

## USING PORTUGUESE IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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Language teachers trained in modern methods have been told not to use L1 in the L2 classroom, and language learners in general have come to demand that only L2 be used. Going against this specialised-made-popular way of thinking, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how knowledge of Portuguese can be applied constructively in the English Language classroom.

The use of a learner's first language in the second language classroom is not usually seen with very benevolent eyes. The stigma associated with using Portuguese to teach English - respectively the first and second language that I shall focus on in this presentation - is that of the non-native speaker teacher who does not know enough English, or who does not know enough about language teaching. English lessons conducted only in English, and preferably by native-speakers of English, is what language teachers have been told is the best and what language learners have come to demand. Language schools all over Portugal proudly advertise that their teachers are native-speakers, and it is to those schools that the learners who can afford it want to go. The general feeling among language teachers and learners is that learning is more effective if you spend the time you have allotted to language learning listening to a native-speaker and trying to speak and think in the target language alone. And in those precious few hours, your first language should preferably be banned from your mind. As a result, it is not uncommon for language teachers to feel guilty when they happen to slip into the first language, or when they are unable to prevent their students from using it.

But this has not always been so. The late 18th century saw the development of the grammar-translation method for the teaching of modern languages. The method, more traditionally used in teaching Greek and Latin, resorted to the learner's first language for lengthy grammatical explanations and interminable translation exercises. Teaching modern languages in this way remained popular throughout the 19th century, and it was only in the beginning of the 20th century that the use of the first language in the second language classroom began to be questioned. Palmer's Oral Method, manifest in his 1925 publication "English through Actions", and later on Hornby's famous "Oxford Progressive English for Adult Learners" (1954-56) plus the Audiolingual Method developed by Fries (1957) in the United States all emphasised the active involvement of the learner in speaking, listening to and thinking in the foreign language. The weight those methods gave to spoken as opposed to written language, and the importance they gave to a good pronunciation made native-speaker teachers popular and

strongly discouraged the use of the learner's first language (Howatt 1984).

Nearer to the present day, in the beginning of the 1980s, the belief that second language acquisition only worked when learners were exposed to the foreign language in communicative situations did little to reopen the doors to the first language in the second language classroom. I remember that when I first began to teach English, in 1983, I was specifically told by my teacher trainer at the American Institute never to use Portuguese in class. Roger Gower's and Steve Walters' famous 1983 "Teaching Practice Handbook" describes translation as "a dangerous habit for the students to be encouraged into" because, they say, "there are numerous occasions when seemingly obvious structural or lexical equivalences are used differently in an English-speaking context" (Gower, R. & Walters, S., 1983:67).

Although nowadays the prohibition against using the learner's first language has been considerably relaxed, the truth is that generally speaking the first language is only used to fill gaps or to patch up communication breakdowns. It is acceptable to use the first language to translate abstract words which are difficult to mime or draw, to check whether students have understood something which has been previously explained in English, and to give instructions and explain things to beginners who otherwise wouldn't understand. Adrian Doff's 1988 teacher-training course "Teach English" has an entire chapter for training teachers to use English as much as possible. In his 1993 "Essentials of English Language Teaching", Julian Edge advises "Whenever possible, run your class in English." (Edge, J. 1993:74).

Teacher-training courses that recommend the maximum use of English and the expectations of learners that English lessons should be only in English are not the only factors responsible for keeping Portuguese, or any other first language, outside the English as a foreign language classroom. Most of the current English as a Foreign Language teaching materials have been developed in English-speaking countries by native-speakers of English, and with no particular regard to the first language of the individual learners of English who will be using those materials. So they too have contributed to keep the learner's first language well away from the classroom.

The natural question that arises after this brief review of why target-language-only classes remain in the mainstream is whether there is any gain in promoting the use of learner's first language in the second language classroom. The answer to this question obviously depends on how and when the learner's first language is to be used. It doesn't make sense to use the learner's first language in a multilingual class, i.e., where learners have different first languages. The teacher would have to be a polyglot and it would even be

rude to address an Italian learner of English in Italian with a Chinese learner of English sitting next door. It also doesn't make sense to use the learner's first language indiscriminately. One mustn't forget that the reason the learners are there in the first place is to learn the second language. In a monolingual class, however, where learners share a common first language, I do believe that there are occasions when this first language can be used for more than simply filling gaps or patching up communication breakdowns. There are times when the first language can be used as tool for teaching the second language.

Working with Portuguese learners of English, I have found it particularly useful to break the English-only rule that I grew up with whenever my students have problems with their English that have specifically to do with their knowledge of Portuguese. In those cases, instead of telling them to forget the Portuguese and to try and think only in English, it seems to be more constructive to encourage the students to take a closer look at the two languages so as to help them focus on their Portuguese-related problems of English (Frankenberg-Garcia & Pina, 1997). Below are three examples of how this can be achieved:

#### Example 1

A very basic but persistent problem typical of Portuguese learners of English is the *present perfect/simple past* distinction, which cannot be easily mapped into Portuguese. To deal with it, students can be asked to translate sentences such as:

- (1) Já leste aquele artigo?
- (2) Li-o ontem à noite.
- (3) Já o li.
- (4) Li-o duas vezes.
- (5) Li-o antes do exame.
- (6) Ainda não o li.
- (7) Não, não o li.

Whereas in Portuguese all sentences are in the *pretérito perfeito*, the English translations require either the *present perfect* or the *simple past*:

- (1a) Have you read that article?
- (2a) I read it last night.
- (3a) I've already read it.
- (4a) I've read it twice.
- (5a) I read it before the exam.
- (6a) I haven't read it yet.
- (7a) No, I haven't.

The exercise serves to help students focus on the fact that the Portuguese *pretérito perfeito* has two possible English translations, and it can also be used to help students understand which situations require the *present perfect*, and which require the *simple past*.

Example 2.

Portuguese learners of English also have difficulties in coping with the prepositions which come after certain verbs, nouns and adjectives. So the students can be asked to translate into English sentences such as:

- (8) Estou cansada de estudar
- (9) O João ficou zangado comigo
- (10) A Maria muito simpática comigo.
- (11) É casada com um francês.
- (12) Mas está apaixonada por um inglês.
- (13) O livro é do Dick Francis.

Without trying too hard, the students might get the first two sentences right:

- (8a) I'm tired of studying.
- (9a) João was angry with me.

The next four sentences, however, are intentional traps inasmuch as the prepositions in them cannot be translated literally:

- (10a) Maria was very nice to me.
- (11a) She's married to a Frenchman.
- (12a) But she is in love with an Englishman.
- (13a) The book is by Dick Francis.

If the students translate the prepositions literally, they will produce:

- (10b) \*Maria was very nice with me.
- (11b) \*She's married with a Frenchman.
- (12b) \*But she is in love by an Englishman.
- (13b) \*The book is of Dick Francis.

I have seen Portuguese learners of English making those errors again and again, and it doesn't seem to pay to ask them to forget the Portuguese and think only in English. But forcing them to fall into the above translation traps seems to be a very effective way of helping them concentrate on the fact that they cannot translate certain prepositions literally.

Example 3

Portuguese learners of English have problems with negative prefixes. Because the two languages are similar but not identical in this respect, students often come up with errors such as **\*impredictable** and **\*disequal**. To address this problem, students can be asked to translate the Portuguese words below into English words with a similar root.

- (14) inconveniente
- (15) indecente
- (16) inconsistente
- (17) infrequente
- (18) inaceitável
- (19) inconsciente
- (20) desimportante
- (21) injusto
- (22) imprevisível

Presenting words (14) to (22) in the above order will probably induce the students to make errors. They might begin by translating words (14) to (17) correctly:

- (14a) inconvenient
- (15a) indecent
- (16a) inconsistent
- (17a) infrequent

However, if they hypothesize that Portuguese and English have similar negative prefixes, their predictions as to which prefix to add will fall apart when they translate words (18) to (22):

- (18a) unacceptable
- (19a) unconscious
- (20a) unimportant
- (21a) unjust
- (22a) unpredictable

which they often translate as:

- (18b) \*inacceptable
- (19b) \*inconscient
- (20b) \*desimportant
- (21b) \*injust
- (22b) \*impredictable

Alternatively, it might also happen that the learners in question have reached a stage in which their perceptions of language distance is such that they have become sceptical about possible similarities in Portuguese and in English (Kellerman, 1987; Frankenberg-Garcia & Pina, 1997). If this is the case, it wouldn't be surprising to find them getting words (18) to (22) right, but translating words (14) to (17) as follows:

- (14b) \*unconvenient

- (15b) \*undecent
- (16b) \*unconsistent
- (17b) \*unfrequent

The errors in (14b) to (17b) are typical overgeneralization errors (Selinker, 1972), i.e., the students have noticed that the English use the negative prefix **un**, which doesn't exist in Portuguese, and have assumed that to make words negative in English all you've got to do is stick the prefix **un** in front of them.

Irrespective of whether the students transfer prefixes from Portuguese, producing errors like **\*impredictable**, or whether they prefer to use the English-sounding prefix **un** everywhere, producing errors like **\*uncoherent**, the exercise helps them realize that they shouldn't always trust their intuitions when using English negative prefixes.

The above are just a few examples of the many ways in which Portuguese can be used constructively in the English language classroom. Of course you may be wondering whether this kind of exercise will not have the backwash effect of actually increasing the language-mix in our students' minds, but no, this doesn't seem to happen. From my experience, what does tend to happen is that students become more careful whenever they are confronted with the problem-areas such as the ones highlighted above. So instead of assuming that the English for **desigualdade** is **\*disequality**, they will have second thoughts and ask someone if it is right or they will look up the word in a dictionary.

Of course raising our students' consciousness to these problem areas does not necessarily mean that they will eventually internalize the English norm so as to no longer have to look things up. In this particular case, however, there are research findings by Tomasello and Herron (1988, 1989) which corroborate the idea that translation traps like the ones seen are effective ways of addressing negative transfer and overgeneralization errors. They help students notice that there are certain aspects of Portuguese and English which do not have a one-to-one correspondence, and they force students to review their hypotheses as to what is similar and what is different in the two languages.

These findings are in accordance with the theory that learning situations that facilitate cognitive comparisons facilitate learning (Nelson, 1987; Tomasello & Herron, 1989), and they challenge the popular assumption that the first language should be forgotten or at least used as little as possible in the second language classroom. Findings such as this also challenge the often-heard recommendation that translation should be avoided in the teaching of foreign languages on the grounds that seemingly obvious structural or lexical equivalences are used differently in different languages. It is precisely to make

students aware of such areas of linguistic contrast that translation can be useful.

Subscribing to the view that it is possible to use the learner's first language constructively in second language instruction, I have recently come across a teacher training book by David Atkinson (1993) called "Teaching Monolingual Classes" which, going against the "use the first language only if you must" doctrine, explains that there is a place and a time for using the first language in the second language classroom. In addition to this, there are a few new language teaching materials which are beginning to recover the importance of the learner's first language in a number of specific teaching situations. Raymond Murphy's famous "Essential Grammar in Use", for example, now has a 1997 Italian version and a 1994 Spanish adaptation which focus on areas of English that can be problematic for native Italian and Spanish speakers. Both books contain translation exercises and exercises which highlight relevant differences between Italian and English and Spanish and English. Unlike multilingual EFL materials, which sometimes overemphasize areas which are not particularly relevant for learners of a given first language and fail to address problems which are, EFL materials created for a particular group of learners who share the same first language-related problems can be particularly useful in monolingual classes.

To my knowledge, there aren't yet any published EFL materials which focus on the problems of English that are typical of Portuguese native speakers. To produce such materials, a sound knowledge of Portuguese, of English and of the Portuguese-related problems of English of our students is required, and there does not seem to be a better place for these materials to be created than in the English departments of Portuguese-speaking universities.

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