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Help or hindrance? The use of the first language in the English classroom

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AIM

To facilitate the use of the target language (TL) by raising awareness of a valuable classroom tool, the first language (L1), and offer a new perspective on 'doeltaal-voertaal'.

‘No single issue in the history of language teaching has polarised opinion as much as the question of the mother tongue use’

Scott Thornbury

SOME THEORY

What are the origins of the concept of an exclusive use of the target language (TL) in the classroom/doeltaal voertaal?

ORIGINS

- **Learning L2 is the same as learning L1**
- **Necessity for exposure to the language**

ORIGINS

- ~~Learning L2 is the same as learning L1~~
- **Second language acquisition (SLA) differs from first language acquisition**
 - More time required
 - Age factor
 - More instruction required
 - Conscious learning
 - Context is different, classroom environment

ORIGINS

- **Practical necessity**
 - Native speaker teachers
 - Little of no knowledge of the learners L1
- **Multilingual classes**
 - Necessary to have one general language
 - ISK

ORIGINS

- ~~Practical necessity~~
 - ~~Native speaker teachers~~
 - ~~Little of no knowledge of the learners L1~~
- Teachers speak the students' first language
- Increasing use of and acceptance of code switching and translanguaging

ORIGINS

- **Languages should be kept apart**
 - They will 'invade' one another
 - Learners will never think in the target language



ORIGINS

- ~~Languages should be kept apart~~
 - ~~They will 'invade' one another~~
 - ~~Learners will never think in the target language~~
- **Languages are not stored separately in the brain**
 - Each language affects the other
 - Interference
 - Competition
 - Positive transfer
 - Thinking in the TL tends to occur in advanced learners only
 - Ineffective to try and keep languages apart



ORIGINS

- **Reaction to grammar translation methodology**
 - Berlitz Method
 - Direct Method/Krashen's Natural method
 - Audio Lingual Method – USA army
 - Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) strong version
- **The benefits of exclusively using the TL with learners that share an L1 has come into question**
 - Research indicates that a principled use of the L1
 - Can benefit language learning
 - Can help maximise the use of the TL
- **What is a principled use?**



A PRINCIPLED USE IS WHEN THE L1 IS A TOOL WHEREBY.....

- **Language use is consistent**
- **Learning is assisted by using L1**
 - Raising awareness of the similarities and differences between the languages
 - Teachers and learners can build on these differences to avoid negative transfer
 - Discussing abstract grammar ideas - especially at lower levels
- **Teaching is more efficient in the L1**
 - Translating some words/quick translation
 - More efficient explanations of (complex) grammar structures
- **Socio/emotional support is offered (naturalness)**
 - Learners (or teachers) are more comfortable in certain circumstances using Dutch
 - Disciplining/Praising

AS A RESULT OF THESE MISCONCEPTIONS

- Teachers feel guilty about using the L1
- Teachers avoid the L1 at all costs
- Teachers lack knowledge of how to use the target language in the classroom
- Teachers overuse the L1
- Lack of exposure to the TL



LISTENING TO A TEACHER'S USE OF L1 & TL

- You will hear an extract from real classroom language
- 3 sections taken from a 50-minute lesson
- Level is VMBO 3Kader

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN LISTENING

- **Efficiency**
- **Learning**
- **Socio/emotional**
- **Was there use of translation?**
 - quick /concurrent translation and sandwiching

Translation

Sandwiching

TL - L1 - TL (unknown language)

After a difficult word or phrase, a translation is added and then repeated in the TL

Advantages:

- Communication is uninterrupted
- provides opportunity for incidental learning
- Teacher can anticipate problems and plan language that needs to be 'sandwiched'
- Useful at all levels

Concurrent translation

Teacher alternates between TL and L1

Known language is translated

Disadvantages:

- Learners wait for the translation
- Learners feel they don't understand unless they understand exactly in their L1

HOWEVER.....

Was Dutch at times, an unnecessary option?

Was the teacher consistent in her language use?

Any other observations/comments

See listening chart handout

OBSERVATIONS

- **Efficiency**
 - Was it more efficient to use Dutch?
- **Learning**
 - Was learning assisted or more effective due to the use of Dutch
- **Socio/emotional**
 - Were learners more comfortable in certain circumstances using Dutch
- **Was Dutch at times, an unnecessary option?**
- **Was the teacher consistent in her language use?**
- **Was there use of translation quick /concurrent translation and sandwiching**
- **Any other observations/comments**

UNPRINCIPLED USE CAN RESULT IN...

- Overdependency
- Loss of useful language practice
- Learners don't know what to expect of you or what is expected of them
- Teachers and learners use the L1 as an easy option
- Using the target language shows that the teacher values it
- Discuss and make agreements with your learners as to when you will use the TL and the L1

CONCLUSION

- **The L1 is a tool**
 - Be aware of your own language use
 - Make conscious language choices
 - Having a principled use of the L1 will maximise the use of the TL in your classroom
 - The L1 should never be used as an easy option
 - There is a fine line between efficiency and an easy option

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