

Students' Beliefs and Perceptions of Teachers' Code Choice in the ESL Classroom: A Study Conducted in Sammanthurai Zone

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Abstract:

In the context of teaching English as a second language, the choice of language for instruction in the classroom is one of the key decisions that has a huge impact on the success of learning. Teachers' code choice in ESL teaching is the decision whether to use only the target language (TL) or both the TL and the learners' mother tongue (MT). This study aims to investigate the students' beliefs and perceptions of teachers' code choice in the ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai education zone. By investigating students' beliefs and perceptions of teachers' code choice, it would provide an insight to understand students' needs and set guidelines on code choice for pedagogical implications. The study adopted a qualitative approach, drawing data from 50 junior secondary students using semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that students are satisfied with a higher proportion of MT as their perception leans towards more MT. However, there was variation in their perception of the amount of TL use by their teachers. In considering students' perceptions of teachers' TL use, a negative attitude was expressed by many. The positive perceptions of MT use are largely due to their reliance on comprehension and affective factors. A minority influenced by education in the family and experiences, despite their differences in socio economic status share a positive attitude to TL. The need of a role model to develop speaking skills shows that there is an urge for some learners to be recognized as English speakers in the broader bilingual speaking community in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Code choice, target language, mother tongue, perceptions, Sammanthurai education zone

Introduction

Evidence in Literature validates the notion that the choice of language for instruction in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom is one of the key decisions that has a huge impact on the success of learning (Levine, 2011; Marungudzi, 2014). In Sri Lanka, teaching ESL in rural areas is a challenge for teachers as the majority of learners have low proficiency

in English and their performance in English is not at satisfactory level. In rural areas, ESL is learnt as a foreign language as L2 is not used in their daily routine but learnt only in school. This implies that teaching ESL takes place in a community that does not use the L2 for their day to day life and Sammanthurai is no exception as the ESL classrooms in Sammanturai zone is most often the only context where the learners receive opportunity to hear and use the L2 (Mahroof, 2015). Teachers' code choice in ESL teaching is the decision whether to use only the target language or both the target language and the learners' mother tongue (MT). In this study context, both teachers and students have a common MT. Hence, first language (L1) and mother tongue are used interchangeably. In the same way, English is essentially the second language (L2), which is also the target language (TL) to be learned in the study context. Therefore, L2 and TL are also used interchangeably. The teacher, as the expert in the ESL classroom plays a significant role in code choice (Nilsson, 2013). According to Mahroof (2018), the use of language, whether it is L1 or L2 is greatly influenced by teachers' beliefs about language use; their perception of learners; their experience as learners and the teaching ethos specific to the context. In investigating the teachers' beliefs on code choice, this study found that the majority believe more L2 to be ideal, but given the sociolinguistic reality, only a few of them use more and most of them feel restricted to use due to student factors such as learners' low language proficiency and their negative attitude towards learning English. As students are one of the key stakeholders in the teaching and learning process, investigating their beliefs and perceptions of teachers' code choice would provide an insight to understand students' needs and set guidelines on code choice for pedagogical implications. Hence, this study aims to investigate the students' beliefs and perceptions of teachers' code choice in the ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai education zone.

Literature review

Students' first language (L1) and target language (TL) are often used alternately by both teachers and students in both foreign language (FL) and ESL classrooms (Levine, 2003, 2009). The Sri Lankan teachers of ESL consciously or unconsciously choose the L1 of the learners, Sinhala/ Tamil or the L2, English - the TL of the classroom as the language of instruction (Karunaratne, 2003; Perera, 2001).

There is an established body of research based on the premise that teachers' language use in the classroom determines the effectiveness of learning ESL. In investigating teachers' language

use in the ESL classrooms, it is reasonable to assume teachers' role as the single most crucial element that determines how students perform (Long, 1980; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Studies have also shown that the theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge need to be aligned through the investigation of classrooms, where the findings can be experienced and practiced (Ellis, 1998, 2012). Second language researchers have long acknowledged the positive influence of the use of TL in the classroom to promote interaction between the teachers and learners because of the limited exposure to L2 beyond the classroom setting (Littlewood & Yu, 2011).

The review of literature on language use in L2 and FL class show a continuum of perspectives about using the TL and L1 in L2 teaching contexts. The proponents who advocate TL exclusivity on one side of the continuum see little pedagogical or communicative value in L1 while those on the other side consider L1 as a resource to facilitate the intake process (Pennington, 1995; Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2005; Hall & Cook, 2012). The recent bi/multilingual turn questions the monolingual assumption, that the teacher needs to use both L1 and TL (Cook, G, 2010; Hall & Cook, 2012; Garcia & Wei, 2014). Although, scholars have found L1 as a resource for L2 learning, there is growing concern for guidelines (Macaro, 2009) and teachers are best placed to decide what is appropriate for their own classrooms (Macmillan & Rivers, 2011). However, studies on teachers' language choice has found wide variation in individual teachers' TL use, even among native speakers.

L1 use has been documented in US classrooms by Polio and Duff (1994); Anton and Di Camilla (1999); Levine (2003; 2009; 2011); Edstrom, (2006). In Australia and New Zealand Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie (2002); Kim and Elder (2008); Macaro (1997; 2001), and in China Littlewood and Yu (2011). In Hungary, Harbord (1992), South Korea, Liu et al, (2004) and in Thailand by Forman (2008). Though L1 is acknowledged as a beneficial tool in teaching L2 and FL, the national policy of several Asian countries like Korea, China and Taiwan, where English is a FL recommend that the use of L1 be kept to an absolute minimum. These official guidelines have alarmed English teachers who use excess of L1.

In view of students' perceptions, Duff & Polio (1990) found that the learners were satisfied with the amount of L1 the teacher used, irrespective of the quantity they used and also reported that they understood all what the teacher said in the TL. In another study conducted by Levine (2003) on L2 teachers and learners in USA, the author found their attitudes and beliefs using a questionnaire survey and classroom observation. The study was aimed at finding the

relationship between reported L1 use and anxiety. It is interesting to note that 60% of the learners reported that their instructors used the L2, 80-100% of the time when speaking to students and that they used the L2 more frequently than the students. They also said that learners used it more when speaking to their instructor's responses. In comparing the instructors' and learners' responses, the learners reported greater L2 use than the teachers. Though the students in this study felt anxious when TL was used, it was found that TL instruction was effective rather than their MT. The study emphasized on how effectively L1 is used to scaffold L2 learning rather than the quantity.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm. Data was drawn from the data collected for a larger study conducted in the Sammanthurai Education zone, involving 40 teachers who teach ESL to junior secondary level classes and their students. The larger study obtained data through classroom observation, audio recording and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. The data of 50 student interviews drawn from the larger study was used for this study to examine students' beliefs and perceptions of teachers' code choice/use in the ESL classroom. As the interviews with students were in Tamil, the response by the students during interviews given verbatim in the finding section are translations from Tamil to English.

Findings and discussion

When students were asked what language, their teachers use during the English lesson, it was reported that they use both L1 and L2, but to a varying extent. Though a positive attitude was shared towards the use of L1 in TL teaching, there was variation in the response to the question that asked students to report their perception of the amount of target language use by their teachers.

As reported by students during their interview, the amount of TL use by teachers in percentage as perceived by them was tabulated. As there was a varying range from 10-90%, the students were grouped into three categories as "Low", "Average" and "High" according to their reported teacher TL use as shown in the table below:

Table-1 Students' perceived amount of teachers' TL use

Degree	Low	Average	High
Range of L2 use %	≤ 30%	31- 60%	61-90%
Number of students	22	20	8

The data in the table is plotted in the bar chart given in **Error! Reference source not found.1**.

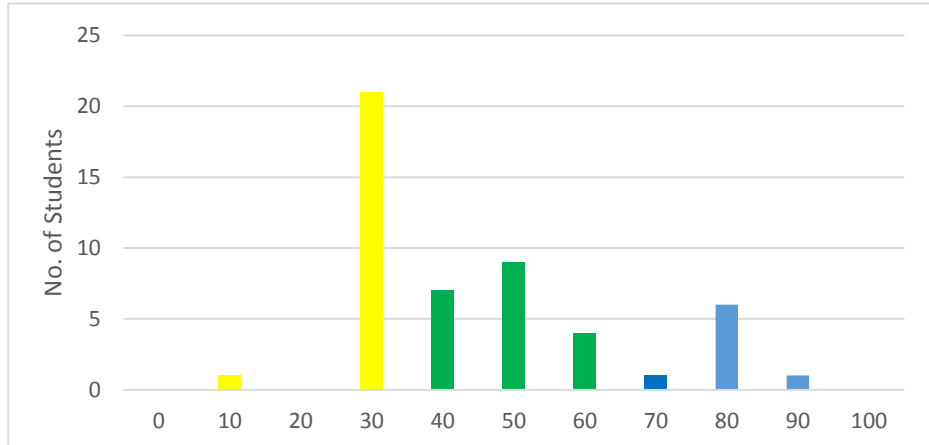


Fig 4 - L2 use of the teachers, as perceived by the students

According to the table, twenty-two students (44%) perceived a low percent of TL use by their teachers (\leq than 30%) while only eight (16%) perceived a higher percent of TL use by their teachers (61-90%) with twenty students (40%) perceiving an average percent of TL use (31-60%).

When asked whether they like their teacher to use ‘more TL than now’, ‘less TL than now’ or ‘the same amount as now’, as illustrated in figure-2, only 10% of the students reported that they like their teacher to use more than the current amount.

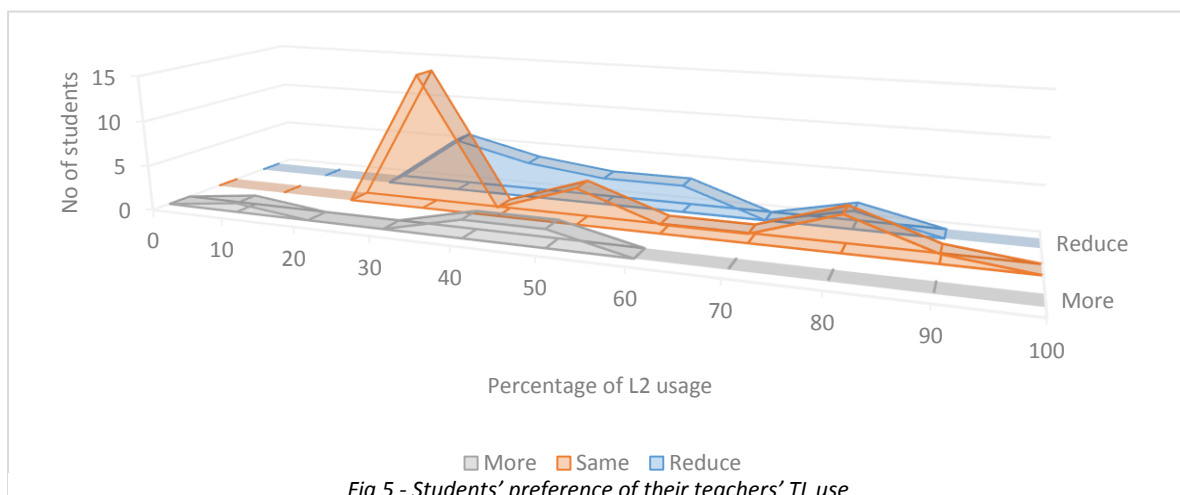


Fig 5 - Students' preference of their teachers' TL use

According to figure-1, 84% of the students perceived their teacher to use between 10 – 60%, with 44% of them in the low category. Yet, there were as many as 54% of students who favour the current use, with 30% from the low category. Even when 44% of respondents believe their teachers to use less than 30%, there were 36% of the total who like their teacher to use less TL

than the current amount, of whom 20% are from the average category and 12% from the low category. This shows that the majority are either satisfied with the current amount of TL use or want it to be reduced. The finding shows that students are satisfied with a higher proportion of L1 as their perception leans towards more L1.

All student participants share the same opinion as teachers towards the positive role of L1 in L2 teaching. When asked whether they need their teacher to use Tamil in the ESL classroom, all responded positively. The next question asked was when and why they feel their teacher needs to use Tamil.

Among the common reasons were ‘explaining lessons and meaning of difficult words’, ‘teaching reading and grammar’, ‘interpersonal relationship’, ‘when giving instructions about lessons and other organizational work’, ‘maintain discipline and assert authority’, ‘ease comprehension’. The views as reported by students suggest that the teachers took advantage of L1 in teaching ESL.

Some examples, as reported by students

“Our teacher uses Tamil to explain the lesson.... whenever we don’t understand, teacher tells meaning in Tamil.... when teacher talks to us when not learning lesson” (S 20)

“Teacher first reads and then says it in Tamil.... when we talk to teacher, then when our teacher speaks to us” (S 31)

“When teaching reading, grammar and difficult words, teacher explains in Tamil ... when teaching and asking questions, she uses English and during other time she uses Tamil” (S 8)

“When they give important information, that is like when telling us to do activities.... when giving instructions.... Tamil is used” (S 15)

“In the English class, our teacher uses Tamil and English, When telling us what to do.... but then when generally talking ...when asking why we didn’t come to school or something like that, he uses Tamil” (S 24)

“Our teacher uses Tamil to explain grammar and when checking our learning.....when someone says wrong answer.... when she gets angry” (S 6)

It was found that students can understand what they must do by asking teachers for clarification in Tamil. The finding reveals that issues related to comprehension have to be done in Tamil for affective and cognitive reasons. For this reason, the students need to be allowed to use L1 for clarification and comprehension to avoid confusion and demotivation.

In considering students’ perceptions of teachers’ TL use, a negative attitude was expressed by many students through the phrases “can’t understand”, “difficult”, “don’t like”.

The next question was aimed at investigating students' perceptions of the benefits they get when teachers use TL in class. According to their views, benefit was expressed in terms of knowing *“how a word can be pronounced”, “how to use them in speech” and “develop speaking skills”*,

For example, as reported by a student:

“when teacher uses English, I will be able to hear how that word is said and learn how to use the word.” (S 24)

Another mentioned, *“when I hear English, it makes me also to speak in English when talking to our teacher”*. (S 28)

One student said, *“I can learn to speak English like our teacher”* (S4). The most common response from the students was their belief in being able to develop their speaking skills. A student reported *“Our teacher speaks in English in (bilingual)English medium class, but she speaks in Tamil during our English class”* (S 40).

This shows their regret of not having a “role model”. When a probing question was asked whether this student has any other opportunity to hear and use English, she replied negatively that their tuition teacher also does not speak in English.

A notable comment of a student whose teacher uses English in class was *“when I’m given a situation to speak in English with the teacher, I feel I can speak English”* (S 27). This expression of the student shows a positive view of the teacher using English.

When there is difficulty in comprehending the instructions given in the TL, the students seek the assistance of their peers as reflected in the following quote:

“When I don’t understand what teacher says in English, I don’t ask our teacher, but I ask my friends” (S 6).

This phenomenon shows that students feel comfortable in asking their peers than their teacher. The symmetrical social relationship established between peers facilitate peer scaffolding rather than the asymmetrical relationship between the teacher and the students, which makes the students more distant to seek teachers’ assistance.

In considering their preferred language for L2 teaching, it is apparent that TL use is unwelcoming for the majority. However, the response from a few students show that they value English for classroom instruction, which stems from their self-confidence that may have been influenced by their family background.

Conclusion

Most of the learners irrespective of their proficiency levels, all had positive attitude towards L1 use. The students' and teachers' over-reliance on L1 for comprehension and affective reasons compel the teachers to overuse L1. Although the learners shared a positive attitude to L1 use, a minority who had education in the family and life experiences, despite their socio-economic standings shared a positive attitude to TL. The learners who perceived the affordance and used for their benefit were seen to be using TL content words in their L1 speech, which reflected their social standings in the broader community. The beliefs of a few students on the need of a role model to develop speaking skills shows that there is an urge for some learners to be recognized as English speakers in the broader bilingual speaking community in Sri Lanka.

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