EOTVOS LORAND UNIVERSITY

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PhD SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

NON-NATIVE
ENGLISH-SPEAKING TEACHERS:
INVESTIGATION OF
USING THE LEARNERS' MOTHER TONGUE

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2009

ABSTRACT

Two of the most controversial topics in the EFL profession have been the use of the learner's mother tongue (MT) in the EFL classroom and the issue of native versus non-native English-speaking teachers. This study tries to portray how teachers use the students' MT in teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Background

The proponents of using L1 see it as promoting both language learning and acquisition. At the micro level, teachers can utilize L1 to facilitate input (Van Lier and Turnball in Turnball and Arnett, 2002:205), class management, comprehension check, and vocabulary instruction (Atkinoson, 1993). At the macro level, Kramsch (1993) and McKay (in Hinkel, 2005:281) claim that the mother tongue is integral to the important interface between diverse cultures and languages. Moreover, Widdowson (1996), among others, harnesses the mother tongue to enable learners to 'appropriate' the foreign language. On the other hand, the opponents maintain that foreign language teaching should occur in the target language. They advocate 'English only' classrooms which enable maximum exposure to the target language (Polio and Duff, 1994; Macaro, 1997) and insist on the link between foreign language performance and teacher use of the TL (Burstall et al., 1974; Carroll, 2001).

The notion of using the learner's mother tongue is believed by some to be a corollary of being a non-native English-speaking teacher. According to Inbar (2001:63), an agreed definition of a native speaker is not available. She claims that "the three most commonly used criteria for defining native speakers in research and for placement purposes are: mother tongue, birth in a country where the language is spoken and self-ascription". Medgyes (1994) differentiates between native speaker and non-native speaker teachers in relation to language proficiency and teaching behaviors. Whereas native speaker teachers tend to be less textbook-dependent, non-native speaker teachers may provide better role models by teaching effective learning strategies and giving learners explicit information about the target language. Kamhi-Stein, Lee & Lee (1999) add that both kinds of teachers "have an equal chance to become successful teachers, but the routes used by the two groups are not the same".

Teaching English as a foreign language in Israel juxtaposes the place of L1 and non-native English-speaking teachers. I addressed these issues by designing and implementing a research project which originates from the normal practice of teaching EFL in Israel and my work as an English supervisor in a non-profit organization[1]. However, changes have occurred along the lengthy and curved road, and as Frost says, "yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back". Instead of conducting a research solely in Israel, I chose the road "less traveled by" and pursued my research over the ocean, in Hungary[2].

Research Design

This study aims to characterize the use of the pupils' mother tongue in the EFL classroom concerning non-native English-speaking teachers.

In order to do the above, the following questions were posed:
1. Do non-native English-speaking teachers use their pupils' mother tongue in the course of an EFL lesson?
2. How frequently do non-native English-speaking teachers use their pupils' mother tongue in the course of an EFL lesson?
3. In which situations does this code-switching occur? What function does it play?
4. What makes teachers use their students' mother tongue?

In light of the literary review and according to the research questions, I designed a descriptive research, (McDonough & McDonough, 1997), which was well grounded in the qualitative methods of study, although some quantitative data were used as well. The research included two phases.

Phase A focused on collecting data on phenomena which are not easily observed. Accordingly, 30 Israeli EFL teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire and take part in a group interview regarding their attitudes towards using the learner's mother tongue (Hebrew) in EFL lessons.

Based on the findings of Phase A, Phase B collected further data on the research questions, this time using observations and interviews. In addition, this phase of the research took a look at EFL teachers in a different context: Hungary. In this phase, 4 Hungarian EFL teachers as well as 5 Israeli EFL teachers were observed while teaching intermediate EFL classes. The Hungarian teachers were later interviewed in a group and the Israeli teachers were interviewed individually.

Findings

Phase A

The findings obtained show that English is without doubt the prevailing language and Hebrew is not taken for granted. Moreover, the teachers are aware of the fact that their subject matter is taught in an environment that is different from the language being taught (Levine et al. 2002) and hence encourage its use. Nevertheless, the participants seemed to agree that their classes cannot be defined as 'English only' and their lessons cannot be taught solely in English. Switching to Hebrew occurs mainly for three reasons: (1) students understand better (2) to maintain discipline (3) to manage the class. These results were partly consistent with those of the studies reviewed in the first part of this research (Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie, 2002; Macaro, 1997; Schweers, 1999).

Yet, there are significant gaps in the data collected by both tools:

- While the questionnaire's respondents seem to tolerate translating words from English to Hebrew as a means to achieving understanding, most of the contributors to the group interview opposed it and came up with alternatives to enhance the mnemonic, cognitive and metacognitive strategies of their learners.

- Surprisingly, reverting to the pupils' MT in order to check for comprehension was overwhelmingly supported in the questionnaire but not at all in the group interview.

- The contributors to the group interview mentioned the social dimension of the MT. They stressed its role in bonding with the pupils and affecting the interrelationships among its ecological systems, to adopt Hawkins phrase (in Hinkel, 2005:28) by creating mutual trust and positive atmosphere (Clearfield, 2006).

- Finally, the questionnaire's respondents related code-switching to the presence of weak students and non-readers. They explained that they speak Hebrew to lower learners' anxiety. Thus, the teachers seem to recognize their students' learning differences and that feelings of anxiety or contentment highly affect learning (Deutsch, 2007).

The greatest advantage in using a questionnaire lies in the fact that the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions, thus affording a good deal of precision and clarity (McDonough and McDonough, 1997:171). Conversely, the group interview unveiled points which had not been mentioned hitherto.

For example, the group interviewees are aware of the fact that some pupils like to speak English and that is why they "remain faithful" to the TL and limit the use of the MT. In addition, the group interviewees reported about their day to day teaching routines and strategies. For instance, they mentioned the importance of repetition and different tactics for conveying meaning of words.

To conclude, while the findings of the questionnaire point to what can be defined as a micro level use of the learners' MT, the results obtained in the group interview clearly locate this use at the macro level. In light of the contradictory findings and given that the results obtained do not necessarily provide evidence for actual teaching practices, I found it necessary to enhance this research by adding two data collection tools: observations and individual interviews.

<u>Phase B</u>

The results of the interviews largely substantiated those obtained from the observations. The current discussion describes the central features which emerged from the findings: major uses of the pupils' MT, drawing on MT and class interaction, and student-centered contexts versus teacher-dominant situations.

Major uses of the pupils' mother tongue

Although all the participants are aware of the importance of using the target language, there are times when the MT is employed. A systematic relationship between the teachers' language choices and particular pedagogic functions was obtained. The findings of the observations and the interviews show that Hebrew and Hungarian have been used for *lecturing* and *directing* and principally served for *explanation, translation, and guidance.*

Explanation was found to have a vital role in EFL lessons. I adopt Canagarajah's and Suresh's definition, in which 'explanation' refers to different strategies, namely, repetition, reformulation, clarification and exemplification (1995:186). Explanation can occur during any of the different stages of a lesson: while reading, writing, speaking, listening, and practicing. In the current research, translation became apparent as a leading strategy of explanation.

Translation constitutes an inevitable ingredient of teaching a foreign language. As Yletyinen (2004) describes, "When a class is going through a new chapter, there are usually new words and expressions in English that the teacher wants the pupils to understand" (p.75). However, the

usage of translation differentiates teachers. Transitions from the TL to the MT were visibly frequent in the elementary classes, where both Israeli and Hungarian teachers made use of their mother tongue to translate (explain) every day words. Resorting to translation became rarer in secondary and upper classes. These findings are consistent with Husain's research, which suggested that using translation had highly positive effects on the low and intermediate proficiency learners, but did not benefit higher level students (cited by Liao, 2006:206). All in all, translation was carried out while writing, lecturing, reading, listening, and practicing grammar, especially if the learners were weak.

Although foreign language educators may have disregarded the role of translation in language teaching, translation is still widely used by language learners to comprehend, remember, and produce a foreign language. (Liao, 2006:192). 40 years ago, Naiman et al. found that translation was one of the strategies often used by Good Language Learners (GLL). They argued that GLL "refer back to their native language(s) and make effective cross-lingual comparisons at different stages of language learning"(p. 14).

Both Israeli and Hungarian teachers employed the MT when the pupils failed to comprehend and follow instructions mostly on task and in reference to written or oral information. Like other studies, I assumed what Todd labels "a non-interactional stance" and examined the language and perspective of the teacher, who is only one of the participants (2008:45). In spite of this, I still believe that directions and instructions are interactional forms of discourse since students' understanding of and reactions to instructions are their raison d'être.

The pattern what is + a word in English was identified, notably while checking for understanding. It recurred in Hebrew as follows: Ma + ze + x (e.g. "Ma ze 'lamp"), and in Hungarian: Mi az + x (e.g. 'Mi az 'it depends'). Gabrielatos (2001b) argues that this type of question is aimed at eliciting language and together with 'what does it mean' allows the teacher to check understanding. Needless to say, the pattern what is +x is an integral part of learning and instructing languages, whether in the primary stages of language acquisition, when a toddler attempts to communicate or while instructing both the mother and other tongues. The pattern what is + a word in English has been frequently employed, thus reflecting the fact that both types of teachers harnessed it to promote understanding.

Intriguingly, only the Israeli teachers brought their MT into play to deal with conduct-related issues. In fact, this was the third use of Hebrew. Some teachers admitted that they resorted to the MT instinctively when dealing with bad conduct. This procedure may be rationalized by citing Yletyinen: "Switching to the mother tongue may serve as an indicator for the pupils that they have done something wrong…it gives more emphasis to the teacher's words" (2004:90).

It was fascinating to note, that the teachers in both contexts did not think of reverting to the pupils' MT as a socio-pedagogic tool apt to build solidarity and bond with the pupils. However, they insisted on its motivational power. The Israeli teachers accorded the MT a facilitative role in comprehension, and avoiding de-motivation and misunderstanding on the part of the learner. The Hungarian teachers also considered that using the MT makes weak pupils "feel safe".

Drawing on MT and class interaction

According to Bigot & Cicurel (2005:2), recent theories in the field of discourse analysis regard class interaction as a planned phenomenon which is met by either cooperation or resistance [2]. The teacher begins a lesson with definite and pre- determined goals of which the didactic interaction is an ingredient. Interaction is conditioned by knowledge, and results in the emergence of didactic activities which are more or less formalized.

Bigot & Cicurel relate class interaction to action theories and what they call *l'agir humain* [the human act] (2005:3). The teacher-actor "acts" according to rational, intentions, and motives of action which are carried out in social situations by means of language. Doing so, the teacher utilizes his communicative flexibility by adapting his strategies to his audience and the signs which it emits (Gumperz in Bigot & Cicurel, 2005).

Based on this view and supported by the data collected in this phase of the research, it is hard to say whether code-switching is planned or a simple consequence of various obstacles which a teacher faces while instructing a foreign language.

Student-centered contexts versus teacher-dominant situations

Although the teachers under observation differentiate in their origin, personality, age and teaching style, they tended to apply the students' MT in teacher-dominant situations, rather than in student-centered contexts.

Lecturing, directing and enforcing discipline are described as 'direct influence' (Baily in Carter & Nunan, 2004:115), and combining them with the pupils' MT may be interpreted as a routine.

Discussion

The findings of both phases indicate that the non-native English-speaking teachers under observation made use of their pupils' MT. MT practice appears as one of the 'resources' the teachers used in order to deal with external 'constraints' which limit their possibilities (e.g. weak pupils, incomprehension). However, while some teachers immediately chose it, others resorted to it only if other means failed. Nevertheless, English was undeniably the dominant language.

Quantification of actual teacher talking time in the MT was found to be extremely challenging. Although the Israeli teachers reported that 9-10 minutes of each lesson were in Hebrew, both the Israeli and the Hungarian teachers were rather vague about it in the group and personal interviews. Due to the fact that I did not use a tape recorder or a video camera, the observations could not indicate exact timing; however, they reflected the balance between the TL and the MT and the situations in which they were practiced.

Although teachers' classroom practices are highly individual (Larsen and Freeman, 2008:165), beyond the discrepancies and the differences detected among the participants, use of the pupils' MT was principally attributed to academic and managerial causes. The following table encompasses the factors which allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the motives for using the pupils' MT.

ACADEMIC	MANAGERIAL
▪ class level	▪ class size
▪ to clarify difficult concepts	▪ class setting (e.g. whole / groups)
▪ to teach about knowledge	▪ organizational factors
▪ to teach effectively	▪ give or clarify class work instructions
▪ to instruct the use of grammar and new words, including translation	▪ complex interactions with pupils
▪ to check comprehension	▪ pupils' behavior
▪ to give feedback to students to compare TL to L1	

Table 1: The factors which influence teachers to incorporate the students' L1 into their pedagogies.

The tangible research results delineated above affirm Critchely's claim: "while TESOL training programs take 'English only' for granted, practitioners (particularly those who speak the L1 of the students) tend to lean toward bilingual support. Some teachers utilize the L1 with particularly disadvantaged students, while others employ it to "level the playing field" (2004).

In order to explain the presence of the MT in the EFL classroom I would like to adopt the term meta-language [3] or meta-talk. In this sense, MTML may be explicit or implicit. In some classes it may not be present at all while in others it constitutes an integral part of the lesson.

This meta- language is used for:
1. Lecturing and making sure the pupils understand the material, principally in the teaching of grammar.
2. Directing, for instance, marking changes in lesson procedure by employing MT when moving from one classroom episode to another in order to catch the pupils' attention.
3. Communicating off-task messages. According to Merritt et al. (in Yletyinen, 2004:23), the mother tongue is the less formal language. English was used when dealing with the lesson content. 4. Class managing, for example, concerning the Israeli teachers, dealing with disciplining matters.

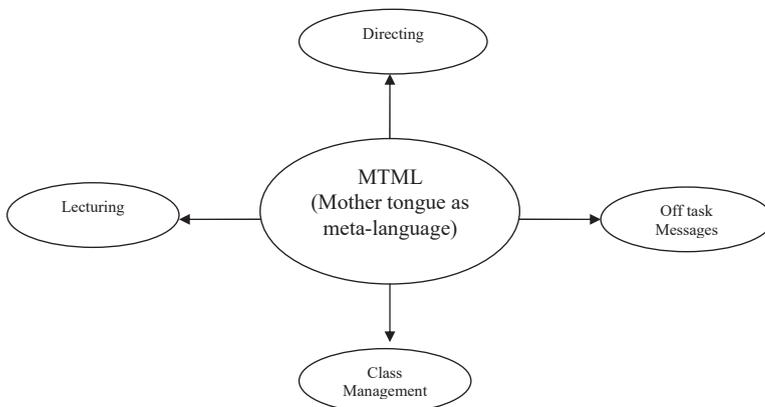I therefore propose the following MTML model and the subsequent continuum.

Illustration 1: MTML model

The teachers differentiate in the role, the stage during the lesson, the status and the function of the MTML. I hereby suggest a continuum whereby most teachers can be placed vis-à-vis their use of the students' MT:

- During grammar presentation and practice - Planned - "Non legitimized" - For definite functions	- At any time of the lesson - Unplanned - "Legitimized" - For various functions

Illustration 2: MTML continuum

Revenons à nos moutons [4], the decisions that the teacher makes in carrying out a unit relate not only to activity per se, but also to more deeply held beliefs about language, learning, teaching, and even life (Woods, 1996:182-3). Though all the teachers in the research were aware of the undeniable importance of exposure to the TL, some made a compromise. To use Gass' words "the burden of continuing a conversation with a non-proficient and non-understanding participant is often too great. Instead, participants opt out and either end the conversation or change the topic completely" (in Doughty & Long, 2003:250).

Contribution of the Study

This study's findings are significant in four ways. First, they add to the increasing body of knowledge concerning use of L1 in EFL, most of which is reviewed in the first part.

Second, this research offers a glimpse into the reality of EFL teachers in Israel and Hungary by documenting their words and actual practice. It gives us a fresh view and a new slant on their problems and ideas. In my opinion, teachers' perceptions should be included in the evolving theoretical work in the domain of language teaching.

Third, "no teacher is an island". This study gave the teachers a stage to share their perceptions and concerns with their colleagues and the readers. I honestly believe that the questionnaire, the observation and the interviews urged the teachers to reflect upon their normal practice. After all, as Carter and Nunan affirm: "the language teacher is not simply a consumer of theory, but is a generator of theories and hypotheses based on his or her professional knowledge and ongoing reflection of classroom teaching" (2004:217).

Lastly, the data collection tools, which were especially designed for this study, can be utilized in future research on related themes, thus serving as an operational construct. Trainees and practicing teachers can make use of my adaptation of FIAC if they wish to develop their professional expertise by investigating their own teaching through a systematic self-observation. English coordinators and department heads may use the questionnaire when interviewing potential applicants and eliciting data about their teaching practices regarding language choice.

The findings of this study imply not a different way of teaching, but merely a different way of thinking about teaching, having exposed a small portion of teaching situations. They recommend various tools for exploration and encourage the use of informal exchanges of experience and idea-sharing among practitioners.

The insights stemming from this study, to some extent, echo those of previous studies in unveiling the use teachers make of the students' MT. It is implied therefore, that teachers have to be sensitized to the benefits and limitations of using the students' MT in the EFL classroom.

In this perspective, the findings are relevant in the domain of teacher education, both in pre-service education, where prospective teachers learn to do the things that teachers need to be able to do, and in in-service education, where teachers learn to reflect on and develop their current practice.

Policymakers and stakeholders should recognize the fact that although the use of the learners' MT is controversial, it is also inevitable and consequently they should consider normalizing it and supporting the teachers with suitable guidelines to help them navigate their language choice. Taking this line, instead of dismissing the role of the MT, language teacher education programs should incorporate relevant materials. A potential curriculum should take into consideration context-

embedded components and refer to school level, age of learners, MT of learners, level of learners, among others.

[1] The function consists of designing syllabi and course materials, assessing both teachers and learners and providing the teachers with didactic and pedagogic guidance.
[2] Hebrew and Hungarian share a common feature: both derive from other sources than Latin and therefore are totally distinct from English.
[3]*Meta-language* refers here to any terminology or language used to discuss other languages.
[4]'Let us get back to the subject' (French)

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