

## Teachers' Attitude Towards the Use of L1 in the L2 Classroom at the Higher Educational Institutes in Tamil Nadu

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### Abstract

In many multilingual contexts, mostly learning English becomes an additional language (EAL), where learners' prior knowledge about his first language and culture is taken into consideration to facilitate L2 learning. This article reports a study in which teachers of English were asked to express their beliefs on mother tongue-based multilingual education from their teaching-learning experience of English in the context of Tamil Nadu. Interviews were conducted to collect the data. One of the findings indicates that considering the needs of the rural / first generation / regional medium students, teachers prefer bilingual teaching even in higher educational institutes to facilitate learning. However, some of them prefer English medium instruction because they think that too much use of the mother tongue hinders learners' input of L2. Moreover, the study finds that teachers' choice of medium of instruction in their L2 classroom is influenced by factors such as learners' English language proficiency, educational and career opportunities.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, mother tongue, education, language proficiency, higher education

### Introduction

We cannot rely simply on an armchair kind of teaching method. We cannot ask a question and become angry because they do not know the answer. That is not how it is. My objective as a teacher is to make sure that they learn English... (Teacher 13 from the interview data)

Many parts of the world are increasingly becoming multilingual owing to the global spread of English and a sizeable migration to different parts of the world. For instance, in Finland, immigrants bring cultural and linguistic diversity to the country (Illman and Pietilä, 2018). Since English is seen as a viable medium of intercultural communication or an international lingua franca (ILF) (Sharifian, 2009), there are also growing numbers of L2 learners—English as a second or foreign language learners (Crystal, 2003; Kachru, 2005). In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), there is a substantial body of research pertaining to teaching and learning English in multilingual contexts.

### **1.1 Teaching English in the Multilingual Context**

In many multilingual contexts, teaching and learning English becomes an additional language (EAL)—either as English as a second language (ESL) and/or foreign language (EFL). EAL is defined as ‘learning and facilitating learning for pupils whose first language is not English’ (Haslam, Wilkin and Kellett, 2007: IV). In the EAL classroom, both teachers and learners may tend to use their first language (L1) as a ‘substitute’ to English (L2), when learners are not capable enough to understand/use in L2 (Krashen, 1991). And this tendency to use learners’ L1 in the L2 classroom is seen as natural (Nation, 2003). In addition to that, scholars working in L2 research maintain that the use of learners’ first language can facilitate L2 learning. For instance, Nation, P. (2003), drawing pieces of evidence from studies, such as Lameta-Tufuga (1994), Knight (1996), etc., argues that the use of L1 in the L2 classroom facilitates comprehending content and meaning, L2 vocabulary and grammatical items, and developing L2 proficiency.

### **1.2 Multilingualism—Cognitive Support?**

Similarly, Anton and Dicamilla (1998 as cited from Turnbull and Arnett, 2002) suggest that L1 can function as a cognitive tool in the L2 classroom. This means that teachers can use learners’ first language to scaffold L2 learning, where learners’ prior knowledge about their language and culture has been acknowledged as a resource (Illman and Pietilä, 2018; Foley, 1994). This concept—multilingualism as a teaching-learning strategy—is not new in ELT, and has already been integrated into concepts such as inclusion (Stadler-Heer, 2019), translanguaging

(Conteh, 2018), and scaffolding (Foley, 1994), However, there might be some difference.

In contrast, first language influence in L2 acquisition is considered 'an indication of low acquisition' and leads to 'unnatural adult second language performance' (Krashen, 1991: 67-68). Ellis (1984) remarks that use of the first language as a part of regular L2 pedagogy hampers learners of L2 input. Studies have also supported this claim that direct use of L2 has resulted in L2 achievement (Carroll et al., 1967 cited from Turnbull and Arnett, 2002).

Despite these conceptual differences and contradicting empirical evidence, it is advocated that based on students' English competency, teachers should have to decide whether learners' L1 can be used to facilitate learning/in/the L2 in their classrooms. At the same time, teachers are considered to be the primary source of L2 input. It is, therefore, emphasized that teachers must have to find ways to encourage students to maximize L2 use within their classroom when the learners hardly have any chance to use it outside the classroom (Nation, 2003).

### **1.3 Teachers' Attitude**

Teachers' choice of language in the second or foreign language classroom is particularly influenced by their belief about the use of those languages. Recently, studies have also shown that teachers believe that the frequent use of learners' previously learned linguistic knowledge benefits L2 learning to some extent (Kieu, 2010; Al-Amir, 2017). Teachers have acknowledged that L1 has different roles in the L2 classroom. For instance, Kieu, (2010) investigates attitudes of university teachers towards using Vietnamese in English language teaching. Data were collected via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The study findings reveal that all the teachers participating in the study recognize that Vietnamese can be used in the following situations: a) explaining grammatical items, b) introducing new words, and c) ensuring students' understanding (given in the descending order of their preferences). Relatively similar findings are evident in another study (Al-Amir, 2017). However, in Al-Amir's study, which investigates EFL teachers' attitude towards students' first language (Arabic) by administering a questionnaire, the statistical analysis of the mean value (2.98) and the SD value (0.742) indicate that teachers believe English must be used by both teachers and students inside the classroom.

Since English only attitude is prevalent in multilingual education, it is noted that as teachers have a clear understanding about the ideological assumption of teaching and learning English, they have developed their stand to draw upon the relevant local and cultural material and resources in a multilingual context (Tupas, 2018).

#### **1.4 Multilingual Context in India**

In India, the Three Language Policy has been in educational practice. Under this, every student is expected to learn the mother tongue, Hindi and English. In Hindi-speaking regions, children have to learn Hindi, English and any classical Indian languages either as a second or third language. And in non-Hindi speaking states, children are expected to learn Hindi or any other Indian language and English along with their mother tongue. Since TLF has not been properly implemented in many states, it is emphasized that individual states have to decide the choice of the second language in primary education and third language in secondary education. The medium of instruction at primary level must be in the children's mother tongue.

In Tamil Nadu, bilingual educational policy has been in practice. In addition to the mother tongue, children learn English as a second language in school education. English is the medium of instruction at higher education and students are expected to develop proficiency in English when they enter higher education.

Recently higher educational institutes have witnessed an increasing number of first-generation students. Since these students do not come from a proper sociocultural and educational background, they are unable to develop expected proficiency in English when they come to higher education, where they face a situation in which they have to learn everything in English. Since they are hardly exposed to English outside the classroom, their only primary source of input are often their teachers. It seems quite challenging for both teachers and students to ensure whether learning happens and to improve learners' English proficiency.

There are a few studies, which intend to examine teachers' attitude towards the use of L1 or dominant local language in the L2 classroom in India (Ramanathan and Bruning, 2001; Meganathan, 2018), indicated that teachers tend to implement whatever methods and strategies that work in

their classroom. Moreover, it seems L1 is a part of their regular pedagogic tools in their English language classroom. For instance, Ramanathan and Bruning, (2001) administered a questionnaire among 11 teachers who teach English from grade 1 to 5 in a private English medium school to investigate their belief about practices and activities carried out in their L2 classroom. One of the findings in the study shows that teachers believe that their students learning English might be affected by the lack of exposure as well as the inference of L1. However, teachers themselves used L1 or the regional dominant language (Tamil) about 20% to 40% of a 40 minutes classroom, especially to communicate with students. Another study investigates the role of the English language curriculum, teaching, and learning via teachers' and students' attitude (Meganathan, 2018). Data were collected through various sources such as ethnographic observation, questionnaire for students (8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup>) and teachers, and semi-structured and open interviews for learners, teachers and administrators. About 225 students and 12 teachers from two English medium schools (Delhi Tamil Education Association School and Raisina Bengali School) in Delhi participated in the study. One finding indicates that an average of 15% of students do not feel like speaking in English in their L2 classroom on account of their low proficiency. Teachers also feel that these students do not get support from home to learn English. A few learners acknowledge that their teachers use the students' mother tongue (Tamil or Bengali) or the regional dominant language (Hindi) to explain tasks and ideas for better understanding. However, most learners feel that most of the time is spent in English only.

It is evident from both these studies that the classroom is the primary source of students' input of learning the English language, where teachers have to bring students' home language and culture as well to facilitate learning even in English medium schools, where students are exposed to English only environment. But, not many studies have investigated teachers' attitudes towards teaching English in the multilingual context of India and there is a gap when it comes to higher education, where students come from both English and regional medium schools, and learn together. It becomes highly challenging teaching English to the students of the first generation with a regional medium and rural background. This study intends to examine the attitudes of the teachers who teach English at higher educational institutes towards using L1 in their L2 classrooms.

## **Research Questions**

The following are research questions:

- (a) What are the attitudes of teachers towards teaching English at higher educational institutes?
- (b) What are the factors which determine the attitudes of teachers towards using L1 in their L2 classrooms?

## **Method**

The data is collected as a part of upcoming doctoral research by the same author from the Centre for English Language Studies, University of Hyderabad. The data were collected via interviews, and an interview questionnaire—includes twenty questions—was designed for the purpose. Only a small proportion of data is used for this paper. The data included in this paper come particularly from the participants' responses to one of the interview questions: What is your opinion of mother tongue-based multilingual education?

## **Participants**

Participants were teachers who teach English at colleges and universities from Tamil Nadu. Twenty-five teachers (from 12 colleges, 4 state universities, and one rural central university) participated in the study, which included 19 male and 6 female).

## **Procedure**

Teachers were individually contacted over the phone and invited to participate in the study. All the teacher contacts were established by known to unknown. Initially, the present research design was partially discussed with 41 teachers who teach English at higher educational institutes in Tamil Nadu. Everyone agreed to be a part of the study but later some of them were unwilling mostly due to unavailability of time. Finally, 28 interviews were conducted but only 25 of them were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify themes.

## **Analysis**

Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to identify patterns and themes within the interview data. Clarke and Braun, (2016) defines TA as 'a method

of identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data' (p. 297). Moreover, they have also explained six phases of thematic analysis: (a) familiarize yourself with the data; (b) generate initial codes; (c) search for themes; (d) review themes; (e) define and name themes; and (f) produce the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87).

The following were the procedures followed to analyse the data: a) the interview data were transcribed, and some examples and proverbs expressed in Tamil were translated into English, b) gathered and arranged all the responses to a single question one by one in a word file c) responses were marked/ highlighted by different colours—each one representing different patterns/themes, d) rearranged the highlighted/ marked responses to arrive at themes and sub-themes, and e) described names and themes.

## **Results**

Analysis of interview transcripts offered rich insight into teachers' attitudes towards teaching English at the higher educational institutes in the multilingual context of India. Results reported in this section include themes and patterns, and representative examples from the interview data.

### **Bilingualism Helps Understanding Concepts Better**

Considerably, 20 (or 80%) of the participants highlighted that bilingualism/multilingualism would be effective in both school and graduate education. Twelve teachers mentioned that they had drawn into bilingual teaching because it helped students' understanding of the concepts better. In addition to that, they highlighted that they had to use bilingual teaching to facilitate the learning of the rural, Tamil medium, and first-generation students. As Teacher 10 mentioned that students were expecting bilingual teaching even at university/college, it was primarily because 'most of the first generation learners don't have any experience of other languages. Some of the students come from villages and have got their school education only in government schools.' It seems that teachers have understood the problems faced by these students regarding learning English—most of them find it difficult to understand if the instruction is only in English. Teacher 13, for instance,



noted that: 'When I teach them in English, they simply stare at me. I can see the fact that they don't understand what I teach them, not even a single word.' In extending his point, he further added that:

I started using Tamil. And then now to a certain extent .... I speak mostly Tamil than English... in my classroom. I have to use Tamil movies, references, comedies to make them understand concepts.

This point—bringing students' home language, culture and knowledge into the L2 classroom to scaffold their learning—was also highlighted by several other teachers. For example, Teacher 22 shared his experience in a rural college, where most first-generation students study, that 'in a classroom, the routine of the teacher is to make what is difficult easier for them.'

As far as the content of the syllabus is concerned, the content which is closer to the local surroundings is helpful for both teacher and students to relate better than understanding something else from Western culture (mentioned by several other teachers). Teacher 6, for example, pointed out that:

We selected content that is easily understood by the student. For example, a general English textbook has many examples from local surroundings. There is an essay about Kodaikanal, which is closer to them so that we are able to relate. Even in the functional English textbook, we try to bring as much local content as possible.

Another instance of this kind is bringing parallelism between the languages to grasp the concepts easily. Teacher 22, for example, stated that:

In Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra is asking Antony that if it is true love...tell me now...then we have to find a new heaven. The same dialogue is seen in one of Kamal Hasan's Tamil movies, *Varumaiyin Niram Sivappu*. When we bring such parallels they may be useful to the students.

### **L1 Supports Learning L2**

As several teachers mentioned bilingualism was helpful to understand concepts/content better, only 7 teachers explicitly stated that the mother tongue would support second/foreign language learning—English in this context. Teacher 12 claimed that 'to understand a foreign language



one needs to know its equivalence in the mother tongue.’ Likewise, Teacher 13 stated that ‘Any language should be taught to the people in bilingual and multilingual so that their mother tongue will certainly help them to understand the second language.’ As far as the transition from mother tongue to the English language is concerned, Teacher 15 noted that ‘if you are not proficient in your own vernacular language, you cannot learn another language.’

Bilingual teaching also helps to build confidence (stated by Teacher 3) and to acquire cognitive skills (mentioned by Teacher 11).

### **English Must be the Medium of Instruction at Higher Education**

Seven participants (28%) reported that English should be the medium of instruction at the higher education level. As based on his own learning experience, Teacher 18 believed that the direct method would result in successful target language learning. He noted that: ‘I have come from a Tamil medium background ...Teachers in colleges... speak only in English from the beginning till the end. So we were able to understand and cope with that language.’ Teacher 4 and Teacher 18 emphasized that considering educational and career opportunities, English was considered to be more important than Tamil (mother tongue). Teacher 4, for instance, noted that: ‘We are responsible for our culture and language but when our mother tongue is not helping us for our better future, we should learn other languages like English.’ Similarly, four teachers highlighted that at tertiary level education must be in the global language. Teacher 6, for example, pointed out that the medium of instruction must be in English. He further explained how learning in the mother tongue would limit the mobility of the students in the following:

...a student who studies Economics in Tamil language, he may never get an opportunity to do his postgraduate/research or cannot take up a career outside the linguistic region. So, that limits both higher education and career opportunities.

Teacher 8 related English language/ education to socio-economic mobility in the global era. She mentioned that ‘Now this English education has become...very important...which...makes you an important person in the job market. Without communicating skills, probably you may not claim the social ladder.’

### **Too Much Use of Tamil Hampers Students' Proficiency in English**

Only three respondents highlighted that increasing use of Tamil in L2 classroom resulted in hindering students' proficiency in English. Since most of the schools in the state offer only Tamil medium education, Teacher 7 felt that students' exposure to English language and communicating skills got reduced. Teacher 20 explained his students' conditions as: 'They struggle a lot in higher education because by the time they have grown too used to their mother tongue and not exposed to a new language.'

### **Discussion**

Teachers' attitude is central to teaching a second or foreign language in a multilingual context. This qualitative study investigated teachers' attitudes towards teaching English as a second language in the bilingual context of Tamil Nadu. Teachers' choice of pedagogical tools might be influenced by their attitude towards learners' characters, classroom situations, parental attitude, institutional practices, etc. Twenty-five teachers who teach English at different higher educational institutes in Tamil Nadu participated in the study. And they discussed their experiences, perspectives, and beliefs about teaching English. Qualitative interview data were transcribed and analysed thematically. The major findings in this study enumerate teachers' attitude towards using the L1 in their L2 classrooms. And the important themes arising from the findings are consistent with prior relevant studies in this field.

Participants perceived that they had to be sensitive towards students who learn English as a second language. Since most of their students do not have adequate exposure to English language and find it difficult to understand foreign concepts in the language, teachers acknowledge that it is necessary to take into consideration the learners' home language and culture. Moreover, they believe that the use of mother tongue in the L2 classroom facilitates students' language learning and understanding concepts better. This perspective seems to support the findings of a few studies discussed in the literature (Kieu, 2010; Al-Amir, 2017; Ramanathan and Bruning, 2001). It appears that teachers have also recognized the role of L1 in the process of L2 learning, reflects the findings of several other studies (Lameta-Tufuga, 1994 and Knight, 1996 cited from Nation, 2003). According to them, the learners' mother tongue will certainly help, to

some extent, learning another language when it is taught in bilingual/multilingual context. In addition to that, students' L1 proficiency may reflect in their L2 learning.

In contrast, overuse of learners' L1 or the regional dominant language prevents students' input of English language, stated by a few teachers, parallels the observation made by Ellis (1984). By doing so, students' communication skills also got diminished. Moreover, students tended to use only their mother tongue, which, according to some teachers, prevents the mobility of the students in terms of higher educational and career opportunities.

It is observed that there is an ambiguity in the teachers' attitudes towards the approaches of teaching English at the higher educational institutes. Despite the teachers' beliefs that the bilingual approach of teaching English seems to be more relevant and more appropriate in the context of Tamil Nadu, the direct approach is also emphasized to some extent because of that the students will be exposed to the large amount of L2 input.

## **Conclusion**

The teachers, who participated in the study, seem to have recognized the positive role of L1 in their L2 classrooms: teachers perceive learners' L1 not only to facilitate students understanding of concepts but also to improve L2 proficiency. For most teachers, bilingualism becomes a regular pedagogic practice because they believe that it can help understanding concepts well, developing rapport with students, and improving students' confidence and cognitive skills. However, for some teachers, the use of L1 in their classrooms prevents students' input of L2 proficiency. In their view, the medium of instruction must be in the target language (L2) because they think learning in the mother tongue limits students' mobility in terms of higher education and career opportunities.

This qualitative study focused on a small number of teachers who teach English at the higher educational institutes in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, further research must be taken to investigate both teachers' and students' perspective by featuring classroom observation, questionnaires, and interviews to find whether similar findings can be produced. Moreover, research should investigate to what extent and why does students' L1 have a role in L2 pedagogy.

In attitude study, social desirability bias is a problem that the respondents might not express their true attitudes to avoid getting prejudiced and to please the researcher. Although care was taken to avoid such by requesting the respondents to answer the questions based on their own experience of teaching, it was difficult to ensure whether they revealed their true attitude. Therefore, a classroom observation is essential to examine whether teachers reflect on their beliefs, and that is beyond the scope of this study.

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