

ABOUT THE (SOMETIMES) IMPERATIVE NEED TO USE MOTHER TONGUE IN ESP/EST CLASSES

Anca SIRBU¹

Camelia ALIBEC²

¹Senior lecturer, PhD, Department of Fundamental Sciences and Humanities, Constanta Maritime University, 104 Mircea cel Batran Street, Constanta, e-mail: ancasirbu@yahoo.com

²Senior lecturer, PhD, Department of Naval and Port Engineering and Management, “Mircea cel Batran” Naval Academy, 1 Fulgerului Street, Constanta, e-mail: cami_alibec@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This paper is meant neither as a plea for the usage of one’s mother tongue in ESP classes nor as an excuse or justification thereof. It is rather to be construed as an exposition of reasons from the perspective of Maritime English lecturers who teach heterogeneous classes of students. All learners of a foreign language need the support of their mother tongue at a certain point, it is just that the amount thereof depends greatly on the proficiency of the students on the one hand and on the character of the particular part of language learned and/or taught on the other hand. This entire matter depends to a large extent on the moment WHEN it takes place. The use of the mother tongue is acceptable when students work in pairs and they use it to deepen their understanding of the new EST vocabulary. Likewise, its use by the teachers is preferable during activities like grammar explanations (drawing a parallel between English and the students’ mother tongue, for example), giving instructions and/or translating new specialized terms.*

Key words: *ESP, EST, mother tongue, native language, translation, Maritime English*

This paper is meant neither as a plea for the usage of one’s mother tongue in ESP classes nor as an excuse or justification thereof. It is rather to be construed as an exposition of reasons from the perspective of Maritime English lecturers who teach heterogeneous classes of students. As is to be shown in the following, all learners of a foreign language need the support of their mother tongue at a certain point, it is just that the amount thereof depends greatly on the proficiency of the students on the one hand and on the character of the particular part of language learned and/or taught on the other hand. With specialized vocabulary, the use of one’s native language and of translation is even more significant for the goal to be achieved.

The modern language teaching methodology has been based to a great extent on the communicative method (teaching English through English, in our case), whereas the old-fashioned grammar-translation method has been highly disregarded on account of students’ lack of fluency at the end of a language course. However, English lecturers (all the more so ESP teachers) must bear in mind that it is not only fluency that is aimed at, but language accuracy and clarity alongside the mastery of precise, strictly-limited technical terms are also among the teaching objectives to attain.

For the scope of this paper, we need to discriminate between the use of the mother tongue in the teaching process as a means to an end, i.e. a teaching aid to language learning, and the teaching of translation as a professional skill. The need to use the mutual mother tongue of lecturers and students in language teaching / learning is usually supported by non-native

teachers. In the not so distant past, most teaching methods in foreign language pedagogy stipulated that the use of native language should be forbidden in class. Nevertheless, the general perception of mother tongue usage and translation in foreign language classes has recently undergone a positive change. Translation is regarded by some scientists as the fifth language skill together with the classic four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. “Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate and advanced level: in the advanced or final stage of language teaching, translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers”. [1]

We also need to point out that by “the use of mother tongue in class” this paper does not only imply its use solely by teachers. Students prefer to use their native language in a vast variety of contexts during foreign language classes. The idea of having to relinquish their mother tongue is very stressful to some students, it triggers a sense of insecurity in the experience of learning new vocabulary in a foreign language.

A further specification has to be made within the purview of this paper, i.e. albeit the terms “mother tongue” and “native language” do not necessarily always designate the language students first learned at home or the language they think in, it is easier to refer to them instead of using terms such as “official language” or “national language” or “L1”. The terms “mother tongue” and “native language” in our paper indicate the language that the students have been educated in, the language they share when they speak with one another and

the language they immediately resort to instead of using whichever foreign language they are taught. Although our students want to be perceived and treated as adults in (almost) every other respect, they haven't been long past their teenage time along with the behavior and reactions thereof. In ESP/EST classes, most of the young adult students (especially in their 1st and 2nd year of study) usually have a tendency to behave like teenagers. Their motivation, for example, may be low at times, especially if they have the feeling that they are compelled to attend classes they think are superfluous. Some of them, due to the permanent contact with TV and the internet have quite a good command of General English, which makes them overconfident. It takes time and patience to make these students understand that a CAE or IELTS certificate is not that helpful in Maritime English classes. ESP, i.e. Maritime English in our case, is an entirely new subject and so are the pertaining topics and vocabulary.

Moreover, some EST texts are so specialized, that there is no excitement in English classes – hence, just like teenagers who have shifting interests, students get bored and act as such.

Other times, they reject certain types of activities that make them feel embarrassed; speaking English in an ESP class may pose a problem for some of them and we, as teachers, need to know how to address this without making them feel even worse and risking to “lose” them altogether. The issue grows even more serious with students who lack confidence on account of insufficient knowledge of English on the one hand and/or of the specific subject matter (e.g. seamanship, shipbuilding, strength of materials etc.) on the other hand. Language is a system in itself, so one cannot be expected to teach EST isolated from the pertaining subject matters. University students have to be able to communicate in English, regardless of how rudimentary their knowledge is. Especially with 1st-year students or with beginners, Maritime English lecturers cannot always make use of visual materials in class when trying to elicit answers like “tanker” or “bulk carrier”, so sometimes an introductory language course proves to be useful.

Maritime English lecturers must bear in mind the fact that maritime terminology, just like any other type of specialized vocabulary, also consists of terms that are used in various domains. This is why a context presentation of meanings of terms is rather to be opted for than a mere dictionary definition of the respective terms. Furthermore, it is by far simpler for students to learn vocabular in context, not isolated. Specialized vocabulary is clear and unequivocal and that means that specialized terms have to be translated in the mother tongue, in order to preclude any sort of ambiguity.

Widdowson objectively highlights the relevance of translation in this context, pointing out that “what we are aiming to do is make the learner conceive of the foreign language in the same way as he [sic] conceives of his own language and to use it in the same way as a communicative activity. This being so, it would seem reasonable to draw upon the learner's knowledge of how his own language is used to communicate. That is to say, it would seem reasonable to make use of translation.” [2] Experience has brought us to the conclusion that in certain circumstances it is beneficial for students with poorer English knowledge to be working in pairs with one of their more proficient peers. As mentioned above, students who feel disheartened by their deficient linguistic skills may feel uneasy and will either turn to what they know best, i.e. their native language, or, worse still, refuse to speak altogether. For this reason, it is preferable to have them speak and/or be spoken to in their mother tongue for a limited amount of time – when they perform a task, especially when one student is explaining something to, or debating with another, they will almost always use their mother tongue. The perks of this particular “shortcoming” is that non-proficient students still gain the targeted knowledge, because by having them work in pairs with a colleague makes them perceive this activity as less constraining (as they would, if forced to speak up before the rest of their class) and helps them be more relaxed, able to take in the new vocabulary and willing to perform the required tasks. They feel it is easier to ask a peer for, and receive information than admit out loud that there are things they are not just yet familiar with.

Alternatively, in order to make sure that everybody in class is on the same page both literally and figuratively speaking and to have a steady uneventful course of the class activities, English lecturers are frequently compelled to resort to explanations in the students' mother tongue, making sure that everybody understands what they have to do.

Irrespective of their proficiency in terms of comprehending authentic reading and/or listening materials, most of the students mentally translate from English into their native language and vice versa. This raises our awareness as English teachers of the relevance of translation in language classes. Why do they keep using their mother tongue in the English class? Jeremy Harmer is of the opinion that “a principal cause of this L1 use is the language required by the activity”, if students are incapable of performing a specific linguistic task due to insufficient knowledge in terms of specialized vocabulary. “The amount of L1 use by particular students may well have to do with differing learner styles and abilities. some use English from the very

beginning, whereas others seem to need to use their L1 more frequently.” [3]

In conclusion, there is absolutely no doubt that students will keep using their native language in class, irrespective of what teachers say. The only problem is whether we really need to prevent them from doing it at all. It is rather a matter of approaching the issue: it is highly likely to discourage students who feel the need for the security given by their familiar mother tongue at a certain point. This entire matter depends to a large extent on the moment WHEN it takes place. The use of the mother tongue is acceptable when students work in pairs and they use it to deepen their understanding of the new EST vocabulary. Likewise, its use by the teachers is preferable during activities like grammar explanations (drawing a parallel between English and the students’ mother tongue, for example), giving instructions and/or translating new specialized

terms. In this manner, there is a greater chance for tasks to be dealt with more efficiently. As David Atkinson explains, “it is not difficult to think of several general advantages of judicious use of the mother tongue”. [4]

There is no claim on what is the best teaching method. Of course, English lecturers always do their best to encourage students to use English in class as much as possible, especially in oral presentations, but maybe we need to be more relaxed about this in other teaching contexts. There are, indeed, moments, especially with heterogeneous classes of students, when the use of the mother tongue may benefit both teachers and students. While the topic is not entirely covered by this paper, an outline has been drawn up herewith as to the importance of using the mother tongue in ESP classes.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Ross, N. J. - *Interference and Intervention: Using Translation in the EFL Classroom* in: “Modern English Teacher”, 9 (3), 2000, p. 63
- [2] Widdowson, H. G. - *Teaching Language as Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 159
- [3] Harmer, J. - *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2001, p. 131
- [4] Atkinson, D. – *The Mother Tongue in the Classroom: A Neglected Resource?* in: *ELT Journal* 41/4, p. 242

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- [1] Brooks-Lewis, K. - *Adult Learners’ Perceptions of the Incorporation of their L1 in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning* in: *Applied Linguistics* 30/2, 2009, pp. 216–235
- [2] Carless, D. - *Student Use of The Mother Tongue in the Task-Based Classroom* in: *ELT Journal* 62/44, 2008, pp. 331–338
- [3] Hall, G. and Cook, G. - *Own-Language Use in Language Teaching and Learning* in: *Language Teaching*, 45.3, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 271-308