

Role of Mother Tongue in Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Introduction

The process of learning a second or foreign language, particularly English, is influenced by numerous factors, among which the learner's mother tongue plays a significant role. While there is much debate on the role that the first language (L1) should play in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, the relationship between the mother tongue and the target language (English) is intricate and multifaceted.

The mother tongue often shapes cognitive processing, language transfer, and classroom interaction. In many educational settings, there is a tendency to either minimize or maximize the use of the mother tongue, depending on pedagogical preferences, beliefs about immersion, and linguistic environments. This paper seeks to analyze these diverse viewpoints and investigate how L1 can influence the acquisition of English, either as a scaffold for learning or as a hindrance to fluency and proficiency.

The role of the mother tongue (L1) in learning a second or foreign language (L2), particularly English, has been the subject of significant debate and research in linguistics, cognitive psychology, and education. Different theoretical perspectives shed light on how L1 influences L2 acquisition, each offering unique insights into the cognitive, sociocultural, and linguistic processes that occur when learners navigate between their first language and a foreign language.

Behaviorist Theory

The behaviorist approach to language learning, which was dominant in the mid-20th century, views language acquisition as a process of habit formation. According to this theory, the mother tongue could either aid or hinder the acquisition of a second language, depending on the similarities and differences between the two languages.

Behaviorists argue that positive transfer occurs when the structures of L1 and L2 are similar, allowing learners to apply their existing language habits to the new language. However, when L1 and L2 differ significantly, negative transfer-or interference-can occur. In this case, the habits formed in the mother tongue may lead to errors in L2, particularly in areas like grammar, pronunciation, and word order. For example, a speaker of a language with a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) structure, such as Hindi, may struggle to adapt to English's Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure.

Although behaviorist views on language learning have been criticized for oversimplifying the complexity of linguistic and cognitive processes, the theory's emphasis on transfer still resonates in discussions of how the mother tongue can either facilitate or obstruct L2 learning.

Cognitive Theories

Cognitive theories, such as Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar, focus on the mental processes involved in learning a second language. Unlike behaviorists, cognitive theorists argue that language learning is not simply a matter of habit formation, but rather an active process in which learners construct meaning based on their existing knowledge.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis, for example, suggests that learners acquire a second language when they are exposed to comprehensible input-language that is slightly above their current proficiency level. In this context, the mother tongue can serve as a bridge to understanding this input, particularly in the early stages of learning when learners may not have sufficient knowledge of the L2 to understand complex ideas. By

using L1 to clarify difficult concepts, teachers can reduce learners' cognitive load, allowing them to focus more on absorbing new language features.

Chomsky's Universal Grammar theory also offers a cognitive perspective on the role of the mother tongue. According to this theory, all humans are born with an innate ability to acquire language, and the principles of language are universal across all languages. The mother tongue, therefore, provides learners with a framework for understanding the rules and structures of other languages, including L2. This theory suggests that L1 is not just a source of interference, but a tool that can help learners make sense of the grammatical principles underlying the target language.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory, based on the work of Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in language learning. In this framework, language is viewed not only as a cognitive tool but also as a means of communication and a way to participate in social activities. The mother tongue plays a critical role in mediating these interactions, particularly in multicultural and multilingual environments.

Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights how learners can benefit from assistance—often in the form of their mother tongue—when working on tasks that they cannot yet perform independently in the target language. Teachers and more proficient peers can use L1 to scaffold learners' understanding of L2, helping them navigate complex linguistic structures and cultural nuances.

Sociocultural theorists argue that the mother tongue is essential in co-constructing meaning during social interactions, especially in classroom settings. For example, in group discussions, learners may switch between L1 and L2 to ensure mutual understanding and to collaborate on language-related tasks. This perspective challenges the idea that the mother tongue should be excluded from language learning environments

and instead sees it as a valuable resource for building linguistic and cultural competence.

Interlanguage Theory

Interlanguage theory, introduced by Larry Selinker, proposes that language learners create a unique linguistic system, called interlanguage, that reflects their progression toward full proficiency in the target language. This system is influenced by both L1 and L2, and it evolves as learners continue to receive input and practice in the target language.

According to this theory, the mother tongue plays a dual role in language learning. On one hand, it can contribute to positive transfer, where learners successfully apply L1 knowledge to L2. On the other hand, it can also lead to negative transfer or fossilization, where incorrect language patterns become entrenched in the learner's interlanguage. For example, if a learner consistently applies L1 rules to L2 (such as using incorrect word order), these errors can become permanent features of their language use.

Interlanguage theory emphasizes the dynamic and fluid nature of language learning, where L1 and L2 are constantly interacting. It acknowledges that errors are a natural part of the learning process and that the mother tongue is an integral part of this process.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), developed by Robert Lado, posits that the similarities and differences between the learner's mother tongue and the target language can predict areas of difficulty or ease in language learning. This hypothesis suggests that learners will find it easier to learn elements of L2 that are similar to their L1, while areas of linguistic difference will be more challenging.

While the CAH has been criticized for not accounting for all types of language learning errors, it underscores the idea that L1 has a direct influence on L2 acquisition. The hypothesis has been applied in language teaching to help educators anticipate and address specific learning challenges based on the linguistic profiles of their students.

The Role of Mother Tongue in English Learning: Benefits

The role of the mother tongue in learning English as a foreign language has both practical and pedagogical benefits. Many scholars advocate for the strategic use of L1 as a cognitive and instructional tool, particularly in the early stages of language learning.

Scaffolding and Comprehension

One of the primary benefits of incorporating the mother tongue in EFL classrooms is scaffolding, a concept originating from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Teachers can use L1 to explain complex concepts in English, allowing learners to grasp the meaning of difficult terms without frustration. This scaffolding can expedite comprehension, especially in beginner-level classes, where students may not yet have the linguistic competence to understand abstract or challenging content entirely in English.

Cognitive Transfer

Positive transfer from the mother tongue to English learning is another key benefit. Many linguistic structures, vocabulary items, and pragmatic rules in the mother tongue can be transferred to English, aiding in faster acquisition. For example, learners whose mother tongue belongs to the same language family as English (such as Germanic or Romance languages) might find it easier to grasp certain grammatical structures vocabulary due to the overlap between the languages.

Emotional and Psychological Support

The emotional and psychological impact of using the mother tongue cannot be understated. Language learning is often a daunting process, and permitting the use of L1 in the classroom can alleviate anxiety and increase confidence. When learners are allowed to use their first language in conjunction with English, they may feel more secure and less overwhelmed, thus facilitating more effective learning.

Clarifying Instructions and Reducing Miscommunication

Especially in early stages of learning English, the mother tongue can play a crucial role in clarifying instructions and reducing miscommunication. In classrooms where learners are grappling with basic English, the use of L1 ensures that they fully understand what is being asked of them. This can be particularly important in task-based or communicative language teaching environments, where clear understanding of tasks is essential for language practice.

Challenges of Relying on the Mother Tongue in EFL Learning

Despite the many advantages, there are challenges and potential drawbacks associated with the use of the mother tongue in learning English. Over-reliance on L1 can inhibit full immersion and may slow down the development of language proficiency in English.

Inhibition of English Fluency

A major criticism of relying on the mother tongue is that it may inhibit the development of English fluency. If learners are consistently allowed to revert to their L1, they may fail to engage fully with English, reducing the amount of exposure and practice they need to develop automaticity in English. This is a key concern in immersion-based and communicative language teaching methodologies, where the emphasis is on using the target language as much as possible.

Negative Transfer and Fossilization

While positive transfer can aid language acquisition, negative transfer (also known as interference) can cause persistent errors in learners' English. Structures that differ between L1 and English, such as word order or tense usage, can lead to mistakes that become ingrained if not corrected early on. In some cases, this can result in fossilization, where errors become a permanent part of the learner's language system.

Pedagogical Limitations

In multilingual classrooms, where learners come from diverse linguistic

backgrounds, the use of a single mother tongue is impractical. Teachers may not share the same L1 as their students, or there may be several different first languages represented in the classroom, making the use of L1 less feasible as a general teaching tool. In such cases, an English-only approach might be more equitable and effective.

Pedagogical Approaches: Striking a Balance Between L1 and L2

Given the complex role of the mother tongue in EFL learning, finding a balanced approach that maximizes the benefits of L1 while minimizing its drawbacks is crucial. The following pedagogical strategies have been proposed to achieve this balance:

Selective and Strategic Use of L1

Many educators advocate for a selective and strategic use of the mother tongue in the EFL classroom. This means using L1 for specific purposes, such as explaining difficult grammar, clarifying vocabulary, or giving instructions, while ensuring that the majority of classroom interaction takes place in English. This approach helps learners comprehend complex material while still providing ample opportunities to practice and develop English proficiency.

Code-Switching as a Learning Tool

Code-switching, or alternating between L1 and L2 within a single conversation or lesson, can be a powerful tool for language learning. Studies have shown that code-switching can enhance cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, helping learners to see connections between their mother tongue and English. When used judiciously, it can aid in learning vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation by contrasting and comparing the two languages.

Task-Based Learning with L1 Support

Task-based language learning (TBL) emphasizes using English to complete meaningful tasks, but L1 can be used to support learners in understanding and carrying out these tasks. For example, teachers might

allow brief discussions in the mother tongue to clarify complex tasks before transitioning to English for the task itself. This ensures that learners understand the task requirements while still focusing on English production.

Bilingual Instruction in EFL Contexts

In certain contexts, bilingual instruction may be the most effective approach, particularly in regions where English proficiency is low, and learners benefit from instruction in both their mother tongue and English. This approach can gradually increase the amount of English used in the classroom, while still providing the support of the mother tongue during the early stages of language learning.

Case Studies: The Role of Mother Tongue in Diverse EFL Contexts

To delve deeper into the impact of the mother tongue in learning English as a foreign language, we examine case studies from various linguistic, cultural, and educational settings across the globe. These case studies illustrate how the use of L1 has been applied in different EFL contexts, shedding light on both its advantages and challenges.

China: L1 as a Scaffolding Tool in EFL Classrooms

In China, English is taught as a foreign language in a wide variety of settings, from primary schools to universities. Due to the significant linguistic and cultural differences between Mandarin Chinese and English, students often struggle with acquiring proficiency in English, particularly in the early stages of learning.

Research conducted in Chinese EFL classrooms has shown that the use of Mandarin as a scaffolding tool in beginner and intermediate levels can enhance students' comprehension of difficult grammatical structures and vocabulary. Teachers often employ Mandarin to explain abstract concepts, provide cultural context, and clarify instructions, especially when working with students who have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. In this context, the mother tongue serves as a cognitive

bridge, enabling learners to grasp complex linguistic material more effectively.

However, this reliance on L1 can also lead to over-dependence, where students may default to Mandarin even when they have the capacity to express themselves in English. This has led some educators to adopt a more restrictive approach, encouraging greater use of English as students advance in proficiency. The key challenge is determining the optimal balance between L1 and English use, so students can benefit from the cognitive support of their mother tongue without hindering their fluency development.

Spain: Code-Switching in Bilingual Education Programs

In Spain, particularly in regions such as Catalonia and the Basque Country, bilingual education programs that incorporate both the regional language (e.g., Catalan or Basque), Spanish, and English have become common. In these programs, code-switching between L1 (either Catalan or Basque), Spanish, and English is frequently observed. Research in this area has shown that code-switching helps students make connections between the languages, enhances their metalinguistic awareness, and supports vocabulary acquisition.

For example, in Catalonia, where Catalan is the mother tongue for many students, English is introduced early in the curriculum alongside Spanish. Teachers strategically use code-switching to highlight linguistic similarities and differences between the three languages, allowing students to draw on their knowledge of L1 and Spanish to facilitate English learning. This approach has proven to be effective, particularly in helping students navigate grammatical structures that differ significantly between the languages.

While this method leverages the cognitive benefits of multilingualism, some researchers argue that excessive code-switching may dilute the immersive English environment, particularly in contexts where English exposure is already limited. Balancing the use of L1 and L2 becomes a crucial pedagogical consideration in bilingual education systems.

Saudi Arabia: The Role of Arabic in Learning English

In Saudi Arabia, English is widely taught as a foreign language in both public and private schools, as well as universities. Due to the significant linguistic distance between Arabic and English, many Saudi learners face difficulties in mastering English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Teachers often use Arabic as a means of explaining complex ideas and ensuring that students understand key concepts.

In many Saudi classrooms, Arabic is used strategically to explain abstract grammatical structures that do not have direct equivalents in Arabic, such as certain verb tenses or sentence patterns. Teachers also use the mother tongue to provide translations for vocabulary items that may be unfamiliar or difficult to understand in English alone.

However, some critics argue that the heavy reliance on Arabic in Saudi EFL classrooms can inhibit students' ability to think in English and develop fluency. To counter this, more immersive methods, such as the direct method or communicative language teaching (CLT), are being explored, where Arabic is minimized in favor of English-only instruction. Nevertheless, in classrooms where students have limited exposure to English outside of school, the mother tongue continues to play a vital role in scaffolding learning and ensuring comprehension.

India: Multilingualism and the Use of Regional Languages in English Learning

India presents a unique context for studying the role of the mother tongue in English language learning due to its linguistic diversity. With over 21 officially recognized languages and hundreds of regional dialects, the use of L1 in English language classrooms varies significantly across different states. In many Indian schools, English is taught alongside the regional language (such as Hindi, Tamil, or Bengali) and is also often the medium of instruction in higher education.

In Indian classrooms, teachers often switch between English and the regional language to clarify instructions, explain grammatical points, and discuss cultural aspects of English texts. The multilingual background

of many Indian students means that they are adept at managing multiple languages simultaneously, and code-switching is a common phenomenon in the classroom. This ability to switch between languages allows students to access English in a way that feels less alienating and more relatable.

The challenges in this context arise from the wide linguistic diversity present in a single classroom, where students may come from different L1 backgrounds. Teachers must find ways to accommodate various mother tongues while ensuring that English remains the focus of instruction. Additionally, the presence of multiple languages can sometimes lead to confusion, particularly when students try to reconcile linguistic differences between their mother tongue and English.

Finland: Translanguaging in EFL Education

Finland, renowned for its high-performing education system, has adopted an approach known as translanguaging in its EFL classrooms. Translanguaging refers to the process of using all of a learner's linguistic resources, including their mother tongue, in a flexible and dynamic way to enhance learning. In Finnish classrooms, students are encouraged to use Finnish alongside English to explore new concepts, solve problems, and discuss ideas.

Translanguaging allows Finnish students to approach English learning from a place of strength, drawing on their existing knowledge of L1 to facilitate understanding and communication. This approach also fosters a sense of inclusivity and acknowledges the value of students' linguistic backgrounds, rather than treating English as a separate and isolated entity.

However, as with other approaches that incorporate the mother tongue, there is a risk that over-reliance on L1 could slow the development of English fluency. Finnish educators aim to strike a balance between using Finnish as a resource and maintaining English as the primary language of instruction, particularly as students progress to higher proficiency levels.

Implications for EFL Instruction and Policy

The role of the mother tongue in learning English as a foreign language has important implications for both instructional practices and language education policy. As seen in the case studies, the use of L1 can provide valuable cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical support in the early stages of language learning. However, the challenge lies in finding the right balance between leveraging the mother tongue and fostering an immersive English learning environment.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teachers play a crucial role in determining how and when the mother tongue is used in the classroom. As such, teacher training programs should equip educators with the knowledge and skills to use L1 strategically, ensuring that it enhances rather than hinders English language acquisition. Professional development workshops could focus on effective scaffolding techniques, code-switching strategies, and methods for transitioning from L1 to L2 over time.

Curriculum Design and L1 Integration

Curriculum designers should consider the linguistic backgrounds of learners when developing EFL programs. Incorporating L1 into the curriculum, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels, can help students build a strong foundation in English. However, as students advance, the curriculum should gradually shift towards more English-only instruction, encouraging greater fluency and proficiency.

Language Policy in Multilingual Classrooms

In multilingual classrooms, where students come from diverse L1 backgrounds, language policies should promote inclusivity while ensuring that English remains the focus of instruction. One possible approach is the adoption of a flexible language policy that allows for the use of multiple languages during certain classroom activities, such as group discussions or vocabulary explanations, while maintaining English as the primary medium of instruction.

Conclusion

The mother tongue plays a complex and multifaceted role in learning English as a foreign language. It can serve as a powerful tool for scaffolding, cognitive support, and emotional reassurance, particularly in the early stages of learning. However, over-reliance on the mother tongue can hinder the development of fluency and may slow down the acquisition of English.

The key to successfully integrating the mother tongue in EFL instruction lies in striking a balance between L1 and L2 use. Teachers must be trained to use L1 strategically and effectively, ensuring that it facilitates rather than impedes the learning of English. Additionally, language education policies should be flexible enough to accommodate the diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners, while still promoting English proficiency.

Ultimately, the role of the mother tongue in EFL learning is not a question of whether it should be used, but how it can be used most effectively to support learners on their journey to becoming proficient in English. By understanding the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of L1's influence, educators can create more effective and inclusive learning environments for EFL students worldwide.

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