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**TOWARDS THE USE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE IN EFL TEACHING:
THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE**

Abstract

The paper discusses the issue of using the first language and the importance of the grammar-translation method in teaching English as a foreign language to multilingual groups in higher educational institutions from the standpoint of the student's perception of the problems in question. The empirical data comprise the results of the recent survey conducted among the BA students of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. The study focuses on the following points:

1. The necessity of using the first language in EFL teaching;
2. The main problems concerning the use of the first language in multilingual EFL classrooms;
3. The importance of the grammar-translation method in EFL teaching.

The study demonstrates that the use of the first language is of exceptional importance for the efficiency of the educational process in EFL classrooms. However, the findings also show that the first language should primarily be used for explanatory or interpretative purposes, rather than constitute a basic means of communication in the classroom. According to the survey, the grammar-translation method, which has recently been a matter of controversy among language teachers, is still perceived as a useful technique for learning a foreign language by the majority of the respondents.

The study represents a supplement to the existing findings and enables us to once again see the problems in question from the student's perspective. The findings of the given research were partially presented and discussed at the fourth international conference "Second Language Teaching/Acquisition in the Context of Multilingual Education", 29 - 30 September 2021.

Keywords: *EFL teaching, first language, grammar-translation method, multilingual education.*

1. Introduction

As is known, the acquisition of a foreign language is a complex process associated with numerous challenges depending on a number of factors, which often determine the efficiency, speed and overall results of language learning. While learning a second language since early childhood may be perceived as a comparably smooth process, which inevitably leads to bilingualism, and therefore, proficiency in both, the mother tongue and the second language, learning a foreign language in adolescence, for instance, may appear rather difficult due to a number of reasons. Among other issues, these reasons include such factors as the influence of the cultural codes embedded in the system of the native language on the behavioural archetypes, which has a substantial influence on the speaker's perception of reality and other cognitive processes.¹ This, in turn, inevitably affects the course of language acquisition, thus requiring a lot of effort on the part of both, the teacher and the student. However paradoxical it might seem though, the role of the first language (L1) is still of vital importance for the efficiency of the teaching process, due to the fact that to a certain degree the first language always serves as a meta-language, a medium through which a foreign language (L2) is taught/learned.² It should be highlighted that a lot of research into the problem of using the native tongue in foreign language teaching has already been carried out, and is still in progress (Richards & Harbord, 1992; Auerbach, 1993; Rodgers, 2001; Pacek, 2003; Cook, 2001; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; De La Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Littlewood & Yu, 2011, etc.) Nevertheless, the use of the first language remains a controversial issue for both, teachers and students. Some of them hold a belief that the first language should be inevitably integrated into the teaching process. Others, on the contrary, suggest that for the efficiency of learning, even at the earliest stages of foreign language acquisition, the use of the first language should be substantially reduced, while at further stages completely excluded from teaching methods, with the preference being given to visual aids.³

¹Frothingham, M.B. (2022, Jan 14). Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. *Simply Psychology*.

www.simplypsychology.org/sapir-whorf-hypothesis.html (Accessed May 25, 2022)

² Solhi, Mehdi & Büyükyazı, Münevver. (2011). *The use of first language in the EFL classroom: A facilitating or debilitating device?* In book: Foreign Language Teaching: Beyond Language Proficiency (pp.490-503).

³ Solhi, M. & Büyükyazı, M. (2011). *The use of first language in the EFL classroom: A facilitating or debilitating device?* In book: Foreign Language Teaching: Beyond Language Proficiency, pp.490-503.

The given paper aims to discuss the issue of using the first language and the importance of the grammar-translation method in teaching English as a foreign language to multilingual groups in higher educational institutions from the standpoint of the student's perception of the problems in question. The empirical data comprise the results of the recent survey conducted among the BA students of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. The study focuses on the following points:

1. The necessity of using the first language in EFL teaching;
2. The main problems concerning the use of the first language in multilingual EFL classrooms;
3. The instances of justified use of the first language in EFL classrooms;
4. The importance of the grammar-translation method in EFL teaching.

With the findings presented in it, the current paper is an attempt to contribute to the already existing bulk of knowledge concerning the use of the first language in teaching English as a foreign language.

2. Methodology and Data

Having been teaching English to Georgian students at Tbilisi State University for almost ten years, in the course of my work, I frequently witness students having difficulty interpreting specific syntactic structures and understanding certain semantic units, especially those not having equivalents in the Georgian language. At the same time, teaching English to Georgian students is more challenging as English and Georgian belong to completely distant linguistic groups, having little in common in terms of semantics and syntax. It means that, when teaching English to Georgian students, teachers should be both, flexible and inventive, in their approach to the teaching process, which, along with other means, inevitably requires using the first language wisely. On the other hand, the majority of the groups at Tbilisi State University are multilingual. This implies there are students whose native tongue is one of the languages of the numerous ethnic minorities living in Georgia; Georgian is their second language, learnt either at school or during their first university year. This, in turn, makes it even more difficult to decide whether to use Georgian or not in the EFL classrooms. Taking all the above mentioned into consideration, we once again return to the most relevant questions related to the topic: whether the use of the first language in teaching a foreign

language is reasonable in terms of multilingual education; when and to what extent teachers should use it; and finally, whether the grammar-translation method should be applied or not to modern teaching methods.

To answer these questions, I decided not to rely on any authoritative opinions and already existing research findings. What I did instead was to ask my students what they thought on the matter. Thus, the given study represents an attempt to look into the students' perspectives regarding the role of the native tongue in foreign language teaching.

The focus group included 60 students from the department of English philology of Tbilisi State University in the academic year 2020-2021. Among them, 60% of the participants were native speakers of Georgian, 25% stated Azerbaijani as their native tongue, other 10% identified themselves as native speakers of Armenian, while the remaining 5% of the respondents named Russian to be their first language. The average age of the focus group was 19-20 years. The students were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey consisting of several questions. The study aimed to collect the students' opinions concerning the following issues:

1. Should teachers use the first language in teaching English as a second language;
2. The reasons, the pros and cons of using the native tongue in EFL in teaching;
3. The instances when the native tongue should be used in teaching the target language;
4. Whether the grammar-translation method should be applied to EFL teaching.

The choice of the focus group was determined by the following reasons:

For the students of the Department of English philology, the aim of learning the English language lies not merely in mastering an international language as a means of communication for future career prospects, or other interactive needs, but in the in-depth learning of the language they further plan to teach or work on as translators. Thus, the students of the Department place great importance on the methods and approaches used by teachers in the EFL classrooms.

2. The students of the Department come from various ethnic backgrounds, thus, making the groups multilingual, which makes them a suitable target group to help explore the question of using the first language (the state language of the country, in this case) in the process of teaching English as a foreign language.

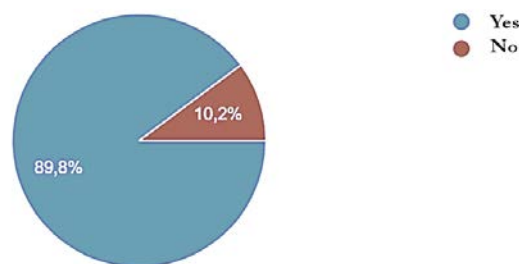
For a clearer picture to emerge, the respondents were asked to provide extended answers based on their personal opinions and experience. Despite the recent proposition that people tend to

display greater honesty when speaking a foreign language (Bereby-Meyer, 2018), the questionnaire for the given study was deliberately compiled in the Georgian language, the state language of the country, so that not to hinder the respondents with the obligation to use a foreign language, thus causing concern for possible mistakes. Apart from that, all the respondents were currently my students, and the necessity to use the English language in the query might have activated certain behavioural codes associated with the classroom environment, therefore affecting the cognitive processes and the degree of honesty. However, the use of the state language in the query would, in my opinion, shift communication to a less formal domain and create an appropriate environment for freedom of expression. Judging by the diverse responses received, all the above-mentioned together with the anonymity of the query has certainly helped to reach the principal objectives of the study. The obtained data were carefully observed, compared, analyzed and synthesized in an attempt to single out common ideas, with equal attention to the differences in the views expressed.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Students' views on the use of the first language in EFL teaching.

The study has shown that the majority of the respondents believe that the first language should definitely be used in EFL teaching. As can be seen from the diagram below (see pic.1), nearly 90% of the respondents agree with the necessity of using the first language in EFL classrooms, while 10% still object to the idea.



Picture 1. The diagram shows the percentage of the responses for and against the use of the first language in EFL teaching.

The findings indicate that among the reasons why the use of first language is so essential in EFL teaching and learning, students single out the following main points:

1. To facilitate learning, especially at earlier stages;
2. To draw parallels and highlight equivalent structures in L1 and L2;

3. To compare and outline semantic, syntactic and pragmatic differences between L1 and L2, which will contribute to the learning process.
4. To translate unknown words;
5. To explain the rules of grammar;
6. To eliminate gaps in the students' knowledge, if such exist.

The following responses support the abovementioned points:

Student A: *Since a foreign language within its very name entails being “foreign”, or “strange”, the expectation of the unknown causes stress and anxiety. It’s a good idea to use L1 to some extent, so that students don’t feel frustrated or discouraged by difficulties in the course of learning.*⁴

Student B: *The use of L1 facilitates the acquisition of the foreign language. It helps to memorize vocabulary, as well as other peculiarities of the language you learn.*

Student C: *At an earlier stage of learning it is absolutely necessary to use L1, as it helps to get used to the new language reality. While at later stages, the occasional use of L1 can comfort students and reduce the stress caused by having to speak a foreign language for too long.*

As can be seen from the examples above, despite the recent progress in language teaching and wide availability of teaching resources and techniques, students still tend to believe that the use of the first language is not only inevitable, but also extremely important and useful for the acquisition of the foreign language, as it serves as a major facilitator in the learning process.

On the other hand, the use of the first language in teaching a foreign language has a number of disadvantages, which simply cannot be neglected. Despite the fact that only a slight minority of the respondents seem to be against the use of the native tongue in English language teaching, the arguments they provide should be taken into consideration. The empirical data have shown that all the possible reasons why the use of the first language slows down the process of the acquisition of a foreign language can be united under the following single idea: the use of L1 prevents students from switching from the familiar mode of thinking to that associated with L2, which hinders their learning to think in the new, foreign language.

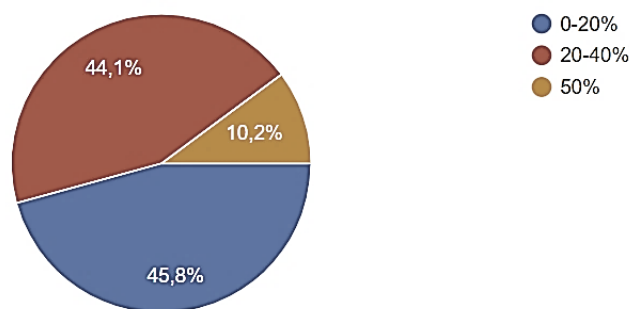
For example:

⁴ All excerpts from the students' responses, presented in the current paper, were translated with precision and accuracy by the author. The original tone and vocabulary have been preserved.

Student D: *The extensive use of the first language in English language classrooms again and again reinforces thinking in the native tongue, which, in its turn, impedes the process of the full-fledged acquisition of the foreign language.*

Student E: *Using the first language in the classroom interferes with the requirements of the target language acquisition.*

As for the extent to which a native tongue should be used in teaching a foreign language, the study has shown that 45.8% of the respondents think that only up to 20% of the classroom communication should be fulfilled in the native tongue. 10.2% tend to think that up to 50% of the classroom communication can be conducted in the first language, while the others, more specifically, 44,1% are somewhere in between and opt for 20-40% of the native tongue use in EFL classrooms (see pic. 2).



Picture 2. The diagram shows the percentage of the acceptable extent of using the first language in EFL classrooms.

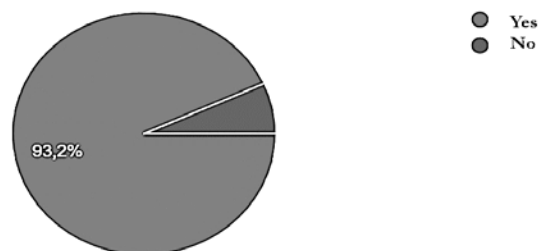
Thus, according to the study, it still appears to be reasonable and necessary to use the first language in teaching English as a second language, especially at an earlier stage. The first language, though, according to the respondents, should function merely as a facilitator, as a means of translation or clarification, but less preferably as a means of basic communication in the classroom. On the other hand, teachers should by all means encourage their students to speak and think in the target language as much as possible, to help immerse themselves in the new language.

3.2. Students' views on the use of the grammar-translation method in EFL teaching.

When speaking about the role of the native tongue in teaching English as a second language, another important issue to be discussed is the problem of using the grammar translation method in the process of teaching a foreign language.

The grammar–translation method is a method of teaching foreign languages derived from the classical (sometimes called traditional) method of teaching Ancient Greek and Latin. In grammar–translation classes, students learn grammatical rules and then apply those rules by translating sentences between the target language and the native language. Advanced students may be required to translate whole texts word-for-word. The method has two main goals: to enable students to read and translate literature written in the source language, and to advance students' general intellectual development.⁵

The study has shown that the vast majority of the respondents are in favour of using the grammar-translation method in terms of foreign language teaching.



Picture 3. The diagram shows the percentage of the responses for and against the use of the grammar–translation method in EFL teaching.

Among the advantages of using the grammar-translation method in EFL teaching the respondents have singled out the following main points:

1. It helps in terms of learning and memorizing vocabulary;
2. It helps teachers check students' knowledge;
3. It improves cognitive processes;
4. It helps to perceive the use of vocabulary in context;
5. It enables in-depth understanding of the semantic structures in both, L1 and L2.

⁵ Zhou, G. & Niu, X. (2015). *Approaches to language teaching and learning*. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 6(4), p. 798

According to the respondents, the use of translation as a teaching method in EFL classrooms does not merely assist in understanding and memorizing vocabulary. Along with the fact that it enables the students to gain a closer perspective of pragmatic peculiarities of contextual use of semantic units and syntactic structures in both, L1 and L2, the grammar-translation method has a beneficial effect on the cognitive processes and critical thinking of the students. As recent studies have shown, with translation being “a process of thinking, rethinking and conscious self-assessment”, there appears to be a correlation between the critical thinking skills and translation quality, and vice versa.⁶ The use of the method in question must by no means encourage students to perform instant translation in their minds while trying to speak the target language, which is so common among beginners, but should serve as an inspiration for students to see the bigger pragmatic picture in the use of the target language in the first place. The latter is of an extreme importance for the development of a substantial linguistic competence and performance among students. For example:

Student E: *In my opinion, translation contributes to students’ progress in the target language, it develops cognitive skills, such as thinking and reasoning.*

Student F: *Even oral translation is useful in terms of vocabulary. I would recommend translating from Georgian into English, which I certainly find more difficult and, therefore, efficient.*

Student G: *I believe, that grammar translation is effective at any stage of learning: at an earlier stage it will teach students to pay attention to details in context. At later stages, the method can be useful in terms of the improvement of skills, such as interpretation and translation itself.*

At the same time, there are still those who disagree with the effectiveness of the grammar-translation method. The study has shown, that a small number of the respondents believe that translation should be used only occasionally, when students come across very specific, complicated structures in the target language. On such rare occasions, teachers are justified to use translation in order to facilitate learning.

For example:

⁶ Mohseni, A., Satariyan, A. (2021) *The Relation between Critical Thinking and Translation Quality*. Journal of Language and Translation. Vol. 2, N. 2, pp.23-32.

Student H: *“Translating sentences and texts is time-consuming. This time could be spent more effectively practicing speaking skills, which, I believe, is more important for language learning.”*

Student I: *“I think, translation as a teaching method is quite old-fashioned. I remember my private tutor making me translate those huge texts, which was rather boring than useful. Of course, students have to translate particular words or collocations for better understanding, but I would rather stick to using this method only on occasions, when there is no other option to explain the meaning of a word.”*

4. Conclusion

The study has shown that the use of the first language still appears to be of extreme importance in teaching English as a foreign language. This, according to the survey, can be explained by the fact that despite the recent progress in the approaches to language teaching and the diversity of aids and methods at hand, the use of L1 on the part of teachers in EFL classrooms is inevitable, especially in multilingual groups. The findings show that according to the majority of the respondents, teachers should use L1 while teaching a foreign language to provide explanations, make clarifications and eliminate gaps in the students’ knowledge. However, according to the survey, the use of the first language by both, teachers and students, should not exceed 40% of the EFL classroom communication.

According to the survey, the grammar-translation method, which has recently been a matter of controversy among language teachers, is still perceived as a useful technique for learning a foreign language. The findings indicate, that the vast majority of the respondents are in favor of the grammar-translation method, for they consider it to be an effective technique that not only helps in terms of language acquisition, but also improves cognitive skills and helps develop critical thinking.

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