

USING LEARNERS' MOTHER TONGUE IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A STUDY CONDUCTED IN AMPARA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT: The mother tongue (MT) also referred as the first language (L1) of the learners is no longer the doctrine of compromise but acknowledged as a pedagogical tool (Atkinson 1987, 1993; Harbord 1992). Given the realities of the ESL classrooms in Ampara district, there is no justification to promote L1 to scaffold second Language (L2) learning, also referred as target language (TL). The study aims to explore the extent to which the junior secondary learners are provided TL affordances via teacher talk to facilitate L2 learning. A qualitative research design was employed. In order to capture the verbal interaction that takes place in the classroom, data was collected through classroom observation and the classroom discourse was audio recorded. Selected language episodes (LE) of the classroom discourse were transcribed and analyzed using Myers- Scotton's (1993) Matrix Language-Frame model to identify the dominant language. A word count of one hundred and fifty words of a lesson was considered to quantify the L1 and L2 used in the lessons of twenty five classrooms.

As reflected in the finding, L1 use was 23-83 % which shows an average of 72% of the selected LE. This clearly indicates that L1 was the dominant language and its unrestricted use did not act as a scaffold to facilitate L2 learning and perhaps English language was taught as any other content subject. Despite the guidelines given for teaching and learning in the Teacher's Instruction Manual (National Institute of Education 2009, p.25) "target language should be the language of the classroom and mother tongue could be used sparingly, where necessary to make meaning clear", the quantity of L2 used was low with a variation from 18-77% across the classroom contexts with an average of 27.71 % in each classroom.

Key Words: Mother Tongue, Target Language Affordances, Scaffold, Dominant Language, Language Episodes

1. INTRODUCTION

Language choice in teaching English as a second language (ESL) has been a controversial issue ever since the emergence of the direct method which advocated total avoidance of the mother tongue (MT). The methodological shifts of teaching ESL have brought about new outlooks on the role of the MT, hereafter referred as first language (L1) of the learners and it is no longer the doctrine of compromise but acknowledged as a beneficial pedagogical tool to scaffold second Language (L2) learning, also referred as target language, TL (Atkinson 1987, 1993; Harbord 1992). Given the realities of the ESL classrooms with limited opportunities to be exposed to target language affordances, the validity of this assumption is debatable as there is a risk of teachers overusing the learners' L1 (Turnbull 2001), depriving the opportunity of learners to get target language affordances (Cook 2001; Ellis 2008). The ESL classroom is often the only place where L2 learners receive L2 affordances as their immediate environment has the invisible presence of L1 in all spheres of life. While there is justification that L1 assists limited L2 proficiency learners, particularly in ESL contexts, researchers have also warned against the risk of overusing L1 by

teachers (Turnbull 2001) and warranted 'principled' use of it to facilitate L2 learning. Reiterating this view, Nation (2003) also cautions against overusing L1, as this might cause students to lose their motivation to use the L2. Active use of the TL by learners is considered to be an integral part of the language acquisition process (Nunan, 1999). In a similar vein, Van Lier (2001) claims that linguistic affordances should be provided to facilitate L2 learning. In these lines, Turnbull (2001) argues that exposure to TL affordances is the strongest theoretical rationale for maximizing the teacher's TL use. Research on language use in classroom interaction is founded on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory that views learning as a socially constructed activity. This view of learning ascribes active roles to both teacher and learners in the teaching and learning process where learning is facilitated and not controlled by the teacher.

The current study focuses on teaching ESL to junior secondary learners in the schools of Ampara District where the L1 of the learners is Tamil. The social background of the learners and their negative attitude to learning English demotivates them in enhancing their L2 competency. In this context, they need to be given a rich TL environment with a range of possibilities to participate in classroom activities. One of the strategies adopted by teachers to assist low proficiency learners is to use L1. When there is unrestricted use of L1, the learners receive little or no exposure to English in the ESL classrooms.

This study aims to address the following research questions with a view to explore the extent to which the students are provided target language affordances via teacher talk to facilitate L2 learning.

- 1 What is the dominant language used by the teacher in the ESL classroom? Do they codeswitch when they use L1 or L2?
- 2 To what extent do teachers use L1 in teaching ESL?
- 3 Given the realities of the ESL classrooms in Ampara District, is the use of L1 a scaffold or a restriction for L2 learning?

2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative design. In order to capture the verbal interaction that takes place in the classroom, data was collected through classroom observation and the classroom discourse was audio recorded. The researcher observed the interactive language used in the classroom without making any attempt to control or determine them.

Twenty five junior secondary ESL classrooms in Ampara district were randomly selected from 1 AB and 1C schools for observation. The sample consists of language episodes (LE) collected from the selected ESL classrooms, where students' L2 proficiency was considerably low.

The data was transcribed and analyzed using Myers- Scotton's (1993) Matrix Language-Frame model. This model was employed to differentiate a switch from one language to another within a sentence (intrasentential code switching) and a switch between sentences or at the end of a sentence. (inter sentential code switching). The matrix language plays the role of the dominant language and the embedded language plays a lesser role. In the context of language teaching, teachers may either switch to L2 within an L1 Matrix or to L1 within an L2 Matrix.

As the lessons across the observed classrooms varied in contents and delivery method, audio recording for real time analysis could not validate the quantity of L1 and L2 within the classroom as there were moments when there was no interaction taking place. In such instances, teachers were involved in delivering the lesson or learners were engaged in activities. In order to maintain uniformity in quantifying L1 and L2 during interaction, the researcher employed word count technique to analyse the selected classroom discourse. Accordingly, a word count of one hundred and fifty words of a lesson was considered substantial to gauge the variation of language use and this was used to quantify the L1 and L2 use in the classroom.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: L1- L2 distribution in the ESL classroom

classroom	English (L2)	L2 %	Tamil (L1)	L1 %	Classroom	English (L2)	L2 %	Tamil (L1)	L1 %
T1	27	18%	123	82%	T 14	28	19%	122	81%
T 2	36	24%	114	76%	T 15	28	19%	122	81%
T 3	116	77%	34	23%	T 16	45	30%	105	70%
T 4	35	23%	115	77%	T 17	44	29%	106	71%
T 5	36	24%	114	76%	T 18	41	27%	109	73%
T 6	44	29%	106	71%	T 19	27	18%	123	82%
T 7	27	18%	123	82%	T 20	36	24%	114	76%
T 8	47	31%	103	69%	T 21	43	29%	107	71%
T 9	46	31%	104	69%	T 22	45	30%	105	70%
T 10	50	33%	100	67%	T 23	36	24%	114	76%
T 11	44	29%	106	71%	T 24	42	28%	108	72%
T 12	42	28%	108	72%	T 25	26	17%	124	83%
T 13	48	32%	102	68%	Average		27.71%		72.29%

As per the word count on the use of L1 and L2, shown in table 1, all teachers except one used more than 67% of L1. A great deal of variation was found across the teachers and classroom contexts.

Of all teachers, whose classrooms were observed, the classroom with teacher T3 used 77% of L2, whose usage was the highest and six used between 30%- 33%

and the rest used as low as 17- 30%. Despite the guidelines given for teaching and learning English in the Teacher’s Instruction Manual(National Institute of Education 2009, p.25) “target language should be the language of the classroom and mother tongue could be used sparingly, where necessary to make meaning clear” , the average amount of L2 used in each classroom was as low as 27.71 % which did not afford opportunities for learners to use L2 in the classroom. In some extreme cases, notably in lessons planned to improve speaking competency, the overall lesson was instructed and delivered in L1 with a very few handpicked words like “road”, “interview”, “expression” in English. While there was substantial variation in the use of L1, the overall average use in the classroom was 72%. This reflects a greater percent in the overall language used in the classroom.

Data on the contexts and purposes in which the teachers used L1 and L2 shows that they either codeswitched or used translation to facilitate teacher- learner communication and afford better comprehension for learners in explaining grammatical concepts and providing meaning for new lexical items.

Some LE that was selected also reveals important differences in the purposes for which L1 was used and how it influenced subsequent language behaviour of learners.

Example 1

T: Where’s my bag? Where is it?

S: **on table**

T: My bag is on the table <Teacher writes on the blackboard>

What is this?<pointing to the word “on”> On *enraal enna? Meile or meethu*

S: <**silence**>

T: preposition

< pointing to the words “bag” and “table”> what is this?

S: **nouns**

T: then ,what is this? It makes a relationship between 2 nouns

On *enra* preposition *irandu* nouns *kkidaiyil thodarpu etpadutthukirathu*

Given the realities of the ESL classrooms with low proficiency learners, the teachers generally struggle to teach grammar. Example 1 is a LE from a lesson that aims to teach preposition. The teacher used English as the dominant language and switched to L1 to clarify and ease comprehension by giving equivalent phrases in L1. Here the teacher explains the preposition “on” by asking questions in L2. When the teacher wanted to give the concept of the targeted word, she commented in L1 in order to get the word ‘preposition’ from the learners. When the teacher identified their inability to comprehend she adopted translation as the potential strategy to target a specific lexical item or a concept. This confirms Atkinson (1987: p.242) who claims translation as “a learner preferred strategy”. The L2 rule is explained in L1 which is an instance of intrasentential code switching.

Example 2

T: Today we’re going to do a writing task. It’s a group activity and here’s your task sheets. Right all must participate. Can you do it?

S: **Yes, teacher**

T: right, discuss and write.

<students do the activity>

T have you all finished?

S: **Yes, teacher**

T: group1, please come. Read your answer

S: **British**

T: No British, you tell again

S: **British**

In example 2, the teacher's dominant language was L2 with very few switches to L1. When inquired whether he shared the same L1 as the learners, his response was positive. He also revealed that his goal was to employ an immersion approach, regardless of the fact they needed some L1 to scaffold learning. While setting the scene of this lesson, teacher asks a few pre-reading questions in L2 and the learners remain silent when questioned. This instance confirms the finding of Turnbull's (2001 p. 1) view that "exclusive use of target language is not theoretically justified" and "there is indeed a place for the teacher to use the students' L1 in ESL and EFL teaching" This episode is also an instance of uptake occurring after the teacher's feedback. The teacher corrects pronunciation of the word "British" after opposing the L2 incorrect form. The recording indicates an improvement in the pronunciation of the word "British" when it occurred later in the lesson..

Example 3

T: *Ithu oru* dialogue, role play, *neenga irandu peir santhikkireenga. Ippa irandu peir road la santhikkiraanga, enna kathaikkiraanga enru paarppom. Irandu peir vaarunga. Neenga natural aaka kathaikka vendum. Saththamaaka kathaiyungal* <Teacher writes the dialogue on the black board>

< students role play>

T: *vaanga, irandu peirum vaanga*, next another one

S: < students role play>

The teacher's aim in example 3 is to improve speaking skill. However, this turned out to be a reading lesson where the learners read the role play from the blackboard in pairs. The teacher used L1 extensively and switched to L2 within the L1 matrix. The teacher overlooked the competency that had to be developed and did not have the need to model the roles to create awareness of the accepted pronunciation. This is an instance of "missed opportunity" for the learners. The phrase "*Ithu oru* dialogue, role play" is an instance of intrasentential code switching where the teacher comments in L1 to conceptualize the meaning of "dialogue"

Example 4

T: Page number seventy *yai edunga paarppoum*, "An interview" interview *la kathaikkira ungalukku theriyum thaane*

S: *aamteacher tholilukku*

T: interview *paarththu irukkireengala*, TV *la*

S: *aamteacher*

T: interview *enra eppady?* Oru aal question *kekkura, matta aal answer pannura. Ithula reporter kkum Samanthakkum idayil oru interview nadakirathu*

Example 4 is also an episode from a lesson that aims to improve speaking skill. Here too the interview was not role played but read from the pupil's text. The dominant Language was L1 with occasional switches to L2 words. It is notable that the teacher did not provide affordance to use L2 which is reflected in the response "aam" used by learners, which means 'yes'

Example 5

T: What is fire?

S: *neruppu*

T: What is fighting?

S: *sandai*

T: *Ippadiyenral yaar* fire fighters?

Thanneer... Thanneer ootrupavar yaar?

S: <silence>

T: fire fighters. Say!

S: **fire fighters**

This episode is an example of triggering the learners to guess the meaning of the targeted word 'fire fighter'. The teacher through questioning the targeted word negotiates the meaning by eliciting the L1 form of the target word from the learners.

DISCUSSION

The significant finding was the overuse of L1 by the majority of teachers as reflected in table 1, indicating 23-83 % of L1 use which shows an average of 72% of the selected LE. This clearly indicates that the teachers use L1 as the dominant language and often switch from L1 to L2 who perhaps teach English language as any other content subject. This confirms the study conducted by (Karunaratna 2003) who found teachers excessively depending on L1.

Though L1 is certainly acknowledged as a pedagogical and communicative tool in the ESL classrooms by scholars in Second Language Acquisition (Cook 2001; Van Lier 2000; Swain & Lapkin 2000; Anton & Dicamilla 1998; Watanabe 2008; Guthrie, 1984; De la Campa Nassagi 2009), the findings of this study show that L1 in the study context was not used in a judicious way to act as a scaffold but was used in an unrestrictive way and did not offer target language affordances to facilitate interaction in L2. Based on this claim the researcher argues that there is no justification for promoting L1 use in ESL teaching, considering the ESL contexts in Ampara district. The basis for this argument is to maximize L2 affordances, given that the learners have no other source or opportunity beyond the classroom (Cook 2001; Ellis 2008; Turnbull & Arnette 2002; Swain & Lapkin 2000; Turnbull 2001). While scholars consider the pedagogical value of L1 as a teaching tool, they have also cautioned the pedagogical implication of over using it in a way that is detrimental to ESL teaching.

Turnbull argues that "if teachers are 'licensed' (Cook 2001, p.410) to use L1 in their teaching, it will result in overuse of the L1" (Turnbull & Arnette 2002, p. 207). While Atkinson (1987) offers three reasons for using L1 such as a Learner preferred strategy, humanistic approach and time saving strategy, justifying it to enhance

teacher, learner interaction when both teacher and learners have the same L1 also warns about the negative consequences of over using it (ibid). This view is echoed by Ellis (2008) and Nation (2003) on the ground that learners will lose their motivation to use L2. In a similar vein, Macdonald (1993) and Wong-Fillmore (1985) claim that TL use will increase motivation to learn the L2.

Polio and Duff's (1994) qualitative analysis on target language and L1 alternation in 13 University in USA whose L1 was English backs up the claims of Nation (2003) and Ellis (2008), arguing that not using the L2 takes away the valuable opportunities for the learners to hear and use the L2. This study provides a further insight on Duff & Polio (1990) who examined how much foreign language (TL in this study) was there in thirteen foreign language classrooms. Polio & Duff (1994) argue that affective factors are not the most important goal and had there been more L2 in the classroom there would have been more L2 acquisition. They also argue that learners are not expected to understand 100% of what a teacher says and by not using L2, the teachers rob the opportunity for learners to figure out what is going on. Another argument by Macaro (2001) based on his study on 6 student teachers of French in secondary school in England to investigate how teachers choose to use L1 also echoes against the use of L1 as it is used in inconsistent or unprincipled ways and that L1 use cannot be justified in terms of pedagogy or second language acquisition as all it is doing is taking away opportunities for the learners to use it.

The finding of the quantity of use of L1 in this study is consistent with Turnbull's (1999) study with 9-89% of L1 on French as a second language in a secondary school in Canada, Duff and Polio's (1990) finding of 0-90%, Liu et al (2004) 10-90% where L1 is Korean in thirteen secondary ESL classrooms in South Korea and Kim & Elder's (2005) study with 12-77% in seven secondary L2 French, German, Korean, Japanese classes in New Zealand whose L1 was English. It is also notable that this finding is inconsistent with Guthrie's finding on teachers' speech in French University classes that reported 2-41% of L1 with a median of 13%, Wing's study of secondary classes with mean of 46% of L1 and Mitchell and Johnstone's case study of roughly 30% of L1 (cited in Chaudron (1988), p. 124)

Weighing up the strengths and weaknesses in the use of L1 and L2, it is more unlikely that the present practice provides affordance for learners to facilitate L2 learning as they are not open to or capable of using simple meaningful exchanges in English. Though the teachers are quite capable of expressing themselves in English, they do not employ their fullest potential when delivering the lesson as they are still guided by the constructs of the traditional classrooms. The proportion of the TL and L1 across the different classes reflects the challenges encountered in the approaches and the nature of pedagogy adopted by teachers despite the policy measures and recognition given to improve English Language Teaching. One of the proposals of the National Policy Framework on General Education (2003) was to "strengthen ESL in the junior secondary levels". However, the implementation of this proposal at junior secondary level of ESL have been less successful as revealed by

Wijesekera (2012) and Perera, Gunewardena and Wijetunge (2003). The finding of this study justifies their view as the teachers in Ampara district are not made aware of the pedagogical implications of overusing L1. In considering the amount of L2 used by teachers in the study, it was 18-33% with an exception of one teacher who used 77%. The overall use of TL was considerably low thus limiting learners' production of L2 and exposure to it. Hence, the overuse of L1 significantly limited the target language affordances to facilitate L2 learning.

Though this finding is limited by the context of the study and the background of teachers, this may be applied to classrooms with similar contexts. Furthermore, the small sample size and the method used to quantify the distribution of L1 and L2 is a limitation that needs to be validated in further studies.

4. CONCLUSION

According to Atkinson (1993, p.13), L1 can be 'the single biggest danger' if it threatens the primacy of the target language or 'the most important ally a foreign language can have' if it is used 'systematically, selectively and in judicious doses' (Butzkamm 2003, p. 30). Weighing up the potential benefits of being immersed in target language affordances for genuine learning (Van Lier 2000), there is a need for teachers to become active participants of classroom activities. In the perspective of teachers, they need to be made aware of their own perceptions and practices of using L1 through reflective practice and be convinced of the benefits of maximizing the use of target language to improve the learners' proficiency while improving their own proficiency in English.

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