

# The merits and demerits of using mother tongue in teaching English

**DR. RUDRA PRASAD SAMANTA**

M.A., B.ED., PHD.

Email: samanta.rudraprasad@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The teaching as well as learning of a foreign language is an arduous task. It is always a matter of debate whether we will use mother tongue while teaching a foreign language. In the early days, the use of mother tongue was encouraged to a large extent, but when the onus is on communicative skills, the use of mother tongue was greatly discouraged. No doubt, there are some demerits. But we can overcome those demerits through meticulous strategy. There are also a number of merits in the use of mother tongue. So, we should use mother tongue in an effective manner keeping in mind the merits and demerits of using mother tongue.

**Keywords:** Mother tongue, language, English, learning, teaching.

**Introduction:** The learning of the mother tongue differs from learning the English language in a number of ways. Some of these points of difference are the following:

1. The learning of the mother tongue is a natural process. The child has the strongest motivation to learn it. It is because he wants to express his needs and wants. If the child does not learn the mother tongue, he cannot adjust himself in society.

On the other hand, learning a foreign language is an artificial process. Mostly the child has little motivation to learn it. The will to learn the foreign language is missing.

2. The child learns the mother tongue in a natural environment. He is surrounded by a number of teachers. His parents and relatives inspire him to learn the language. He listens to the mother tongue most of his waking hours.

The foreign language is taught in an artificial environment. More often than not the child's only contact with the foreign language is in the classroom. There are a number of holidays in the school and the time devoted to the teaching of the foreign language is limited.

3. The child learns the mother tongue in situations. The grown-ups point to certain things and tell the child their names. The child listens to a lot of sentences in the mother tongue and he himself tries to imitate them. Thus, he grasps the situation or concepts and the language simultaneously.

When the child learns the mother tongue, his mind is a clean slate and no other language is getting in the way. But when he learns the foreign language, his habits of the mother tongue interfere with the habits of the new language.

## Interference from the mother tongue

Mother tongue interferes in the learning of a foreign language in a number of ways. This is but natural. When the child learns his mother tongue, there is no other language getting in the way. But when he learns a foreign language, the habits of his mother tongue continually conflict with those of the foreign language. This conflict arises in all areas, viz, sounds, structures and vocabulary.

## Sounds

The sound system in no two languages is the same. Different languages have different sounds.

If we compare the sound systems of English and Hindi, we find that whereas English has 20 vowels and diphthongs, Hindi has only ten. The English vowel sounds which do not occur in Hindi are the vowel sounds in 'set', 'cat', 'pot', 'all', 'bird', and the initial vowel sound in 'above'. The English diphthongs (combinations of vowel sounds) in 'fly', 'toy', 'cow', 'dear', 'fair' and 'tour' are also not found in Hindi.

Some English consonants are also not available in Hindi. They are the initial sounds in 'west', 'thin', 'this', 'zebra' and the middle 'sound' in 'measure'.

Besides the differences in individual sounds in the two languages, there are differences in stress, rhythm and intonation. Whereas English is a stress-timed language, Hindi is a syllable-timed language.

These differences in the sounds, stress, rhythm and intonation make it difficult for a Hindi speaker to acquire correct English pronunciation. The speech habits of a child's mother tongue continually get in the way. He has to keep at bay the habits of his mother tongue and cultivate a fresh set of habits.

## Structures

The arrangement of words in the sentences is different in Eng the mother tongue and the English language. The learner tends to build sentences in the English language in the same way as he does in his mother tongue.

The following examples show how English structure differs from that of Hindi:

1. In English the object follows the verb, but in Hindi it precedes the verb.  
Example: We eat rice.
2. In English the helping verb precedes the main verb whereas in Hindi it comes after it. Example: The birds are flying.
3. In English the interrogative sentences are framed with the question word or the helping verb in the beginning whereas in Hindi question word alone makes a question. Example: What are you doing?  
Do you like films?
4. In English the gender of the subject does not affect the verb but in Hindi it does. Examples: The boy plays. The girl plays.
5. In English the gender or number of the thing does not affect its adjective, but in Hindi it does.  
Examples: A good boy, a good girl, good boys, a good mirror, good pictures.

## Vocabulary

Students make many mistakes because of the influence of the mother tongue. For example, they make a number of mistakes in the use of prepositions and articles. They write:

"It is ten o'clock in my watch".

There is a tendency to translate literally. The following sentences show this tendency. The correct sentences are given in brackets.

- (i) The station has come (We have reached the station.)
- (ii) The question does not take birth. (The question does not arise).
- (iii) She resembles with her mother. (She resembles her mother).

The interference from the mother tongue can be minimized by drilling the correct forms to the pupils. The mistakes in pronunciation, grammar and usage should be pointed out to the students and the correct forms should be drilled.

### **Mother tongue - A valuable aid**

The knowledge of the mother tongue is a valuable aid to the teaching of English. The teaching of the mother tongue and the teaching of a foreign language can support and assist each other effectively.

#### **(i) Speaking**

The habit of speaking should first be cultivated in the mother tongue in the classroom. If it is not done there, it will be doubly difficult to get it in English classroom.

To speak well the speaker has to develop the habits of (i) gathering ideas, (ii) arranging them in the best order for communication, and (iii) choosing the best words in which to convey the meaning. If the pupil has acquired these habits in the mother tongue and can face an audience confidently, it will help him in acquiring the same habits in the case of the foreign language. If the pupil has ideas in the mother tongue, it will greatly facilitate oral composition in the foreign language because the only difficulty that he has to face will be that of the subject matter and not of the language.

#### **(ii) Reading**

Before beginning to teach a child to read a foreign language it is necessary that he should be made fully efficient in the reading of his mother tongue.

Taste for extra reading should first be created in the mother tongue. Once the reading habit is formed, it will soon manifest itself in English.

#### **(iii) Writing**

One of the problems in writing in a foreign language is the lack of ideas. This difficulty, however, can be overcome if the pupils have sufficient ideas in the mother tongue. Another difficulty is the organization of ideas in a proper sequence. But if the pupil knows how to organize ideas in the mother tongue, he will be able to do so in the case of English also.

#### **(iv) Grammar:**

If the pupil knows the grammar of his mother tongue, it will facilitate his understanding of the grammar of the foreign language. The sentence patterns can also be taught by comparison and contrast with those of the mother tongue.

Thus, we notice that a severe training in the use of the mother tongue is not a rival but a necessary preliminary to training in the use of English.

In the preceding paragraphs we have seen how the mother tongue can help indirectly in the learning of English. Below we find how the mother tongue can help directly in the teaching of English.

### **When to use the mother tongue**

The mother tongue can profitably be used in the following situations:

#### **a) For giving instructions to beginners**

The mother tongue can be profitably used in giving instructions to beginners in English. These instructions may be for doing drill work or attempting exercises.

**b) For telling meanings**

The mother tongue can economically be used for telling meaning of certain words, e.g., beauty, courage, etc. If we use contextualized oral presentation to explain the meanings, the students may not be able to understand the exact meaning. Moreover, it needs really a skilful teacher who can explain the meaning through contextualized oral presentation.

The meanings of idioms like a nine days' wonder, through thick and thin and proverbs like A bad workman quarrels with his tools can be effectively explained in the mother tongue.

**c) For Teaching Grammar**

To teach formal grammar, reference to the equivalent grammatical terms in the mother tongue and to the similarity and contrast in the behaviour of the two languages can facilitate understanding of grammatical rules.

**d) For Testing Comprehension**

Comprehension can be quickly tested, specially at the early stage, by asking the pupils to answer comprehension questions in the mother tongue

**e) For Teaching Contrast in Phonology**

The sounds of English are different from those of the mother tongue. We may use the mother tongue to explain the differences between the sounds of English and those of the mother tongue.

**f) For Remedial Teaching**

In remedial teaching also if it is felt that the explanation, which must always precede practice, could be brief, brisk, straightforward and easily understandable in the mother tongue, then the use of the mother tongue should be encouraged.

So, the efficiency of using mother tongue can be enhanced through meticulous use of mother tongue while teaching English.

**References:**

- Baker Colin – “Bilingual Education and Bilingualism”- Multilingual Matters - 2011
- Mohanty Ajit K. – “The Multilingual Reality: Living with Languages”- Multilingual Matters – 2019
- Jhingran – “Language Disadvantage: The Learning Challenge in Primary Education” – APH Publishing-2005
- Bialystok Ellen – “Language, Literature and Cognition” – Cambridge University Press – 2001

**Copyright & License:**