

The Communicative Role of the First Language in Second Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper is centred on the role of the first language in second language learning. The main thrust of the paper is to x-ray the different communicative roles of the first language (mother tongue) in the learning of English as a second language in Nigeria. One of the on-going debates amongst language teachers is whether or not the mother tongue should be integrated into second language learning and in other language situations. Many ESL teachers advocate the use of the second language only in the learning of the second language, while others advocate the use of L1 in second language learning. Factors which affect these decisions include such things as social and cultural norms, student motivation and goals, whether or not English is a primary means of communication in the environment external to the classroom, age and proficiency of the students, and the linguistic makeup of the class (monolingual or multilingual as relates to L1), among others. One interesting point to mention is that the limited and judicious use of mother tongue in ESL classroom does not reduce students' communicative ability but can assist in the teaching/learning process. The use of L1 is indeed the reply to a far-reaching cry to restore the dignity and potentiality of the learner's mother tongue, which is totally ignored and neglected in direct method and in the structural approach. Indeed, it is disheartening to mention that the mother tongue has been neglected and relegated to the background as a result of the more fashionable new comer-English. This paper therefore calls for an integration of the mother tongue into the learning of the second language and will consequently serve as an avenue for the preservation of the mother tongue which is gradually facing language shift/extinction.

Key words:

Mother tongue, first language, second language, Language shift

Introduction

English language teaching/learning in a developing country like Nigeria, has taken a new dimension. There is enough evidence to show that English plays a predominant role in our society. Through out the world, students at different levels of education find it absolutely necessary to learn English. In most of the countries, English has taken a unique position that all the students or scholars are pushed to the situation where they cannot have better career or higher education without the knowledge of English. The students remain in a compulsory situation to learn English in order to stand up to one's own expectations. The second language learner always has the tendency to view the second language through the grammatical rules of his/her first language. The use of the L1 as a resource in second language learning serves as a scaffolding tool, preparing students to

perform at higher levels in the L2 than would be attainable without the assistance of the L1. The use of one's native language is also noted to have cognitive, psychological and linguistic functions. Even as early as the late 19th century, leading philologist Sweet acknowledges the value of the native language in acquiring a second or foreign language. From his years of experience in teaching and studying languages, Sweet (1964) theorizes that language instruction must "...begin with a knowledge of one's own Language, the first preparation for the study of a second language is the acquisition of a thorough knowledge of the peculiarities of one's own language" (p. 193). Palmer (1956), a leading specialist in the theory and practice of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), also saw the potential of using the native language in learning another. In fact, he considers the use of the L1 as "perfectly harmless and in many cases positively beneficial" (p. 125). More recently is the work of Auerbach (1993), who has determined from her studies of adult English as a second language (ESL) students that beginning L2 instruction in the L1 is beneficial to students: They gain a sense of security and express themselves in ways they may not in an L2-only setting. However, many ESL instructors have argued that L1 is inhibitive due to the so called interference phenomenon; they are yet to concentrate on the other side of the coin- the merits associated with the use of the mother. Such people failed to realize that the first language is the child's basic asset. For the child, the first language is the behaviour, communication, achievement and fulfilment. It is intimately linked with the child's biological, psychological and social fulfilment.

In Nigeria, English was given an important place before independence. In most of the institutions, English had been the medium of instruction. The students were happy to learn the language because native speakers of English taught it. The study of English was considered to be a superior quality not only status wise but also for career. The child is expected to interact through English with its family members and neighbours in various types of interaction.

First Language Acquisition versus Second Language Learning

The term "acquisition" is used to refer to picking up a second language through exposure, whereas the term "learning" is used to the subconscious or the process of acquiring a language other than mother tongue in a structured means or tutored setting. First language is the language, which the child acquires first when the child learns to communicate with the people around. The language that is taught or used for communication by one's mother is the first language to his/her child. The child feels most comfortable in using the language. This language is called the child's mother tongue from the time of nurturing. The child has an innate language acquiring device. This is in line with the views of Chomsky who pointed out that every normal child has the imprints of language; such a child has got the innate tendencies to acquire the language of his immediate environment. The child first learns his native language without being taught in a formal situation. This language is learnt spontaneously without much strain since the urge for language in the infant stage is very strong. Second language acquisition stands in contrast to first language acquisition. It is learnt as one's additional language after one has acquired one's mother tongue. Second language acquisition is used to refer to all the aspects of the language need to be mastered by the language learner. However, it is important to study how an L2 learner acquires grammatical sub-systems of L2.

The second language learning takes place in a different manner. Generally, the second language learner always has the tendency to view the second language through the grammatical rules of his/her first language. Then, it is needless to say that the influence of the mother tongue will be on the second language at every level starting from phonology to syntax. This is the reason why researchers often distinguish between language learning and acquisition. While learning the second language, the phenomenon of interference from the mother tongue is the one, which is inevitable for most of the learners. It is the main reason to develop the second language methodology in such a way that the above-mentioned interference should be avoided to a great extent. Language teachers experience a constant struggle between theory and practice. Many past and present theories of L2 instruction promote the use of the learners' L2 in all classroom instruction, thereby denying the role of the learners' L1 in acquiring the L2. On a more functional level however, language instructors often sense the learners' need for more unambiguous and stress-free method of communication; a need that can sometimes only be satisfied through interactions in the learners' native tongue. The question is: Where should educators draw the line? Should they strictly use the L2 in L2 education, or formulate some other option, an option in which the learners' L1 and L2 can co-exist and mutually support language acquisition? More than 150 research studies conducted during the past 35 years strongly support what Goethe, the German philosopher, once said: "The person who knows only one language does not truly know that language". This paper suggests that using L1 in L2 education will help learners develop more flexibility in their thinking because they will be processing information through two different languages. These were the purposes for which the language is acquired primarily. It has been observed that in some areas and environment, L1 is not necessarily the mother tongue. In south east of Nigeria, and in some other eastern region, the L1 is the mother tongue. However, the medium of education/instruction is English. When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality.

The similarities between L1 and L2 learning

- (i) The first and second language learning mostly deal with the process of learning the written form of a language (be it first language or second language) in the school set-up.
- (ii) The target of language teaching/learning is to have mastery of all the language skills in both first and second language.
- (iii) Each language has got its own grammar and the grammar of the two languages may have some distinctive features which may be similar or different from each other. It is usually quite easy for the learner to master those features that are similar to each other, while it takes him time to learn those that are different.

Differences between first language acquisition and the second language learning

1. The L1 syntax is acquired unconsciously while the L2 syntax is acquired subconsciously in most cases. It must be stressed that only a few L2 learners develop the same degree of unconscious, rule-governed insight into L2 use which they demonstrate with the L1.

2. The student is quiet fluent in speaking first language and it helps him to acquire the written variety of first language in school. However, it takes a lot of skill before the learner achieves fluency in the second language. The L2 is not learned as part of the learner's general cognitive development. It is not an essential life-skill in the same way that the L1 is.
3. The learner can get enough opportunity to interact with the teachers and friends through first language and this situation motivates the students to learn first language better. In the case of learning a second language, the learner is not that much familiar with the target language.
4. The learner always has the opportunity and he feels at ease using the first language but second language learning is a difficult process for the learner because getting opportunity to manifest the second language both inside and outside the class room is lesser.
5. L2 learning is not genetically triggered in any way unless the child grows up bilingually (in which case, it is not really L2 learning at all). Consequently, the students are not able to develop the skill in second language as they develop these in the first language.

Influence of the First Language on the Second Language cum Communicative Role

The issue of the use of students' first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom has been debated for many years. Steven Krashen in his Natural Approach to language acquisition proposed that students learn their second language much in the same way that they learn their first and that L2 is best learned through massive amounts of exposure to the language with limited time spent using L1. However, in recent years, focus has been shifting towards inclusion of L1 in the language classroom. Research has shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2. While discussing the influence of first language over the second language, it is appropriate to mention what Lado said. According to him, those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult. At this juncture, we must point out that the language teacher and language learners should know the structures of both the mother tongue and the second language. This is because such knowledge can help the language teacher to identify the areas of influence of mother tongue on the second language and consequently, develop some methods of rectifying the interferences. Wells (1999) has identified the communicative roles of L1 in L2 learning. He advises students to use L1 while speaking in order to: ask each other clarifying questions, express frustrations concerning their lack of understanding, clarify meaning of words in L2, find new words in L2 which correspond to already known words in L1, use language to process complex concepts and build shared meaning while evaluating written tasks through shared discussion. According to him, L1 use in written tasks is especially valuable because it helps to clarify and build meaning and allows learners to repeatedly evaluate and clarify communication with regard to choice of content and register appropriate to the task.

Advantages of using L1 in second language learning

The first language performs some semantic functions in L2 learning. L2 students routinely make use of various semantically-rooted techniques such as translation, dictionary searches, etc. in their

quest for meaning in the L2. Using the L1 as a mediating tool enables students to collaboratively gain access to L2 forms and these help those students to find meanings that would be unavailable through exclusive use of the L2. The use of L1 greatly enhances student's progress and achievement in all areas of development: reading, writing, speaking, listening, developing and in maintaining interpersonal relationships. However, learning a second language without the support of one's native language makes one to suffer from the inability to communicate and one equally experiences a loss of confidence. This view is in line with what Auerbach, said. According to him, without the availability of the L1 for support, students cannot communicate their needs to others. Any condition that produces an inability to communicate in the L2 undermines the very purpose of L2 education. Several useful applications and contexts for L1 use have been recorded to help in L2 research: strategy work, reinforcement of language (L2) content, clarification, classroom management, collaborative work and interactions, and testing. These applications go a long way towards helping the learners achieve massive proficiency in the second language.

From the foregoing, it is evident to say that L1 use helps quite tremendously in the learning of the second language. It has been discovered that the damaging effects of banning the use of the L1 (as seen in some of our societies) greatly outweigh the proposed benefits. The paper emphasizes that recognizing and accepting the indispensable role of one's L1 on acquiring one's L2 is an essential foundation to L2 learning. It is worthy of note to state that the child's mother tongue is essential for his overall personal and educational development. In fact, this initiation of the use of the L1 in the teaching of a second language has opened up new avenues of knowledge and possibilities in relation to second language teaching and learning. We must reiterate that the importance of using the L1 in the teaching and learning process cannot be over emphasized. Therefore, L1 should be integrated into L2 learning because of its usefulness in Language learning.

The Negative Implication of L1 Removal in L2 learning

The removal of L1 in L2 learning adversely affects the acquisition of the second language. The reason is that L2 learners rarely possess a high level of L2 expertise. By implication, prohibiting the use of L1 which happens to be the only language they may be proficient in will surely have detrimental effects in their achievement of success in the target language. Many facets of the language learning process are likely to be affected by the complete removal of the L1. In fact, research has revealed negative effects of prohibiting the L1 in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interpersonal relationships. The research carried out by Auerbach, (1993) and some other people revealed the harmful effect of L1 removal in L2 learning. Previous research reveals that the L1 removal leads to fragmented interaction among learners; students cannot communicate their needs to others. Consequently, students get lost in the content, feel overwhelmed, and suffer tremendous blows to their self-esteem. How can students possibly experience success if they do not comprehend the only language of communication used within the class? Auerbach, 1993 concludes that with test scores and confidence levels dropping, students may very well experience an unnecessary sense of failure.

Language Loss/Language shift

Language loss occurs when a child's competence in the first language diminishes when compared to those of the second language. Language loss occurs primarily in a context in which maximum support is given for the use and maintenance of the L2. We must reiterate that the sociolinguistic environment plays a critical role in the emergence of L1 loss and language shift. Language shift results in changes in native language use with an eventual erosion of abilities in the language. L1 loss however, refers to a more rapid shift from first language prominence to second language prominence. When it occurs in children, L1 loss can be described as a language shift phenomenon that occurs within – rather than across generations. In some countries today especially in our present day Nigeria, some of the indigenous languages are gradually facing language shift/displacement (extinction). The reason is that many parents, guardians and teachers wholesomely promote the use of L2 in social and academic interactions without having recourse to L1 usage. Again, our educational policies and programmes highly promote L2 acquisition and nothing much has been done in the area of L1 maintenance except where the policy stipulates the inclusion of any one of the indigenous languages in the curriculum of both primary and secondary education. In order to reduce the extent of language loss, parents should establish a strong home language policy, and provide ample opportunities for children to expand the functions for which they use the mother tongue (e.g. reading and writing) and the context in which they can use it (community day care and playgroup). Teachers can also help children retain and develop their mother tongue by communicating to them strong affirmative messages about the value of knowing additional languages as it is a strong force in important linguistic and intellectual accomplishment. For example, they can initiate classroom projects, focused on developing children's language awareness e.g. surveying and celebrating the multilingualism of students in the class.

It is quite disheartening to say that some of the languages we inherited from our fore fathers are longer in existence, while some are gradually facing extinction as a result of the emergence of the so-called second/foreign languages. I still maintain that the indigenous languages must be allowed to co-exist with our second/foreign languages in and outside the curriculum of education.

Conclusion

Ample evidence shows that L1 plays a pivotal role in L2 learning. The child's first language/mother tongue is essential for his overall personal and educational development. As a result, it should be integrated into the learning of the second language as it boosts the learning process. The L1 does not hamper the learning process but rather serves as a language tool. It must be stated that to be proficient in language learning, factors like motivation, aptitude, and attitude towards the two languages, sound context and the learning environment should be put into consideration as they have a powerful impact on the degree to which people do or do not acquire a second language. Summarily, we can vividly say that in L2 learning, L1 performs the following Language analysis: presenting rules that govern grammar, classroom management, discussing cross cultural issues, giving instructions and explaining errors. In this paper, the writer has exhaustively x-rayed the communicative roles of the first language in second language learning and concludes that while L2-rich input is essential, the L1 should be fully utilized as a valuable tool in L2 education.

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