

Mental Translation in the Learning Process of Second Language Acquisition?

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Throughout my personal experience and my professional practice in teaching second or foreign languages (L2) in different contexts, that is, French in Peru and Canada as well as Spanish in France and Belgium, I have observed that in a learning situation the L2 is constantly influenced by the learner's mother tongue (L1).



In the 50s, especially with the audio-oral and audio-visual methods influenced by the behavioural current (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957), teachers were asked to thwart the persistent habits coming from the L1 that were undesirable in L2. In the 60s, the arrival of the concept of prior knowledge (L1 being a part of this prior knowledge) in the cognitive theory brought about important changes in the way teachers taught the L2. Corder (1967) states that the L2 learner formulates hypotheses about the L2, tests them and modifies them if necessary based on his L1 knowledge. The error is no longer a bad habit from the L1 but becomes an important indicator of the learning process. In 1979, Bibeau, reflecting on the errors committed by learners as well as proficient users of the L2, elaborated a hypothesis explaining the source of these errors. He supports that when it is possible to find, in L2 errors, direct or indirect traces of the L1, it is reasonable to think that these traces are issued from associations between the L1 and L2 structures in the individual's mind and that these structures are of the same type as those of translation. He talks about a mechanism used in the LL2 that is very similar to the translation mechanism that he calls, in French, "translation" (1979: 571).

Translation is traditionally defined as being the expression of a message in a different language from the one in which it was originally formulated. It has been studied within different perspectives, such as literary, philosophical, linguistic, pedagogical, and is considered by the latter as a teaching technique. *Mental translation* (MT) can be apprehended as a translation phenomenon, but taking place in the mind of the translator or the L2 learner.

Inspired by the results of the studies that I have analysed and by the legitimate concern to propose an explanatory framework for the influence of L1 in learning and use of L2, I have developed the concept of MT and tried to determine its role in L2. I have come to the conclusion that MT can reasonably constitute a major element in the learning of a foreign or second language and be treated as a relatively stable process, not only during learning, but also during the use, even fluent, of a second language. In inserting the concept of MT in the LL2, it would be naïve on my part to pretend to explain, in its wholeness, a process as complex as that of learning a second language. But, if MT is present in the LL2, how can we take advantage of it in teaching, instead of fighting against or willingly ignoring it?

As you know, in many of our English schools, we have students coming from different language backgrounds. If we, as teachers, take into consideration the importance of the

mother tongue, maybe, we should teach English, non as a mother tongue, but as a second language.

Resources:

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