

Review

Usage of mother tongue in learning English

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Accepted 14 May, 2012

In Turkey, where English is a foreign language and where learners share the same native language, teachers are often reluctant to use small group speaking activities because the learners do the ranking, bridge the information gap, or find an answer activities using their first (native) language. This article studies the problem and suggests a range of solutions. On a more general level, the article suggests two principles that should be considered whenever teachers face a problem in their teaching. The first principle is that, as a matter of professional pride, teachers should try to solve classroom problems through the application of pedagogical skills rather than through administrative or disciplinary procedures. The second principle is that most problems have a variety of causes, which to some degree reflect the variety of individuals in a class. There is, thus, likely to be a variety of solutions, and so a teacher may need to put together a package of complementary solutions rather than just try one possible solution.

Key words: Education, native language, foreign language, English, skills.

INTRODUCTION

Importance of the language

In its simplest terms, a language is a set of signals by which we communicate. Human beings are not the only species to have an elaborate communication system. Bees communicate information about honey and information regarding the site of a new hive; chimpanzees can use vocalisation to warn of danger, and to signal the discovery of food or to indicate attitudes to connected with mating; and dolphins can communicate information on food and danger by means of whistles and clicks.

According to Celik (2007:3), one of the major tasks facing human beings is to communicate their ideas, feelings, plans, expectations and surprises. Of all the tools to achieve human communication, language is, undoubtedly, the most efficient one. This is so because human language, among other means of communication, is the easiest, fastest, most economical, most versatile and the most elaborate.

Bloch and Trager (1942:5) say, "A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates." This definition emphasizes the vocal and symbolic character of language, which is not surprising since these two scholars study phonetics. Ergin, one of the most eminent linguists on Turkish, offers the following definition: "Language is a natural means to

enable communication among people, a living entity that has its own peculiar laws by means of which alone it can develop a system of contracts whose foundation was laid in times unknown and a social institution interwoven with sounds" (Ergin, 1990:3) translation by the author. Ergin's definition appears to be the most comprehensive of all the definitions. This is so, most probably, because he was laboring to describe the language phenomenon rather than subscribing to a most important aspect of language, as did the previous four scholars.

LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN TURKEY

According to the recent reformist arrangements in the Turkish educational infrastructure, Turkish students start their learning of English when they are in the fourth grade of primary school (10 to 11 years of age). This is the age just before the critical period (Lenneberg, 1967) commences. In this educational system, English is treated as a minor part of the curriculum and not as a significant method of communication. Therefore, this course of study does not receive primary attention in

public schools except at Anatolian and Specialized High Schools where more time and effort are allotted for English language teaching. In regular public schools, the learners spend most of their time and energy learning grammar instead of trying to acquire English for communication purposes.

Consequently, students acquire only a minimal competency in English and they have no choice but to learn the formal structures of English. This system is maintained until students enter college.

During the four (or five) years of college, however, the students' styles of learning English differ greatly, depending on motivations, needs, interests, and attitudes. For instance, aside from colleges that have ELT departments, most colleges offer English for only two or four hours a week. The students in these departments do not attempt to learn English unless they have to prepare themselves for various standardized tests such as TOEFL, KPDS (Foreign Language Proficiency Exam for State Employees), UDS (Inter-University Board Language Exam). Students who attain high marks in these tests can expect access to better job opportunities.

Learning the English language is becoming an essential and popular course of study, especially at secondary schools, colleges and universities in Turkey. The emphasis upon learning English has grown with the continuous development of economic and political reforms (and also because Turkish government is following a policy of establishing better relations with countries in which English is used as a primary means of communication). Currently, teachers and students pay more attention to developing such skills of language learning as listening, speaking and writing in English). However, English language teaching in Turkey is being updated and modernized with the introduction of new tools such as computers and sophisticated language learning software.

USING NATIVE LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Speaking activities, such as ranking, information gap and problem-solving tasks can meet several language-learning goals. They can be used to learn vocabulary and grammatical structures, develop the skill of speaking and developing fluency in listening and speaking. But most of these goals will not be reached if the learners spend a large part of the time during an activity speaking their first (Turkish) language to each other. In Turkey, where English is a foreign language and where learners share the same native language, teachers are often reluctant to use small group speaking activities because the learners do the ranking, bridge the information gap, or find-answer activities using their first (native) language. This article studies this problem and suggests a range of solutions.

On a more general level, the article suggests two

principles that should be considered whenever teachers face a problem in their teaching. The first principle is that, as a matter of professional pride, teachers should try to solve classroom problems through the application of pedagogical skills rather than through administrative or disciplinary procedures. The second principle is that most problems have a variety of causes that to some degree reflect the diversity of individuals in a class. No single solution may prove effective. The teacher may need to put together a package of complementary solutions instead of depending on just one.

Let us look at ways of encouraging the use of the second language by considering causes of native language use under the major categories of learner proficiency and task difficulty, circumstances of the task and learner attitude. Turkish learners may be reluctant to use English because they feel shy, because the task does not engage or motivate them, or because they see no point in it. They may wish simply to get the job done as quickly as possible even using their native language. In general, the ways of dealing with the lack of a positive attitude toward the use of English involve getting learners to see the benefits of using English while completing the tasks. The discussion and presentation of information, which can be used to help learners change their attitude towards the use of English, can be done using the native language, if necessary.

Turkish learners may use their native language when completing the task because they are doing things, which are normally done in the native language, such as discussing a procedure for doing a job, or clarifying misunderstandings. The teacher needs to change the circumstances of the task so that it seems just as natural to use the second language. For example, one might have learners pretend to be someone else during a task, making the use of English seems more natural. This may mean introducing a role-play element to a task.

Turkish learners may be willing to speak English during activities, but they might forget and fall back on the native language. In some tasks it may be possible to assign a member of each group whose job is to keep reminding the others to speak English and to point out when English is not being spoken. This monitoring may be accompanied by a penalty-and-reward system. This may be something like the system that family members or colleagues set up to reduce swearing. Whenever a person swears, they have to put a certain amount of money in the pot. Token systems have often been used in schools and they have both supporters and opponents.

Turkish learners may be reluctant to use English because they feel that the task is threatening or embarrassing. There are several ways to deal with this problem. One way is by allowing learners to choose the groups they will work in, so that they feel comfortable with the members of the group. Another way is for the teacher to stay out of the groups, as he/she may be the cause of the embarrassment. Yet another way is to give careful

attention to the choice of the topic of the activity, as learners may be reluctant to talk about some issues. Allowing the learners to prepare for the task may be another way of reducing the threat of the task. If the learners come to the task well prepared, they may feel much more confident and positive about it.

The range of solutions suggested here have covered language proficiency, the nature of the task, and the attitudes of learners. They should not be seen as alternatives but mainly as complementary ways of dealing with problems. That is, it may be more effective to try an integrated set of various ways of dealing with the challenges. The problems can be approached by a combination of proficiency, attitude and circumstances-based solutions.

In order to encourage students to refrain from using their first (native) language, in our case it is Turkish, the teacher should explain to the learners the benefits of using English in activities. This explanation can be more convincing if the teacher is able to show examples of how using English in a task helps learners. The examples could include instances of effective negotiation of the meaning of words taken from previous uses of the task before and after examples of individual learners' improvement in speaking as a result of using English and for older learners some of the experimental evidence. Learners may also be encouraged to contribute to the discussion by suggesting benefits that may occur.

With regard to specific language skills, the activity has proven to be an asset in developing listening, oral production and written production since all are practised throughout the process. A number of language functions, such as describing people, habits and behaviours, expressing opinions, asking for more exact information, clarifying, criticizing, responding to criticism and contrasting and comparing are present in different stages of the activity, which means that the students are given plenty of opportunities for using the appropriate language. Other language functions such as predicting and explaining cause-effect relationships are also realized in the written homework. This means that the activity can be easily incorporated into programs based on the communicative approach. It is also important to mention that both the oral and written components of the activity contribute towards increasing vocabulary.

ADVANTAGES OF GROUP WORK

In this case, the students work together in small groups, exchanging and discussing information with the goal of forming a more complete picture of the situation. A well-respected scholar, Byrne, defines the group as a working unit in the class. To created "working units" a class can be divided into small groups of variable sizes and these groups can be organized into manageable units.

According to Byrne, group work increases both the

quantity and quality of language use, because with quantity the students can do more actively and with quality, students can be more creative when they are free of the teacher. Moreover, the learners have many opportunities to use the language and to learn from each other. And particularly slow learners can often get help from brighter students when the teacher can not always give those help.

There are some essential points that the teacher should take into consideration at the time of group-work. First of all, it is the size of groups. There are some factors that affect group size, such as the kinds of activities, physical factors (e.g. furniture), and friendship among students. Byrne (1989) says that six to eight students is a good working number for groups, but according to scholars such as Savova and Donato (1991); Brown (1980), a group of three or four is the best because the smaller the group, the more each person talks.

Second, the teacher should form groups carefully. When he/she does this, he/she should follow four common criteria, which were determined by McGreal (1989): Random sample (grouping according to seating arrangements), that is, grouping according to furniture design; ability levels (grouping to overcome mixed-ability problems at the classroom level); friendship (we consider that students with similar habit should sit together) and interest (putting students with similar interests in the same group). Lastly, the teacher should pay attention to the use of the language among his/her students. If the students are trying to understand the procedure of the activity better, allowing them to use their native language may be helpful.

Consequently, during group work activities students can participate more actively and provide each other with communication practice. Therefore, this technique may be considered to be acceptable in the classes where the teacher is generally the center of all the activities.

APPLICATION

The students may consult with or quiz each other about customs, national characteristics, the meaning of specific words and grammatical points and they may also change the forms of the words (e.g., verb tenses or pluralization). It is important to circulate throughout the classroom in order to clarify points, answer questions and encourage students to be spontaneous and creative in their responses while composing the story. Assure them that they will not be penalized for mistakes in grammar or spelling. When each group has finished writing down their story, collect them and save them for the next class period.

Observation of learners performing speaking activities shows that foreign language vocabulary learning can occur when learners negotiate in L1 (native language) the meaning of L2 (foreign language) words in the written

input of the activity. When learners use the native language in speaking activities, the teacher should observe this carefully to see what opportunities for learning are occurring. Are the learners usefully discussing and clarifying the procedure that they will follow to complete the activity? Are they explaining unknown L2 items to each other? Are they gaining a good understanding of the ideal content of the activity so that they can then do it with full understanding? Looking for answers to questions like these may lead a teacher to consider encouraging learners to complete a part of the activity in their native language. A secondary goal of this article has been to find ways of dealing with classroom issues in a systematic way. In this article, this has been done by approaching the problem of getting learners to speak English from four directions:

1. from a proficiency viewpoint (Does the learner know enough?);
2. from a circumstances viewpoint (Is the situation helping to create the problem?);
3. from an attitude viewpoint (Does the learner need to feel differently about the problem?);
4. and finally by seeing it not always as a problem and turning the seeming disadvantage to an advantage.

There are other ways of systematically approaching classroom issues. One way is to see problems as a symptom of the need for change and innovation. Thus Turkish students with limited English proficiency must also learn standard language forms, such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics and other aspects of language through speaking, listening, reading and writing. Their experiences must include acquiring social/cultural understandings as even greetings in different cultures which take on different meanings. Instruction needs to be authentic and include doing, practicing, participating and discovering language forms in meaningful interactions. Communication is a by-product of doing authentic activities together. Shared experiences are a springboard for developing both spoken and written language. New vocabulary is acquired readily because the students have a need to talk to one another in order to participate in the activity. Vocabulary that is acquired through shared experiences must be practised in order to be maintained. Whole language activities provide students opportunities to experience comprehension in authentic ways. Because of the interactive nature of communication and the multiple interpretations possible, it has been suggested that learners participate in collaborative text encounters with both teachers and peers. Because of the instructional need for both speech and reading, EFL students benefit from collaborative efforts of both their speech instructors and their reading teachers. Instruction centered on allowing diversity of responses to printed material and engaging in authentic experiences, which promote

communication in small group settings has been used successfully.

At different learning stages with Turkish students, the training should be conducted in the form of intensive and extensive listening. Intensive listening, to be conducted at the early stage of the training, consists of catching the general idea of a news story, correctly answering the questions raised by the teacher, and being able to understand and repeat each sentence. Care must be taken in the intensive listening stage, however, not to wrongly lead the students into putting their listening emphasis on individual words or sentences instead of the main idea of the news. In the extensive stage students should be able to retell the news story in their own words. They can retell the news once together as a class, with everyone orally contributing main ideas and details of the news story in an organized fashion. Then they can retell the news stories in groups of two or three. Finally, they can each write down the news story individually for their instructor. For example, after having gained some experience in listening to the Special English program, the students will have both a stronger desire and a better ability to challenge the more advanced Standard English program, a program delivered at normal speed with a larger vocabulary and more complicated grammatical structures, whereby similar learning strategies are applied. Once a student can follow this program, he/she will have little difficulty in understanding other English programs on radio stations/Internet throughout the world, and he/she can thus comprehend up-to-date knowledge that is impossible to gather from dated textbooks.

It is reasonable to deduce that other forms of redundancy and elaboration may likewise aid in listening and comprehension and effective listening in the classroom can itself act as a marker or advance organizer for comprehending later reading passages. The uses of video/software programs can therefore, potentially aid language students with not only listening and comprehension, but also reading comprehension. Furthermore, acquired cultural and contextual cues provided by video/software programs may enhance an EFL student's comprehension of class lectures in the target language.

CONCLUSION

Depending on the class level and content, the video should run from one to thirty minutes. From the prepared CD/DVD, the teacher should then prepare an advance organizer consisting of three segments. The first is a casual class discussion to lower the affective filter. Such a discussion, familiar to EFL teachers, would introduce the video topic along with two or three relevant vocabulary words. The second (introduced or not, depending on the teacher's philosophy) is a more complete vocabulary list, introduced verbally and in written form, including flash cards, pictures, or any other instructional

aids. The third segment should include any new grammatical forms, which the teacher wants to introduce through the CD/DVD.

If the grammar lesson concludes the first day's class, the next class should begin with a short review of the vocabulary and topic. Depending on the nature of the course, this can include journal writing. The teacher then should show the CD/DVD for the first time and allow students to work in small groups following the CD/DVD. The teacher should encourage students to use the new vocabulary as they respond to pictures and discuss questions relevant to the material covered in the CD/DVD. A general class discussion should follow.

The next class segment should begin with a second viewing of the CD/DVD, followed by a first silent reading of the accompanying text and a multiple choice or true/false comprehension check (or the comprehension check alone if the class focuses on conversation). After the individual work, the teacher should pair students or sit them in small groups. They should discuss their answers orally, with the teacher moving from group to group. Students should be encouraged to reread confusing parts, model how they arrived at their answers and discuss vocabulary, etc. The segment should conclude with a third viewing for lower levels and then the teacher's preferred assessment tool.

Student interest and comprehension should both rise significantly with the addition of the CD/DVD to the lesson; however, a CD/DVD is not a complete lesson plan. Research results suggest that the CD/DVD works well as a comprehension aid to the classroom methodology within well-defined parameters.

The CD/DVD does not become culturally enhanced comprehensible input without a teacher's moderation and a good advance organizer.

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