



Using mother tongue for Creating Better Students

Mario Rinvolucri feels that “using the mother tongue in a judicious and highly technical way in EFL classroom allows the fullness of the learner’s language intelligence to be brought into play.” (MET, vol.10,no.3, p.44) I strongly agree with him and yet I would like to present another perspective on this topic.

Since learning is the process of linking old knowledge with new knowledge, teachers can build on pupils’ prior knowledge as a basis for new learning. Among other things this means that teachers can use the learners’ first language to explain and model effective language learning strategies. They can use the first language along with the target language to raise the learner’s awareness of their learning styles and the strategies they use to learn a foreign language. In addition, teachers may allow the learners to use the mother tongue to help them assess their own weaknesses and strengths and to evaluate their development in the process of learning a foreign language.

As a non-native speaker of English and as a teacher of English as a foreign language to Arab pupils I think that by allowing the native language to be used in EFL classroom, the teacher is helping pupils to regulate their own learning process. Once they manage to regulate their learning process, learners will, most likely, become more active participants and they will start taking more responsibility for their own learning. Here are some ideas that may help learners regulate their learning process and evaluate the productivity of their own thinking strategies.

Teaching and modeling learning strategies:

Teachers can help students by training them to improve their learning strategies; better strategies improve language performance. As such, the teachers may try to integrate learning strategies into regular target language activities

over a long period rather than treating them as a separate short intervention. Prior to any learning activity, teachers need to take time to develop, discuss and model strategies and steps for enhancing the acquisition, storage, retention, recall and use of new information. Swartz (1990) argues that students learn best by imitating the significant adults around them. He, therefore, encourages teachers to publicly demonstrate learning strategies. Teachers who model learning strategies will probably produce students who can consciously use specific actions, behaviors, steps and techniques that will improve their progress in internalizing and using the target language. Pupils need to be provided with opportunities to learn how to learn. The teacher may model to them (or they may model to each other) different learning and study strategies. The mother tongue may, then, be used when modeling and demonstrating metacognitive strategies such as organizing, evaluating and planning learning. Teachers can use the pupils’ native language when asking or answering questions like “what do you do when you memorize?” or “how do you know that you are correct?”

Oxford (1989) notes that language learners at all levels use language strategies without being fully aware of them. The role of the teacher is to emphasize these strategies and to help the pupils use them. Assessing the strategies that learners use can take different forms such as diaries, thinking aloud procedures, observations and surveys. The pupils should be encouraged to use the target language to describe their thinking. At the same time, they must feel free to switch back to their mother tongue to describe their own learning strategies. While demonstrating a learning strategy or while thinking aloud, the teacher can enrich the students’ thinking vocabulary for greater understanding and to familiarize students with the use of these words. (words like: guess, analyze, reason, and summarize).

1- This Article was published in MET “Modern English Teacher,” April issue 2002, England.



It is important that the child know that it is normal to feel upset when something violent and scary happens. It is normal for children to express feelings of fear and anger, or to cry. Not all children will express their feelings through words, so it is important to pay close attention to actions, changes in patterns of behavior and play activities. As parents and educators we should try to be patient, understanding, reassuring and accepting of children's feelings; under no circumstances should we criticize the child's emotions or behavior. Instead, we might discuss with our children why they are feeling a particular emotion and behaving in a certain way and help them find healthy ways to work through their suffering.

Trauma can leave children feeling that they have no control over the world around them, so it is important to allow them a degree of control over their own lives. This can be carried out in everyday practice by offering our children reasonable options about their daily activities. For example, we might ask our children what they would like to eat for breakfast or what clothes they would like to wear.

In general, children will be much healthier mentally if their lives are stable and predictable. To us as parents and educators this means that we try the best we can to return to the normal routines in our lives. Obviously this is almost impossible for us given that we cannot predict if there will be curfew or an invasion, nor can we guess the degree of difficulty in passing the checkpoints everyday. But we can contribute to stability by creating routines and schedules in the home: try to set regular meal times and regular hours for chores, homework, television, friends and other activities. As much as possible, do not deviate from these schedules as it will help to counteract the instability of the environment outside of the home.

As the situation continues to deteriorate, the home, as far as possible, must become a refuge, a safe-haven from the chaotic world our children face everyday. As much as possible, we want to avoid bringing the violence into our homes; of course we are not totally in control of this, as IOF soldiers continually conduct house searches

and arrests across Palestine. But, if we can, we need to try to shield our children from repeated exposure to traumatic events because the home should be a place where they feel safe. What this means practically is that we should try to limit our children's exposure to family discussions, news and other media sources as much as possible. Media images are sensationalistic and incredibly frightening for children. Repeated exposure through the media to violent acts, whether witnessed first-hand or not, can lead to nightmares and a lasting sense of fear. Television and radio reports bring the violence into the home, shattering the feeling of security and comfort that we as parents and educators have been trying to create for our children. It is of course not always easy to just turn off the TV or radio because there may be many people of different ages in one house, many people coming and going, and a sense of urgency in needing to have a news update minute by minute. But perhaps we could try switching channels if young children enter the room, or waiting to watch the news until the children have fallen asleep and perhaps having adult discussions while the children are at school.

Finally, parents and educators can help their children by sharing their own feelings. If the child knows that we share similar fears and sadness, his/her thoughts and feelings will be legitimized. Bear in mind though, that it is important for us to manage our own emotions as much as possible because anxiety can be contagious! We can spend time together as families, telling stories and engaging in fun family activities which take our children's minds off the horror they witness everyday.

The above are suggestions which I hope will be useful and applicable. If you are interested in further information about this issue or other ideas for activities, see the following websites:

www.istss.org/terrorism/children_and_trauma.htm

www.sesameworkshop.org/parents/advice

www.anxietyandtraumaclinic.com

www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/ptsd70.htm

Sky McLaughlin
QCERD