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## TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PREVALENCE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes the role of the mother tongue (MT or L1) in the foreign language (FL or L2) teaching process. The purpose of the paper is to determine MT prevalence in foreign language (FL) classroom, moreover, to explore the degree of MT usage by teachers and to determine the perception of teachers regarding its use in foreign language teaching, specifically whether MT should be used continuously, partially, or not at all within the FL teaching process. For the purpose of this paper and in addition to the theoretical research of professional literature in this area, a survey for teachers has been conducted to determine and explain the role of the mother tongue (L1), namely whether the mother tongue is generally used in foreign language teaching and acquisition, how often, and in which segments MT usage is mostly prevalent. The results of this paper will contribute to facilitating foreign language teaching process, specifically by perceiving overall teachers' perspectives on MT role and usage in upper secondary schools, which in turn will enable easier and more efficient learning and successful acquisition of the foreign language.

**Key words:** *mother tongue, foreign language, prevalence, foreign language classroom, teacher*

### Introduction

Second language teaching and acquisition is a scientific field that deals with the process of learning a second language after the mother tongue. We adopt the first (L1) or the mother tongue naturally, separately from the institutional and formal education. The MT is in fact the basis, the connecting point and the object of comparison when learning foreign languages (Todorova, 2017, p.601). Therefore, MT cannot be entirely excluded in the teaching process, however, it is used consciously and actively in the foreign language classroom. MT structures a mental network of connections in which all the elements, units and structures of the new language are integrated (Todorova, 2017, p.601). The second or foreign language can be acquired through informal education such as in the natural environment, formal education, or a combination of formal and informal education (Todorova, 2017, p.600). This research is focusing on the analysis in terms of formal education, more specifically on the process of foreign language teaching in upper secondary schools in N. Macedonia. The study focuses on the teaching methodology, i.e., how teachers usually teach foreign languages, more specifically whether and how much they use their mother tongue, at what language level and in which language structures, as well as teachers' attitudes whether better results are achieved if the MT is used, etc. The survey questionnaire serves to provide answers to the questions previously mentioned, as well as a clearer view on how prevalent the mother tongue in foreign language teaching at secondary school level is and what is their role and influence in the foreign language classroom.

The influence of the mother tongue on the second or the third language affects each language structure starting from speaking & pronunciation to grammar and vocabulary of the foreign

language. The influence of MT can undeniably be a positive and a negative phenomenon in both teaching and learning of a foreign language. The learner's mother tongue is actually an important determinant of foreign language acquisition and it serves as a resource which learners use both consciously and subconsciously in order to help them acquire the foreign language as well as to perform at their best. According to Samuel Johnson (cited in Alameddine, 2012, p. 2), "To use two languages familiarly and without contaminating one by the other, is very difficult,"

A significant number of research has been conducted on the subject and all of them have shown that MT has a great influence on the learning and teaching process of the target language, yet many scientists in the field worldwide still face the dilemma about how much MT should be represented as part of the teaching methodology, whether MT should be used as a basic, intermediary or auxiliary language. Many of them advocate the exclusion of the MT from teaching and aim for full use of the target language, while others advocate a combination, i.e., partial use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching. These dilemmas are long-standing as there has always been a debate throughout history about what the best foreign language teaching method is. For example, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the well-known grammar-translation method was very popular whereas the students' mother tongue was solely used in foreign language teaching. Gradually, however, many teachers concluded that if the teaching process continues with the exclusive use of the MT only, the students would never actively use the target language. That was a crucial moment when other and more effective methods of teaching a foreign language were about to be explored. Thus, four special teaching methods were singled out during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as: Grammatical-translation method, Direct method, Audio-visual method, and the Communicative approach. The *Grammar-translation method* refers to mastering the grammar and vocabulary of the taught language so that the learner can use written texts in a foreign language. The method entails translation and grammatical analyzing of adapted texts taking into consideration the learners' needs and level of proficiency (Broughton, 2003). As for the *Direct Method*, it is said to be based on the contact among teachers and learners with a prime goal to implement and maintain communication in a foreign language. It also emphasizes the importance of the contact and communication between the learner and the native speaker in order to achieve proper communication. Grammar rules are introduced inductively; vocabulary is learned through everyday communication and is interpreted by presentations of images and objects through facial expressions and associations. However, the usage of the mother tongue is strongly neglected. According to Richards and Rodgers (Richards J.C. and Rodgers T.S., 2001), this method introduced new techniques into teaching, but it lacks a stronger methodological basis. The *Audiolingual Method* is also known as the first scientifically recognized method of foreign language acquisition. According to Brown (Brown A. and Dawling P., 1998), its goal is to master speaking, listening, reading, and writing in a foreign language, and it is achieved by constant mechanical repetition and memorization of sentences, produced by the teacher or played in an audio version, without analysis and additional explanations and references to grammar. By repeating, learners and teachers tend to avoid mistakes that are inadmissible due to the lack of linguistic analysis. Similarly as the direct method, the audiolingual method excludes the usage and presence of the mother tongue within the learning process. The *Communicative Language Teaching* emphasizes the situation in which the individual is exposed to speaking, i.e., communicating in a foreign language and thus favors the delay of speaking in the initial stage of learning and enables greater listening activity. In terms of this modern approach the teacher no longer teaches a language, but rather acts in organizing the lessons and participates in the process of learning a foreign language. The teacher ought to understand the nature of communication and learning in general, as well as the learning of peculiarities of the foreign language. It is also quite important that the skills possessed by teachers, in order to apply their knowledge and experience in the class and at high level need to be critical, flexible, and experimental throughout the teaching process. As for the CLT method, successful communication is the final goal and the communication is the basic means of this teaching method. According to Richards (Richards, 2006, p.3), "One can master the rules of sentence formation in a language and still not be very successful at being able to use the language for meaningful communication." In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e., the boom of the era of modern education, the communicative approach appears to be the most common, but whether the mother tongue is

completely out of use in foreign language teaching in secondary schools will be further on thoroughly presented via the research results below.

## **Methodology: participants, research method, analysis, results, and discussion**

### ***Participants***

The survey involves 79 teachers of all foreign languages that are included in the curricula of upper secondary schools (English, German, French, Italian, Russian, Turkish) across N. Macedonia, aged 25 to 65 years.

According to the data from the State Statistical Office of R. N. Macedonia (State Statistical Office, 2009, p.10), Macedonia is divided into the following regions: Vardar, Pelagonia, East, Polog, Southwest, Northeast, Skopje and Southeast. The purpose of the study was to include a number of upper secondary schools covering all regions in N. Macedonia, therefore the participants in the survey are actually secondary level FL teachers from more than half of the towns throughout Macedonia such as: Veles, Kavadarci, Negotino (Vardar region), Kochani and Shtip (East region), Bitola and Prilep (Pelagonia region), Tetovo (Polog region), Kichevo (Southwest region), Kumanovo (Northeast region), Radovish, Strumica and Gevgelija (Southeast region) and Centar (Skopje region).

### ***Research method***

For the purpose of the research, an online survey was created and conducted in Google Docs, in order to involve a vast number of respondents covering all the upper secondary schools in N. Macedonia. Each question and answer are given in Macedonian, and the questionnaire contains a total of 21 questions related to the perception and attitudes of teachers regarding the prevalence, usage, and role of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom. The survey is standardized, i.e., the questions and their sequences are given in advance. The questionnaire is comprised of mixed questions, i.e., alternative (yes / no answers) and scaled questions (multiple answers given on a scale of 1-5 ranging from "rarely-often" to "most often"). The survey was sent to every foreign language teacher and the participation was fully voluntary emphasizing that their contribution is solely for the purpose of obtaining objective and valid results. The time frame for the responses of the questionnaire was 1 month and each sample submitted on time was fully summarized and properly analyzed. In addition, we analyze the survey questionnaires, and the results will be discussed in detail.

### ***Data analysis and research results***

The introductory questions (1-5) of the survey provide general information about the participants, according to which 93.7% of the respondents are female teachers and all participants are aged 25 to 65 years. More than half of the secondary school teachers in N. Macedonia (53.2%) are millennials (45 or younger) approaching the peak of their career whereas nationally they are considered as rather *young professionals*. This data confirms the stereotypical belief of the profession- foreign language teacher, confirming that this occupation is still considered a female profession. The highest number of respondents in the survey are the English language teachers with 64.6%, then French with 17.7%, German with 13.9% and Italian with 3.8%. In general, the survey involved foreign language teachers to students in all four years in upper secondary school, precisely 35.4% of them work with fourth-year students, 26.6% with first-year students and 19% with second and third-year students. Given that in Macedonia foreign languages are taught at an early age and are included in the curricula in primary and secondary school as mandatory subjects, it is not surprising that approximately 84.8% of the respondents are advanced level teachers.

The next set of questions (6-17) refers to the prevalence of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom, implying on the perception and attitudes of teachers about MT use in FL teaching, its role in foreign language acquisition, as well as the effects and outcomes of its usage. Regarding the question "*whether they use their mother tongue in the FL classroom*", about 92.4% of the respondents answered affirmatively, but regarding "*how often do they use their mother tongue in FL classroom*" the survey' results indicated separate opinions presented in the figure below:

7. How often do you use mother tongue in foreign language teaching?

79 responses

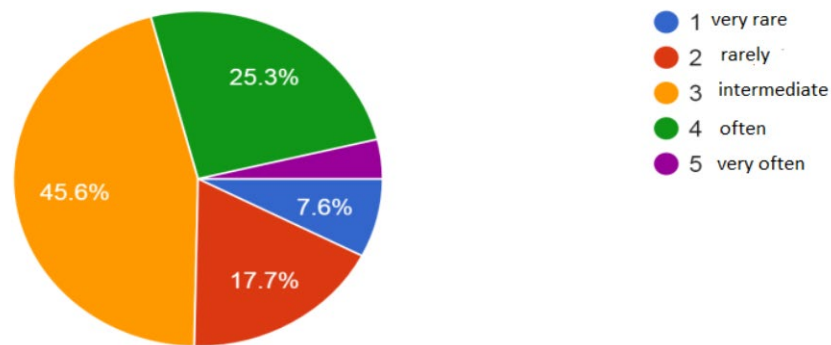


Figure: 1

According to the presented results, quite a number of respondents, namely 86.1%, use MT as intermediary or auxiliary language and 77.2% of them use it consciously and in a planned manner. Only 13.9% use MT as a primary language and 22.8% use it unconsciously and spontaneously. The result indicating frequent planned and conscious usage of MT is most probably owed to the fact that a large percentage of participants in this research are advanced level FL teachers, hence it is quite coherent that the MT is used more deliberately and consciously as an intermediary or auxiliary language rather than as a primary language. Regarding the prevalence of the MT in the FL classroom at an elementary and an advanced level, the teachers' attitudes resulted almost alike at both levels. Therefore, 77.2% believe that the MT is used in the FL classroom at an elementary level and 72.2% believe that the MT is used at an advanced level. Regarding the language structures, the questionnaire contained analyses regarding grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling. The answers to the question "whether the mother tongue is used in teaching the following language structures (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling)" are presented in the figures below:

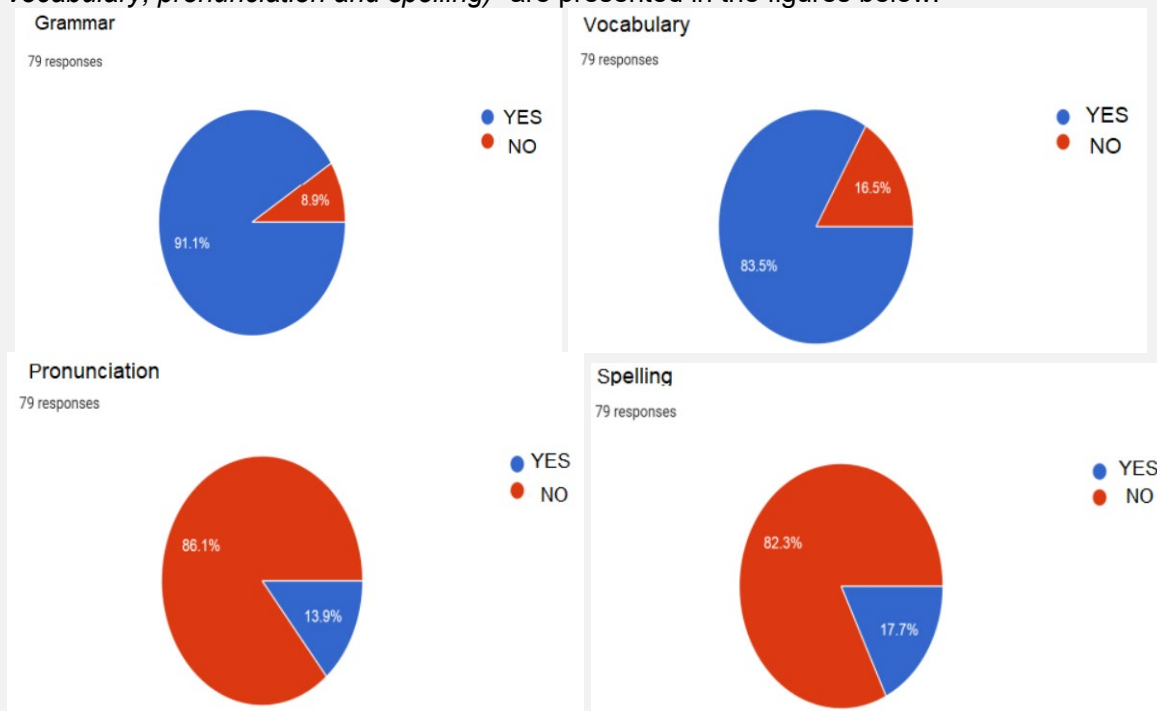


Figure: 2

According to the results, teachers use MT most frequently in teaching grammar (91.1%) and vocabulary (83.5%), and less frequently when teaching pronunciation (13.9%) and spelling

(17.7%). Most of them responded affirmatively regarding the use of the MT in the FL classroom and believe that its role is crucial and necessary in foreign language teaching. Particularly, about 77.2% "voted" *for* and 22.8% *against* the use of MT; furthermore, to 64.6% of respondents MT is crucial and necessary in FL teaching and 35.4% believe that FL teaching can be done without MT usage. Also, a large percentage of teachers, precisely 83.5%, agree that MT usage facilitates the FL acquisition and teaching and 69.6% believe that MT usage helps gaining better results. Therefore, about 79.7% of the teachers often compare the language structures of the target language with those of the mother tongue.

The following set of questions (18-20) refer to the teachers' opinions on the students' language awareness regarding the connection between the MT and the FL respectively, the transfer of knowledge from the mother tongue and its impact on foreign language acquisition. To the question "*is transfer of knowledge from the MT noticeable to FL students*" many of the teachers answered affirmatively, that is 84.8% claimed the presence of MT transfer of knowledge mostly in terms of grammar acquisition (68.4%) and vocabulary acquisition (26.6%). However, a very small percentage regarding the MT transfer was stated in the acquisition of pronunciation and spelling (2.5%). Hence, regarding the question "*whether the teachers spotted mistakes in MT transfer*", about 82.3% responded affirmatively which refers to a negative transfer of knowledge, pointing out that students rely on the MT system which in fact has a negative impact in a greater extent over the foreign language acquisition.

Question no. 21 of the questionnaire gives an opportunity for teachers to express their views and opinions, ideas, suggestions, and recommendations regarding the MT usage in the FL classroom. In addition, some of the suggestions and recommendations of teachers regarding the MT prevalence in the foreign language classroom are singled out and directly conveyed in this paper, such as:

- Should be reduced to a minimum, i.e., to be avoided as much as possible;
- Should be used less frequently and limited, but planned;
- Should be used in moderation and only at the elementary level when explaining certain grammatical structures;
- Should be used only when there is a need for contrastive analysis in a teaching unit;
- Should be used when comparing grammatical structures, distinguishing "false pairs" in vocabulary, phonetics, etc. in order to easily overcome them;
- Should be used only if the teacher considers that he/she is unable to work on a matter otherwise. In other words, MT usage should be rare but not completely excluded;
- Recommended, in some grammatical structures, vocabulary at the elementary level and when giving instructions for some activities;
- Should be used in explaining of abstract concepts and complex grammatical structures;
- Should be used, especially when studying grammatical forms;
- Students can master a foreign language without using their mother tongue if the teacher knows how to use appropriate methods for that purpose.

Even though the opinions and attitudes of the teachers are varied, it is clearly noticeable that most of the participants agree that the MT should be used in the foreign language classroom and consider that it generally boosts the FL acquisition and teaching, especially in terms of grammar and vocabulary. According to the results, there are teachers (7.6%) who generally exclude MT usage in FL classroom, also there are teachers who consider that the level of foreign language knowledge among secondary school students is sometimes elementary and that there are classes with poor FL knowledge. There are teachers who claim that they work with students with low level comprehension and insufficient knowledge of grammar in general, which refers to the inevitable need to use the mother tongue in order to be able to explain grammatical structures or new vocabulary fully and properly.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of the mother tongue (MT or L1) in the foreign language classroom (L2 or FL) and to determine its prevalence in the FL teaching process of the target language. The research involved a total of 79 foreign language teachers (English, German, French and Italian), from number of upper secondary schools in towns covering every region of Macedonia. Based on the results obtained from the research, it can be concluded that

teachers are generally positively oriented towards the use of the MT in the FL classroom. They believe that the use of the MT facilitates the comprehension and acquisition of new grammatical structures and vocabulary, and the level of MT usage generally depends on the students' proficiency and their prior FL level. The teachers - respondents generally point out a drawback that they have discovered in the FL classroom, specifically that it is evident that students acquire knowledge and master the mother tongue LESS than they master the FL. Lacking MT grammar proficiency, they therefore lack comprehension of certain grammatical structures, which moreover imposes the need for additional explanation of it initially in the MT. Teachers also suggest intensified MT usage at an elementary level and further if or as needed, according to teachers' assessment depending on the degree of the language proficiency in a particular class, and not as a general practice to every class, because not all students are equally proficient. However, many agree that in small classes where 90% of students are somewhat at the same FL proficiency level and where maximum and uninterrupted attention can be achieved during the teaching process, there is a possibility to roll the lesson plans fully in FL and it probably would be successfully conducted. As of the afore said, it can be concluded that despite the modernization of the educational process in Macedonia and the aspiration to apply innovative methods in teaching that imply full and exclusive use of the foreign language, this cannot be fully achieved in upper secondary schools in Macedonia yet, due to many additional factors. Consequently, choosing a unique teaching method in the FL classroom or setting an inelastic approach such as minimizing MT usage or switching to its ample usage in the FL classroom is probably not the best strategy of a FL teacher. The best teaching method to a particular group of FL learners should be a blend of teacher's observation, experience, and broadmindedness in class, at the same time minding students' abilities and proficiency level. Therefore, mother tongue has an exceptional role in foreign language teaching. Thus, hearing about the standpoint of the teachers observed through the results of this paper will contribute to the facilitation of the teaching process simply by having the opportunity to know the general attitudes and practices of their fellow teachers, to confirm or deny hesitations on the MT frequency of usage etc., which in turn will enable easier and more efficient learning and successful foreign language acquisition.

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