

THE MOTHER TONGUE IN THE CLASSROOM: *cross-linguistic comparisons, noticing and explicit knowledge*

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Abstract

The role of the mother tongue in instructed second language acquisition/learning has been the subject of much debate and controversy. This article reports on a piece of research carried out in my own teaching/learning environment (a private English language school in Tarragona, Spain) and presents a comparative study of students', teachers' and teacher educators' perceptions regarding the adequacy of cross-linguistic grammatical comparisons in the monolingual classroom. Results suggest that a judicious and systematic use of cross-linguistic referencing may present the teacher with opportunities for equipping the learners with explicit knowledge of the target language systems. This in turn may help students to notice the gap between the state of their inner grammars and the target language and ultimately aid acquisition.

Introduction

Throughout much of the history of research into second language acquisition (SLA), the role of learners' first language (L1) has been a hotly debated issue. Prodromou (2000) refers to the mother tongue as a 'skeleton in the closet', while Gabrielatos (2001) calls it a 'bone of contention'. Such views are but a mere reflection of the different methodological shifts in English Language Teaching, which have brought about new and different outlooks on the role of the mother tongue.

Intuitively, a good number of teachers feel, partly based on their own experiences as learners of a second language, that the mother tongue has an active and beneficial role to play in instructed second language acquisition/learning. In the literature, an increasing number of teacher-researchers stress the growing methodological need in TEFL/TESOL for a principled, systematic and judicious way of using the mother tongue in the classroom. And yet, for some of us, there seems to be a generalised feeling of guilt that we are acting counter to the principles of good teaching when we use the learners' mother tongue as a tool to facilitate learning.

One of the first and main advocates of mother tongue use in the communicative classroom has been David Atkinson (1987 and 1993). Atkinson points out the methodological gap in the literature concerning the use of the mother tongue and argues a case in favour of its restricted and principled use mainly in accuracy-oriented tasks. His views, however, are reflections of his own personal experience as a teacher and not the result of measures of comparative achievements of students taught in different ways or of perception-based surveys.

There has been very little research done on what use of L1 is actually made in practice in the classroom and what the perceptions are of students, teachers and teacher educators on this subject. We will now turn briefly to two pieces of research in these under-researched areas.

Schweers (1999) investigated the use of L1 in his monolingual Spanish-speaking classes in Puerto Rico. He noted that a high percentage of students (over 80%) found the use of L1 in the classroom useful. They cite the following as instances when they find L1 use the most useful: to explain difficult concepts; when they feel lost; to feel more comfortable and confident; to check comprehension; to define new vocabulary items. Even though all teachers reported using the L1 to some degree, they saw a place for a more restricted use of the L1 than students in the situations mentioned above.

Prodromou (2002) carried out research into the perceptions of 300 Greek students regarding L1 use in the monolingual classroom at three levels – beginner, intermediate and advanced. A relatively high percentage of beginner and intermediate students (between 53% and 66%) answered that both the teacher and the students ‘should use the mother tongue’, while only a minority of advanced learners supported those views. This contrasts with the students’ opinions concerning the use of L1 in specific classroom situations (i.e. giving instructions, explaining grammar and so on). Here L1 use receives a small amount of support from the different level groups. Prodromou concludes that his study presents a clear pattern: the more English students learn, the less reliant they are on the L1 and that, on the whole, his students seem to have a negative opinion of L1 use in the classroom.

The research

As part of my MA thesis (2002) I carried out a comparative study of students’, teachers’ and teacher educators’ perceptions in order to attempt to ascertain whether there is a role for the mother tongue in the monolingual classroom in these situations: *Giving instructions*, *Checking comprehension*, *Grammar work (cross-linguistic comparisons)*, *Scaffolding of the learner’s language production* and *Pair/group work*. Questionnaires and interviews were used to explore the reasons behind participants’ perceptions.

Participants comprised the students at my school, who were divided into three main proficiency level groups (beginner, intermediate and advanced), teachers working in the same or a similar geographical and professional context to mine, and teacher educators from a variety of contexts.

This article will focus primarily on the results that the research yielded in one specific classroom situation: cross-linguistic comparisons and how such results relate other research and theory.

The research: questionnaires

Students were provided with a questionnaire presenting them with a number of set answers after each question. They were allowed to tick more than one answer or to offer an alternative rationale if necessary. When asked if they thought it was helpful that the teacher requested a translation of a grammatical structure (e.g. ‘How do you say *I’ve lived here for a year* in Spanish/ Catalan?’) the vast majority of beginner students answered positively. Here is their rationale: out of 34 learners 22 said that a) they felt they learnt more efficiently that way, while 9 argued that they b) learn *better* when L1 and L2 are compared. Intermediate students also looked favourably upon relating L1 and L2 in grammar work. 12 (out of 37) students gave rationale ‘a’ and 17 gave ‘b’. It is interesting that at later levels a good number of students (7 out of 17) still saw the

mother tongue as beneficial: 3 (out of 17) students gave rationale 'a' and four rationale 'b'. The rest prefer English only arguing that a) cross-linguistic comparisons confuse them (4) or b) that it is not necessary to translate in order to understand grammar (5).

In a second question which addressed cross-linguistic comparisons in grammar teaching/learning more directly *only* about 50 per cent of beginner students saw a place for it arguing that a) they notice differences and avoid mistakes (12) and b) they understand grammar *better* that way (6). The rest gave *No* as an answer claiming that c) comparing the L1 and L2 doesn't prevent you from making mistakes (6) and d) they need to learn to think in English (11). Rationale 'd' needs to be considered with extra caution though. It has been my experience that the 'you need to learn to think in English' popular belief which accounts for how languages should ideally be learned may have been fed into the students so systematically that it may have become ingrained into their perception of the best way to learn and they might have felt compelled to choose option 'd'. The considerable number of intermediate and advanced students (8 and 9 respectively) lending support to such a view seems to reinforce my assumption. 16 intermediate students give rationale 'a' and 5 rationale 'b'. The rest see no place for L1 and support rationale 'c' (8) and 'd' (8). Advanced students mainly give a negative answer: two give rationale 'c' and nine 'd' although a significant number go for rationale 'a' (6) and rationale 'b' (1). Again it is interesting to observe that 6 out of 17 advanced students, not a poor ratio, find cross-linguistic grammatical comparisons helpful in developing their understanding of the target grammar system.

Teachers generally agree (25 out of 35) that use of contrastive analysis in grammar work has a legitimate place in the L2 classroom. They favour this use particularly with lower levels.

Teacher educators' opinions are in line with those of teachers'. 23 out of 32 stress the importance of cross-linguistic comparisons. Raising awareness of differences is the most frequently given rationale.

On the whole all three groups perceive the mother tongue as a legitimate tool to use when exploring the workings of the target grammar system, although, again, advanced students are the most reluctant. We will now see how the above-mentioned findings contrast with those findings that the interviews bore to light.

The research: interviews

Teachers' views appear mixed. Out of nine interviewed three lend support to contrasts of grammars as a legitimate practice. Some of the comments are: "contrast is vital but it should be short and sharp", "it saves a lot of confusion" or "students seem more confident". One teacher holds that comparisons are only helpful "for things that are identical" and "if things differ it would only complicate matters", which correlates with only a small number of the students' responses (11). The remaining five teachers, contrary to much of what research in this article shows, present a united front against L1 use in grammar work. They argue that there are other ways of presenting and checking comprehension and give timelines and concept questions as examples. However, their answers, to a good degree, imply that they understood L1 use as literal translation and I get the distinct impression that I might not have been clear enough when presenting my question to them. This needs to be taken into account when interpreting their responses.

All seven teacher educators I interviewed opt for grammatical cross-linguistic comparisons and the implications for consciousness raising. ‘How do you say this in Spanish?’ rates high as a concept checking technique. Jenny Johnson, Head of the teacher training department at International House Barcelona argues “it depends on the grammar. It is definitely worth asking this sort of question (What’s ‘x’ in Spanish?). And that is a check for you and reinforcement for them because of the fact that there is a difference. I would try and anticipate problems students may have because of these differences. Karl Kalinski, also a teacher trainer at IH Barcelona, comments “I would always explain something and then clarify meaning in L1 but what I’d do is for example ask the students ‘is this the same in Spanish?’. So, I’m using my knowledge of L1 but I’m not actually speaking it. Absolutely! (to cross-linguistic comparisons). You might as well use it because students are doing it all the time. We have this idea of no L1 in the classroom but L1 is constantly being used in the classroom. Students are, especially at lower levels, always using their knowledge of the world and their L1 to make comparisons with English. By comparing it with your own language you’re trying to make it more comprehensible, I guess, and memorable”. Lynn Durrant, Head of the Young Learners teacher training department at IH Barcelona makes a distinction between adults and *younger* learners and comments that “cross-linguistic comparisons are useful as long as the teacher knows how to use them. But with children, most of the time, it doesn’t do any good to ask them to translate the grammar because it doesn’t mean anything to them because they can’t go into all the internalities of the present perfect for example. I find it’s intellectually unnecessary (with children) but it may be with adults because they may need to dissect the language due to their way of learning whereas a young learner doesn’t”. Finally, Scott Thornbury, well-known teacher educator and materials writer, goes further and gives an example of how you might *force* students to make comparisons and notice differences: “Yeah (to cross-linguistic comparisons). Again in the interests of resolving ambiguity. Students are going to make these comparisons mentally, or between one another anyway constantly. It’s better I think to make it explicit. An awful lot of time can be saved by showing for example that the future perfect in English is formed in exactly the same way as in Spanish. And I think it’s also legitimate to force those kinds of errors (where there are cross-linguistic differences) where you set up a situation where students have to, for example, produce false friends, whether lexical or grammatical, and when you correct them it makes more of an impression.”

Other research and theory:

Prodromou’s classroom survey (2002) contrasts with my findings. 27 out of his 100 beginner students find ‘explaining differences between L1 and L2 grammar’ useful. Intermediate and advanced students don’t find much utility in the explanation of such differences; only 4 and 6 respectively out of 100 agree with the approach. In a second question asking students to consider whether ‘explaining differences in the use of L1 and L2’ may be useful, percentages of positive answers increase considerably in all three level groups. However, the highest percentage is still a low 33% for beginners, 22% for intermediates, and 20% for advanced. Prodromou warns that his statistics may reflect the degree to which students may have internalised received opinion, something which also needs to be born in mind with my own findings. The reader is also advised to be mindful of the different contexts in which the surveys compared above took place. This emerges as a big consideration in qualitative research such as this one.

A number of authors have talked about the potential pedagogical benefits of carrying out contrastive analysis of grammars. Both Atkinson (1987) and Harbord (1992) present similar views. Atkinson proposes a simple explanation or demonstration of the rule followed by a translation exercise in those cases where L1 and L2 differ structurally and recommends translation of a paragraph containing *known* false cognates to raise students' awareness of misleading similarities between the two languages. Harbord, in a similar line, finds these comparisons helpful in that they can make students aware of the danger of single-word translation. Schweers (1999), in a report of the outcomes of his research on the use of the mother tongue in English classes, concludes that 'a second language can be learned through raising awareness to the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2', and Pellowe (1998), in his thesis entitled *Negotiation, noticing and the role of selective cross-lingual strategies in foreign language classrooms*, makes a case for a *judicious* use of cross-lingual techniques to promote consciousness raising and facilitate features of the input becoming *intake* when differences are made salient and noticeable. It needs to be stressed that the term *judicious* is a recurring one in the works of the different authors mentioned here. While in favour of a communicative approach and meaning-focused instruction they still see a legitimate place for *judicious and principled* L1 use mainly to foster accuracy.

James (1980) makes reference to *Contrastive Teaching* as a valid technique to impart (students with) 'packaged information, in a form easily assimilated as knowledge, about the intricacies of L2 systems'. This, he argues, is more in line with a cognitive view of language learning which stresses the need for students to base their behaviour on knowledge rather than on habit. Contrastive teaching involves presenting learners with a linguistic system (be it grammatical, phonological or lexical in nature) which contrasts with the corresponding L1 system. James coincides with Odlin (1989) on the importance of cross-linguistic information at discourse and, implicitly, cultural and social levels. Odlin suggests learners need to be made aware of the socio-cultural conflicts that inappropriate use of language may entail, due to cross-lingual form-meaning misalignments, by giving them information on areas such as: requests, apologies, greetings, proverbs, turn-taking in conversation and discourse structure, where 'differences related to expectations about *coherence* in discourse (written or oral texts) may create special problems for learners in their reading or listening comprehension efforts'. This is particularly true of Spanish students who on occasions come across as curt or even rude to native English speakers. The level of directness of Spanish speech and the low incidence of polite terms such as *thank you* or *please* are but an example.

Lightbown and Spada (1999) state that 'in rejecting behaviourism, some researchers also discarded contrastive analysis as a source of valuable information about learners' language' (p.85). They cite a study which suggests that learners may have difficulties when L1 and L2 patterns are similar but not identical. In those cases the learner may fail to notice the exceptional behaviour of the L2 pattern and generalise the L1 pattern. They argue that form-focused instruction which provides learners with explicit information on how their first language contrasts with the target language may be needed especially in classes where all learners share the same first language.

The case is built stronger when we consider SLA research on the effect of formal and explicit instruction in the classroom.

It is generally accepted that instruction that focuses on language form can both speed up the rate of language development and raise the ultimate level of the learners' attainment – Willis (1996, p.15)

Therefore, by equipping learners with explicit grammatical knowledge of the target language they may be in a better position to 'notice features in the input that otherwise would be ignored' and 'compare what they have noticed in the input with output derived from their current interlanguage grammars' (Ellis 1997, p.123). Thus, the argument goes, because students have been equipped with explicit knowledge they will be able to notice instances of those linguistic features they have paid formal attention to in posterior communicative encounters and eventually incorporate such target features into their interlanguages once they are developmentally ready.

My argument is: if students are trained to contrast L1 and L2 grammars, and differences as well as similarities are made explicit, chances are such explicit knowledge will enable learners to notice the 'gap' between their inner grammars and the target language and ultimately, through constant hypothesis testing, achieve higher levels of grammatical as well as communicative competence. Thus, the principal role of cross-linguistic referencing becomes *consciousness raising*, a recurring concept in the words of those teacher-researchers above-mentioned. Rutherford (1987), in a chapter dedicated exclusively to the central role of consciousness raising in language learning, holds that 'successful learning comes about only when what is to be learned can be meaningfully related to something that is already known' (p.16). He links this assumption mainly to language universals. To that I would add that few *already-known* things are more meaningful to the learner than their mother tongue.

Conclusion

My research findings along with the literature provided would, in principle, point to and recommend a *judicious* use of cross-linguistic comparison techniques when doing grammar work in the English classroom.

I need to stress, however, that cross-linguistic comparisons should be but one of the many tools at the teachers' disposal when dealing with grammatical aspects of language. The good teacher will know when and where cross-lingual references are appropriate.

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