

THE POWERFUL AND CONTROVERSIAL STRATEGY OF USING STUDENTS' FIRST LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This study explores the extent to which using the students' first language in teaching foreign languages is beneficial, and recommends some successful strategies of putting L1 knowledge to good use. Given that it is widely recommended to avoid the use of L1 in favour of monolingual approaches, that provide complete language immersion, it is especially challenging to define the situations when students' first language can be used as a valuable and beneficial tool to support foreign language learning. Although L1 use is widely discouraged, some researchers suggest that, if used correctly and coherently, it does not hinder, but promotes language learning. In order to establish the extent to which L1 could support foreign language learning, this study sheds light on strategies used during teaching Romanian as a foreign language, aiming to make enlightening connections between L1 and L2, thus exploring the similarities between Romanian and Italian, the mother tongue of the students. The teacher used basic information about etymology, language history and phonetic transformations to explain the connections between words in Romanian and Italian, based on the common Latin inheritance. Moreover, the teacher used brief explanations and informal comments in Italian to build a meaningful relation with the students and create an inclusive, friendly and relaxed environment for language teaching. This comparative linguistics approach was assessed in relation with the results obtained by another class of Italian students, where the teacher made no such linguistic comparisons and avoided use of L1.

Keywords: *L2 teaching, L1 use, comparative linguistics, etymology.*

1. Introduction

Monolingual approaches to language teaching have been acclaimed since the end of the 18th century and have been stealing the spotlight in language teaching, through strategies like the direct method, the communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching (Howatt, 1984). Researchers have argued that extensive use of the learners' target language helps them follow the same learning pattern as in the process of acquiring their own mother tongue (Krashen, 1981), as well as those languages are based on distinct systems, that should not be overlapped in the learning process (Lado, 1957). For such reasons, researchers advocating the avoidance of L1 are adamant on maximal target language exposure (Duff and Polio, 1990; Mori, 2004).

Rarely challenged until recently, the monolingual approach works wonderfully when students come from different linguistic backgrounds. However, researchers have begun to question the exclusive use of L2, particularly when there is a linguistically homogenous group of learners, and to consider the potential benefits (Medgyes, 1994; Auerbach, 1993). Some approaches suggest that learners might be provided with more cognitive support when allowed to strategically use their native tongue, which would enable them to process and analyse language to the benefit of L2 learning (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Swain and Lapkin, 2000). Related to L1's usefulness in explaining tasks and classroom management, researchers have reached near consensus, stressing the importance of such a strategy for a thorough understanding of instructions and clarification of directions and rules (Auerbach, 1993; Brooks and Donato, 1994; Swain and Lapkin, 2000). Besides this administrative side of the lessons, there are studies highlighting that providing extensive grammar explanations, correcting errors, checking comprehension and linguistic analysis are areas where L1 could provide consistent and welcomed support for language learning (Atkinson, 1993; Auerbach, 1993). Butzkamm (2003) advocates fervently L1 use as a valuable pedagogical and cognitive tool, meanwhile stressing the emotional advantages resulted from such an approach, reflected in a more confident and less frustrated attitude of the learners. Additionally,

collaborative tasks might benefit from L1 use, as it supports enhancement of language proficiency when wisely allowed (Blooth, Azman, and Ismail, 2014). This finding is in line with the studies that suggest that L1 use has sociocultural benefits, thus supporting group cohesion and creating an inclusive and relaxed environment. “Learners’ first language is seen both as a tool for communication when used in their interpersonal speech with others, as well as a tool for thought in learners’ self-directed intrapersonal speech. In other words, L1 serves both social and metacognitive functions in the SLA process.” (Yaghobian, Samuel, and Mahmoudi, 2017: 38). However, supporters of this method also warn against overuse of L1, which could result in high dependence on L1 (Lantolf, 2000: 87). Consequently, prudent and systematic resort to L1 in foreign language classes, in correlation with the educational objectives, might be a valid method so as to achieve optimal learning of L2.

2. Data collection

This study aims to take researches regarding L1 use in the classroom further, in an attempt to apply the conclusions of the numerous studies mainly focused on ESL to the uncharted territory of Romanian as a foreign language. The data collection has taken place in autumn 2021, during an intensive Romanian language course for Italian students (aged 17 – 20), which aims to take learners all the way to B1 level in two months of lessons, so that learners would pass a linguistic competence exam needed for faculty admission. The study analyses the progress made by two groups of students (15 students in each group) that had simultaneous classes, following the same curriculum and using the same textbooks and audio-video materials. The activity of the students was observed during two weeks of lessons (level A1). The teacher of Group 1 did not speak Italian and applied an L2-only approach, using full language immersion to achieve linguistic skills acquisition. Group 2 had a teacher with medium level of proficiency in Italian, and used the students’ first language in specific contexts, in order to boost language acquisition. The tools used to assess the outcomes of this didactic strategy were: teacher observation sheets, linguistic competences tests, and student feedback questionnaires. The results were processed qualitatively and quantitatively, so as to establish whether a controlled and didactically coherent use of L1 is a good approach to language learning.

3. Educational key points

The teacher of Group 2 defined beforehand the key points where L1 should be employed and set the objectives of the lessons. The approach aimed for a systematic and coherent use of the students’ native tongue, in defined contexts: giving instructions, clarifying classroom routines and rules, making linguistic connections between Italian and Romanian, supporting collaborative tasks, and establishing student-teacher rapport. With regards to linguistic aspects, the teacher chose to focus on a comparative linguistics approach, aimed to stress the similarities and the dissimilarities between Italian and Romanian with respect to: phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar.

In terms of the comparative linguistics approach, we shall briefly review a few examples that would shed light on the teacher’s choice of educational key points. In order to improve pronunciation, phonetic rules were presented in relation with their Italian correspondents: the identical pronunciation between the Romanian group of letters *ci, ce, che, chi, ge, gi, ghe, ghi* and their Italian counterparts, the phonetical correspondence *t* (Ro) – *zz* (It) and *ș* (*ro*) and *sc* (*it*). For vocabulary, the teacher chose to use images, mime and context to render meaning, avoiding translation and confirming whenever students could identify by themselves the correct L1 correspondent. Moreover, to support learning and enable students to make linguistic connections, the teacher presented a set of etymological rules that are consistently observed in the formation of the two languages, tracing the roots of the words back to the Latin roots. L1 was also used by the teacher for brief explanations, classroom management, small comments aimed to create cohesion and build a relaxed and friendly environment, and discussions on cultural aspects related to customs, habits, cultural symbols and sharing memories and funny stories.

4. Results

The teachers’ observation sheets have shown that students were highly responsive to the comparative presentation of L1 and L2 and have even shown a keen interest for etymological comments, especially since some of them had previously studied Latin. Words whose meaning was explained contrastively, in connection to Italian, were better remembered, as revealed in the recapitulative sections of the lessons and test results. While the teacher from Group 1 noted that the L2-only environment was sometimes met with frustration and could not prevent L1 conversations between the students, the 2nd Group teacher noticed a high interest for intercultural discussions and for the common Latin inheritance. Furthermore, Group 2 teacher considered that interpersonal use of metatalk about assignments was effective, given that more proficient students managed to mediate their colleagues’ learning of L2 through

L1, which resulted in a better involvement of all students in the learning process and in increased confidence and motivation.

After the first two weeks of studying Romanian, students took a test which assessed their linguistic competences: listening, reading and comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and speaking. The results obtained by the two groups were compared and associated with the student satisfaction questionnaire and teacher feedback. The comparison revealed that the performance of the students in Group 2 was better. Thus, the overall score obtained by Group 2 after the written and oral test comprising all linguistic competences was higher by 24%. Another important finding is that a thorough analysis of the typical errors made in writing or speaking led to the conclusion that pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar knowledge were improved through the appeal to L1, given that students in Group 2 made fewer mistakes in the use of the notions that were approached contrastively.

The student satisfaction questionnaire was aimed to assess overall perception of the students on the effectiveness of the lessons and on the classroom dynamics and also inquired about the learners' perception on the use of L1 or lack thereof. The overall satisfaction score was higher by 28% in Group 2. The questionnaire for Group 2 was enriched with additional items aimed to evaluate how students viewed the use of L1 in three specific areas: clarifications and task completion, comparative approach of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar, and classroom interaction. All students found that task completion was easier when the teachers' explanations also used L1. When asked to define classroom interaction, students from Group 2 described the learning environment as inclusive, relaxed, and engaging. Nevertheless, regardless of how promising the results of the data analysis might be for L1 use, it is important to also stress that language learning has surely been impacted by other factors that could not be quantified: the teacher's skills and personal style, and group dynamics.

3. Conclusions

Starting from the assumption that L1 use in foreign language learning can be beneficial, as numerous studies have previously shown, if used methodically and in line with the educational objectives, this study examined the extent to which the use of Italian, the students' native tongue, is valuable in learning Romanian language. L1 was used only in carefully defined contexts, so as not to run the risk of students becoming overly dependent on L1 and of unnecessarily diminishing linguistic exposure to L2. The findings show that the students' progress has been consistent and significant, and that the comparative linguistics approach resulted in a better acquisition of all language skills and was met with enthusiasm. Moreover, task completion and classroom interaction were at optimal level, and learners considered that the educational environment was encouraging, inclusive, and felt that their needs were adequately met by the teacher's bilingual approach.

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