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On Some Aspects of Foreign Language Teaching at the Beginning Level

Patman Antadze-Malashkhia

Associate Professor, PhD, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

Abstract

When teaching a foreign language, any method or approach is justified if it facilitates the process of language acquisition. We share the view that foreign language teaching should be based on a combination of diverse approaches and methods, as well as various perspectives combining practice and theory.

According to our teaching experience, typologically oriented and structure-based teaching combined with the communicative approaches facilitates foreign language learning. It is especially effective in adults' groups at the very initial stage of learning. Thus, the first /native language of learners serves as a reference point for adult beginners.

The principles of our teaching approach are based on the course elaborated by us and tested three times with university students.

We argue that along with the contrastive analysis of the native/first language (L1) and the foreign/target language (TL) embracing phonetic-prosodic, morphological-syntactic and lexical-phraseological aspects and all other specific features characteristic of the relation of L1 and TL must be taken into consideration in the teaching process. In case of Persian and Georgian, these are a large amount of Persian loanwords in Georgian as a result of the long-standing intense Persian-Georgian language contacts and adequacy of the Georgian alphabet for the Persian sounds. Envisaging of these factors along with the above-mentioned elementary systemic phonetic-prosodic, grammatical and lexical-phraseological characteristics serves the purpose of facilitating and accelerating the acquisition of TL.

Keywords: typologically oriented teaching, systemic characteristics, sounds, alphabet, loanwords.

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1 On the Role of L1 and Translation in Foreign Language Teaching

At different times opinions of experts varied as to the attaching of priority to the use of native language (NL)/ the first language (L1) or exclusion of the latter in foreign language (FL)/target language (TL) teaching. Hence, the attitude to the role of translation in foreign language acquisition has changed.[1]

The grammar-translation method, traditional and widespread in the German scientific school, regarded the native language as the basis for the teaching of foreign language. By the end of the 60s of the XIX century, L. Sauver and his followers criticized this method as useless for speech and communicative purposes. Thus, this method was substituted by the Direct/Natural Method, widely introduced by L. Sauver and M. Berlitz in the USA and later widespread in France and Germany(J.Richards&T.Rodgers,2001, p.11-12).It is quite natural that this method was developed in the USA, where, due to a large number of immigrants from various countries, a (FL)teacher had to give classes to speakers of diverse languages. For this reason, L1 could not be taken into account.

The Direct Method, which was based on the absence of translation and inductive teaching of grammar, was reviewed in the 20s of the XX century. As it turned out, complete attachment to this method was often counter-productive, and certain explanations in the native language would accelerate the understanding and mastering of a foreign language. Later, during World War II, the necessity for intense and accelerated training of military translators led to the restoration of the unilingual method in the audio-lingual form. The attitudes continued to change in the following decades.

It should be noted that even practically unilingual Communicative Language Teaching(CLT), worked out by British sholars (D. Wilkins, H. Widowson, C. Candlin, C. Brumfit, K. Johnson) and actively functioning from the end of the 60s till today, which largely contributed to the development of the European Council's lingo-didactic vision, justifies reasonable use of the native language and translation in FL teaching. Finocciaro and Brumfit remark: "judicious use of native languages accepted where feasible" and "translation may be used where students need or benefit from it"(1983, p. 92).This attitude is also reflected in CEFR(6.4.1;6.4.7.6;6.4.7.7).

Beginning from the 80s of the XX century, the use of L1 in FL teaching has been actively encouraged. For instance, Swan (1985:85) considers that the factor of L1 is not sufficiently envisaged in CLT and notes that "it is a matter of common experience that the mother tongue plays an important role in learning a

[1]On diverse methods and attitudes to FL teaching, see.J.Richards&T.Rodgers, 2001: Pym et al (2013).

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foreign language" and "if we did not keep correspondences between foreign language items and mother tongue items we would never learn".

Psycholinguists have also paid attention to the issue of unilingual teaching of foreign language. R. Brown (Brown, 1973, p.5) described a failure in explaining the meaning of Japanese words to English speakers. He noted that in this case translation would have been much more efficient. Naturally, this problem is especially acute on the initial level of foreign language teaching, when the vocabulary of language learners is rather poor. In such crisis situations, the best way out is to use L1 and translation. Pym, Malmkjaer and Gutiérrez-Colón Plana point out that "One general use of a translation is as a scaffolding activity for learners in the early stages, when L1 assistance is warranted" (2013, p.27).

The role of L1 and, correspondingly, translation is especially important when teaching adults, "the older the students, the more translation is used (possibly because adults tend to pass through mental translation anyway" (Pym & Ayvazyan, 2016, p.11).

In the past decades, the necessity to use L1 and translation as linguodidactic resources in teaching TL is most vividly declared in the collection edited by K. Malmkjaer (1998) and a book jointly written by A. Pym, K. Malmkjaer and M. Gutiérrez-Colón Plana (2013).

Contemporary experts who advocate the use of L1 and translation in FL teaching do not imply a return to the outdated grammar-translation method. What they mean is to include a moderate volume of L1 and translation in FL teaching, alongside with various other methods and attitudes. In this way, they aim to achieve maximum results in language. Atkinson, the supporter of the use of L1 and translation in FL teaching, considers the overuse as a detrimental factor in TL learning (Atkinson, 1987:246). According to Ivanova (1998:105), language teaching through translation can be compared to a medicine "which will have a beneficial effect only when properly administered and in the right dose."

A focus on L1 and translation should not exclude or replace the communicative approach and immersion methodology widespread in the past decades. Instead, it should enhance communicative skills because translation itself as language production is a form of communicative activities. A reasonable combination of methods and attitudes, where L1 and translation restore their rights, should be a precondition for highly efficient teaching. "We are in the postmodern realm of mixed language resources. The use of translation would thus seem logical and indeed unavoidable" (Pym et al.2013, p.103). In the 'post-methods' era, different approaches and methods must be studied and mastered in order to learn how to use them "and understand when they might be useful" (Richards &Rodgers, 2001, p. 250).

Based on our experience, we consider that the most intense phase of teaching FL from zero level by using L1 should embrace one semester university

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course. It should form solid grounds for a transfer to unilingual teaching. However, the use of translation and comparison with L1 should not be neglected during the following stages either, because explanation of new lexical-phraseological units or grammatical structures in the target language requires sufficient knowledge of the target language. Hence, it is efficient at the stage when the language competence of the student does not hamper the process of explanation by complete exclusion of the native language. Some experts correctly consider that L1 and translation enhance FL competence on the higher levels of FL teaching as well (Titford, 1983, p.53; Schäffner, 1998:125).

In the four-volume manual compiled by Iranian authors for non-Iranian speakers and currently successfully used in Georgian universities (Samareh,2005; Moqaddam,2007) the factor of comparison with the native language is taken into account. The authors have selected English as the language under comparison, due to the international status of the latter. Beginning from the second volume, English explanations and comments are gradually replaced by Persian. The glossaries appended to all the four volumes are Persian-English and English-Persian. Such attitude is absolutely correct, as the knowledge of Persian among students who use the above-mentioned manual is still insufficient for using an explanatory dictionary (Persian-Persian) for language learning purposes.

The use of English for comparison purposes when teaching the Persian language on the initial level is justified in international groups of students, where the use of native languages of all the students is practically impossible. However, if the students speak a common native language/L1, a focus on the latter will naturally improve the quality of teaching.

2 Alphabet and Transcription

One of the hampering factors in foreign language acquisition is the alphabet, which is phonetically imperfect and graphically unusual for the learner. Georgians who study the Persian language encounter this obstacle. The Persian alphabet, worked out by means of slight modification of the Arabic script, is rather unusual for a Georgian learner due to partial absence of vowels (as only consonants and long vowels are spelt), the direction of writing from right to left, incomplete correspondence between sounds and letters, namely, the use of four different letters to express the same sound, for instance, the sound **z**. Another challenge is related to different ways of expression of one and the same letter, based on its position (initial, middle, final) in the word. Due to the above-mentioned complexities, a prolonged format of teaching, namely, 16-18 academic hours, is necessary for Georgian students to master the specific alphabet.

As compared to the study of the alphabet, Georgian students feel much more comfortable when mastering the Persian sound system, as the majority of Persian sounds are not alien to them. During the very first two classes, the students

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are introduced in the simplest possible way to the relations between the Persian and Georgian phonetic systems. Above all, emphasis is made on the consonants absent in standard Georgian: **f, y** and glottal **'**.

Attention is also paid to the rules of pronunciation of those Persian sounds that at first sight resemble the Georgian sounds, but in fact are very different. A vivid example of this difference is Georgian **a** versus Persian so-called short **ä** and long **å/ā**.

There is a difference in softness between Persian **l**, **k**, **g**, **č**, **j** and Georgian **l**, **k**, **g**, **č**, **j**, as in Georgian these sounds are pronounced harder.

Two or three academic hours are sufficient for explaining the above-mentioned differences between Persian and Georgian sounds. During these initial classes we also explain one of the main rules of Persian prosody – the stress mostly falling on the final syllable. In the very first week we explain two exceptions from this rule, which are conditioned by grammatical factors (absence of stress in **e** added to the determinate and **i** in the indefinite article). In the same period, students are introduced to the so-called phrasal prosodic elements, e.g. they are able to distinguish between unstressed **äst**/colloquial **e** "is" form and stressed **nist** "is not" form. At the same time, students are given simple rules regarding the intonation contours of declarative and interrogative sentences. Both the word stress and the phrasal stress are compared to similar categories in Georgian.

As we have already mentioned, these issues are taught in parallel with the Persian alphabet. Illustrative examples are given with Georgian transcription, which is well adjusted to Persian, due to similarities between Georgian and Persian sounds and the vivid phonetic type of the Georgian alphabet. We have to add just three symbols for **ä**, **å/ā** and **f**. The sounds **y** and' exist in some Georgian dialects and they can be denoted by rarely used Georgian letters. Such transcription helps students in the process of adaptation to a completely alien language. After the students have mastered the alphabet, the Georgian transcription is gradually substituted by the transcription based on the Latin alphabet, which is used in the Iranian manuals of the recent period.

Our attitude aims at teaching lexical-grammatical units parallel to the teaching of alphabet. This saves time and gives the students an opportunity to study the basics of Persian phonetics, prosody, grammar, vocabulary, and stylistics.

3 Grammar Issues

Our one-semester course embraces basic issues of the normative grammar of the Persian language. Their sequence is based on the transfer from simple to complicated, as well as on the principle of grouping the grammatical forms based on structural similarity. If necessary, we take into account relations between languages. Persian models are compared mostly to Georgian, and, sometimes, to other, chiefly English, language data, as the latter reveals morphosyntactic similarity

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with Persian, and Georgian students are more or less aware of the English grammar.

At every class we initially present grammar rules and lexical-phraseological models, then we give sentences based on these rules and models.

According to Krachen's Monitor Theory "adults have two independent systems for developing ability in second languages, subconscious language acquisition and conscious language-learning, these systems are interrelated in a definite way: subconscious acquisition appears to be far more important" (Krachen,1981, p.1). The way in which second language production may be performed by using the conscious grammar, the Monitor is considered unnatural and hence less productive, however, it is pointed out that such a way is appropriate where students can no enjoy the luxury of passing a silent stage of acquisition and early production is absolutely necessary.

Limited terms of University education practically exclude any opportunity of a 'silent stage' for language learners. Logically we are grammar/monitor-oriented and quite successful in this line. As Swan notes "grammar has not become any easier to learn since the communicative revolution" (Swan, p.78), thus neglecting of grammar rules becomes an obstacle to normal communication. Our experience proves that sound knowledge of grammar and lexis structure prepares the best ground for language acquisition.

The given article is focused on the issues enabling the students to acquire elementary knowledge at the very initial stage of learning, parallel to the mastering of the alphabet. The issues are as follows:

- Certain grammatical functions of the stress;
- Prepositional and postpositional agreement of the determiner and determinant, in case personal and demonstrative pronouns, cardinal numerals and nouns are used as determiners;
- The interrogative functions of the numeral **čänd** "how many?" and **če-qädr**? "how much?";
- Interrogative function of adverbs denoting time and place, e.g. **kei**? "when?" ; **koja**/**ku***?* "where?";
- adverb of quantity and size **xeili** "very/very much";
- Prepositions of time and place: **tä** "before"(denoting time and place); **där**/**tu** (-**ye**) "in"; -**ru** *(-***ye***)* "on";
- Coordinating and correlative conjunctions:**vä** "and";**häm**, niz "also, too"; **häm**...**häm** „both…and"; **nä**..**nä** "neither…nor", **yå**..**yå** "either…or";

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subordinating conjunctions: **ämmä, likän, väli** "but, although"; equative conjunction **yä'ni** "id est";

- Affirmative particles:**bäle /bäli/** colloquial**åre/åri** "yes" and čerå "why not ";
- negative particles:**nä/xeir/nä- xeir** "no";
- affirmative-negative particle**nä čändån** "not much/yes and no";intensifying adverb**hättä** "even";
- interrogative particles:**mägär?åyå?** "indeed? Really?";**yå nä?**"or no?", used in alternative questions.

Prior to the acquisition of the alphabet, the number of verbs taught is minimized. The focus on nominal vocabulary facilitates the overcoming of initial obstacles. Verbs are represented only by III person singular affirmative and negative forms of "be" and"have" in the present and past tenses: **äst/e**"is"vs. **nist**"isn't"; **bud** "was" vs. **nä-bud** "wasn't" and **dår-äd/dår-e** "has" vs. **nä-dår-äd/ nä-dår-e** "hasn't"; **dåšt** "had" vs **nä-dåšt** hadn't". We also explain how interrogative pronouns **ki/ke**"who"and **če/če**"what" combine with **äst/e,** yielding verb forms **ki-st/ki-e***?* "who is?" and **či-st/či-e**? "what is"?. In addition we discuss the morphonological aspect related to **äst** and its colloquial variant **e**, namely, the rules of their combination with words ending in consonants, different vowels and diphthongs.

From almost zero level, the teaching of a foreign language should be focused on the ability to generate certain communicative units, above all, sentences. Despite the minimal amount of verb forms, the above-mentioned material enables the students construct affirmative and interrogative sentences with a compound nominal predicate. This is practised on the basis of translation exercises.

Due to the students' extremely limited knowledge of verb structures, it is reasonable to teach communicative units like words-sentences without verbs, e.g. **bäs!"**Enough!"; **yävåš!** "Quiet!"; **såket!"**Hush!".

As, prior to complete acquisition of the alphabet, the students have only a slight knowledge of finite verb forms, they are given only those communicative models where the above-mentioned verb forms can be avoided. Thus, at the initial level of teaching the material should be restricted to brief variants of greeting-farewell and gratitude formulae.

After mastering the alphabet, students go deeper into basic morphological and syntactic issues, which implies almost half of the normative grammar of the Persian language. The grammar-based course helped the students in their studies at the following stage, when they dealt with manuals of Persian language compiled by Iranian authors based on the communicative approach.

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4 Vocabulary Teaching

During the entire semester, students learn over 800 lexical and phraseological units, out of which about 120 units are taught in parallel with the teaching of alphabet. The key principles of selection of lexical units are high frequency of usage and thematic relevance of certain groups.

From the thematic point of view, the selected vocabulary and phraseology embrace the following fields: identity, age, marital status, relatives, professions, health, home, furniture, clothing, food, colours, days of the week, telling the time and some other communicatively relevant topics. During every class, we also offer several models of speech etiquette and one idiom or proverb.

The vocabulary is also selected based on the principle of systemic characteristics. This, above all, implies the study of antonymic pairs, which is especially efficient on the initial stage of foreign language acquisition. Less focus is made on synonymy and polysemy, because, in order to achieve sufficient results in this field, a student has to master significant lexical resources. The selection of synonyms and polysemantic words for the initial level is based on the frequency of use of various meanings of polysemantic units and the frequency of use of certain pairs of synonyms (e.g. polysemantic word **måh**1.”moon”; 2. ”month”and synonyms **ämmå/väli**”but”.

On the very initial stage of vocabulary learning, while still teaching the alphabet, we offer the students the etymons of various loans that have penetrated into Georgian from Persian.

Opinions vary regarding the use of loans (lexical units borrowed by L1 from TL) for teaching purposes. Some experts consider loans as a hampering factors (Sheperd, 1996; Simon-Maeda, 1995), while others regard them as factors facilitating the learning process (Daulton, 1999; Nation, 1990; Inagawa, 2014). Based on our experience, we argue that a focus on loans helps students adapt to a completely new and alien language environment. In this regard, Georgian-speaking students have a favourable basis for learning the Persian language, as the intense process of borrowing from Persian during almost ten centuries embraces diverse semantic fields and almost every part of speech, above all, nouns (M. Andronikashvili, 1996).The process of borrowing has also affected phraseology.

The loans taught during our course have been selected based on certain criteria, because, in our opinion, in order to enable efficient use of loan-words when teaching FL, borrowings should be differentiated envisaging various levels of teaching.

We argue that the selection of borrowings must be based on phonological, morphological, semantic and stylistic correspondence with the etymons. Frequent use of the word or idiom in both donor and recipient languages is also taken into consideration. When selecting loan-words for the initial stage of our course of lectures, we are guided by the following principles:

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High frequency of use of the etymon and the loan;

Utmost phonetic similarity between the etymon and the loan;

The sameness of the etymon and the loan regarding their morphological category;

Semantic analogy between the etymon and the loan;

Stylistic neutrality of the etymon and the loan.

The focus on such vivid and simple loans facilitates the teaching process, and the students who are totally unware of the Persian language feel less alienated in the process of learning a new language.

The loans selected for our pilot course are of the following type:

Nouns of concrete-substantive meaning (cf. Persian **bå**ɣ –Georgian **baɣ-i**[2]"garden"; Persian **šäkär/ šekär**–Georgian **šakar-i** "sugar");

Some ethnonyms and toponyms that have penetrated from Persian into Georgian (cf.Persian**rus**– Georgian **rus-i**"Russian"; Persian **engelis/engelestån**–Georgian **inglis-i**"England"; Persian **moskou** – Georgian **moskov-i**"Moscow");

Persian anthroponyms that are widespread in Georgian. They are actively used in illustrative examples (cf. Persian **mehråb**–Georgian **merab-i**;Persian **bižän**–Georgian **bežan-i);**

Georgian calques of Persian idioms, one component of which is transferred into Georgian (cf. Persian **meidån** and Georgian **moedan-i** in corresponding idioms: Persian **in gui vä in *meidån***–Georgian**ha burt-i da *moedan*-i**"the ball is in your court"; literally "here is a ball and here is a pitch").

The efficiency of the above-mentioned loans as positive transfer in language learning process is especially vivid on the initial stage of teaching, when the loans, given with Georgian transcription and minimal amount of verbs, play the role of a "vaccine" facilitating the process of adaptation to a new language.

5 Stylistic Aspects

Almost from the very initial level, the students are taught stylistic differences between literary and colloquial Persian. These differences embrace not only lexical but also phonetic, morphological and syntactic aspects. Due to such peculiarities of the Persian language, understanding of the differences between the literary and colloquial registers at an early stage of learning enables the students to easily perceive the peculiarities of oral speech and establish adequate speech contacts.

[2]**i** is a marker of the nominative case in Georgian nouns with consonant stems.

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6 Types of Exercises

Translation from TL into L1, in our case, from Persian into Georgian, is justified only in the process of explanation. Exercises are based solely on translation from L1 (Georgian) into TL (Persian). They are really effective because in a sense translation is a form of language production. This is a good precondition for the development of communicative skills.

Transformation exercises are also widely practiced.

In the classroom, simple dialogues are encouraged as a form of oral exercises.

Based on the experience, in the following semester the students find it easier to do construction and composition exercises of non-translation type.

7 Concluding Remarks

"Adults proceed through the early stages of second language development faster than children" (Krachen, 1982, p.43), to our mind the reason is much more important role of consciousness in adults' learning. Thus structure-based teaching is preferable in adults' groups, especially at university, where the students' consciousness and education level allows a maximal structured language input.

Our approach to the teaching of adults from zero level is based on a pilot course in Persian language, successfully tested three times with Georgian students of our University. This experience has clearly outlined the positive role of L1 on the initial level of foreign language learning, as well as the positive effects of combination of grammatically–oriented and communicative approaches, based on contrastive analysis of languages.

Relevance of the Persian colloquial register from the morphonological and morphosyntactic viewpoints conditioned the introduction of stylistic issues into our syllabus for beginners.

Our experience has also revealed the positive role of structured teaching of vocabulary and the transfer from the simple to the complicated.

It has been proved that the focus on certain issues should be conditioned by the specific features of L1 and TL and their individual relations. In case of Georgian and Persian, this implied certain phonetic similarity, the efficiency of Georgian alphabet for the transcription of Persian sounds on the background of completely alien and unusual Arabic-Persian alphabet, abundance and frequency of Persian loans in the Georgian language.

Considering the above-mentioned factors and adjusting them to concrete teaching goals, utmost focus on similarities between L1 and TL, explanation of the teaching material in a simple way – all this has enabled the students undergo the above-mentioned intense course without any obstacles. Thus, a solid basis has been formed for a transfer to the next stage of learning, where the role of L1 in TL

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acquisition is, to a certain extent, diminished, and there is a major focus on the contrastive approach that reveals differences between L1 and TL.

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