

# Role of Mother Tongue in Second Language Learning

**Dr. Manoj Kumar Yadav**

Assistant Professor, English Department  
College of Arts & Science, WaddiAl Dwassir  
Salman bin Abdulaziz University, Riyadh  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
E-mail- rudrmanojyadav@gmail.com

## Abstract

*The role of mother tongue in second language learning has been the subject of much debate and controversy. Most teachers feel that the use of L1 should be minimized and they feel guilty if they use it a lot. When challenged they find it difficult to say why. Against the use of L1, it is the general assumption that English should be learned through English, just as you learn your mother tongue using your mother tongue. But the idea that the learner should learn English like a native speaker does, or tries to 'think in English', is an inappropriate and unachievable thought. The role of mother tongue in teaching and learning of English has been discussed in literature. The influence of mother tongue is proved both positive and negative in teaching and learning of English. A learner's L1 is an important determinant of Second Language Acquisition. The L1 is a resource which learners use both consciously and subconsciously to help them arrange and re-arrange the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can. The cultural features connected with L1 use can be put to good effect when teaching L2. Second language acquisition is a developmental process; L1 can be a contributing factor*

*to it. This paper makes an attempt to understand the role of L1 in the teaching and learning of English and also reports on different methods, classroom management and some activities that could help them in learning English.*

**Key Words:** Acquisition, L1, L2, Linguistic, MOI (medium of Instruction)

## Introduction:

For about 16 or 17 years of our lives, we are in pursuit for academic excellence. Unlike the past, most of us have grown up speaking and studying in English. Parents do not seem to be as stringent as their folks were when it comes to ensuring that the children learn their mother tongue. Some believe their children will learn it in due course.

“That is why I am sending them to school, to learn those local languages,” says one father. Other father assumes that the mother will take it upon herself to teach the children.

## What is the mother tongue?

The term 'mother tongue' harks back to the notion that linguistic skills of a child are honed by the mother and, therefore, the language spoken by the mother would be the primary language that the child would learn. This was/is quite possible if the couples are from the same tribe. The mother tongue, native or first language, is what a person has learned from birth or within a critical period, where the ability to acquire a language is biologically linked to age, and thus becomes the basis for social identity and becomes the medium of learning in school and society. Christine Senfuma, a wife and mother of one, says: "The mother tongue is the language a person has learned as a child at home, usually from the parents." She adds that children groomed in bilingual homes can have more than one mother tongue. Allen Kaziro, a secondary school teacher and mother of two, says: "The mother tongue may indicate a language that a person is as proficient in as any other local person who speaks the same language and the language is common to that community, for example, Luganda."

### **Significance of mother tongue in child's Life:**

The mother tongue is part of a child's personal, social and cultural identity. It is this identification we get from speaking our mother tongue that enforces successful social patterns of acting and speaking. Our diverse social backgrounds make us unique and appealing in society. The mother tongue is an indispensable instrument for the development of intellectual, physical and moral aspects of education. Habits, conducts, values, virtues, customs and beliefs are all shaped through the mother tongue. Needless to say, weakness in the mother tongue means a paralysis of all thought and power of expression.

### **Role of Mother tongue in child's**

### **education:**

Early Childhood Care and Education, UNESCO (2007) points out the overlooked advantages of multilingual education in the early years. When children are offered opportunities to learn in their mother tongue, they are more likely to enroll and succeed in school and their parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning. Mother tongue-based education, especially benefits disadvantaged groups, including children from rural communities and girls, who tend to have less exposure to an official language. They tend to stay in school longer, achieve better and repeat grades less often when they are taught in their mother tongue. Most children speak a home language that differs from the language of instruction in education programs. Research also confirms that children learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual and multilingual education. Whether children successfully retain their mother tongue while acquiring additional languages depends on several interacting factors.

### **Mother tongue's influence on second language influence in L2 learning?**

Studies show that six to eight years of education in a language are necessary to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievement in secondary school. To retain their mother tongue, children whose first language is not the medium of instruction must have: Continued interaction with their family and community in their first language on increasingly complex topics that go beyond household matters; Ongoing formal instruction in their first language to develop reading and writing skills; and Exposure to positive parental attitudes to maintaining the mother tongue, both as a

marker of cultural identity and for certain instrumental purposes (eg, success in the local economy or global trade).

In addition, research increasingly shows that children's ability to learn a second or additional local language and an international language such as English, French, or German, does not suffer when their mother tongue is the primary language of instruction throughout primary school. Fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages e.g. English language.

When children receive formal instruction in their first language throughout primary school and then gradually transition to academic learning in the second language, they learn the second language quickly. If they continue to have opportunities to develop their first language skills in secondary school, they emerge as fully bilingual (or multilingual) learners.

**If, however, children are forced to switch abruptly or transition too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition may be weakened or even lost. Even more importantly, their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning may decline, leading to lack of motivation, school failure and early school drop-out.**

In spite of the fact that the world is a global village, we ought to harness our virtuous customs and beliefs; they define us and establish our rightful belonging. As much as it is important to teach our children international languages, they ought to learn and appreciate their local dialects, too.

**Why should we teach in the mother tongue?**

**Guidance for Secondary Schools** (September 1997)

Educational research worldwide and in Hong Kong has shown that students learn better through their mother tongue. The educational benefits of mother-tongue teaching include :

- Mother-tongue teaching has positive effects on students' learning;
- Most students prefer learning in the mother tongue;
- Students learning in the mother tongue generally perform better than their counterparts using English as medium of instruction (MOI); and
- Students of traditional Chinese-medium schools consistently achieve a higher pass percentage than the territory-wide average in both Chinese Language and
- English Language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. This shows the positive impact of mother-tongue teaching on the learning of Chinese and English as a subject.

It is therefore Government's policy:

to encourage secondary schools to use Chinese as MOI; and

to discourage the use of mixed code, i.e. a mixture of Chinese and English, in teaching and learning.

- With the use of Chinese as MOI, lifting language barriers in the study of most subjects, students will be better able to understand what is taught, analyse problems, express views, develop an enquiring mind and cultivate critical thinking. Mother-tongue teaching thus leads to better cognitive and academic development. Our students can also have more time to concentrate on

the learning of English.

- Nonetheless, Government fully appreciates that some schools have been operating successfully with English-medium teaching and have achieved good results. These schools may continue to teach in English if they wish to do so and satisfy with it.
- There is consensus among the education sector that ED should continue to work together with schools and relevant bodies to promote mother-tongue teaching and concurrently enhance the language proficiency of our students.
- ED will continue to do all it can to assist schools to upgrade the standard of language teaching and learning.

Thus, like this example In India, In the process of teaching a foreign language, the teacher's use of mother tongue can influence the learner's acquisition of the target language. Throughout the history of English language teaching and second language acquisition, the role of mother tongue has been an important issue. The various views are reflections on the methodological changes in English language teaching, which have in such way brought different perspectives on the role of mother tongue.

When and How to use Mother Tongue:

Using L1 is not the problem. The problem is when and how to use it. Before answering this question, it should be borne in mind that L1 use must be considered "as a means to an end".

Knowing when and how to use the mother tongue and when to use English in a

classroom is one of the hardest decisions to make. In the past, many writers have recommended that teachers should only use English – that the mother tongue, in other words, should not be allowed. This is not a view we take, especially for young learners. Firstly, it is impossible to learn anything unless you relate it to what you already know. This means that children will always translate even if we tell them not to. It is important, then, that we make sure they have the correct translation. The old argument about 'encouraging them to think in English' is only really feasible when they have enough language in which to think. For primary school children, this is unlikely to be the case with a foreign language for a very long time. Secondly, it is important that the children have a sense of security in the classroom that they feel they can ask for help, explain problems, and say how they feel, and so on. They will only do this in the mother tongue. Thirdly, using the mother tongue means that it is possible to do more interesting work and more complex types of activities.

There is, of course, a danger in this – that the children will hear very little English. Every situation is unique, but a general principle might be to try to use English as much as possible – without producing confused, worried or bored learners.

To make input comprehensible, the use of mother tongue is generally necessary (1981:51). Also Willis suggests:

"Banning mother-tongue use altogether may not be advisable. A study carried out recently in Turkish secondary school classes with 12-year-olds revealed that in circumstances when the mother tongue was totally banned in group talk, the resulting interaction tended to be shorter, more stilted and less natural. Many weaker students gave up after a very short time. If learners

realize they are using the target language to communicate, they will still use their mother tongue on occasions, but they will use it in a way which is systematic, supportive and relevant to the task goal (1996:46).”

### **How to Use MT in classroom: A Few Suggestions:**

- Give instructions in English, but repeat them in the mother tongue. After a while, you could give an English instruction and get the children to say it in the mother tongue, so that you know they have understood.
- Give instructions in English, but try to use as much gesture as possible to make the meaning clear. In the craft activities, for example, the children can hear an instruction in English and see what it means.
- Give instructions in English, but allow time for the children to ‘process’ the language before you give another instruction. Comprehension is improved by giving the children time between statements, not by speaking more slowly.
- Only use the mother tongue at certain times. For example, when you are previewing or when you are helping the children to understand something new.
- Try to use the same language again and again. The ‘Classroom language’ section in the teaching notes for each unit gives examples.
- Teach the children the meaning of classroom language that you will use a lot. For example: Work in pairs. Open your book. Listen and follow.

You could put a poster on the wall with common phrases that you use, and their meanings. When you give an instruction, you can then point to the poster at the same time.

- Teach the children some phrases that they can use. For example: I don’t understand. Please say it again. I can’t hear. What’s the English for .....

### **Using the Mother Tongue Judiciously:**

- There is, of course, a need for caution in utilizing the MT in the EFL classroom. Atkinson (1987: 246) acknowledges this by noting the potential for the following undesirable outcomes of overuse:
- The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not ‘really’ understood any item of language until it has been translated.
- The teacher and/or the students fail to observe the distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation.
- Students speak to the teacher in the mother tongue as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean.
- Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom it is essential that they use only English

### **Teaching English in the classroom:**

This part is based on Halliwell’s perception of teaching English to pupils. Halliwell suggests that foreign language speakers have been taking risk in using the foreign language while operating on partial information. It is not important that we do not understand everything what has been said to us, but that we are able to guess the

bids as if we do understand everything. However, in the foreign language classroom teachers tend to check every word of English, they also say one sentence in English and then translate it into the mother tongue. Although this happens from the teacher's best motives, the constant checking implies that teachers expect the pupils to understand every word. The fact is that pupils are unlikely to be able to understand everything. Even in our mother tongue we do not understand everything, since we deal with the whole message. The real communication demands risk taking, without risks and mistakes we would not learn anything and thus teachers can teach foreign language through the medium of the target language itself. All of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing must be involved in the foreign language classroom, but the biggest contribution is in the spoken interaction among pupils. Halliwell further proposes that teachers can leave pupils talking in pairs or groups doing so called information gap activities without fear that pupils will totally slip into their mother tongue. This example of the second form of real language use in the classroom contribute to the learning process by:

- Encouraging pupils to predict meaning.
- Providing element of indirect meaning.
- Confirming that language is used for real situations.
- Increasing the amount of exposure pupils get to the language.

This is because classroom talk is very limited so teachers can conduct the whole lesson almost entirely in English on a basis of a small number of phrases and structures (2000:1216). The language used by the teacher should be very simple, since pupils respond very well to context and facial

expression. There are several ways to help pupils understand such as:

- Using gesture while giving instructions and explaining.
  - Demonstrating, miming, acting.
  - Speaking simply, but with natural stress and intonation.
  - Repeating and paraphrasing, giving pupils time to think it out for themselves sometimes.
  - Giving lots of examples and using visual aids where possible.
  - Establishing routines in class for various activities.
- (Willis, 1991:84).

Judicious use of mother tongue can be occasionally beneficial for pupils, but teachers should abusing it by overusing. In addition, most of the suggestions follow current communicative approach and thus replace the use of mother tongue with other techniques if possible. Description of each four skills also provides a sample classroom language which teachers might use instead of native language. Since if teachers use the same language all the time, they will develop language routines that contribute to pupils' understanding. Mother tongue might be occasionally used, but teachers must keep in mind that exposure and practice of the target language is the main thing if they want to reach their teaching goals. Concerning pupils, they should use their mother tongue only when it is permitted by the teacher and it is again the teacher, who has to stop pupils using it and ask to return to the target language. Teachers should lead pupils on to perceiving target language as the means of communication and to using it for real-life situations. To recap, when pupils are accustomed to use the target language, they do not tend to need understand each word and they are able to successfully

convey and perceive message, which is the goal of current foreign language teaching.

The target language must be used where possible and L1 when necessary. Here are some examples of appropriate use of L1 in EFL classes.

### **Beginners:**

The mother tongue can be probably more beneficial to beginners. As they progress in their learning the target language will take the lead.

### **L1 can be time-saving:**

Instead of going through long explanations in the target language, it is sometimes easier and more efficient to give a translation of a vocabulary item or an explanation of a grammar point. Imagine a teacher who wants to teach the word “car” to French students and starts by phrasing the explanation as follows “a car is a road vehicle with an engine, four wheels, and seats for a small number of people” while a simple translation of the word (or perhaps the use of visual aids) would be enough.

### **Culture**

Language is a vehicle for cultural aspects. If teachers ban the use of the mother tongue, this underlies an ideological conception of L1 culture as being inferior. Alternatively, cultural differences and similarities can be highlighted to help learners accept and tolerate differences while at the same time preserve their cultural uniqueness. This can be done through various activities where L1 plays an important role.

### **Proverbs**

Students may be given a set of proverbs in the target language and be asked to find the corresponding ones in their mother tongue if they exist. If not they

try to translate the proverbs into their language.

### **Idiomatic Expressions**

Again, finding the corresponding idioms or a translation of target language idioms might be very helpful to detect cultural differences or similarities

### **Songs**

The translation of lyrics from the students’ favorite songs can be a pleasant experience.

### **Jokes**

Funny EFL activities can be built on jokes. Students may translate and tell or act jokes to create an environment where there is no stress.

### **Classroommanagement:**

Management of conduct and discipline is sometimes hard to be done in the target language. For instance, if a serious problem emerges in the classroom, will the teacher really insist on an English-only policy when coping with it?

### **• Grammar**

L1 can be of great help when teaching grammar. Translation exercises for example may be the perfect practice when there is a grammar point that is causing trouble to students.

### **• Instructions**

Many failures in tests are due to learner’s lack of understanding of instructions. L1 can be used to redress this issue, helping students to understand what is exactly asked from them.

### **• Rationale**

Students need to understand the rationale behind activities or methods. They should understand what lies behind the methods the teacher is using. This can only be

done at this level through their native language.

- **Errors**

The discussion of some recurring errors can be a helpful activity for the students. It is true that a lot of errors are caused by L1 transfer. French students, for example, say “I’m agree” instead of “I agree” which is an error due to L1 transfer (in French “Je suis d’accord”). A discussion in L1 of such errors will help students overcome these problems.

## ROLE OF L1 IN TEACHING METHODOLOGY:

EFL teachers manage the process of language instruction in their classrooms by exploring the students’ L1. Here, the aim is to first categorize different language teaching methods and then discuss the role and the use of L1 in each of them briefly. A common classification of methods is: traditional, alternative and current communicative methods. In the field of English language teaching the traditional methods of teaching a language are: Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, and Audio-lingual method.

A haphazard use of the mother tongue may be an unwanted side-effect of monolingualism, often employed today by disaffected teachers. A very concise description of L1 role in EFL context is presented by Larsen-Freeman. She supports the role of the mother tongue in the classroom procedures and summarizes the role of L1 in various ELT methods:

- **Grammar Translation Method:** The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students’ native language. The language that is

used in the class is mostly the students’ native language.

- **Direct Method and Audiolingual Method:** The students’ native language should not be used in the classroom because it is thought that it will interfere with the students’ attempts to master the target language.
- **Silent way:** The students’ native language can, however, be used to give instructions when necessary, and to help a student improve his or her pronunciation. The native language is also used (at least at beginning levels of proficiency) during feedback sessions.
- **Suggestopedia:** Native-language translation is used to make the meaning of the dialogue clear. The teacher also uses the native language in class when necessary. As the course proceeds, the teacher uses the native language less and less.
- **Community Language Learning:** Students’ security is initially enhanced by using their native language. The purpose of L1 is to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Also, directions in class and sessions during which students express their feelings and are understood are conducted in their L1.
- **Total Physical Response:** This method is usually introduced initially in the students’ native language. After the introductory lesson, rarely would the native language be used. Meaning is made clear through body movements.
- **Communicative Language Teaching:** Judicious use of the students’ native language is permitted in communicative language teaching.

The students’ native language has had a variety of functions nearly in all teaching methods except in Direct Method and Audiolingualism. Those methods had their

theoretical underpinnings in ‘structuralism’ and assumed language learning to be a process of habit formation, without considering the students’ affect, background knowledge and their linguistic abilities in L1.

### **SOLUTIONS OF OVERCOMING THE USAGE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING:**

Every language teacher at some point has felt guilty, puzzled and frustrated about their students’ perceived overuse of their mother tongue in the classroom. In a monolingual context, that is to say where all students speak the same mother tongue (a classroom reality for the majority of language teachers), this perception can become quite a problem. The best way to deal with the problem (at least for some teachers) is to deny the students’ use of the mother tongue and determine them to speak in English. There is nothing wrong with this strategy as far as it goes, but it rarely allows the teacher or the students a chance to understand why L1 was being used in the first place.

A more complete strategy however is to be proactive. This means that the teacher should actively control and influence how and when the mother tongue is used. He shouldn’t waste time trying to eliminate the use of mother tongue completely from the classroom. Instead, he should concentrate on ways of exploiting and playing with L1. Decide when it might be beneficial to use L1 and why. The teacher should explain his choices to his students if he thinks that it would be helpful. If he can do this, his classes are likely to be more authentic in the sense that they reflect the natural interplay of L1 and L2 which is inherent in second language acquisition. Here are some activities which involve the use of both L1 and L2 in EFL classes.

#### **□ 15 minute activities**

#### **Conversation Starters (pre-intermediate +)**

Using mother tongue newspapers for conversation practice. Choose or get students to choose an article from today’s newspaper and explain what it is about in English. Depending on the difficulty of the text this may generate vocabulary work as the students work on communicating key points of the text to the teacher. This is similar to (but usually more effective than) using pictures. The L1 text, like the picture is a fast way of stimulating ideas for conversation.

#### **Dubbing (intermediate +)**

Show students a clip of a popular mother tongue TV programme (e.g. soap) and tell them they have been commissioned to dub it into English for BBC. With larger classes get students to work in teams. The best version gets the contract! The students can work on translating the script and taking on the roles of the actors and literally dubbing with TV sound off.

#### **False friends word search / Crossword puzzle (intermediate +)**

Prepare a series of sentences with a false friend in them. Write the sentence in English. Prepare a crossword puzzle with the correct words in English. Give the puzzle to the students and let them figure it out.

#### **Shadow and a doubt (all levels)**

Have the students rehearse a communicative activity (shadow) in mother tongue before attempting it in English and then afterwards compare. This can be a very effective way of challenging advanced learners, as it helps to raise specific awareness of the difference between their ability to express themselves in English and in the mother tongue (doubt).

#### **□ 10 minute activities**

#### **Sight translation (intermediate +)**

Prepare a series of interesting quotations (for example, 10) on a piece of paper. Show them to the students one by one (using a videoprojector would work nicely, otherwise

write them on the board or prepare a piece of paper that students look at little by little). Give the students 30 seconds to read it, then take it away. They must each individually write what they understood but in their own language. Compare translations afterwards.

Reverse translations (intermediate +)

Group A are given a short text in mother tongue to translate into English. Group B are given a similar length of text in English to translate into the mother tongue. Groups then give their translations to each other to be translated back into the original. Finally groups compare the originals with the translated version.

Interpreters (all levels)

This can be adapted to any oral pair work situation. The students work in groups of three (minimum). One person is the interviewer, and speaks only in English. The interviewee speaks only in L1. The interpreter works as a go-between, translating the interviewer's questions into L1 and the interviewee's answers back into English. Variation: Arrange a press conference, with several interviewers. The interviewee plays the role of a famous film star, politician etc. Teenagers especially like this activity and recognize the scenario from TV interviews with pop stars and sports personalities.

Restaurant role play (all levels)

Use a mother tongue menu so that natives have to explain the dishes to English speaking guests.

Translating pop songs (intermediate +)

The students translate the lyrics (or small sections of the lyrics) of their favourite songs into the mother tongue. Teenage magazines sometimes include songs with mother tongue translations so you can use these to do it the other way round as well.

□ **5 minute activities**

Broken telephone/Telegram (all levels)

Devise a sentence that might cause translation problems into the students' L1.

Whisper it to the first student in English. The first student translates it into L1 and whispers it to the second student, who translates it back into English and whispers it to the third. Go round the class in the same way. At the end, compare the final English version with the original. Variation: Do the same exercise, but in writing.

## CONCLUSIONS

The debate over the use of L1 in foreign language teaching hasn't been settled yet. On the one hand there are teachers who reject the use of L1 or fail to recognize any significant potential in it and on the other hand, there are those who massively overuse it. Both are abusing a resource of great importance. My view consists of using the target language as the medium of instruction when possible and switching to the mother tongue when it is really necessary. A rational and judicious use of L1 in EFL classes can only be advantageous. L1 use must be tuned up with effective target language teaching, taking into consideration the learners' mother tongue and cultural background and using them to the best of their interest.

Most important, we must remember that students' errors are a precious resource for the teacher, which inform him about the state of his pupils' interlanguage. This is why it is so important to avoid negative marking, where the student simply learns that if he makes an error he will lose points. The foreign language teacher should use the students' mother tongue only in certain situations, for example:

- When comparing English grammar with the mother tongue's grammar;
- Beginners will probably progress at a quicker pace if the use of the mother tongue is allowed in the classroom;
- Translation exercises may also be the perfect practice when there is a grammar

point that is causing trouble to the students.

In conclusion, I would like to re-iterate that I am not advocating the abandonment of CLT and all that it stands for. I am, however, convinced that teachers need to think more carefully about the EFL/ESL distinction, take more serious notice of student beliefs about learning and classroom preferences, and act accordingly. The use of the MT in EFL classrooms is one obvious area in which we might act.

As McKay (2002: 116) rightly notes, “there is no one best method, and no one method that is best for a particular context”. In the final analysis, choosing the best approach to use with a particular group of students should come down to a mixture of observation, cultural and interpersonal sensitivity, experience, and experimentation on the part of the teacher.

### **Bibliography:**

[1] Pramanik, T.K. (1988). A study of some affective variables related to learning English as a Second language at the post-secondary stage in Orissa. Unpublished PhD dissertation in English. Hyderabad: Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages.

[2] Ramamoorthy, L. (2004). Multilingualism and second language acquisition and learning in Pondicherry. *Language in India*. 4:2.

[3] Sandeep, K.T.(2007). Teaching English as a second language to meet the needs of the learners in Rural Areas: A Challenge. *Language in India*. Vol.7/9.

[4] Pradeep, D.(1997). Interrogation of Tamilian English: An Intonation Study. Unpublished

M. Phil dissertation Annamalai Nagar: Annamalai University.

-----\*\*\*\*-----