

Strategic Handling: Language Teaching in an Undergraduate Multilingual Classroom

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Abstract

The English teacher faces the challenge of engaging with and adding value to students of varying language proficiency in the Undergraduate Indian classroom. Her literature background has not trained her in the pedagogy of teaching language, and that too in a multilingual classroom. She must depend on her own reflective knowledge based on experience and modify her praxis according to the needs of each batch of students. A flexible curriculum which allows her a fair amount of autonomy and mentored, group-based, in-class project work can help her to improve literacy outcomes. For her, the multilingual classroom is both a challenge to be overcome as well as a resource to be cherished.

Keywords: Multilingual classroom, multilingualism as resource, literacy, teacher autonomy

“The teaching of English ... requires strategic handling to achieve the aims of a language classroom that strengthens critical literacy in a globalised world.” (Position Paper on Teaching of English, 2006, p.37)

“Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances”—the title of Michael West’s 1960 publication, based on his experience as a teacher and teacher-educator in Eastern India, still resonates for the English language teacher in an undergraduate multilingual and multicultural classroom. Large class sizes, students of varying levels of proficiency—“ill-graded” in West’s words (p. 7), and teachers with a literature background who are not trained in the pedagogy of language teaching—some of West’s

definitive characteristics of the problems still persist. Dare we hope that the challenges can be translated into opportunities? This paper will try to show how a reflective teaching practice can leverage classroom conditions to reach certain literacy outcomes.

It is pertinent to note that the term literacy itself has evolved to widen its ambit far beyond competence in the four micro-skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. It also involves the learning of social and intercultural competencies and a critical consciousness of the world in which we live (Jayendran et al., 2022, pp. 84, 87). Thus the language teacher's mandate is to support language skills and promote critical thinking, cultural sensitivity, social responsibility and self-expression.

Her workspace has students belonging to a variety of backgrounds—linguistic, regional, cultural and socio-economic, among others. This classroom diversity can offer her students the valuable experience of being in a community that is reflective of the larger society. It can provide an exposure to multiple perspectives and can help to build empathy, tolerance and an openness to accept difference. Thus the language teacher can work towards her larger duty of building cultural and critical literacy which will lead to better outcomes in functional literacy (Jayendran et al, 2022, p.128). A simple activity like asking students to list the languages they know can begin the process of generating awareness of the rich linguistic resources that they have.

It is imperative for the teacher to create a classroom environment which can “liberate and organise” the capabilities of the students (Dewey, 2012, p.150). Students are accustomed to being passive receptacles of examination-oriented knowledge, irrespective of the source from where they get it—online or offline. In a system where rote learning is rewarded, they are not accustomed to speak up—to question, discuss or debate. Few realise the validity of their own experiential knowledge and fewer still have the confidence to speak about it to their peers in the classroom.

The language teacher can encourage her students to speak in class. It can begin with a simple Yes or No answer. She can make use of simple activities to break the ice and get them to feel comfortable about being in her class. She can also allow translanguaging and code switching so that affective filters go down (Krashen, 1982). This would help all students, irrespective of their English language proficiency. Thus the

classroom becomes a safe space where students feel that they will be heard without being judged for what they say or how they say it. This builds self-confidence, boosts positive identity construction and creates a conducive climate in which learning can take place. The teacher is a key enabler in this context.

She would need to make special efforts to include students with poor English language skills. They are often from vernacular medium and government schools. These are the English Language Learners (ELLs) who feel doubly disadvantaged in college as they need to handle higher level content in a language which they are still learning to use. Forced to share their learning space with students from privileged backgrounds with high levels of language proficiency, they feel deficient. Hence, at least at the beginning of the term, they need more attention and confidence-building measures.

The language teacher therefore consciously needs to plan and use various strategies to work effectively in a diverse, multilingual classroom. Since her disciplinary background has not included training in pedagogy for a language class, she must build her praxis by reflecting on her experience, talking to fellow teachers and taking feedback from her students. This is always work in process and is facilitated by the degree of autonomy which is allowed to her by the curriculum and institutional requirements. It is worth examining how this aligns with the principles put forth by Kumaravadivelu (2001) and Hooks (1984).

Teacher autonomy is at the heart of Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy (2001, p. 548). Eschewing methods laid down by theorists, it calls for a focus on the experience, understanding and reflective practice of the teacher who is the best judge of the conditions in which she teaches. He calls this the principle of particularity. Hooks (1994) too uses the term 'particularity' to speak of the differences between individual students (p. 13) and the subsequent need for a flexible pedagogy which must be adapted to meet the needs of each classroom (p. 16).

Noting that teachers are capable of constructing their own theory based on their knowledge and experience, Kumaravadivelu (2001) comments that this kind of theory can be constantly modified on the basis of seeing what works in the classroom, why and how it does so and what needs to be changed for better outcomes. He calls this the principle of practicality and offers it as a solution to the disjunction between theory

as propagated by experts and the actual practice of classroom teaching. His third principle of possibility (2001), draws upon Freire's vision of the emancipatory quality of education which empowers teachers and learners by generating a critical awareness of their reality through lively classroom discussions. Hence Hooks, another proponent of Freirean pedagogy, writes: "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognising one another's presence" (1994, p. 13). The diverse multilingual undergraduate classroom offers great potential for building this kind of engagement and bonding.

Hence every student needs to be encouraged to speak and bring in her own funds of knowledge (Moll et al., p. 133). Since "knowledge is cognitively constructed and socially mediated" (Windschnitl, 2002, quoted in Reyes and Vallone, 2007, p. 43), this helps all students to construct new knowledge schemas, far more powerfully than through book learning and lectures. In-class activities expand in relevance as students bring in their real, lived experiences. By making ELLs active classroom participants, the learning space is enriched and deepened. Furthermore, in some complex way, well beyond the purview of this paper, this makes other students conscious of how their own L1 gives them access to their culture and forms their identity. Thus both critical and cultural literacy are improved.

Kumaravadivelu's principles of particularity and practicality, explained above, make it clear that each teacher has to find her own route into the heart of a multilingual classroom. This researcher will now go on to speak about what worked for her, what did not and what she learned in the process of teaching different batches of students in multilingual undergraduate classrooms in a public university.

Importance of Building Rapport and Comfort

This is crucial as it sets the stage for teaching and learning. Introductory ice-breaker activities and conversation can help build trust in the teacher and an understanding of the value-addition that is intended. The latter is important given that the English class is sometimes seen as a time-pass. Simultaneously, a few of these activities can function as a kind of formative assessment for learning.

Short activities which call on students to give one-word or one-line

answers orally or on the blackboard, one after the other, are useful to elicit 100 per cent participation. A strategic use of such activities—which can be done impromptu—energises the class and gathers wandering attention. When used judiciously as fillers, they create a sense of belonging to the class and a feeling of ease and comfort whereby inhibitions about speaking and participating are lowered. Thereafter they feel more confident about speaking in the class, even out of turn, by responding to a question or a prompt.

Monolinguality, Bilinguality and Multilinguality

Compulsory monolinguality—an English-only policy—effectively silences the ELLs, thereby denying the entire class the benefit of their active presence. Their lack of engagement manifests in irregular attendance patterns. This contributes to a vicious cycle as teachers assume a lack of interest on their part and make little effort to involve them in classroom activities. During online classes in the pandemic, ELL students in a language class spoke of how they remained silent throughout the previous semester in a compulsory Communicative English class in which a strict English-only policy was imposed. The same students quickly dropped out of the Personality Development classes organised by the institution as they felt left out when other students used English to bring up their concerns.

A bilingual classroom is naturally more inclusive than a monolingual one. Hakuta's study (1986, quoted in Position Paper...Indian Languages, 2006, p. 29) shows that bilingualism improves academic outcomes, reduces absenteeism and drop-out rates and improves students' self-esteem. However bilingualism excludes those ELLs whose L1 is different from the dominant regional language. A public university undergraduate classroom in NCR, with students from different corners of the country, invariably has ELLs whose L1 is not Hindi. A classroom policy of bilinguality giving equal space to Hindi and English would largely leave them straggling and struggling to keep up. This would promote neither equity nor inclusion, the cornerstones of SDG 4.

How can multilinguality be addressed in a language classroom? The teacher can herself model an attitude of respect for all languages and cultures. A simple exercise of getting students to reflect on the languages they understand and use makes them understand that all languages have value, not just English. Further reflection would suggest different

ways of making all ELLs feel included in the class in a manner in which their cultural identities are also validated. This researcher found one such opportunity in a language project which required students to work on their cultural heritage.

Project-Based Learning Using Multilingualism as a Resource

For many years, projects have been a regular part of summative Internal Assessment practices. Students often cobble together project work using online resources of dubious quality. The challenge before the teacher is to promote real learning along with quality output.

This paper will now focus on the researcher's experience with administering projects in two Generic Elective (GE) language classes which offered her varying degrees of autonomy. One class (2nd semester) was offered the option of English Language through Literature (ELTL I) and the other (fourth semester) was allocated English Fluency (Fluency II). Both classes were large in size and included a significant number of ELLs. ELTL I required a familiarity with newspaper reports, articles, drama and poetry. Hence students needed support to help them understand these genres to score well in the end-term examination. Fluency II allowed for greater flexibility as literary genres were not specified for study. Furthermore, while the Fluency II students were naturally more mature and accustomed to the teacher, having met her in their 2nd semester as well, the ELTL I students were younger and needed more time to build a rapport with the teacher.

For Internal Assessment purposes, both batches were assigned a project keeping syllabus and end-term examination requirements in mind. The ELTL students were asked to pick a poem in their mother tongue, find or prepare an English translation of it, read two papers that spoke about the culture of their community and then think about how the selected poem reflected their culture. Finally they had to make an oral presentation. Though they were given the option of working in pairs if they shared a common language, most of them worked individually. The Fluency students were asked to choose a research topic of their choice, read some literature on it, collect primary data, prepare a report using proper academic writing protocols and then make an oral presentation in class. The work was to be done in groups in class under the teacher's supervision. Deadlines for each part of the work were reinforced through WhatsApp reminders before every class.

General Outcomes

Class Attendance

In the Fluency Class, students took time to form their groups and then to brainstorm and find a topic of interest. They used Google Scholar to find some literature on their topic and prepared questionnaires which they sent out among their target groups. Attendance shot up dramatically as students came to class to work on each part of the task.

In the ELTL class, students worked on their own, outside class hours. There was no improvement in class attendance except on the days of the presentations.

Quality of Work and Effort

The Fluency class did work of very high quality, showing great engagement with their topics, their data analysis and then in completing each part of their written work. The planning, regular scheduling reinforced by reminders and active in-class supervision by the teacher provided the necessary scaffolding. Reyes and Vallone use Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to explain how under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers, students cover the distance between their actual developmental level and the level they are capable of. (2007, p. 9). Peer group influence was very positive in maintaining engagement and standards. Even irregular students were impacted when they sat through presentations and saw the effort put in.

The ELTL project, on the other hand, was assigned as homework. This was due to the requirements of the syllabus which demanded valuable class time for exam preparation. Quality control was therefore absent as there was no regular monitoring. Hence there was great variation in their output.

Literacy Outcomes

Critical Literacy

Fluency students devoted time to select topics which interested them and about which they had some idea. They chose relevant and contemporary topics dealing with mental health and other psychological issues, deep fakes, OTT platforms, relationship with teachers, Value Added Courses (VAC) under NEP 2020, the impact of AI, rape, etc. As they engaged with

meaningful content and tried to build their knowledge of that subject, they clearly took ownership of their learning (Biggs and Tang, 2007, pp. 53-54). They built upon their ability to discourse quite knowledgeably about their topics.

Cultural Literacy

ELTL students spoke of the joy they found in talking about their language and their culture. One student from Telangana sang his poem in Lambada and explained to the mesmerised listeners how it was used parallel to Telugu in his state. An ELL who had barely spoken throughout the semester, spoke fluently, in Hindi, about how her poem reflected the tenets of Sikhism.

This anecdotal evidence is complemented by the results of a survey conducted by this researcher among the ELTL students (Annexure A). 53 out of the 72 students submitted their responses. Some of the salient points thrown up were as follows:

- a. 94 per cent students agreed that the project increased their awareness of the multicultural and multilingual nature of the classroom.
- b. 94 per cent found it interesting or very interesting to listen to other students talk about their culture.
- c. 98 per cent found it very interesting to read up about their culture.

Multilinguality as a Resource

One group of three in the Fluency class chose the topic “The Effect of Climate Change on Agriculture.” They were from a rural agricultural background and were very knowledgeable about farming which they said they loved. They made their Google form questionnaire in Hindi and sent it to people in their villages. Prior to the assignment of the project, they had been very irregular in class barring one who would sometimes sit through an activity and barely talk. After starting their project, they began to share their experiences, speaking about how they went home to take part in farming operations and how even urban relatives kept their ties to agriculture by growing vegetables on their balconies and terraces. This is an example of how ELLs engage in class activities when they feel that their cognitive competence is acknowledged and their experience is validated. It also showcases how multilingual resources can very organically become part of the classroom.

The entire ELTL project, as explained earlier, was focused on using multilinguality as a classroom resource. A few interesting points were thrown up regarding students' attitudes to their linguistic heritage:

Consciousness of language loss: A few expressed their sadness at not knowing their L1 well. Speaking of how Bangla is a very sweet language, the lone Bengali student regretted her inability to speak the tongue and requested extra time to work with her mother on the task. Another regretted that though he was Kannada, he was forced to select a poem in Hindi due to his weak grasp of his mother tongue. Both were highly proficient in English.

Unconscious language loss: In the survey, 90.5 per cent of the student respondents said that they could read out their chosen poems in their mother tongue. The inability of the others to read their own languages implies some language loss on their part.

Use of other languages in the classroom: 98 per cent felt that it was acceptable to encourage other languages in an English classroom.

Identification with language communities: Interestingly seven students who reported Hindi as their mother tongue and language of maximum comfort, picked up poems in cognate languages like Pahari, Kumaoni, Awadhi, Rajasthani and Mewati and spoke about those cultures. This implies that though they speak Hindi at home, they are aware that they belong to these communities whose languages were taken under the umbrella of Hindi. This corroborates this researcher's experience in other classes where students identify with different language communities, though they use Hindi at home.

Operational Literacy

Following Palincsar and Ladewski, Jayendran et al define operational literacy as "gaining competence in technologies, tools and procedures required to handle language proficiently" (2022, 85). Under this head we may look at students' language competencies, their use of technology and their oral presentations.

In the Fluency class, by getting students to speak on what they had done for the day vis a vis the project, the teacher could elicit their opinions on their chosen topics and related matters. This improved their conversational skills and gave them the confidence to articulate their thoughts and opinions. Moreover, they learnt to use academic writing

conventions to organize their written work. Thus they improved their language competence by engaging in meaningful activities (Kumar & Agnihotri 2022, p. 299).

Oral Presentations

In both the classes, when prompts were disallowed, their oral presentations took on natural speech rhythms which attracted the attention of the listeners in a positive way. Furthermore, in the ELTL class, their content also became more reflective of their lived experiences of their culture.

ELLs had been encouraged to speak up and participate in all classroom activities throughout the term. This actually laid the groundwork for the final presentations making them less stressful for the students.

Presentation Rubric

Midway through the ELTL presentations, students were asked to come to the board one-by-one and note down what they regarded as most important in a presentation. Though repetition was allowed, students carefully noted what their peers were writing in order to add something which they felt had been missed. At the end, related points were connected with coloured markers and the category headings were put on the board. Thus a rubric was created. After the double period was over, a group of students stayed back to discuss this rubric. One related it to his performance in a speech competition. Thus students used their metacognitive abilities.

This exercise was not done with the Fluency class due to time constraints.

Quality of Powerpoints

Power-points invariably had to be redone as the written work had simply been transcribed on the slides.

Conclusion

For this researcher, project-based learning proved to be a powerful tool to improve literacy outcomes in multilingual undergraduate classrooms. The key generic takeaways may be listed as follows:

- Projects need to be carefully designed and scheduled
- Regular reminders must be put in for key tasks and deadlines

- Projects need to be done in class, in groups under the teacher's active supervision.
- Students need to comprehend the tangible outcomes and how they are benefiting

The learnings are neither final nor complete. No two classes are ever the same and the conditions in which teaching-learning occur are constantly changing. The evolving nature of the challenges demands an ongoing search for answers. This reinvigorates our classroom practice and sustains our interest in it.

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Annexure A

Feedback on Poetry Project - GE: English Language through Literature

<iframe src="https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeAcRAHdXQLR2JjaFI3MdoUmrwK6dw66AHk4oL3C4a7Pn-8Mw/viewform?embedded=true" width="640" height="2423" frameborder="0" marginheight="0" marginwidth="0">Loading...</iframe>

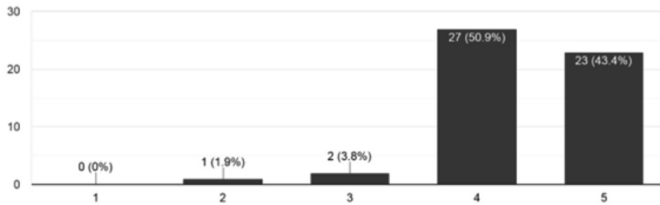
a

Did this project make you aware about the multicultural and multilingual nature of your classroom?
53 responses



b.

How did you feel upon listening to other students talk about their cultures in their presentations?
Rate your response according to the scale below.
53 responses



c.

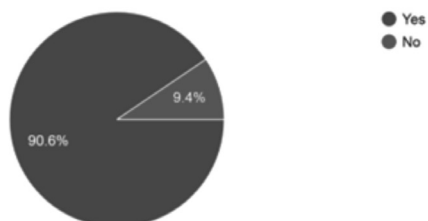
You were required to read up 2 articles about your culture. How did you feel about this requirement?
53 responses



d.

Could you read it out in the original language?

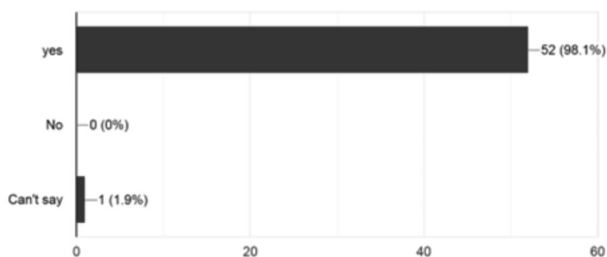
53 responses



e.

Do you feel that it is acceptable to encourage other languages in an English classroom?

53 responses



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