language by consulting bilingual dictionaries or asking for teacher's explanations.

Native language use in the classroom can cause students to think that words and structures in English have a L1 correspondence, which does not exist. Therefore, raising students' consciousness of the non-parallel nature of language allows learners to think comparatively (Atkinson 1993). The important question is how to reach a balance between L1 and L2 in the learning process. It is thought that four factors should be considered, namely, the students' previous experience, the students' level, the stage of the course, and the stage of the individual lesson (Atkinson 1993).

The blog on the plenary session at the IA-TEFL Conference in Aberdeen, 18–20 April, 2007, summarizes the ideas of a well known linguist Guy Cook (Aberdeen 2007).

„The most important statement was the fact that EFL and ESL teachers tend to take a monolingual approach thus neglecting the importance of translation in the process of teaching

English. The EFL/ESL classroom cannot follow the motto “One nation, one people, one language”, a somewhat overrated statement since it implies that a classroom is a state. Quite contrary to that, the L1, i.e. the mother tongue of the students, should by all means be acknowledged. The importance is highlighted even more by the fact that the students' culture is part of their language and by neglecting their language, the teacher, in a monolingual classroom, neglects their culture which leads to the danger of neglecting their identity as well. What is more, there is no valid database that could confirm the standpoint that the monolingual approach in teaching is the best one. The disregard of the students' mother tongue can in fact demotivate the students and be counterproductive. Therefore, there is neither a scientific nor a pedagogic reason to exclude L1 from the teaching process. There are probably more reasons, utilitarian and political, to make the use of L1 quite valuable in the process of teaching English. The former reason implies that the students would be motivated to think more about appropriate equivalents in their own languages and the latter one, of course, emphasizes the importance of cultural diversities and tolerance among nations”.

Taking into account what has been written above, it is essential to bring research into the use of mother tongue and utility of translation up-to-date. Recent results of teachers' voting on the use of mother tongue in the English classroom reveal the following: 21% of respondents use only English, 58% sometimes use mother tongue, 8% – frequently, 7% – most of the time, 6% – about half the time. There were 641 respondents in this research (Use of the...).

There is an opinion that ‘rigidly eliminating or limiting the native language does not appear to guarantee better acquisition, nor does it foster the humanistic approach that recognizes learners' identities’ (Mattioli 2004). Translation as a teaching tool needs to take into account a number of different aspects, such as grammar, syntax, collocation and connotation. Uncritical use of translation may give learners insufficient,

confusing or even inaccurate information about target language.

This paper aims, first, at rating contemporary students' perceptions of mental translation they employ in learning, and, second, at sharing the experiences of using translation in class activities. The implications of the use of the mother tongue in learning English are described.

Respondents and methods. The respondents in this research were the students specializing in Social Sciences at Mykolas Romeris University and studying English for Specific Purposes. There were 45 participants aged 18 to 22 in this project. They were predominantly females at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels.

The amount of time spent in L2 environment was 4 hours per week for 2 semesters, which amounts to about 130 hours of English instruction. In this study we administered a brief survey designed in accordance with the accepted standards to surveys in Social Sciences (Dornyei 2003). All the statements were rated on the Likert scale of five possible answers: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree. The obtained data were statistically processed and interpreted.

Results

The data were obtained for the groups of students of three specializations: psychology, social work, and penitentiary law. The students were asked to rate 7 statements on the five-point Likert scale. The statements are reproduced below.

1. In English classes, I occasionally prefer to use my mother tongue. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

2. In writing activities, I often mentally translate ideas from my mother tongue into English. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

3. While reading professional texts I use a bilingual dictionary to translate unknown words. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

4. In ESP vocabulary tests, it is easier for me to translate terms from English than into English. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

5. In listening activities, I mentally translate what I hear. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

6. Making presentations or giving individual talks, I prefer to look at my notes – I worry about my English. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

7. In impromptu speaking, I find it hard to recall the ESP terms. 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree.

The survey results are summarized in Table 1. Numbers 1 to 7 in Table 1 match the above statements. The high values of the Means, i.e. which equal or are above 4, indicate a strong or simple agreement with the statement. The Mean values around 3 point up learners' doubts, while values below 3 show disagreement with the statement. Therefore, students, who study penitentiary law (first column) and social work (third column), are more likely to use their mother tongue than students who study psychology (second column of Table 1).

The data show that all students are quite positive about the use of mother tongue in English classes, but the amount of it depends on learners' proficiency in English. The less proficient learners of penitentiary (PN) specialization require more reference to mother tongue – the Mean values of this group to statements 1, 3, and 5 are higher. Similarly, the students of social work (SW) specialization rated more positively statements 1, 2, 4, 5, than the students of psychology (PS) specialization, who are the most proficient out of the three specializations. The students of psychology generally prefer less code switching in the same linguistic situation – statements 1, 3, 5, and 7. Moreover, in certain cases the psychology students are more negative to the use of mother tongue, e.g. the Mean values to statements 2, 5, and 6 vary between 2 and 3. This trend is quite obvious in Fig. 1, where the

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Two-Tailed Significance Levels computed for each statement and different groups. The number of respondents: Penitentiary (PN) specialization – 8 students, Psychology (PS) specialization – 20 students, Social Work (SW) specialization – 17 students

Number of the statement	Means			Standard Deviations			Two-tailed significance levels (p)		
	PN	PS	SW	PN	PS	SW	PN vs. PS	PN vs. SW	PS vs. SW
1	4.25	3.65	4.31	0.66	0.96	0.57	0.070	0.819	0.014
2	3.50	3.20	4.13	0.87	0.93	0.97	0.424	0.118	0.006
3	4.13	4.00	4.06	0.60	0.71	0.94	0.640	0.842	0.822
4	4.00	4.45	4.50	0.71	0.74	0.97	0.145	0.158	0.864
5	4.00	2.60	3.19	0.87	1.11	1.08	0.001	0.054	0.112
6	3.38	3.40	3.69	0.86	0.86	0.89	0.945	0.409	0.327
7	3.38	2.60	3.50	1.22	1.11	1.14	0.130	0.809	0.021

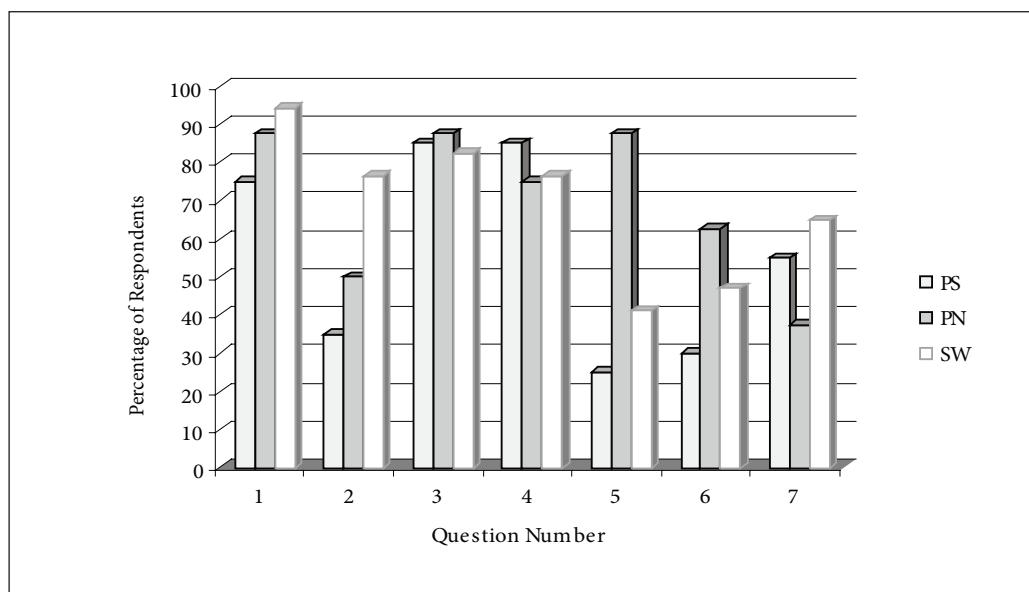


Fig. 1. Percentage of learners of each specialization who responded positively to statements 1 to 7

data show the percentage of positive responses to each statement. The columns are arranged in groups of three: the 1st column represents the positive responses of the PS students, while the 2nd – of the PN students, and the 3rd – of the SW students. It is seen that responses to the

1st and 2nd statements are spread out from the lowest for the PS students to the highest for the SW students. The evaluations of the 3rd and 4th statements are almost leveled off. The most significant difference is observed in the evaluation of the 5th statement – the lowest by the PS

students and the highest by the PN students, while the responses to the 6th and 7th statements do not differ significantly. Thus, the results demonstrate the importance of mother tongue in learning ESP. Two main differences in students' attitudes are 1) the amount of mother tongue that the learners of different specializations need, and 2) the different linguistic situations for the use of mother tongue.

In social sciences, experimental data are analyzed using inferential statistics. Statistical computations allow drawing conclusions about the significance of research questions. Here it has been important to assess whether the difference between the Means and Standard Deviations for various statements between the groups is significant or not. Statistical significance is the probability that a particular statistical result occurred by chance. The findings were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The computed ratios p allow to compare how significant are the differences in the values of the Means. The ratios are labeled PN versus PS, PN versus SW, and PS versus SW and are shown in Table 1 (columns 7, 8, and 9).

It can be seen that p values are different for various statements. The interpretation of p values is as follows: values $p < 0.01$ indicate that there is no significant difference between the responses there, and the closer p values to unity, the differences between the responses are fewer. These results allow drawing a conclusion that, in spite of the small sample of respondents, the data are statistically significant and can be applied beyond the studied sample.

As a matter of interest, the latest poll into the use of mother tongue (online reference 14) by 691 teachers has shown that 22% of teachers (148 respondents) use only English in the classroom, 58% of teachers (397 respondents) use mother tongue sometimes, and the rest either about half the time (6%, 42 respondents), or frequently (8%, 55 respondents), or most of the time (7%, 47 respondents). The data support our idea of the importance of native language in mastering the skills of English.

Research implications: translation activities in ELT

It is now generally accepted that language transfer or cross-linguistic influence, does occur, but is a far more complex phenomenon than hitherto believed (Benson 2002). Transfer can be positive and facilitative, where the two languages are identical, or negative, when there are significant differences between two languages. Transfer may occur at all levels: phonology, syntax, lexis, and pragmatics. Raising learners' consciousness can be valuable: teachers can explicitly point out differences between L1 and L2. For this purpose translation may be useful, because it can be interactive, learner-centered, promotes learners' autonomy, and uses authentic materials (Mahmoud 2006). With the ESP learners, we have used a number of activities that are beneficial for their linguistic development. Post-reading activities give students the opportunity to review, summarize, and react to reading material through discussions in small or large groups.

After having read a professional passage as homework assignment, students were encouraged to generate various comprehension exercises, such as multiple choice questions, true or false statements, general questions on the contents of a professional text. Students' generated exercises were scrutinized in pairs or small groups. The activity of writing different types of summaries, e.g. restatement, descriptive summary or opinion essays, has proved being very useful. It allowed teachers to pin-point errors stemming from the mother tongue, although checking written work increased teacher's load significantly. The most beneficial activity has been back-translation class activity. Selected texts for re-translation should not be too long, not too complex linguistically, not too distant from the ESP knowledge of the student. Students in pairs translated different short professional passages from L2 into L1. Then pairs exchanged their translations and translated the passages back into L2. Finally translations $L2 \rightarrow L1 \rightarrow L2$ were examined and compared with the original texts.

The ultimate analysis allowed raising learners' awareness of vocabulary, grammar, style, and language transfer.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn. First, all the learners customarily rely on their mother tongue in learning English. Second, the amount of the native language that students need depends on their proficiency and linguistic situations. Third, the statistical processing of the research findings showed that the data are significant in spite of the small sample of recipients. Finally, the autonomously generated reading comprehension exercises, summary writing and back-translation activities help raise learners' awareness of differences between English and their mother tongue and facilitate linguistic development.

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GIMTOSIOS KALBOS VAIDMUO MOKANTIS ANGLŲ KALBOS

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Pastaruoju metu vėl išaugo susidomėjimas gimtosios kalbos vaidmeniu mokantis užsienio kalbos. Tai lėmė besimokančiųjų poreikiai, susiję su užsienio kalbos vartojimo aiškumo ir tikslumo tobulinimu. Tyrimo tikslas yra išsiaiškinti gimtosios kalbos įtaką užsienio kalbos suvokimui ir mokymuisi įvairiose lingvistinėse

situacijose. Taip pat aptariamos įvairios kalbinės veiklos, kurios padeda ugdyti besimokančiųjų kalbinį suvokimą. Tyrimo rezultatai parodo, kad dauguma besimokančiųjų naudojami gimtąja kalba, kaip mąstymo procesų pagrindu, mokydami angli kaip užsienio kalbos, tačiau gimtosios kalbos naudojimas priklauso nuo besimokančiųjų užsienio kalbos išmokimo lygio.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Specialybės anglų kalbos mokymasis, besimokančiųjų kalbinis suvokimas, gimtosios kalbos vaidmuo.

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