

Use of Other Languages in English Language Teaching at Tertiary Level: A Case Study on Bangladesh

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Abstract

There has been a continuous debate over a long period over the issue of using the learner's mother tongue in teaching the second language. We have two schools in this regard – monolingual approach and bilingual approach. Those advocating the monolingual approach have claimed that learning is determined by the quantity of exposure to the target language. On the other hand, bilingual approach focuses on the fact that learners are facilitated by the use of their mother tongue. The primary concern of this study is to find out whether Bangla is used in teaching English at tertiary level in Bangladesh and if used, in which situation and to what extent. This study has been done in a private university situated in Dhaka. The researchers have used various techniques to collect the data, the analysis of which reveals that teachers of tertiary level use Bangla in English language teaching classes in some specific situations such as explaining difficult grammatical rules, presenting new vocabulary, giving instructions, etc. and they do so in accordance to the proficiency level of the learners.

Keywords: English, Bengali, Bangladesh, teaching, private university, tertiary level

1. Introduction

There have been many theoretical arguments for and against the use of learners' mother tongue or first language (L1) in teaching the second or foreign language (L2). According to some researchers (e.g. Mahadeo, 2006; Tsao 2001) the use of L1 is a barrier to learning L2. Some other researcher (e.g. Baily, 2005) think that it is difficult to use L1 in a multilingual class while Atkinson (1987), Harbord (1992) and Nation (2003) have found out that it is natural and beneficial to use L1 in a monolingual class.

In this regard, Bangladesh is a monolingual country with 95% of her people using Bangla as their L1 (Bangladesh, 1998). After the country became independent in 1971, the new nationalist government made Bangla the only official language and the sole medium of instruction at all levels of education (Haque, 1989). However, in 1974, English was introduced in the sixth year to be taught up to the twelfth year of education. In 1996, Compulsory English language foundation course was introduced in the state university undergraduate classes. And now English is taught as a compulsory subject from class I to class XII in all governmental and private institutions (Bangla medium).

This paper aims to examine whether the teachers of tertiary level in Bangladesh use Bangla in their English language teaching class which consists only of students speaking Bangla as their L1.

2. The Historical Background of the Issue

The attitude towards the use of learner's L1 has undergone periodical but regular changes. Several hundred years ago 'bilingual teaching' namely, Grammar-Translation method was the 'norm'. This method advocates translation into and from the target language. The medium of instruction is the learners' mother tongue. Reading and writing are the major focuses whereas speaking and listening are paid almost no attention (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

In the late 19th century, grammar-translation method was seriously challenged by the rise of Direct Method (Harbord, 1992; Harmer, 2001). The method advocates the use of the target language in the class and translation

to be avoided at all costs (Thornbury, 2006). This method gives a lot of importance to speaking and listening in L2. Direct method gained popularity because of mass migration, spread of world trade and commerce, and in particular, the emergence of United States as a world power (Harmer, 2001). Besides, political agendas, the growing trend of taking ELT as a casual career by the young people visiting Europe contributed to strengthening the English-only policy (Harbord, 1992).

But the criticism against the Direct Method and taking ELT as a career by many non-native people have brought L1 back into the class. When the non-native teachers try to implement the ‘all English class’ strategy, they face students’ incomprehension and resentment. So they start using the mother tongue, which is very natural.

3. Literature Review

Before starting the study, it is important to look at some studies related to this issue. We will look at these studies from two perspectives: supports for the monolingual approach and support for the bilingual approach (Note 1).

3.1 Support for Monolingual Approach

There are many who support the use of L2 in the class as the sole medium of instruction and communication. They believe that using only L2 in the class, though challenging to implement, ultimately results in increasing confidence in speaking and listening skills, creating more realistic environment for the learners.

Cook (2001) has identified three fundamental principles of the monolingual approach (though he is not a supporter of the approach):

- a) The learning of L2 should model the learning of L1 (through maximum exposure to the L2).
- b) Successful learning involves the separation and distinction between L1 and L2.
- c) Learners should be shown the importance of L2 through its continual use.

But, promoting English language as a medium of instruction in educational institutions has got two kinds of responses. At one extreme is the nationalistic response which advocates centering of the national language. At the other extreme is the functionalistic response which emphasizes the inevitability and usefulness of English (Mahadeo, 2006). As an example of the latter, Mahadeo refers to Singapore where English is not the L1. His research shows that an institution with high infrastructural resources, instructional equipment, language learning materials, and professional competences along with the use of English in instruction can produce learners with high proficiency level in English. On the other hand, Tsao (2001) has found out that because of the prevalent Grammar Translation method the school leaving Taiwanese students cannot read and comprehend any English article although they are taught English in their elementary as well as secondary level of education.

Turnbull (2001) also opines that it is important for teachers to use as much L2 as possible in a situation where the students spend only a short period of time in the class on daily basis.

In a multilingual class, the monolingual approach is more applicable unless the teacher can speak all the L1s: it is no good using any particular L1. A lot of teachers also believe that L1 should not be used in EFL/ESL context because it creates over dependency on L1. It may also mislead learning because of the differences between L1 and L2.

Thus there are some specific reasons why L1 should not be used in the class. However, Philipson (1992) and Aurbach (1993) have challenged these assumptions. They think that these are impractical in global contexts and lack in pedagogical evidence. They have also highlighted the fact that monolingual principles are rooted in a particular ideological perspective which serves to reinforce inequities in the boarder society.

3.2 Support for Bilingual Approach

During the past 15 years, monolingual orthodoxy has lost much of its appeal. It has been argued that it is degrading to exclude L1 and it has harmful psychological effects on the learners (Nation in Tang, 2002). Monolingual teaching can also create tension and a barrier between the students and the teachers. Besides, there are many situations where it is inappropriate and impossible to exclude L1.

Monolingual approach claims that native speakers are the ideal teachers. But the phrase ‘native speaker’ is problematic. It is because there are many versions of English and it is a matter of debate what makes an authentic native English speaker (Phillipson, 1992). Besides, as bilingual teachers are proficient in two languages, they have a higher level of metalinguistic proficiency and awareness that enable them to teach better (Mora, 2009).

Atkinson (1987) has identified three reasons why a limited amount of L1 should be allowed in the class in EFL context: it is a learner-preferred strategy, a humanistic approach and an efficient time saver. Harmer (2001) has found out five similar reasons:

- a) L1 is required by the activity in the class.
- b) It is entirely natural to translate from and into L2.
- c) Learners like using L1.
- d) Teachers use learners' L1 because they like it.
- e) The amount of L1 use depends on the learner's styles and abilities.

Cianflone (2009) also opines that using L1 is a learner preferred strategy and teachers subscribe to the judicious use of L1. And whereas Cole (1998) thinks that L1 can be used at lower levels in a monolingual context to show the differences between L1 and L2 and to teach tenses, Cianflone states that at the tertiary level, where language proficiency is higher, using L1 can be an important device in language learning as it can save time and increase learners' motivation.

The findings of Harboard (1992) and Gill (2005) demonstrate that the idea of excluding L1 from the class is too stressful for many learners. Harboard also claims that the use of L1 facilitates communication, teacher-student relationship and the learning of L2.

Nation (2003) has identified the following strands through which a learner can learn L2:

- a) Meaning focused input - learning through listening and reading
- b) Meaning focused output - learning through speaking and writing
- c) Language focused learning - learning through deliberate attention to language features
- d) Fluency development - learning through working with known material across the four skills at a higher than usual level of performance

Nation believes that the opportunity to use L1 while discussing before performance helps the learners to reach a higher level of L2 performance. There are various ways of teaching new L2 words, but L1 translation is the most effective (Lado, Baldwin, and Lobo in Nation, 2003). The use of L1 can also be a very useful tool of teaching grammatical structures. Finally, Nation states that using L1 in English language class is showing respect to the learners' mother tongue. In the same way Bailey (2005) has found out that banning L1 from the class can make the learners uncomfortable while it might be very frustrating for lower-level adult learners as they cannot express themselves in L2.

While arguing for L1 use in the class, most researchers have cautioned against its over use because it can create an over dependency on L1 and can over simplify the differences between L1 and L2. It can encourage laziness among learners and minimize the use of L2 (Atkinson, 1987). Thus, using L1 is not the ultimate tool of L2 learning; rather using a justified amount of L1 facilitates the learning of L2. It is necessary in certain situations such as motivating learners, creating a tension-free learning environment, raising awareness, etc.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Objectives

The class in Bangladesh is the best place to use and practise English because the students hardly get any exposure to the language outside. But for the same reason, the students' English proficiency level is very low and the necessity of using the justified amount of Bangla in English language teaching emerges. The objective of the research is to find out if Bangla is used in the English language teaching class. If used, to what extent and in which situation is it used? The study also wants to discover whether the use of Bangla facilitates the learning of English in the context of Bangladesh.

4.2 Participants

The participants (N) of this research were sixty students (male and female) from three departments - BBA, Pharmacy and Computer Engineering Department - of an English medium private university established at Dhaka in 2003. They were in their first semester doing a fundamental English course called Foundation Course (including reading, writing and grammar). They were from Bangla medium educational background (learnt English as a compulsory subject from class I to XII) and share the same L1, i.e. Bangla.

Besides, the data providing teachers whose classes were observed were all male and moderately proficient in conducting the class in English. One of them was working at the university for six years while the other two were for two years.

4.3 Tools of Data Collection

The data were collected by class observation, unstructured interviews and administering a questionnaire. While

observing the classes, the researchers sat at the back of the class so as not to disturb the normal atmosphere of the class by their presence. The students had been briefed about them and their work. The researchers interviewed the teachers immediately after observing the classes. During the interview, they asked the teachers about what they had observed in the class. A questionnaire in English was administered during the normal class time. The objectives and methods of the study, including the questionnaire were first explained thoroughly to the learners. No time limit was set, but most respondents responded in 20 to 25 minutes.

4.4 Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations. Firstly, the institution where the research was carried out was situated in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Secondly, the data were collected only from the students and teachers of one private university. Finally, minor discrepancies may exist concerning the occasions when L1 should be used due to different level of learners' proficiency.

5. Data Collection and Findings

In this part we will at first present the data and then go on to analyze them. Finally we will state the findings.

5.1 Students' Questionnaire

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the responses to the questionnaire.

Table 1. Teachers' Language

Question 1	only English		only Bangla		both	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Which language does your teacher use in the class	05	8.33%	00	0%	55	91.7%

As we see in Table 1, 91.7% of the participants have said that their teacher uses English and Bangla together in teaching English. No teacher uses Bangla alone although about 8% of the participants have said that their teacher uses only English in the class.

Table 2. Learners' Attitude Towards L1

Question 2	not at all		a little		sometimes		a lot	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you like your teacher to use Bangla in the class?	01	1.67%	11	18.33%	43	71.67%	05	8.33%

Table 2 shows that almost all the participants (excepting 1.67%) like their teacher to use Bangla in the class. This huge student support for L1 makes it necessary for the teacher to use L1 while teaching L2.

Table 3. Learners' opinion about using L1

Question 3	yes		no	
	N	%	N	%
Should Bangla be used in the class?	39	65%	21	35

As Table 3 shows and as it can be concluded from the discussion for question 2, most of the learners (65%) think that Bangla should be used in the class. And it is humane to act in the way which majority of the students support.

Table 4. Learners' opinion about the frequency of using L1

Question 4	never		Rarely		sometimes		quite often	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
How often do you think Bangla should be used in the class?	04	6.7%	08	13.33%	44	73.33%	4	6.67%

As we see in Table 4, most of the learners (73.33%) think that the teacher should 'sometimes' use L1 in the class.

On the other hand, only 6.7% of the learners think that L1 should 'never' be used in the class.

Table 5. Learners' opinion about the role of L1

Question 5	No		a little		fairly much		a lot	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you think the use of Bangla in the class helps you learn English?	04	6.67%	13	21.67%	22	36.67%	21	35%

As Table 5 presents, while 36.67% of the participants think that using L1 helps them 'fairly much', 35% of them think that it helps them 'fairly much' or 'a lot'. Thus about 72% of the learners in total think very positively about the effectiveness of L1 use in ELT classes. On the other hand, 6.67% of the participants believe that the use of L1 does not help them to learn English.

Table 6. Different reasons for using L1

Question 6	explaining difficult grammatical rules		new vocabulary items		abstract ideas & concepts		giving instructions		giving suggestions	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
When do you think it is more necessary to use Bangla in an English class?	18	30%	13	21.67%	14	23.33%	06	15%	09	10%

The data in Table 6 confirm the findings of the studies (Atkinson, 1987; Harmer, 2001, etc.) implying the idea that in some specific cases using L1 is profitable. There are at least five specific situations in which, the learners think, using Bangla is worthwhile. And it is important to comply with the learners' opinions because, according to Krashen (1985), if the input is not comprehensible, the affective filter will be high. The learners will block out L2 if they are tensed, embarrassed, upset or angry.

5.2 Class Observation

From the class observation it was found out that the teachers often use L1 in the class especially to discuss difficult grammatical items, to explain the meanings of unknown words, and to give instructions. In a class the students were asked to take part in different activities based on a selected English passage. Before the students did the exercises, the teacher explained the passage with some translation. He also gave the Bangla equivalent of some difficult words and phrases. The use of both L1 and L2 seemed to be quite effective judging from the students' responses. In giving instructions, the teachers first used English and then Bangla. Another teacher first attempted to explain the words, grammar points and meanings of complex ideas in English, but reverted to Bangla when he found the students unable to understand his English explanations. The other teacher used L1 only to give instructions such as to follow him and not to make noise. Among the three observed teachers, one teacher used Bangla a lot (about 60% of the limited time) because he thought that the learners would not understand if he conducted the class in English. One of the teachers opined that in some cases using Bangla saved time. The observations indicate that Bangla is used when English fails to work.

5.3 Teachers' Unstructured Interviews

The purpose of the teachers' interview that followed each class observation was to find out their beliefs regarding the use of L1 in ELT classes. From the interview, it was discovered that they use Bangla to explain difficult English words because this saves the learners from being confused. One of the teachers believes that if he conducted the whole class in English, the students would feel that English has been imposed upon them. The teachers also use L1 to save the class time. One of the teachers uses Bangla to give instructions which are difficult for the learners to understand. And most importantly, all the teachers think that how much English is to be used depends largely on the proficiency level of the students.

5.4 Findings

From the questionnaire, class observation and teachers' interview, it is evident that teachers of tertiary level in

Bangladesh use Bangla in teaching English. The data seem to show that the judicious use of Bangla based on the situation does not hinder learning; rather it assists the learners in overcoming the problems, dilemmas and confusions generated by the extensive use of L2. Most of the learners think that in some specific situations Bangla can be used (See Table 4 & 5). It is beneficial to discussing difficult grammar, presenting new vocabulary items, explaining abstract ideas and concepts. Sometimes the teachers use L1 to give instructions. But they use L1 in accordance with the proficiency level of the learners.

6. Data Analysis and Discussion

It has already been stated that teachers of the tertiary level in Bangladesh use Bangla in some specific situations for some specific purposes. The use of L1 is beneficial to presenting new vocabulary items, explaining difficult grammar and abstract ideas, and giving instructions as well as suggestions. This finding supports the findings of Nation (2003). But the teachers should be aware of its over use because Atkinson's (1987) study shows that only a 'judicious' use of L1 is beneficial. To determine the judicious amount, it is important to identify the necessary situations. The data show that understanding difficult grammatical rules is one of the major areas of struggle for the learners (See Table 6). In this situation teachers can help the learners by showing the differences between L1 and L2.

During the interviews the teachers claimed that they use Bangla to save time, to make learners understand the difficult things, etc. One of them said that he uses Bangla because his students do not understand English very well. But researchers have cautioned against the over use of L1 because it can create laziness (Atkinson, 1987). Another teacher claimed that he uses Bangla to draw the attention of the learners. But giving instructions is one of the most realistic and meaningful opportunities of exposing the learners to L2. It must be remembered that meaningful and realistic use of L2 is an underlying principle of CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

6.1 Implications for ELT

On the whole, the results of the study show that Bangla has an important role to play in teaching English. The use of L1 provides the learners with a tension-free environment, lowers their affective filters and thus helps them to anchor the L2 concepts. But L1 is to be used only to supply a scaffold for the learners. The learners should be encouraged to use as much L2 as possible. Besides, they need to be very clear about the purpose of learning L2. Discussing the value of L2 with the learners can be very effective. As the frequency of using L1 largely depends on the teachers, the teachers should decide how frequently they will use L1. To do it, the teacher has to design the lesson plans and tasks very carefully in accordance with the objectives of the lesson and the proficiency level of the learners. They should use L1 only as a facilitating device, not as a medium of instruction. It is because the language of the teachers directly affects the learners (Cook, 1996).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this research assert that using a justified amount of L1 in some specific situations does not hinder the learning of English; rather it works as a facilitator. This is in harmony with Krashan's (1998) findings that properly organized bilingual programs provide more comprehensible input in English. On the other hand, over use of L1 or improperly designed bilingual programs hinder comprehensible input and thus impede learning. Moreover, over use of L1 may create a dependency on it.

Considering these the researchers suggest some ways of overcoming the obstacles:

- To tell the learners why they need to learn L2
- To discuss with the learners the value of using L2 in the class
- To design the tasks according to the proficiency level of the students
- To determine how much and how often L1 should be used
- To plan the lesson in such a way so that the learners get enough exposure to L2
- To involve the learners in the tasks through warm-up activities
- To use aiding materials so that the learners feel secured and less stressed
- To encourage the learners to use L2 while engaged in group or pair work

However, this list may vary and grow according to the level, need, attitude and situation of the learners. The findings of this research will indeed acknowledge other researchers to find out the role of mother tongue in second language teaching and learning.

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Note

Note 1. The proponents of English-only policy are collectively known as the Monolingual Approach while those advocating the use of L1 in the class are known as the Bilingual Approach.