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Philip Kerr

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1 Introduction

Why this book?

How to deal with mother tongue in an English class??

- No matter what nationality you are Mother tongue is always there interfering in our lessons.
- [Translating in the classroom] got so out of hand, that even I was looking up Spanish and (heaven forbid) writing translations on the board. After a few months of this, I realized that this has to stop and stop NOW.
- I work at a university prep school where using the mother tongue is forbidden but most of us use our mother tongue time to time as we feel the necessity of it.
- We treat the mother tongue as a problem because of the stupidity of our immersion methodology.

Figure 1.1: Blog postings at eltcommunity.com (2009–2010)

The use of the learner's own language in language teaching is a contentious issue. It is a topic that has been largely ignored in the most widely used teacher training manuals for English language teachers and on UK-based pre- and in-service training courses such as CELTA. (Early editions of some handbooks (Scrivener, 1994; Harmer, 1983) paid very little attention to the use of the students' own language in language classrooms. Both writers, however, have more recently made clear that they consider this an important issue.) It is also a topic which has featured very infrequently at ELT conferences in the last twenty-five years. Many language teaching organisations (from schools and school chains to language departments in colleges and universities) have policies banning the use of the mother tongue in language teaching classes.

There has been a steady stream of dissent (e.g. Bolitho, 1983; Atkinson, 1987; Prodromou, 2002), but, it seems, these voices have not been widely heard. At the same time, many teachers have continued to use the language that they share with their students. Research (Copland & Neokleous, 2011) tells us that many of these teachers under-report the amount of L1 they use in the class, suggesting that they do so with a sense of guilt. Luke Prodromou (2002, p. 5) has suggested that this guilt has cramped the potential of translation as a classroom resource.

Language teachers who use their mother tongue in the classroom, even teachers who write translations on the board, should be reassured. 2010 saw the publication of Guy Cook's award-winning *Translation in Language Teaching*. Critical reaction to the book has revealed an academic consensus on the role and use of the mother tongue. Such respected names as Vygotsky, Halliday and Widdowson were already on record as advocates of own-language use in learning another language.

Following publication of Cook's book, a string of well-known ELT trainers, writers and researchers (e.g. Jane Willis, Tessa Woodward and Rod Bolitho) supported the use of L1 when interviewed by the British Council for a series of YouTube videos (British Council, 2010). New editions of the teacher training manuals have begun to include sections on mother-tongue use in language teaching. The pendulum has swung so far that some researchers and practitioners are claiming that strictly monolingual learning environments may actually be detrimental to language learning. Perhaps the most forceful promotion of the use of the students' own language was put forward by Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009).

Whilst there is no shortage of evidence that principled use of L1 in the foreign language class can be beneficial, there is a shortage of practical material for language teachers. This book is intended to fill that gap.

Recent years have seen rapid advances in machine translation and the growing availability of free software such as good online bilingual dictionaries, online translation tools, and smartphone apps. These improving technological tools have become available to both teachers and students, and their quality and popularity will improve further. Some of the practical ideas in this book will draw on such easy-to-use web tools (see Chapter 4).

The first page of this book has referred to 'mother tongue', 'L1' (first language) and the learner's 'own language'. Another term that might have been used is 'native language'. Throughout this book, my preferred term will be 'own language'. 'Mother tongue' is problematic since the language in question may not be that of the learner's mother. 'Native language' is unsatisfactorily vague. 'L1', which for a long time has been the most commonly used term, is potentially misleading, especially in today's multicultural and multilingual classrooms where the learner's 'L1' may actually be a second or third language. The term 'own language' was advocated by Cook (2010), and can refer to the learner's own language or the shared language of the classroom, other than English, when this is not the same. See *Multilingual contexts* on page 10.

Translation and translating

This book suggests a wide variety of activities that involve the learner's own language in some way. These range from using bilingual dictionaries to translating long texts. The point of all of them is to promote language learning, rather than to develop translation skills (although some teachers of Translation Studies will find new ideas here). The majority involve spoken interaction, rather than written translation. The kind of translation mostly associated with Translation Studies – literary translation – is unlikely to be of much value to the vast majority of language teachers, whose students are not yet at the level of C1 or C2 where they may begin to tackle sophisticated literary texts.

The activities are typically focused on the process of translating, as opposed to the end result. More often than not, there are no wrong or right answers. What counts are the learning opportunities that are presented along the way.

Traditional reasons against using the learner's own language

Criticism of translation as a learning/teaching tool goes back at least to Maximilian Delphinus Berlitz at the beginning of the twentieth century. Berlitz had two fundamental principles: (1) 'direct association of thought with the foreign speech and sound', and (2) 'constant and exclusive use of

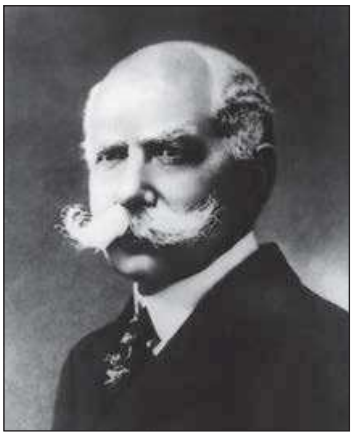

Figure 1.2: Maximilian Delphinus Berlitz

the foreign language'. These principles certainly led to commercial success, but his arguments have resonated more with the general public than with language specialists.

Berlitz advanced three main reasons for abandoning translation:

- Too much time is taken up using the learner's own language, and not enough in using the language to be learned.
- You never really get used to the 'spirit' of a foreign language if you study with translation. 'The learner has a tendency to base all he [sic] says upon what he would say in his mother tongue.' (Berlitz, 1916, pp. 3–4)
- 'A knowledge of a foreign tongue, acquired by means of translation, is necessarily defective and incomplete; for there is by no means for every word of one language, the exact equivalent in the other.' (Berlitz, 1916, p. 4)

Berlitz's first point will strike a chord with many people who have studied a language in very traditional settings, where, especially at lower levels, virtually all exchanges are in the students' own language. These exchanges typically consist mainly of explanations of grammar. It is clear to most people that extensive use of the target language in the classroom is preferable, but it does not follow that *all* classroom exchanges should be in this language. The fact that some teachers overuse the students' own language in translation-aided teaching cannot justify the complete exclusion of this language, especially if judicious use of it may generate large amounts of the target language.

Regarding Berlitz's second point, it is difficult to define exactly what the 'spirit' of a foreign language is. Berlitz may have been referring to the popular idea that, in order to use a language well, one must also learn to think like someone who has that language as their mother tongue. The idea is seductive, but it is also vague because it makes an enormous generalisation about the mindsets of people who share a language. As an idea, it may also not be very relevant in the twenty-first century where English is mostly used as a tool of global communication. In contexts where English is being learned to communicate with others from non-English speaking backgrounds, the 'spirit' of the language (if some sort of national culture is meant by this word) is neither here nor there.

Leaving aside the relationship between a language and a particular culture, there is a further difficulty with the idea of learning to think in another language. This idea is widespread and often reported by people who have achieved a high level of proficiency in another language. If successful language learners experience a 'eureka moment' when they begin to think in the other language, it seems reasonable to do everything possible in the classroom to bring that moment forward. One proponent of the Direct Method, E. V. Gatenby, wrote that our aim must be 'to get our pupils […] to the stage where they can use English without having to think' (Gatenby, 1967, p. 70). He did not mean, of course, that the students should not think at all, but that they should learn 'to dissociate the two languages'. It is this pervasive belief that students need to separate the two languages that is usually at the heart of the exclusion of their own language from foreign language classrooms.

Whilst this attempt to separate the two languages may work well for some learners in some contexts, it is unlikely to work for all. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the human brain is not neatly compartmentalised into regions, with one language stored in one part of the brain, and another language in another part. Studies, such as research into word associations (e.g. Spivey & Hirsch, 2003), show clearly that the brain processes knowledge of two or more languages in parallel, at least to some extent. Languages cannot be separated out, even if we would like them to be. The second reason is that the vast majority of language learners do not need, and may not even wish, to achieve a level of proficiency which would permit 'thinking' in that language. The language of thought, it has been suggested (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009, p. 5), is inevitably the students' first language, except for those who have reached advanced levels (C1+). In other words, an English-only policy, however well-intentioned, may be both unrealistic and inappropriate to the majority of students.

Berlitz's third point – that there is no such thing as full word-for-word equivalences between language and that therefore a translation approach, which seems to promote a search for equivalences, will lead to a 'defective' and incomplete knowledge of the language – is superficially attractive, but does not stand up to scrutiny. Competence in any language, one's own or another, is necessarily an emergent phenomenon, whether it has been acquired by translation or not. We would not choose to use words like 'defective' these days: learners need to acquire a foreign language up to the level they need. An inability to appreciate the finer points of, say, poetry may not be terribly important.

The published critics of classroom translation, including Berlitz, have tended to paint worst-case scenarios of the dullest, driest, most relentless grammar-translation slog, held these up for ridicule (what one writer has called the 'And-now-who-will-take-the-next-sentence?' approach), and then used them as justification for rejecting all cross-lingual work. This logical fallacy does, however, lend support to the strongest, and possibly the only, reason for avoiding the use of the learner's own language in the foreign language classroom: the commercial imperative.

Many private schools sell themselves on their native-speaker teachers (who may not know the language of their students and who may be assumed to use something resembling a Direct Method approach). University departments sometimes pride themselves on their target-language-only policy, and these departments are often competing for the same students as the language schools. 'Native speaker is best' remains a commonly held folk belief in many, perhaps most, parts of the world, and so there is, and is likely to remain, a market for target-language-only teaching. We would be unwise to underestimate the significance in the classroom of the students' beliefs about the most effective language teaching methodology for them, even if these beliefs are not informed by the insights of applied linguistics.

The role of the learner's own language

It is beyond the ability of anyone to banish totally the learners' own language from a foreign language learning experience. Learning is, by definition, built upon previous learning, and the most significant resource that learners can bring to the language learning task is their existing linguistic knowledge – a substantial portion of which consists of knowledge about their own language. Learning is scaffolded, and, especially in the early stages of learning another language, it will be scaffolded, in part, on the language(s) they already know.

Whilst teachers can, perhaps, control the language their students speak, they cannot force them to think in the target language. Furthermore, the use of some translation techniques is one of the preferred learning strategies of most learners in most places (Atkinson, 1987). Like it or not, translating won't go away. It makes more sense for a teacher to use translation in a principled, overt way than to pretend that the students are not using it covertly.

There are a number of very powerful reasons (see below) why the use of the students' own language in the language classroom should not only be tolerated, but, at times, actively encouraged.

1 Own language as a point of reference

Evidence from both cognitive linguistics and neuroscience point strongly towards a role for the students' own language in the language classroom. In fact, Widdowson (2003) and others have argued that the neglect of translation has little to do with pedagogical principles or scientific research. New knowledge is constructed on a base of old knowledge. As long ago as 1934, Vygotsky wrote that learning a new language necessarily involves the use of one's own language 'as a mediator between the world of objects and the new language' (Vygotsky ed. Kozulin, 1986, p. 161). Neuroscience confirms that the initial acquisition of new words in a foreign language depends on the association of these items with corresponding own-language items in the learner's memory (Sousa, 2011, pp. 24–7).

It is commonly believed that the use of translation activities in the classroom can lead to 'negative transfer', where the learner falsely assumes an equivalence between corresponding forms in two languages (e.g. false friends). In the case of English and any other language, there are likely to be many more true 'friends' than false ones ('friendships' that can be efficiently explored through translation – see Activity 7.1). In the case of all languages, it is probably the case that the best and most efficient way to deal with 'negative transfer' is to compare the two languages directly.

A direct contrast between English and the learner's own language may also pay dividends in the study of grammar. Some aspects of the grammar of one's own language (e.g. word order) can be very hard to shake off when learning another language. Conscious awareness of what these are can help learners make progress in these areas. Translation is likely to be the most unambiguous and efficient way of achieving this awareness. See the introduction to Chapter 7 on page 121 for further discussion of contrastive analysis and for activities which directly juxtapose elements of English and the learner's own language.

2 The discourse of English language teaching

Disapproval of the use of the students' own language in the language classroom can be traced back historically. It is well documented (see *A brief history of own-language use in language teaching*, page 8). The world of English language teaching, or rather the world of ELT authors, conferences, books and journals, publishers and well-known lecturers, is dominated by a group of native speakers