Encounter in English as a Second or Foreign Language Classroom

Man Bahadur Khatri

Abstract

This article discusses how mother-tongue interference can influence second or forreign language learning, specifically learning English. In Nepal not only does the mother tongue interfere with English learning, but also the methods used in the schools, specifically the grammar translation method and the deductive approach to teaching grammar, influence student learning as well.

Key words: Tertiary level, inductive approach, deductive approach, fossilization, language transfer

Background

I have been learning English for 24 years and have been teaching English for ten years. I have also taught English from nursery to tertiary levels. I consider myself to be a fluent speaker in English. However, I dream in Nepali and I think in Nepali because Nepali is my mother tongue and English is my second language. I always filter English through Nepali and memorize the words and understand the meaning. While teaching English to my students, I have encountered some interesting but serious questions regarding the English language use.

Reflecting on Classroom Teaching Experience

A bachelor's degree student raised his hand in the middle of my class and asked whether his statement '*I made my heater boil the water*' was correct or not. I asked the classroom to discuss the question. I hoped they would be able to decide whether the statement was right or wrong. Many students were in favor of saying the statement was correct, but some students said it was not acceptable. When I asked the reason behind its correctness or incorrectness, the class became silent for a while.

Breaking the silence, I told them that the statement was not correct because the sentence is in causative form and if the verb 'made' comes in a causative form it needs an 'agent' to be written as a verb in the infinitive form preceding the object. Therefore, I explained them that 'my heater' is not an agent.

"I made 'the heater' boil the water because I joined its wire, I supplied the current so I made it boil the water", the student, who put the question, said excitely. 'But heater is a non-living thing and to be an agent, it should be a living being, and if possible a human being' – I said again.

'No sir, but I made it like a living being so, it did the task that I wanted', the student said. Everybody started laughing at me as though I was wrong.

After a long debate, I calmly wrote the sentence 'Yesterday I talked and laughed to my buffalo' on the board and asked if this sentence was right or wrong. All the students laughed and said, 'syntactically it is right but it is also not acceptable because the buffalo is an animal which can't talk and laugh with a human being.

'If you can make your heater boil the water then can't I make my buffalo talk and laugh with me? Here I also made my buffalo talk and laugh.' I said.

They were surprised and stared at me and became

quiet. 'Yes, of course, the buffalo can't talk and laugh because it should be a human being to communicate and laugh. We can't make our buffalo talk and laugh so it's impossible. Same is the case with the heater. We can't make our heater boil the water. It is a non-living thing so it can't be the agent or doer. We can make our mother, sister, brother….boil the water but the heater can't perform the task we ordered so your sentence is also unacceptable', I said.

Now, the students seemed convinced.

In the next class again I faced a similar problem when I said *'my, your, our, their* and *her* are not pronouns but they come under 'adjective and function as determiners'. Almost all the students of my classroom were teachers in public or private schools. According to them, they had learned the above given words under possessive pronouns in the grammar books of school and college levels but they claimed that they had not seen this type of categorization under adjectives. They asked me to prove how they could be adjectives and function as determiners but not pronouns. Some of the students even showed me the books which had categorized these words under possessive pronouns while defining the parts of speech.

This concept had fossilized in the minds of the learners; therefore they claimed 'how can all of books be wrong?' Thus, they again suggested me to consult more books and dictionary and find the fact.

I wrote some sentences on the board:

      1. a. That is my book.

        b. That book is mine.

        c. That book is my.*

      2. a. She is your mother.

        b. She is yours.

        c. She is your.*

I asked them to define the pronoun. They said 'a pronoun is a word which can stand in place of a noun'.

'Can MY and YOUR in (1c) and (2c) stand alone in place of a noun i.e. at the end of sentences? I asked again. They practiced a lot and said 'they

can occur only in noun phrase preceding the head noun. They need a noun to be completed at the end'. 'That's why; they are determiners and come under adjectives' – I said.

After much discussion the students looked at the Oxford dictionary and Cowan (2008) to be convinced then drawing their tongue out they said 'how foolish we were till now?'

These problems were nothing. Being a teacher, I have faced a number of problems while teaching school kids in elementary level. These children are still in primary classes and know the verb 'eat' in Nepali. They speak Nepali at home and school. When they began school and learned the verb 'eat' in English and its corresponding Nepali verb '*khanu*', they started to speak about 'eating' in English. Now they speak about "eating rice", "eating water", "eating milk" and "eating scold" while using English. They have found it is easy to transfer the '*khanu*' verb into English. Unfortunately, what they found easy to transfer from Nepali to English became intolerable in the target language, English.

In the same way, these children "wear" many things in the Nepali language. They "wear" clothes, they "wear" color on the benches, bars and doors, they "wear" wall, they "wear" brooms, they "wear" beds and they "wear" gossiping correctly in Nepali. When they start learning English in the classroom, they learn the word meanings of some English verbs like "wear" and find the corresponding Nepali verb '*lagaunu*'. They transfer the verb *lagaunu* into English and generate unacceptable sentences as 'I wore bed for you' instead of 'I prepared bed for you'.

One day a child said "Uncle! I have got my leather itching". Here, I realized, she wanted to say her skin was itching but she had learned 'skin' and 'leather' are synonymous and both mean 'the outer layer of our body i.e. *'chhala'* in Nepali. She might have thought both were interchangeable. In the Nepali language 'chhala' means both 'skin' and 'leather' alive or dead. That day, I was also surprised by observing the language variation and language transfer system.

Remembering these mother tongue influences, I personally observed 20 students of class eight, nine

and ten for a month. From my close observation also, I came to know that almost all the students have a habit to use the terms like *na, ka, by, ta, byare, kyare, la, hai* etc in their English conversation. I want to present some real sentences produced by the students here in the examples as;

- Please, bring my book na.
- Go ka go, otherwise sir will be angry with you.
- Come here na. How foolish you are by.
- See ta how these children are fighting and tearing the papers.
- Don't give byare ni, she has already taken one.
- If you give more homework, we will not do kyare.

I realized it happened because of the problem of language transfer from the first language to the second language. I found learning language and substituting concepts from one language to another is not an easy task.

We can't see and measure language acquisition and learning in the same way. When I analyzed the root of the problems, I found problems are the result of our teaching methods and techniques, which we have been using for years. We teach English to our children bits by bits using the Grammar Translation method with the help of 'parroting' (rote learning) in the schools and parroting doesn't help for true understanding (Fujishin, 2007, p. 65).

While teaching English, we lead our children down a narrow path. First, we teach the alphabet, then simple words and grammar, then their meanings and discourse. I have found that the children are always confused by the words, their meanings and their structures. If they encounter new structures, our students memorize them without realizing the way to use the words. Therefore, they generate the sentences like; 'I made my heater boil the water', 'this book is my' and 'I have got pain in my leather'. Therefore, this approach is less suitable for lower level language students (ITTO).

In our English language teaching (ELT) conferences, seminars and workshops, we (teachers) have been in favor of the inductive approach and communicative methods, but when we enter the classroom, immediately we shift into the deductive approach and grammar translation method. This is I believe the main reason why our children 'eat' many things in English. Grammar translation method cannot encourage the students' communicative competence (Orrieux, 1989). Therefore, our students are lagging behind in communication skills.

These days, when I meet the students who I discussed earlier, they say they will never forget the discussion held in the classroom and will not make similar types of structural errors while teaching the English language. Their words reminded me of how important the discussion is in the language classroom. I have realized, teaching is not merely reading from the books to the learners, but it is also important to discuss the learning with the students. In this regard, Barton, Heilker and Rutkowski (n.d) say, discussion is not simply a communication. It is beyond communication.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I encourage all the language teachers and ELT practioners to teach language through inductive approach with the help of communicative method. The learners who learn English as a second language try to either generalize the rules from that language or they transfer the rules from their mother tongue. While learning, if the students get chance to discuss in the class classroom, it will become permanent and reliable for further instead of rote learning or parroting.

Notes

Tertiary level: higher level of studies or university level, especially used in British English.

Inductive approach: here, inductive approach is related to teaching and learning language in which teaching learning starts with examples and the teacher asks learners to find the rules.

Deductive approach: opposite to inductive approach, deductive approach starts by giving learners the rules and structures in the classroom rather than giving the examples first. It is called step-by-step process sometimes.

Fossilization: concept of something that has already been fixed in mind and unable to change

easily even if the person is willing to change. This is the term coined by an applied linguist Lerry Selinker who believes that it is extremely rare for the learners of an L2 to achieve full native like competence.

Language transfer: it is also sometimes known as cross-meaning which refers to speakers or writers applying knowledge from their native language to second language.

Positive transfer: when the rules, units and structures of both the languages b e c o m e similar to each other then there a language facilitates to acquire the rules   and structures of another or we can say that it helps for correct language production in another language. This is known as positive transfer.

Negative transfer: Opposite to positive transfer, if a language interfere in learning the another language and causes more errors then that is known as negative transfer.

Grammar translation method: It is a traditional method which was originally used to teach the languages like Latin and Greek. In this method, it focuses on learning the rules of grammar and their application in translation passages from one language into the other language.

Mana Khatri is a faculty at the Department of English Education, Sanothimi Campus, Bhaktapur   where teaches English Grammar for graduate students.

References

Barton, B., Heilker, P., & Rutkowski, D. (n.d). *Fostering effective classroom discussion*. Retrieved from http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/discussion.htm.

Cowan, R. (2008). *The teacher's grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fujishin, R. (2007). *Creating effective groups: the art of small group communication*. United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Retrieved from: http://books.google.com.np.

ITTO (International Teacher Training Organization). (n.d.). *Inductive approach and deductive approach in TESOL*. Retrieved from http://www.teflcertificatecourses.com.

Orrirux, C. (1989). *The grammar translation method*. Retrieved from http://oswaldoipc.wordpress.com/2007/06/22/the-grammar-translation-method