THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Andreea NĂZNEAN[1]

Abstract

In my article I intend to prove that the use of the students' mother tongue in teaching a foreign language is essential, in spite of the modern tendency which tries to emphasize only the importance of the communicative competence. Based on some tests that I have conducted on my students I will demonstrate that the students who benefited from the use of the mother tongue had better results than the ones who were deprived of it.

Keywords: translation, mother tongue, tests, language, method.

In my attempt to prove that the use of the mother tongue can help us teach translation, I made the following experiment that lasted for one semester: I taught English to students in two parallel classes, 10C and 10D, both classes studying Biology-Chemistry, intensive English, having 4 English classes per week. For one semester I taught English in 10C without translating anything into Romanian, while helping the students in 10D better understand certain words and phrases by translating them into their mother tongue. At the end of the semester, the students in class 10D could use the new vocabulary and grammar structures in different contexts, confident of their own choices, while the students in 10C still needed additional explanations and information when they were to use the words and structures independently. But the best proof of this fact is the test that the students wrote at the end of the semester which indirectly yet pertinently highlights the importance of mother tongue in teaching a foreign language. Here I will only present two of these test papers, one of a student in class 10C and one of a student in class 10D so as to notice very clearly that the students who were taught with the help of the mother tongue had better results.

Therefore, in the textbook *Upstream Upper Intermediate*, written by Bob Obee and Virginia Evans, published in 2005 by Express Publishing House, the first unit, *Crossing barriers*, contains, among other aspects, different exercises related to articles, countable and uncountable nouns, so the test paper also includes a translation exercise based on this topic. The fragment belongs to the book *Engleză. Exerciţii*, written by Cecilia Croitoru and published in 2008 by Booklet Publishing House. The rest of the exercises are selected from the test booklet belonging to the textbook, written by the same authors and published by Express Publishing House in 2003.

I will illustrate here only two of the test papers, one of a student in 10C and one of a student in 10D. Other examples of this test can be found in the appendices. This is the test the students had to solve:

[1] PhD Candidate, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University, Iaşi.

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

Test paper

I. Fill in the missing word:

1. Please don't shout ……. me! I didn't mean to break the fax machine.
2. We need a new photocopier; this one's ……. old to handle the volume of work that we give it.
3. I'm afraid I can't accept this report. It's not good …….
4. I haven't heard ……. John for a long time.
5. ……. my husband and my daughter came with me on my business trip to China.
6. Let me give you a ……. of advice: don't believe everything you hear.
7. Good morning, Mr. Smith's office. ……. the line and I'll check if Mr. Smith is in.
8. He sent his application ……. fax.
9. I'd like to ……. a favor: could you water my plants while I'm away?
10. ……. up or we'll be late for the meeting.

II. Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence using the word given. Use between two and five words:

1. His mother asked him if he wanted to invite any more people.

else His mother asked him if ……. he wanted to invite.

2. He couldn't read the writing because it was too small.

too The writing ……. to read.

3. He's much too inexperienced to go on that course.

enough He's ……. on that course.

4. I couldn't see anywhere that we could put the new filing cabinet.

nowhere There was ……. the new filing cabinet.

5. He didn't know many people at the computer exhibition.

few There were only ……. at the computer exhibition.

III. Find the unnecessary word for each sentence:

1. On the 13th November I'll be travelling to Edinburgh on business. …….
2. Both of New York and Glasgow are cold in the winter. …….
3. He went to the town where he was born there. …….
4. What you do for a living it can affect your health. …….
5. People in desert regions are often being short of water. …….

IV. Translate the following text into English paying attention to the countable and uncountable nouns:

Peter şi Tom s-au decis într-o bună zi să le arate surorilor lor, Pam şi Ann, ce bucătari buni sunt. Şi s-au gândit că prepararea unei prăjituri este cel mai potrivit mod pentru a demonstra aceasta. Dar când erau gata să înceapă au observat că aveau nevoie de o mulţime de lucruri. Au hotîrât deci să meargă la cumpărături. Supermarket-ul nu era departe, aşa că într-un sfert de oră erau acolo. Au luat un căruţ şi au început să aleagă de

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

pe rafturi: 1kg d e zahăr, 1 kg d e făină, un borcan cu gem, un pachet d e biscuiţi, o ciocolată, o cutie de lapte, o duzină de ouă, două pahare cu iaurt şi două sticle de suc. Dar când să plătească şi-au reamintit că, de fapt, lista de cumpărături ar fi trebuit să fie mai lungă. Părinţii nu avuseseră timp săptămâna anterioară, aşa că au hotărât să le facă o surpriză şi să cumpere şi celelalte lucruri de care aveau nevoie. Deci, înapoi printre rafturi! Curând căruciorul era atât de plin, încât cu greu îl mai puteau mişca. Şi era de înţeles: pe lângă ingredientele necesare preparării mult doritei prăjituri, se mai aflau şi 4 pâini, 2 kg orez, ½ kg de şuncă, 4 sticle de ulei, 1 sticlă de oţet, 3 kilograme de carne, 2 sticle de cola, 3 săpunuri şi 10 sticle de apă minerală. (2008: 20)

The students in class 10C, where I did not use the mother tongue at all for one semester, found the test pretty difficult and they made many mistakes. One of the students solved this test in the following way:

I. Fill in the missing word:

1. Please don't shout *at* me! I didn't mean to break the fax machine.
2. We need a new photocopier; this one's *too* old to handle the volume of work that we give it.
3. I'm afraid I can't accept this report. It's not good *enough*.
4. I haven't heard ***of*** John for a long time.
5. *Both* my husband and my daughter came with me on my business trip to China.
6. Let me give you a ***sort*** of advice: don't believe everything you hear.
7. Good morning, Mr. Smith's office. ***On*** the line and I'll check if Mr. Smith is in.
8. He sent his application *by* fax.
9. I'd like to ***make*** a favor: could you water my plants while I'm away?
10. *Hurry* up or we'll be late for the meeting.

In the first exercise the students made four mistakes; in the fourth sentence they used the preposition *of* instead of *from*, in sentence number six they used *sort* instead of *piece*, which means that they did not know the singular form of the noun *advice*, in the seventh sentence they used a preposition instead of a verb, they should have used the verb *hold* and not the preposition *on* because thus the sentence has no verb, consequently it has no meaning and in sentence number 9 they made another mistake because they used the verb *make* instead of *ask*, but we never use the verb *to make* when we offer our help, we use the verb ***to do*** and in this case it should have been the verb *ask* because the person speaking is asking his/her interlocutor to help him/her with something, he/she does not offer any help.

II. Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence using the word given. Use between two and five words:

1. His mother asked him if he wanted to invite any more people.

else His mother asked him if there ***is*** anyone *else* he wanted to invite.

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

2. He couldn't read the writing because it was too small.

too The writing was small for him to read *too*.

3. He's much too inexperienced to go on that course.

enough He's not *enough* experienced to go on that course.

4. I couldn't see anywhere that we could put the new filing cabinet.

nowhere There was **…….** the new filing cabinet.

5. He didn't know many people at the computer exhibition.

few There were only a *few* people he known at the computer exhibition.

In this exercise there are mistakes in each sentence:

In sentence number one the students should have used past simple because the initial sentence was written in the past simple tense as well and the introductory verb in the sentence that had to be rephrased was also in the simple past tense. So, the correct sentence is: *His mother asked him if there* ***was*** *anyone else he wanted to invite.*

In the second sentence the students did not know where to use *too* and they just placed it at the end of the sentence without thinking of its meaning; *too* should have been written in front of the adjective and then the correct sentence is: The writing was ***too*** **small** for him to read.

In sentence number three the students did not know that *enough* is used after the adjective and they used it in front of it, but the correct sentence is: He's not experienced *enough* to go on that course.

The students did not solve sentence number 4 at all, I asked them why they had considered it so very difficult and they told me they did not think of the fact that if they kept the verb in the affirmative form, they could have used *nowhere* instead of *anywhere* and the meaning would have been exactly the same: There was *nowhere* we could put the new filing cabinet.

In the last sentence the students knew how to use the given word, *few*, but they made a mistake regarding the verb: they used *known*, which is the participle form of the verb instead of the second form, *knew*, which is the second form used for the simple past tense: There were only a *few* people he ***knew*** at the computer exhibition.

III. Find the unnecessary word for each sentence:

1. On the 13th November I'll be travelling to Edinburgh on business. *correct*
2. Both *of* New York and Glasgow are cold in the winter. *of*
3. He went to the town where he was born *there*. *there*
4. What *you* do for a living it can affect your health. *you*
5. People in desert regions are often being short of water. *correct*

In this exercise there are also many mistakes:

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

The students considered the first sentence to be correct, but it is not, the unnecessary word is the definite article *the* because it should not be used in front of a specific date: *On 13th November I'll be travelling to Edinburgh on business*.

The students found the mistakes in the second and the third sentences; however, they considered another word to be unnecessary in sentence number four, *you*, but the unnecessary word is the pronoun *it*, which should be omitted because the first part of the sentence, *What you do for a living*… is actually the subject of the second part … *can affect your health*. That is why we do not need the pronoun *it* because then the subject would be used twice.

And in the last sentence they did not identify the unnecessary word, the verb *being*, which should not be used since the sentence refers to a general situation, not to a temporary one: *People in desert regions are often short of water*.

IV. Translate the following text into English paying attention to the countable and uncountable nouns:

One day Peter and Tom had decided to show to their sisters Pam and Ann what good cooks they are. And they thought that cooking a cake is the best way to prove it. When they were ready to start they observed that they needed a lot of things. So, they decided to go shopping. The supermarket wasn't so far, so in one half an hour they were there. They took a shopping cart and they started to choose from the shelves: 1 kilo of sugar, 1 kilo of flour, one jar of jam, one pack of biscuits, a bar of chocolate, one milk box, a dozen of eggs, two glasses of yougurt and two botles of juice. When they were about to pay they remembered that their shopping list should have been longer. The parents haven't enough time the previous week, so as they have decided to make them a surprise and to buy the other things that they needed. So, back through the shelves! Soon the shopping cart was so full that they hardly could to move it. It was understable that in addition to the ingredients which were necessarily for cooking the cake, there were four breads, 2 kilo of rice, ½ kilo of bacon, four bottles of oil, one vinegar bottle, 3 kilo of meat, 2 bottles of cola, 3 soaps and ten bottles of mineral water.

The translation of this text proves the fact that the students had problems not only with the sequence of tenses, but also with the plural forms of the nouns and with the topic in different sentences. The first sentence demonstrates the fact that the students also had problems as far as the punctuation in a sentence is concerned because they did not use any commas, thus hindering a little the understanding of the sentence and they should have written ***how*** *good cooks they are* and not ***what*** *good cooks they are*: *One day, Peter and Tom had decided to show to their sisters, Pam and Ann, how good cooks they are*. In the second sentence they used the present tense together with the past tense, but the whole situation refers to a past event, so they should have used the past tense in the whole text; another mistake refers to the choice of the verb *cook* referring to the cake, but it would have been correct to use the verb *to make* in this situation: *And they thought that making a cake was the best way to prove it*. They translated într-un sfert de oră by *one half an hour*, but it means *o*

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

jumătate de oră and we do not normally use *one* in front of *half an hour* when we refer to 30 minutes. The sentence *They took a shopping cart and they started to choose from the shelves: 1 kilo of sugar, 1 kilo of flour, one jar of jam, one pack of biscuits, a bar of chocolate, one milk box, a dozen of eggs, two glasses of yougurt and two bot ks of juice* contains many mistakes: firstly, when the subject of one or two verbs is the same it is not necessary to repeat it, after the verb start they should have added the –ing ending to the verb, so the students should have translated: *They took a shopping cart and started choosing from the shelves…* They translated o *cutie de lapte* by *one milk box*, but it is actually *a carton of milk* and this example is given in many textbooks. The correct form is *a dozen eggs* and not *a dozen of eggs*, *iaurt* is translated by *yoghurt* and not *yougurt* and the correct word is *bottle* and not *botle*. In the following sentence *When they were about to pay they remembered that their shopping list should have been longer*, only the comma is missing, but it is also important for the general significance of the whole sentence: *When they were about to pay, they remembered that their shopping list should have been longer*. And also the sentence: *The parents haven't enough time the previous week, so as they have decided to make them a surprise and to buy the other things that they needed* has many mistakes: both the negation and the tense are wrong; the students should have used the past perfect tense since the idea refers to a previous situation of a past event, *as* in *so as* is redundant, the use of the present perfect tense is wrong, the simple past tense is suitable in this context and also the use of the long infinitive for *to buy* is wrong, they should have used the short infinitive because it refers to the same subject: *Their parents had not had enough time the previous week, so they decided to make them a surprise and also buy the other things they needed*. The next sentence contains the wrong preposition, *through*, instead of *to*: *So, back to the shelves!* In the sentence: *Soon the shopping cart was so full that they hardly could to move it* the topic is wrong and the fact that the students used the long infinitive after the modal verb *could*: *Soon the shopping cart was so full that they could hardly move it*. In the last sentence the students wanted to write *understandable* in order to translate *de înțeles*, but they did not spell it correctly, they should also have used *necessary*, not *necessarily*, but they also made mistakes regarding the plural forms of the nouns: *breads* instead of *loaves of bread*, 2 *kilo* instead of 2 *kilos*, the Romanian word *șuncă* is translated by *ham*, not *bacon* because bacon is another type of meat, they wrote *one vinegar bottle* instead of *one bottle of vinegar*, they should have written *3 kilos of meat*, *coke* instead of *cola*, *3 bars of soap* and not *3 soaps*.

While the students in class 10C made a lot of mistakes in solving the test, proving once more that the lack of mother tongue in explaining certain words and structures is a hindrance in acquiring new knowledge when learning a foreign language, my students in 10D, where I used the mother tongue the whole semester whenever they needed additional information and explanations, were incomparable better than their colleagues. Here is one test that I selected; it belongs to a student in 10D. The translation of the text proves the fact that the students in 10D not only knew more suitable words and grammar structures when they had to deal with this text, but they also knew how to use the words in the sentences in order to have a greater impact on the target reader.

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

I. Fill in the missing word:

1. Please don't shout *at* me! I didn't mean to break the fax machine.
2. We need a new photocopier; this one's *too* old to handle the volume of work that we give it.
3. I'm afraid I can't accept this report. It's not good *enough*.
4. I haven't heard *from* John for a long time.
5. *Both* my husband and my daughter came with me on my business trip to China.
6. Let me give you a *piece* of advice: don't believe everything you hear.
7. Good morning, Mr. Smith's office. *Hold* the line and I'll check if Mr. Smith is in.
8. He sent his application *by* fax.
9. I'd like to *ask* a favor: could you water my plants while I'm away?
10. *Hurry* up or we'll be late for the meeting.

II. Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence using the word given. Use between two and five words:

1. His mother asked him if he wanted to invite any more people.

Else His mother asked him if there was anyone *else* he wanted to invite.

2. He couldn't read the writing because it was too small.

too The writing was *too* small for him to read.

3. He's much too inexperienced to go on that course.

enough He's not experienced *enough* to go on that course.

4. I couldn't see anywhere that we could put the new filing cabinet.

nowhere There was now*h*ere we could put the new filing cabinet.

5. He didn't know many people at the computer exhibition.

few There were only a *few* people he knew at the computer exhibition.

III. Find the unnecessary word for each sentence:

1. On *the* 13th November I'll be travelling to Edinburgh on business. *the*
2. Both *of* New York and Glasgow are cold in the winter. *of*
3. He went to the town where he was born *there*. *there*
4. What you do for a living *it* can affect your health. *it*
5. People in desert regions are often *being* short of water. *being*

IV. Translate the following text into English paying attention to the countable and uncountable nouns:

One day, Peter and Tom decided to show their sisters, Pam and Ann, how good cooks they were. And they thought that the best way to prove it was to make a cake. But when they were ready to start, they noticed they needed a lot of things. So they decided to go shopping. The supermarket was not far, so in a quarter of an hour they were there. They took a trolley and began choosing from the shelves: one kilo of sugar, one kilo of flour, a jar of jam, a packet of biscuits, a bar of chocolate, a carton of milk, a dozen eggs,

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

two glasses of yoghurt and two bottles of juice. But when they were ready to pay, they remembered that the list should have been longer. Their parents had had no time for shopping the previous week, so they decided to make them a surprise and buy all the other things they needed. So, back again to the shelves! Soon the trolley was so full that they could barely move it. And it was easy to see why: apart from all the ingredients necessary to make the so longed cake, there were also: four loaves of bread, two kilos of rice, half a kilo of ham, four bottles of oil, one bottle of vinegar, three kilos of meat, two bottles of coke, three bars of soap, and ten bottles of sparkling mineral water.

Conclusion

Using only the foreign language in teaching a foreign language is perhaps useful and suitable for proficiency students or students preparing for different exams, when they need conversation exercises in which they need to prove the fact that they are sure of their knowledge and they are positive enough so as to use only the target language, but when we are at the stage of teaching, not exercising, then we need to use the mother tongue.

Tests and experiments have proved the fact that it is absolutely necessary to use the students' mother tongue, students acquire the new information and knowledge faster and they are more confident in using it alone in different situations.

So, even if the emphasis continues to be on communication in teaching a foreign language, results in different tests are an essential proof that the mother tongue still is of a great importance in learning a foreign language.

Bibliography

Cook, G., (2010), *Translation in Language Teaching,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Croitoru, C., (2008), *Engleză. Exerciţii*, Bucureşti: Booklet

Chesterman, A. (2000) "Teaching Strategies for Emancipatory Translation" in C. Schäffner and B. Adab (eds.), *Developing Translation Competence*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Davies González, M. (2004), *Multiple Voices in the Translation Classroom. Activities, tasks and projects*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Dollerup, C. (2006), *Basics of Translation Studies*, Iaşi: Institutul European

Harmer, J. (2007), *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition), Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited

Neubert, A. (2000), "Competence in Language, in Languages and in Translation" in Schäffner, C. and Adab B. (eds.), *Developing Translation Competence*, Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Obee, B., Evans, V., (2005), *Upstream Upper Intermediate*, Newbury, Berkshire: Express Publishing

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)

Obee, B., Evans, V., (2003), *Upstream Upper Intermediate*, *Test Booklet*, Newbury, Berkshire: Express Publishing.

BDD-A20520 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:44 UTC)