Validating Cultural Identity: Comparative Approach to EFL Teaching

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Abstract

The importance of integrating comparative strategies of using L1 minimally and with a clear purpose into the EFL classroom are discussed in the article. In the current diverse and inclusive environment, connecting with learners on cultural levels that can enhance their learning often results in missing important opportunities. The authors analyze a usage-based approach to EFL teaching based on sociocultural theory where L1 is understood as a beneficial cognitive tool to be employed in the process of teaching as a cultural agent constructing knowledge within unique local environments. With cultural practices in L2 unknown in L1, sometimes explaining becomes too time-consuming. L1 application contributes to teaching and building rapport, eases apprehension and breaks down barriers. The conclusion is made that to avoid misunderstanding in intercultural communication and to interpret the idea expressed in L2 one should get an insight into the native speakers' vision of the world, their mindset.

Keywords: foreign language, native language, EFL, cultural identity, comparative approach.

The debate over whether to use or not to use the learners' native language (L1) inside the classroom has always been the topic of discussion for the reason of its being considered a serious obstacle in building a bridge in cross-cultural learning. The ban on the native language in the classroom was imposed until

1990-s being promoted as the best way to foster the foreign language (L2) acquisition.

There is a certain sense in the fear of using too much L1 when teaching L2. According to L. S. Vygotsky, people, while learning their non-native language, are consciously working with the application of language elements and their combinations in various communicative situations [Vygotsky 2014]. In addition, they build a system in their mind that can serve to convey various non-linguistic elements or meanings. So, using the principle of reliance on L1 can also cause problems in the process of learning L2. For example, a new foreign word may not have an equivalent in the native language, thereby establishing an erroneous connection between words in two languages. It should be also noted that the native language will always dominate in speech, being the cause of language interference.

However, "Languages have strong, inseparable, and complex ties to culture" [Jenkins 2010: 943]. Thus, in current diverse and inclusive environment it seems to be a miss of important opportunities to connect with learners on cultural levels that can enhance students' learning. When teachers work with students who share one language and one culture, the lack of L2 culture integration in a classroom environment appears to be a terrible miss since sometimes it is more important for students to understand a concept than it is for that concept to be explained exclusively in English.

That is why today a great deal of teachers agree that conscious application of L1 in teaching L2 opens good opportunities for the successful achievement of learning goals, and bilingualism, used as an unavoidable situational necessity in order to master grammatical and lexical material, in certain cases can be a more effective means of achieving a positive result of the educational process, than a monolingual approach.

A reasonable combination of L1 and L2 ensures the unity of actualizing the following functions of the studied language: communicative, cultural and pragmatic. The learning process should become a basis for the dialogue of cultures due to comprehensive consideration of the interrelationships between language, thinking, and culture.

The authors have tried to define cross-cultural tools and techniques for encouraging students to identify and develop conceptual links between L1 and L2 vocabulary "in order not to make them feel their identity threatened" [Hopkins 1988:18]. Auerbach believes that L1 "provides a sense of learners' security, allowing them to express themselves freely. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English" [Auerbach 1993: 19]. In sociocultural theory [Lantolf 2000; Vygotsky 1978, 1986] L1 is understood as one of the beneficial cognitive tools to be employed in the process of teaching a student as a cultural agent constructing knowledge within unique local environments. The main idea of such an approach is that integrating contrastive strategies of using L1 minimally and with a clear purpose into the EFL classroom can contribute to teaching and building rapport, which eases apprehension and breaks down barriers. The main idea that lies behind teaching EFL in particular contexts is based on the stance that every learner-teacher relationship is unique, and every context is unique [Brown 2000]. Thus, incorporating L1 can be helpful and relieve tension, which is sure to arise while studying foreign concepts.

So, it can be stressed that correlation between a native language and a foreign language is vital in teaching EFL since the world is globalized, which forces methodologists think in terms of integrating linguistic phenomena of other countries in local context, comparing, evaluating and understanding cultural differences reflected in the language. While learning L2, the stu-

dents, relying on L1, design their own language system including the main features of both, their native language and a foreign language. This native linguistic and cultural experience contributes to better understanding of foreign language peculiarities.

Considering that social practice theories prove that misunderstanding in intercultural communication often occurs due to the lack of cultural diversity knowledge we believe that in order to interpret the idea expressed in a foreign language one should get an insight into the native speakers' vision of the world, their mindset. Thus, Ufimtseva reveals that self-image and the language consciousness of Russians is different with the English and Russian speakers. The author pays attention primarily to the lexicalized content of consciousness of Russians on lexical associations. In her article *Ethnic character, Self-Image and Linguistic Consciousness of Russians* the author reveals the contrast between associations caused by stimuli between the English and the Russian native speakers. The analysis shows that the images of the world of Russians and English speakers differ significantly primarily in their consistency [Ufimtseva 1998]. For example, the first place in the English associative range is taken by the word *me*, whereas in the Russian associative mentality it is obviously not at the top. The Russian mentality is represented by the word *man*, which displays the tendency of the Russian speakers to think big, generalize through global statements of a declarative character. The English speakers being more egocentric seem to be more specific, precise and laconic. In this regard the Russian mentality is very poor in idioms containing parts of the body in comparison with the English language and it seems to be the reason why students experience difficulties in finding allusion to similar expression in their native language. With cultural practices in L2 that are foreign in L1, sometimes explanation can take a tremendous amount of time. Incorporating L1

can be helpful and relieve tension which is sure to arise while studying foreign concepts.

For example, the English idiomatic comparison *as drunk as a lord* is difficult for acquisition for a Russian student because the word lord has a positive connotation while analogical expression in Russian has a negative connotation *as drunk as a shoemaker / swine*.

But idiomatic and phraseological units reflect the cultural specifics of the language and play an important role in intercultural communication. Their understanding greatly facilitates the perception of modern journalistic and artistic works. However, it is often impossible to understand L2 phraseological meaning without searching for its analogue in the students' L1. For example, the expression *don't haloo till you out of the wood* in Russian has nothing to do with the wood, but sounds as *не говори гоп, пока не перепрыгнешь*.

Another category of words, hardly understood without translation, are pseudo-international words, or the so-called "false friends of the translator". It is quite difficult and time-consuming to explain to students that *complexion* is not '*комплекция*', but '*цвет лица*', and *комплекция* will be '*body shape*'; that *decade* is '*ten years*' for the English speaker, and *декада* is only '*ten days*' for the Russian speaker; that English *angina* is '*стенокардия*', and Russian *ангина* is '*tonsillitis*' in English, although both originate from Latin.

A good example of an incorrect meaning application was translation of the word *sabotage* (a polysemic word) as '*саботаж*' in many Russian mass media after the explosion of Nord Stream 2. When discussing this fact in the classroom with the students in L2, we realized that they could not see any mistake, referring to the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary which gives two meanings: "1. *the act of damaging or destroying equip-*

ment, weapons or buildings in order to prevent the success of an enemy or competitor; 2. *the act of intentionally preventing the success of a plan or action*". The English *sabotage* and the Russian *саботаж* seemed 100 percent equivalent to them. Only turning to L1 helped to show the difference between 1. '*диверсия*' and 2. '*саботаж*'.

Therefore, we may note that translation exercises when getting acquainted with both idiomatic expressions and phraseology, as well as with the "translator's false friends " are quite effective in choosing language means adequate to the communicative task.

So, the conclusion can be made that using L1 has no risk of preventing students' effort to find the meaning from explanations or contexts. Vice versa, it facilitates critical thinking through comparative analysis of concepts given in L1 and L2.

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