



THE ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

PerdeliyevJumamyrat

Instructor of Oguz han Engineering and Technology University of Turkmenistan
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Annamyradova Aygul

Student of Oguz han Engineering and Technology University of Turkmenistan
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Abstract

The role of the mother tongue in learning a second language, particularly English, has been a subject of ongoing debate in the field of language acquisition. While some believe that the mother tongue can hinder second language learning, others argue that it can play a supportive role in the process. This article explores the relationship between the mother tongue and the English language learning process, focusing on both positive and negative aspects. It examines how the mother tongue influences vocabulary acquisition, grammar understanding, pronunciation, and overall language skills development. The article also discusses strategies for teachers to utilize the mother tongue effectively in the language learning classroom.

Keywords

Mother tongue, second language acquisition, English language learning, bilingualism, language transfer, language teaching methods.

1. Introduction

The learning of English as a second language (ESL) is influenced by various factors, one of the most significant being the student's mother tongue. The relationship between the native language and the target language can have both positive and negative impacts on the language learning process. In this context, the mother tongue plays a crucial role in shaping how learners acquire new vocabulary, understand grammar rules, and develop speaking and listening skills. While some educators and researchers view the mother tongue as a barrier to English language acquisition, others believe it can be a valuable tool when used appropriately.

2. Positive Effects of the Mother Tongue in Learning English

In certain contexts, the mother tongue can facilitate the learning of English by providing a foundation for comparison and contrast between the two languages. The use of the native language can ease the transition into English, particularly when learners are starting their journey. Understanding the connections between the two languages can enhance language learning, enabling a smoother and more intuitive process. Some of the positive effects include:

Vocabulary Acquisition:

Learners often find it easier to learn English vocabulary when they can relate it to similar words in their mother tongue. Cognates—words that share common etymological roots in both languages—help learners make connections between words in English and their native language. This connection not only aids in faster recognition but also in recall and retention. For example, the English word "information" shares a similar form and meaning with its counterparts in many languages (e.g., French "information," Spanish "información"). Such similarities create a bridge between the learner's knowledge of their mother tongue and English, accelerating vocabulary acquisition. In addition to cognates, learners can also use their native language to develop associations with new words in English, which helps to establish deeper understanding and long-term memory. Additionally, many languages share lexical borrowing from English, which provides another layer of familiarity and ease in learning vocabulary.

Grammar Understanding:

Many English grammar rules have parallels in other languages. For instance, word order, verb tenses, and the use of articles in English often align with structures in learners' mother tongues. Understanding these connections allows learners to transfer knowledge from their native language to the target language, making grammar rules more intuitive and easier to internalize. For example, in languages like Spanish, French, or German, verb conjugations reflect tenses in a way similar to English. Drawing on this existing understanding enables learners to apply familiar concepts when learning new rules. The concept of word order (subject-verb-object in both English and many other languages) also allows students to more easily understand sentence structure. Additionally, the knowledge of sentence types, such as declarative, interrogative, and exclamatory, in their native tongue, can facilitate a smoother transition to English grammar. As learners recognize patterns in both languages, they can gradually begin to rely on these grammatical structures in their own writing and speaking.

Cognitive Benefits of Bilingualism:

Research has shown that bilingual individuals tend to develop stronger cognitive abilities, which can significantly enhance the process of learning English. Some of the key cognitive benefits of bilingualism include improved problem-solving skills, better memory, enhanced multitasking abilities, and increased mental flexibility.

The brain of a bilingual learner constantly switches between languages, which trains the brain to be more adaptable. This heightened cognitive function allows learners to process information faster, and in turn, can make learning new languages, such as English, easier. Furthermore, bilingual learners have the advantage of accessing linguistic knowledge in multiple ways, allowing them to approach English from different angles. This flexibility enhances their overall language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as they are accustomed to shifting between languages. Cognitive advantages also extend to better attention control, as bilingual learners tend to have greater focus and concentration when processing language. These mental advantages, supported by their ability to switch languages, help learners approach English with enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

3. Negative Effects of the Mother Tongue in Learning English

While the mother tongue can be beneficial in language learning, it can also pose challenges in certain situations:

Language Interference:

One of the primary issues in second language acquisition is language interference or transfer, where learners apply rules from their native language to English. This can result in grammatical errors, incorrect word usage, or pronunciation difficulties. For instance, learners may struggle with English word order if their mother tongue follows a different syntax pattern.

Pronunciation Issues:

The influence of the mother tongue can affect English pronunciation, especially if certain sounds in English do not exist in the learner's native language. This can lead to an accent that may interfere with clear communication. For example, Spanish speakers may have difficulty pronouncing the "v" sound, while Chinese learners might struggle with the "r" and "l" distinction in English.

Overreliance on the Mother Tongue:

If learners depend too heavily on their mother tongue during the language learning process, they may find it difficult to fully immerse themselves in the English language. This can hinder the development of fluency and natural language production, as students may always rely on translation rather than thinking directly in English.

4. The Role of the Teacher in Using the Mother Tongue

Teachers play a significant role in determining how the mother tongue is utilized in the classroom. Some effective strategies include:

Code-Switching:

Teachers can use code-switching (alternating between the mother tongue and English) strategically to clarify difficult concepts, explain grammar rules, or ensure comprehension. This can reduce learner anxiety and help them make sense of complex language structures.

Contextualizing Vocabulary:

When introducing new vocabulary, teachers can draw parallels between the learner's mother tongue and English to provide context and facilitate understanding. However, they should avoid over-translation, as it can inhibit the learner's ability to think in English.

Encouraging English Thinking:

While the mother tongue can be a useful tool, it is essential for learners to gradually shift towards thinking in English. Teachers can encourage this transition by designing activities that promote immersion, such as discussions, debates, and role-playing exercises, where students are encouraged to think and respond directly in English.

5. Strategies for Overcoming Negative Effects of the Mother Tongue

To minimize the negative effects of the mother tongue on English language learning, several strategies can be implemented:

Focusing on English Input:

Providing students with ample exposure to English through listening and reading activities is crucial. The more learners hear and read in English, the more they will internalize the language, reducing the reliance on their mother tongue.

Pronunciation Practice:

Teachers can incorporate pronunciation drills and activities that focus on difficult English sounds not present in the learners' native language. This will help students overcome pronunciation challenges and improve their speaking skills.

Encouraging Independent Thinking:

Encouraging students to think and respond directly in English is key to developing fluency. Teachers can help by using questions and tasks that require students to use English without translating from their mother tongue.

6. Conclusion

The mother tongue undoubtedly plays an important role in learning English as a second language. While it can serve as a useful tool for vocabulary acquisition, grammar understanding, and cognitive development, it can also lead to interference and pronunciation challenges. By carefully balancing the use of the mother tongue in the classroom, teachers can help learners maximize its benefits while minimizing potential drawbacks. The ultimate goal is to help students become confident and fluent English speakers, capable of thinking and communicating in English without the constant need for translation.

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