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The Role of Mother Tongue in Second Language Acquisition

Abstract

In the first part of this paper, the author discusses the importance of the first language in the process of learning English as a second language as explored by previous researchers. In the second part, the author describes the results obtained, in two small case studies, among the students of different ethnic backgrounds learning the English language. The present paper consists of two parts. The first part is comprised of online questionnaire answers provided by Georgian, Mandarin, Hindi and Lithuanian speakers, where participants were asked to answer questions regarding their experience while learning English and whether they were encouraged to use their MTs in the process. The second study was conducted at the International School of the Hague (ISH). Five students were interviewed and recorded as they shared their experiences of using their MTs during the learning process.

The research generates mixed pictures, however most of the participants agree on the importance of their mother tongues in learning the target language.

Key Words: *Sociolinguistics, first language/mother tongue, second language, language learning, sociolinguistic competence.*

Introduction

Amongst other things, globalization brings about the importance of acquiring different languages of the world. However, learning a second language might be a very challenging and stressful experience for a learner, especially at an early age. Therefore, in order to make this process less demanding and more enjoyable, numerous linguistic studies set out to investigate the factors which accelerate the process of the acquisition of the L2 and, in addition, which help the students score higher in sociolinguistic competence (MacWhinney, 2008; Lado, 1957). Recent theories in linguistics and pedagogy put an emphasis on the relevance of the mother tongue in the process of learning another language and present it as an asset that a child can bring to the classroom. In other words, L1 is presented as a powerful base on which the second language can be built on (Cummins, 2001). However, it is also worth noting that a native tongue can not only be classed as a welcome foundation for the second language acquisition, but also as a hindrance. It is also maintained that both similarities as well as differences between the two languages should be pointed out to a student as it will only be beneficial for a learner to see the links or contrasts between the L1 and the L2 (Bybee, 2008).

This paper firstly aims to review the research concerning the importance of the mother tongue in the process of second language acquisition. The research is based on qualitative data of two small case studies - an online questionnaire, conducted in four different language groups (Georgian, Lithuanian, Mandarin and Hindi) and interviews at the International School of the Hague (ISH)¹. This paper investigates what the learners think about the role of their native tongues while acquiring English as a second language.

Theoretical Framework

The main aim of acquiring a language is to be able to exchange ideas appropriately with others and ultimately to achieve a high level of *sociolinguistic* and *grammatical competence* (Geeslin & Long, 2014).

¹ This case study was conducted within the course 'Sociolinguistics of SLA' at Leiden University by Sopio Totibadze, Mindy McCracken, Lisanne Voges, Samah Rahmeh and Claire Veldhuizen.

However, to do so, according to the previous researches (Lado, 1964; Bybee, 2008; Cummins, 2000, 2001), one initially must have a deep understanding of their first language. Even more, the ability to comprehend the structure of their mother tongue will assist the learners to better understand the socio-cultural and structural aspects of the L2. In addition, the skills of L1 can easily be channeled to the second language as speakers already have the concepts and ‘chunks’ (Bybee, 2008) in their first language that simply are translated into the second language. For instance, when one knows how to tell time in their L1, they will only need to learn the new labels and ‘surface structures’ in another language for the skill that they already have. This, undoubtedly, makes the acquisition process less stressful and challenging (Cummins, 2001). One of the cognitive approaches to language learning, Connectionism, also stresses the importance of the first language suggesting that it enhances the process of acquisition by creating patterns of association between the native tongue and their second language (Geeslin & Long, 2014; Gasser, 1990). As well as this, Ellis claims that while L1 is crucial in the beginning of the foreign language learning process, its role gradually decreases when the learner approaches the proficiency level (1985). Lado in ‘Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis’ (1957) also suggests that, based on a comparative study of student’s L1 and L2, a teacher can identify differences between the two and there is a high chance that the student will find those areas most difficult to learn, whereas Andersen (1983) claims that influence of L1 on L2 will only be apparent in those structures where L1 and L2 are parallel.

Apart from the above-mentioned reasons, Cummins in his ‘Interdependence Hypothesis’ disregards the approach that languages are placed in different “boxes” in the brain and, in fact, suggests that psychologically they are very much interdependent. Every language the person speaks is drawn from a ‘common underlying proficiency’ and exactly because of the common source, the languages can influence each other. Specifically, the first language knowledge can be positively reflected and be remarkably instrumental in the second language acquisition (1978). Besides, Cummins puts forward a suggestion that using L1 in the classroom situation can have a strong influence on children’s developing identity. Even more, according to him “to reject a child’s language in the school is to reject the child”, whereas encouragement of L1 during the teaching process will lead to the children bringing “a little bit of home” to school, which will eventually result in an emotional safety leading to a confident speaker of L2 (2001).

Data and Methodology

Case Study 1

The data of for this research are based on a small case study of four distinct first language backgrounds - Georgian, Lithuanian, Mandarin and Hindi speakers who have learned English as their second language. The participants of the online questionnaire were asked to answer several open questions about their experience concerning the process of foreign language acquisition. More precisely, whether they were allowed to use their mother tongue during their classes and whether they considered their native language as a helping tool to the L2 or as a barrier. The participants were also expected to provide specific examples supporting their position. Altogether 21 answers were analyzed comprising of 4 Lithuanian and 4 Mandarin, 5 Hindu and 8 from Georgian native speakers. Out of 21 participants, 8 were male and 13 female, varying mostly within 20 - 30 age groups.

The aforementioned language groups were singled out based on their basic differences in regard to English. Georgian (Kartvelian language group), Hindi (Indic branch from Indo- European language family) and Mandarin Chinese (Sino- Tibetan language family) have their own distinct alphabets, whereas Lithuanian (Baltic branch from Indo-European language family) employs the Latin alphabet composed of 32 letters and has managed to preserve its features from the Proto- Indo European language. Unlike English, which is

characterized with weak inflections, Georgian, Hindi and Lithuanian are highly synthetic languages, whilst Mandarin is analytical with no inflections.

Case Study 2

The second case study was conducted at the International School of the Hague (ISH) which has successfully incorporated the role of the L1 of the students within the process of acquiring a second language. All together 5 students were interviewed, 4 of them were recorded, while one, because of his shy nature, chose to give a written interview.

Participants were of mixed backgrounds (Hungarian, Chinese/German, Hebrew, Serbian and Chinese) and have spent 17 months at ISH. Interestingly, all of the participants came to school with no or very little knowledge of English. The interviewees were asked several questions about the school, their experiences there and what they had to go through while learning English as their second language through their mother tongues. Questions included topics like the first day at school, what was it like to learn another language, what helped them the most on their journey, did they use their mother tongue when learning English, etc.

Results and Discussion

Because of the fact that students are inseparable parts of the learning process, it is extremely interesting to see their standpoint regarding the process. More precisely, it is interesting to know whether the theories about the relevance of the mother tongue in L2 learning are taken in by the students (mostly unaware of the theories) in real life situations and whether they have employed their native language structures in their practice when acquiring English.

Case Study 1

Interestingly, the questionnaire results yield mixed pictures as they vary from one language group to another. However, most of them (11 respondents - 3 Mandarin, 2 Lithuanian, 3 Hindi, 3 Georgian speakers) claim that the use of their native tongues was mostly not encouraged during English classes and they were asked to employ only the target language, especially when the lesson involved group activities. Nevertheless, as some of the participants noted (2 Hindi and 3 Georgian learners), at the beginning stage of learning the English language, their mother languages were used by the teachers to explain grammatical materials and vocabulary. The remaining 5 participants (1 Mandarin, 2 Lithuanian and 2 Georgian speakers) responded that the classes were usually held in their first languages and expressed negative attitudes to this method. In fact, Georgians felt frustrated about it, claiming they would have achieved better results if the classes had been conducted in English, especially after they had already accumulated basic language skills. On the other hand, other participants of the study (2 Lithuanians and 2 Georgians) claimed that they understood the L2 structure better when explained in their L1 and also, when the teacher compared and contrasted relevant examples taken from both languages. This, as pointed out, resulted in their better understanding of the foreign language.

When asked whether their L1 had facilitated or hindered the process of learning English, 3 out of 4 Lithuanians stated they believed L1 to be of a great help as the alphabets are “almost the same” and the basic sentence structures coincide with those in English. This meant first thinking in Lithuanian and then translating the sentences into English. On the other hand, one respondent claimed that L1 had a more negative rather than a positive influence on their skills in English as the two grammars vary significantly and that made it tremendously difficult for their group to grasp the reasons and logic behind using a certain tense, for instance.

Mandarin speakers indicated that they considered their L1 as a hindering factor when learning English. Especially difficult was to learn how to write in a “European” way, as Chinese characters are notably different from the Latin alphabet. Besides, different ways of expressing tenses in these two languages made it

challenging for Mandarin speakers to acquire English as they feel that when confusing tenses interlocutors cannot understand them. As well as this, while Chinese is based on unique tone patterns and sounds, the participants of the study maintained that they had (and have) more difficulties in achieving target like pronunciation and intonation.

Interestingly, all but one native Hindi speakers conveyed that in most of the cases they thought that a good knowledge of Hindi helped them better understand the notions in English. Despite the fact that those two languages are totally different in nature, their L1 provided the students with the “tool” to grab the essence of the words in English. For instance, it made the process of learning new words easier if they were told the meaning in Hindi. However, they also believed that, although translating generally is of great help, the students should be aware of the fact that the exact word to word translation often gives a wrong picture of the context.

As for the Georgian participants, they suppose that to a certain extent Georgian was both a help and a hindrance in the acquisition of the L2. More specifically, possessing a more developed inflectional system than English, Georgian students found it easier to learn certain aspects of grammar. The participants suggested several similarities between the languages pointed out by the teachers: e.g., in English when expressing the present tense –s is added to the third person which is also true for the most third person verbs in Georgian (khatavs- paints; tsers- writes, etc.); a possessive case marker in both languages is also s, for instance, Sophie’s pen- sopios kalami. Interestingly, some of the participants noted the role of religion in the process of acquisition of L2. More precisely, it was indicated that as being part of the Christian culture simplified the understanding of shared socio-cultural peculiarities, especially while acquiring idioms and proverbs in English. On the other hand, phonetically, the interdental (e.g., /θ/) that are not part of the Georgian sound system, were most difficult for the learners to master. As noted by the respondents, what made the process of L2 (English) most difficult, was employing articles properly as they are absent in their L1. Spelling and using capital letters are also listed as barriers to overcome when acquiring English, as in Georgian the number of sounds and letters coincide, whilst capital letters are not used in the language. In addition, while Georgian is characterized by free word order, students found it difficult to stick to SVO structure only. Besides, plurality was also highlighted as difficult to acquire for Georgian learners as in their L1 numerals are followed by nouns in singular (in Georgian it would be correct to say two apple, rather than two apples). Though some of the participants of the survey sided with translation to be used in the process of learning L2, most of the native Georgian speakers suggested that direct translation can generate undesired results due to differences between synthetic structures and word collocations in English and Georgian. For instance, in Georgian it is correct to say ‘I the pill drank’ (me tsamali davlie); and “me and my friend to the cinema went” (me da chemi megobari kinoshi tsavedit), whereas in English is correct to say ‘I took the pill; my friend and I went to the cinema’, respectively.

Case Study 2

In this case study, all of the participants univocally (partially because of the school policy) suggested that they used their mother tongues in the process of learning English and they found it immensely helpful. Despite the fact that it was hard for them to get round and about on the first day, they had “buddies” with the same language background as them to help them around. This, as they have stated, helped them overcome the stress much better.

To the question “how does their MT help acquiring English”, interviewees answered that they have either by the help of the teachers or by themselves established the links (“bridges”) and came up with tactics how to use their L1s to learn English: “Basically, we learned a lot of tactics to write and we learned other words for the basic words” (Jovan, age 10). Students are also skilled at writing in their own languages and then translating

everything into English. According to them this saves a lot of time and their writings, at this stage, turn out much better than writing directly into L2- “it can help me to remember the words and what it means. We learned about drafting and speedwriting So I just um did it first in Hebrew very fast then just translated all of them and wrote it in English” (Itay, age 10). Interestingly, students who have mixed backgrounds (German and Chinese, for instance), choose the language (in this case, German) that, from their point of view, will help them more in the process of acquisition of L2.

Moreover, interviewees suggested that the school provides a very relaxed atmosphere that undoubtedly accelerates the process of learning. For instance, mistakes, as they say it, are part of the learning process and that “you often learn out of your mistakes, especially if they are really bad” (Tommy, age 10).

Conclusion

The small-case study, 1, showed that despite the fact that in most cases L1 was not encouraged to be used during the English lessons, students unconsciously or consciously still found ways of incorporating their mother language in the process of the L2 acquisition. Most of the participants (notwithstanding the language they presented) univocally stated that knowing the word in their native language accelerated the process of learning it as they just had only to learn the word form in English and not the meaning of the word. However, it was not considered to be advisable to translate L1 sentences word for word into L2 or *vice versa*. Arguably, an especially relevant and interesting opinion was suggested by a Georgian participant, who noted that even hindrance can become helpful at times. Specifically, if there is a difference between the languages and it is pointed out to the student, the latter will be aware of it and manage to avoid L1 based automatic (transfer) errors when acquiring L2.

On the other hand, the students at ISH (case study 2) who are actively encouraged to use their mother tongues to learn English show a huge improvement in their language skills. Because of the fact that they are allowed to bring “a little bit of home” to school they feel safer, more relaxed and have better results when it comes to learning English and using it on a day-to-day basis. The ability to use their mother tongue to learn L2 helps the students to understand the target language better by establishing links between the languages “as connections” (Itay, age 10). Besides, bilingual students choose independently between their mother tongues based on which is closer to the target language. Using MT in the learning process helps the students to boost their confidence and also creates the sense of belonging. On top of that, most of the participants of the interview feel more connected to their own culture. However, they also state that ISH gives them the opportunity to experience other cultures through their international school peers. This makes them happy and highly motivated to learn.

Thus, to sum up, even though the selected language backgrounds significantly differ from English, the participants (apart from Mandarin speakers) nonetheless found their MT to be mostly useful, even pivotal in the process of learning English, subsequently agreeing that its role is really important and even more, their mother tongues have helped them greatly in the process of fully mastering the second language, including communicative competence.

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