CHAPTER V

THE MOTHER TONGUE AND THE LEARNER

1. Teaching Methods Using MT

A method (of learning an L2) other than the DM cannot easily ignore the use of the MT. Whether it is the GTM or the BM, a liberal use of the MT is made. The L1/MT cuts short the otherwise tortuous process of suggesting the actual life situation meanings of English terms such as, for example, 'Knight-at-arms' in Keats's poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". It can thus be used to explain to the learner the meanings of lexical items of the TL. It can also be used to explain the grammatical patterns of the sentences being taught.

2. Inevitable Interference of the MT

This use of the MT may occasionally result into some kind of interference giving rise to some errors. But as pointed out towards the end of the last chapter, even if no use of the MT is made, this interference, in some measures, is bound to be there. Some people are under the impression that there will be no MT interference in the learning of L2 if no use of L1/MT is made in the process of teaching. But the fact of the matter is that this interference is there on account of the psychic processes at work during learning. The common thing between the acquisition of L1 and the learning of L2 through DM is the approximation/correspondence between experience and its verbalisation/articulation. This would mean that when we use DM
during L2 learning and expect the correspondence of experience and articulation the MT/L1 will interfere internally, may be unconsciously. Of course when we use MT while teaching an L2 the former acts as a buffer between the experience and the L2, but the buffer will serve as a link between the two and not as a disjoiner.

However, the context in which we are talking we cannot and, therefore, ought not to ban the use of the MT. Further, if MT is an essential and indispensable part of our situation the only practical and useful alternative left is to carry out some remedial teaching to remove mistakes creeping in on account of MT interference. But it will be unrealistic to assume that the use of the MT causes only interference. The reality is that there is also a lot of relevance of the MT to the teaching of L2 and it is better to recognize its efficacy than to try to eliminate it.

3. Converting Interference into Relevance

Since the use of the MT in this situation is natural and therefore, advisably necessary as concluded while discussing the context and the learning process, the teacher/learner will have to convert the interference into relevance by making the best use of the MT, by approaching the TL with such a strategy that the acquisition of L2 becomes easier in the given circumstances. Besides, there are also certain situational reasons why the use of MT only helps one acquire the TL more easily. This is now going to be the subject of our study.
4. An Untenable Assumption

The protagonists of the DM believe that a direct connection between the foreign word and its meaning is possible. But it is difficult to accept that we can disregard entirely the conceptual meaning already built up in the mind of the learner. It is not possible to build up a new meaning in a state of insulation, i.e., without reference to the earlier build-up. In any case it is not possible to do so at one or two sittings in the day which is what we can have in our situation. A new connection cannot be made between the existing concepts and the foreign words now proposed to be spliced on to them except through the intermediary native language. For example, what will happen when a book is held up and the word 'book' is uttered, or the drawing of a house is pointed to and designated as a 'house' to a learner with Hindi as his L1. The only direct connection that could possibly be made would be between the word 'book' and that particular book, or between the word 'house' and that particular house in the form of a drawing. "How can meaning be evoked apart from its identifying tag? And how can it possibly be held in mind without this sole concrete handhold? The foreign words do not of themselves have any mystic meaning of their own in the form of a surrounding halo which hovers in the background ready to function. That halo shines only for those who used these words as a nucleus around which to centre gradually evolving meaning. Since the original process cannot be repeated, meaning to those without this background has to be
Here it may be argued that grown up immigrants to, say England, do learn English in the same way as one learns one's native language. And "it is true that the conditions surrounding the immigrant are very similar to those that confront an infant. Unguided imitation and haphazard trial and error seem to be the only possible approaches; but who can say the mental processes are the same for that immigrant in learning English as they were when he learned his own language as a child. Wouldn't it be easier for him to use his own language as a nucleus and build English around it? Could he avoid doing so? That something very different takes place in each case is seen when we compare the English acquired in this manner by the parents and their children born here (in England). The persistence of the native-language accent and word order in the English used by parents show how impossible it is to ignore native language; and the fact that these faults are less glaring when a mature person has already learned (or is willing to learn) the simple facts of English usage".  

5. L2 Learner's Psychic State

The point to be kept in mind here is that though the surrounding conditions in respect of words and objects are similar, the grown up learner is dissimilar from the child. The


2. Ibid.
infant's mind is clear, the adult's is not as it is loaded with L1. In fact, in the beginning of the migration, adults translate even money into their native currency and then buy things. Some of them even forgo the delicacies and even some of the necessities of the adopted country because they find them to be too expensive in terms of their native currency. Like thinking in terms of native currency, thinking in terms of native language also is a fact of psychology. Tulsi Ram has the following to say on this phenomenon while talking of learning English as a second language by an Indian in India:

This reference back to the original language of experience is a fact of learning psychology and, in my view, underscores the relevance of the mother-tongue to the teaching of English as a foreign language. In fact, all our acquisition of English—pronunciation, syntax, idiom, words and meanings—is an approximation to the pronunciation, syntax, idiom, and words and meanings of the mother-tongue. The reason is that while we learn English, our natural, social, cultural and linguistic environment remains Indian. When English is transplanted into a foreign environment such as Indian, then by the sheer force of the laws of nature it gets adapted to the facts and laws of the environment.3

Tulsi Ram reinforces this observation by citing an incident of his own academic life. His English, inspite of his long experience of studies and teaching of English at one of the most prestigious places in India, was described as non-native by

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3. Tulsi Ram, p. 333.
his own research guide, Professor Norman Callan. The Professor once asked him if he thought in Hindi and then translated into English to which Tulsi Ram agreed. On the basis of his experience in language learning and language teaching he arrives at the following conclusion:

For an Indian, English cannot be the original language of thought. When it is used as a language of thought, it is bound to reflect the idiom and flavour of his original language.

A brief reference (which is being made here rather apologetically) to Tulsi Ram's personal attainment in the field of language will perhaps clinch the issue with regard to this fact of psychology. Besides his experience of teaching English at prestigious institutions he has been an earnest student and teacher of English for many years and if such a person also experiences the interference from the MT it is unimaginable that this interference can be warded off in any other case.

6. MT and the TL Lexis

The L2 learner already has concepts and a word for each one of them. His only job is to have these concepts retagged, replacing the words of his native language with those of the TL. In such a situation, to think that the native tags do not come up would be unrealistic. C.F. Sparkman has the following to say on this point:

4. Ibid., p. 335.
If native-language words inject themselves like a shadow along with the concepts, it is downright stupid not to bring them out in the open so that the learner's attention may be focussed squarely and unmistakably on the concepts to be retagged. A number of short-sighted analysts have imagined they foster a direct connection when they use foreign words that are cognate to English words. To realise this isn't true one has only to ask himself whether the human mind is likely to refuse to use this old handhold, disguised a bit but easily recognizable.  

This is applicable not only to words in isolation but also to whole phrases and complete sentences. Continuing his argument Sparkman further says:

"The same thing happens when whole phrases or complete sentences are introduced orally and acted out for the student's benefit. If meaning is aroused at all, it is grasped by means of its accustomed outward signs. This hocus-pocus is not only useless and time-consuming; it is positively harmful in that it places the emphasis where it is not at all needed, in making it a problem to be solved, when the real need is obviously to avoid any puzzle but to keep the foreign words under the closest scrutiny possible while a new neural path is being forged between them and meaning...  

The greatest disadvantage of DM in the average Indian context is that it means depletion of the already short time available to a student for English. In the DM most of the

6. Ibid.
talking in the beginning has to be done by the teacher in an effort to establish for the learner a direct connection between the foreign word and the object. The learner, consequently is left with little time for drills. "An analysis of the stimulus-response activities in direct method teaching shows why the number of responses in a given time is so small. In rejecting the mother tongue as an aid to foreign-language learning, the teacher not only places himself in a position where he must have available an excessive amount of time to convey sentence-meaning—an activity in which the teacher does all the work and in which the pupils have very few active speaking contacts—but he also limits himself severely in the choice of language-learning exercises and drills."7

Besides, the talk of MT interference is also largely a myth in most of the L2 learning situations. In fact MT plays a positive role as a conveyer of meaning of lexical items and also of full sentences. Dodson says on the basis of his empirical studies:

All the experiments, in which the mother tongue was used as an initial conveyer of meaning, produced no evidence whatsoever that this has any bearing on the quality of the language spoken by the pupils. In fact, the contrary was the case. As meaning could be conveyed almost immediately and retained by means of visual aids, a much larger amount of time could be devoted to making the learner respond orally in the foreign language,

7. Dodson, pp.55-56.
thereby not only improving his pronunciation and fluency, but also giving him a greater opportunity of reaching a level where the foreign language is coupled directly with the situation so that the pupil can begin to think in the language.  

On the other hand the DM forces a teacher "to give pupil an excessive number of listening contacts when, in fact, speaking contacts are of greater importance in the pupil's development towards a true mastery of the language."  

7. Double Standards Vis-a-vis the MT

Some protagonists of DM speak of complete dissociation from L1 but in the classroom they find it difficult to stick to their guns. There they have to take recourse to the use of L1 time and again to explain various kinds of difficulties. They feel satisfied and re-assured about their pupils having followed them only after they have explained things in the L1. Teachers in Haryana and Punjab, in fact, have had to explain the facts and concepts of English not too successfully in Hindi, they have had to take recourse to the local variation of Hindi and Panjabi.

Sparkman also has a dig at those teachers of L2 (in England) who "pride themselves in banishing English (the native language of the learner) from the classroom", and says:

Strange to say, the very teachers who try to avoid the use of English equivalents in their actual teaching use

8. Ibid., p. 55.

9. Ibid., p. 60.
reading texts that contain a complete vocabulary of English equivalents of every word used. The textbook writer realised (if he did not he was brought into line by a hard-boiled editor), that the meaning of new foreign words could not be grasped without being associated with their English equivalents; and all teachers find this bilingual vocabulary of great value to students when their stock of classroom objects and picturable material is exhausted.\(^\text{10}\)

8. MT and the TL Syntax

Not only does the MT have lexical relevance in learning L2 it has syntactical relevance also. Even if there is nothing in common syntactically between L1 and L2, the syntaxes of the two will have to be juxtaposed to see the contrast and also to observe it while an attempt is made at teaching the TL. Illustrative examples in the TL to bring home to the learner will not suffice unless he fully understands the contrast involved between the two languages.\(^\text{11}\) Sparkman again makes this point clear by showing how per force the learner and the teacher are compelled to take recourse to the MT:

As regards foreign-language syntax, a grudging comparison with English models is usually permitted; but

10. Sparkman, p. 358.

11. If the teacher wants to teach his pupils the following pattern of sentence (Present Progressive Tense):

He is solving the sums.

He can compare it with its Hindi equivalent: वह प्रश्न निकाल रहा है. and invite their attention to the verb phrases in the two and highlight the contrast. In the former the helping verb figures before the main verb, in the latter the रहा है (which is the equivalent of the helping verb) follows the verb. Besides, the object in Hindi precedes the verb or verb phrase and in English the object follows the verb. Also, of course, a practice in the pattern, in the form of a drill will have to be carried out.
the guilty feeling that some linguistic sin is being committed is not conducive to making such comparisons on all necessary topics or even to doing a limited number of them well enough. The evidence that native-language models tend to persist unless thwarted by studied interference may be seen when the old German immigrant says, 'I am here fifty years'. Yet young students of English in Germany do say correctly, 'I have been studying English for two years'. The difference is not in the relative intelligence, but in the fact that the contrasting speech patterns are held up and compared in the German classroom, and drills featuring the English idiom drive the matter home. No one even took the trouble to analyse and make the necessary comparison for the old immigrant and he continued to use it as he had always done in German, assuming that he had really heard it that way in English. 12

This only shows that the MT will have to be resorted to in order to study the syntactical contrast between the two languages, otherwise the learner is likely to go amiss and fail to convey the meaning correctly; at least he will be unusual in his expression which may even be ludicrous, even though remotely conveying the meaning.

The relevance of the MT also lies in explaining to the learner the grammatical/syntactical rules of the TL. Such rules cannot be explained in the language being learnt because the learner yet does not have the capacity to understand it fully. So recourse will have to be taken to the MT. The protagonists of DM suggest that a number of illustrative examples can

themselves bring home to the learner the underlying pattern of inflection or deflexion. But such examples can mean something only after the grammatical point involved is clearly understood theoretically. To explain this point Sparkman gives an example:

If one teaches English to Spanish-speaking students, he soon finds that certain errors are almost sure to be made by the whole class. For example, no matter how many illustrative examples are given, the possessive adjectives 'his' and 'her' won't come out right until the English system of agreement in gender with the possessor (and not with the thing possessed) is clearly understood. Then and only then do the illustrative examples mean something. 13

Similarly it will have to be explained to a student with Hindi as his L1 that the Hindi system of agreement of the gender of the possessive pronoun with the thing possessed (e.g., उसका भाई, उसकी बहिन, मेरा चाचा, तेरी चाची, हमारा पुत्र, हमारी पुत्री, etc.) is different from the English system of the agreement of the gender of the possessive pronoun with the possessor (e.g., 'his brother', 'his sister' and 'her brother', 'her sister'). Such grammatical facts can best be explained through L1, and illustrative examples can follow.

In a footnote Sparkman underlines a further use of the MT, "This comparative grammar can be taught even to students who rely on the old alibi that they do not know English grammar. What they don't know is really the grammatical terminology. They usually observe the rules without being aware of them. It is an easy matter to teach them the few grammatical terms needed.

13. Ibid.
in discussing the systems followed in the two languages; and through these the ability to analyze can be stimulated. 14

For teaching this kind of functional grammar it is not the TL but the MT which should be used if the desired results are to be obtained. Some teachers under the influence of the DM try to explain the grammatical rules in the TL. Besides, even the traditional teachers using the GTM have used English as the medium of teaching grammar. In this situation the same paradox of language learning and medium of knowledge, as earlier discussed in connection with the medium of instruction, can be clearly seen. If a student can understand the language of the grammar, probably he can as well understand the language of his language text book. In that case the teaching of the language text book becomes unnecessary. However, in most cases, the fact of the matter is that the learner does not know enough of the L2 to understand the rules of grammar. Therefore, L1 may be used to explain the grammatical facts of L2 in order that the teaching may be realistically effective.

Explaining the rules of the grammar of L2 in L2 itself is unrealistic and ineffective because the learner is not so well versed in the TL as to be able to understand the underlying rule. Sparkman also speaks of this situation:

Some teachers realising that comparisons of speech patterns must necessarily be made have salved their conscience by resorting to the old Berlitz device of

14. Ibid.
using the new language itself to explain the usage under consideration. Obviously the explanation is unnecessary if the students already understand the foreign language well enough to follow a technical grammatical explanation in said language; and if not understood, the time wasted might well be devoted to understandable oral drills so necessary to the relabeling process.15

9. MT and the TL Pronunciation

Having seen that the use of the MT is of vital significance in teaching the lexis as also the syntax (grammar) of L2, we come to the third major area of teaching, viz., pronunciation. There are only two ways of imparting accurate or near-accurate pronunciation to an L2 learner. The first is to put him among the native speakers of the TL. But this method is not possible in the present case as our learner here is not likely to go anywhere close to the native and natural atmosphere of L2 (used as L1 in that atmosphere). The other alternative is to let him know which speech organs are to be used to produce a particular sound. Let him also further analyse what slight alternations in the position of the speech organs have to be made to form new sounds. He should also, side by side, be made to know which sounds of his native language are closest to which ones of the new language and how the new sounds should be produced. Sparkman also suggests that "a knowledge of slight alterations in position of the speech organs in forming the new sounds is the only way to perfect these new sounds. Without

15. Ibid.
such knowledge the student continues to hear and to reproduce unknowingly the nearest equivalent English sounds, "i.e., the nearest approximation of the L1 sounds to the L2 sounds.

A child ideally taught in his L1, say Hindi here, is supposed to have had a fair knowledge of the vocal organs used and the sounds of the letters of Devanagari. If we refer to Hindi text books of about 50 years ago, and some being used at present also we will find the place (स्वान) and the effort (प्रयत्न) involved, of various sounds given in them, and these are also expected to be taught. If we refer to the Satyartha Prakasha (Ch. II on education) of Maharshi Dayanand—a work steeped in Indian tradition but giving a modern interpretation of the same—we will find that the mother is supposed to train the child in correct speech with practical demonstrations of the manipulation of the speech mechanism. A child with this background is sure to find L1 of great relevance in learning the articulation of new sounds through a comparative/contrastive analysis.

However, analysis alone is not sufficient. The articulation should be demonstrated and confirmed with practice. And this is precisely what we said in relation to grammar: theoretical knowledge coupled with practice is the ideal way to learning and consolidating. Linguists and teachers of L2 support this view on the basis of their own experience:

16. Ibid.
But analysis is only the first step. Once the basis for the new muscular habit is fully understood, daily drill must be provided if the new habit is to be superimposed over the old one. 18

In this way we have seen that the use of the MT in our context is not only unavoidable and necessary but also advisable and very useful. It is of use and relevance phonologically, lexically and syntactically/grammatically. The DM regards the use of MT and grammar as a taboo in a language learning context but we have seen above that it is nothing but superstition "handed down from one innocent victim to the next." 19 We shall in the chapters to follow discuss each of these points in full detail.

10. Two Types of MT Relevance

However, before going over to the next chapter, one important point in this connection needs a special mention. There can be two types of the use of the MT in learning English or any other language as an L2. One is universal which is applicable to every L2 vis-a-vis the MT of the learner. The other is what may be termed as local or specific which means the one-to-one relationship between the TL and the MT of the learner. As for the universal relevance it is mostly psychological, and this kind of relevance consists in re-tagging

the concepts/linguistic patterns already built up in the learner's mind. Even interference (which is a natural phenomenon) of the MT has to be converted into relevance.

The other kind of relevance, viz., the local, has to be determined by the linguists who have equal command over both the languages, viz., the TL and the MT of the learner. This has to be worked out phonologically, lexically, morphologically, and grammatically. This type of relevance will differ from one MT to another, and the degree of relevance will also differ, depending upon the amount of similarity and the kind of contrast between the two languages concerned. According to M.L. Tickoo, "A careful comparison of English and various other languages has revealed that different native languages create different English-learning problems, or at least English-learning problems different to some extent." Consequently teaching materials to cope with areas of interference have to be prepared.

Here an attempt is being made to determine the relevance of Hindi as the MT in learning English as L2. Separate attempts can be made to work out the relevance of other MT's.