

Multilingualism as A Teaching Resource in an ESL Classroom

- Ravi Bhushan

Abstract: Notwithstanding a number of language teaching methods like grammar translation, direct, audio-lingual, and the latest communicative language teaching (CLT) being used for teaching of English, the debate on effective English language teaching continues. In fact we have reached the stage of “beyond methods”. My paper would emphasize on the fact that ELT pedagogy needs to be oriented towards using multilingualism as a framework and consider mother tongue as an important asset as far as teaching of English is concerned.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Language awareness, ESL, Culture

Multilingualism, which is defined as speaking two or more than two languages, is a growing worldwide phenomenon. Due to globalization and interdependent economies, many countries including India have significant multilingual population in their workforce and educational systems. In fact due to an increasing scope of international commerce & trade, the demand for multilingual education and training has increased considerably leading to unprecedented establishment of socio-cultural contacts. English as the major language of international business is spoken as a second or third language in many countries around the world. In fact English can be considered an important factor in creating multilingual societies. That is why educational programmes in English are in high demand. Students who study English as a second language often speak two or more other languages too. In fact knowing more than one language is a necessity for most of us. Knowledge of more than one language helps in learning subsequent languages. It quite often happens that students take the knowledge of their mother tongue for granted and do not take full advantage of what they already know. The teachers of English, teaching English as a foreign language can make great use of their students' familiarity with multiple languages. Engaging in the activities based on multilingual experience is of immense help to students, teachers and anyone who wants to add a new dimension to language teaching and learning. The aim should be to relate the learning of English with the students' previously known languages and make this multilingual approach a part of oral discussions, written assignments and projects in the classroom.

Research evidence shows that acquiring more than one language creates different kinds of connections in the brain, which gives multilingual students an advantage in some respects compared with monolingual individuals. Multilinguals are more aware of sociolinguistic variables and functions than those who speak one language and are adept at switching between different regional varieties, registers, formal and informal

language styles. This kind of knowledge when brought to a conscious level is known as language awareness and metalinguistic awareness (knowing about and being able to talk about how language is structured and functions) and is a special advantage of multilingualism. Besides knowing about languages, subject matter and pedagogy, the teachers should have an understanding of the socio-cultural circumstances of students' social & educational communities. Many of the teachers of English and students entering into an English classroom think that the languages students already speak (Mother tongue) inhibit or otherwise stand in the way of learning English. Moreover multilingual students will not always make the connection between their previous language learning (acquired at an early age) and their current language learning. The students may be discouraged by the fact that they have had less exposure to foreign languages compared to ones with which they are already familiar. Preconceived notions about the comparative value of different languages will also affect student learning and use of these languages. The goal of a teacher teaching English as a second language should be to counteract these notions and encourage their multilingual students to reflect and draw on their rich store of language information and skills in order to facilitate the learning of English. What we should be aiming today is to make our learners competent speakers of their own language besides English. The dangerous side-effect of banishing L1 from the English classroom show that the learners' mother tongue is inferior, or doesn't count, thus compromising the learners' linguistic identity. The only valid argument for minimizing (not banishing) L1 use is that over-use of L1 lessens the time available for English use in the classroom. Obviously, we want our students to have maximum exposure to English in our classes. But this means limiting L1 use, not banishing it altogether.

Some Purposes of L1 in Learning L2 : Some purposes of L1 use might be for explaining difficult grammar, for giving instructions which might not be understood in English, for checking comprehension, and for saving time which can then be used for communicative work in English etc. Now, the question is how to decide when to use English and when to use L1? It's essentially a question of professional judgment. Many times during a lesson, we need to ask ourselves: should I insist on English here, or should I use mother tongue? It's necessarily a split-second decision. The answer will depend essentially on how easy or difficult the message will be to convey and understand in English. The solution of saying things in English and then translating into L1, incidentally, is not a solution at all. Students learn very quickly that they don't need to listen to the English as the mother-tongue version is coming up, and this strategy simply gets them used to ignoring the English. This is not to say there is no place for translation. Translation helps us to understand better the influence of one language on the other, and to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed. And, because translation involves contrast, it enables us to explore the potential of both languages – their strengths and weaknesses. Translation is a natural and necessary activity. If translation is going on outside the classroom - in

offices, banks, factories, shops, and on airports, etc., then why not inside the classroom? Language competence is a two-way, not a one-way system. We need to be able to communicate both ways: into and from the second language. Understandably, textbooks place great emphasis on competence in the foreign language. Yet little guidance is given on how to communicate back into the mother tongue, as many professionals need to do in their daily work. Translation is ideally suited for practicing this vital skill.

Back-Translation Class Activity : In this kind of activity, before they tackle the task of translation, students talk about the topic to generate vocabulary and language they could find in the text. In small groups students translate the text into L1. Groups swap their L1 translations and retranslate them into L2. Then the original and the L2 versions are contrasted and discussed: Have any important ideas been lost? Does this loss affect the meaning of the text? Have words been changed and are these changes important? Have any sentence structure alterations affected the meaning of the text? After the discussion, students can work together to make more appropriate changes. The whole issue of using L1 in the classroom, in fact applies to only those teachers who are proficient in the learners' mother tongue. Explaining grammar, for example, is often a complex linguistic operation which some teachers who do not share the learners' mother tongue may not feel competent to do accurately. I think, essentially, we have to examine or re-examine the reasons for not using L1 in the classroom and decide whether they remain valid or not. However two trends that appear are:

- i. The idea of translating difficult words and parts of any text into L1, where spending time on them would be a waste of efforts.
- ii. The teacher using L1 to give instructions or explanations of the procedure(s) of the lesson and its rationale, so that lesson's aims and objectives are clear and achievable. Teachers may judge when to use each of the above and might like to think about the kinds of lessons each is likely to appear in. There is a third use I'd like teachers to consider.
- iii. How about actually incorporating texts written in L1 into the L2 lesson?

Exploitation of L1 in this way could be meaningful and bring strategies learners use into the limelight. It could bring out differences between the two languages and as such help overcome kinds of fossilization that can occur because of other kinds of teaching where the differences are so great that the difference does not lend itself to learners making the kinds of mental adjustments that are required.

Conditions for the Use of L1 : In our own classrooms, we should prefer possibly hesitant, error-full English contributions on the part of students over utterly correct, but limited sentences, interwoven with L1. They need to resort to L1 occasionally: and it's up to us to make sure that they only do this when they cannot possibly manage in English. I think the same basic rule goes for us: only to use L1 when there is no way we can get them to understand through English. Or, when doing it in English would be so long and boring and frustrating that it would actually save time for English use to do it in L1. There is no need to feel guilty when

using the L1. It is a point of professional judgment, and this is especially so when the teacher is not able to convey ideas in L2.

Cultural Features: American linguist Sapir considered the relationship between culture and language as a complex formula. He said that concepts like race, culture and language should not be confused or identified with each other, they are not necessarily correlated. This does not mean that they never are. The cultural features connected with L1 use can be put to good effect when teaching L2. While attempting a writing task in any examination in which a sample writing task may be like writing an article for an international student magazine describing a festival or celebration in your country' or similar topics that refer to their own cultural backgrounds, learners quite often resort to the knowledge of L1 to overcome the difficulty of English equivalent (e.g. Eid ul Fitr, Holi, Deepawali, Pongal, Makar Sakranti etc.). This can be used as an opportunity to exploit L1 for L2 practice. First, the learners transcribe the item into L1 script and then they write a brief description of what it is in English. There are a whole range of culturally bound items which a teacher can get students to explain in L2.

The adoption of such a technique, though, does return us to the idea/discussion of what kind of L2 are learners aiming for and how perfect do we want them to become. As mentioned above, using L1 allows students to compare and contrast English with the language they know best. Various course books now encourage students to translate model sentences into their own language as a means to study form and meaning. Cognitive processing makes learning active and more memorable. Whether to use L1 or not also depends on the aim of the activity and language skill being practiced. There are ways in which students' linguistic, cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge can be drawn to enhance ESL instructions. Lessons for students who are more fluent in English can be conducted entirely or partially in English and for other students, appropriate use of native language should be made. This is to help the students in making them aware of language & language learning skills they already possess and for comparison with English language structures and functions. Unfortunately, students (and even teachers) may enter the English classroom thinking that the languages students already speak, inhibit or otherwise stand in the way of learning English. In addition, when studying ESL, multilingual students will not always make the connection between their previous language learning – which may have been acquired at an early age – and their current language learning. These same students may be discouraged by the fact that they have had less exposure to foreign languages compared to ones with which they are already familiar. Preconceived notions about the comparative value of different languages will also affect students learning and use of these languages. A goal of ESL teachers, therefore, is to counteract these notions and encourage their multilingual students to reflect and draw on their rich store of language information and skills in order to facilitate the learning of English.

Language Awareness in a Multilingual Context: There could be two basic goals of teaching English as a second language; to help the students

gain a basic foundation in the subject and to help them further develop their spoken and written English. While the students are eager to improve their content and language skills, they rarely use English outside the classroom. Moreover, students in our classrooms are expected to repeat the knowledge they receive from textbooks or teachers and not necessarily reveal much of their own personal experiences. In order to address these obstacles, we can use our past experience and realization that students generally respond well in writing about their own social reality and do not find it as difficult as other kinds of academic tasks. This type of teaching contributes to pedagogy of particularity – in other words, a way of teaching that is sensitive to local conditions. Language problems could be considered from psychological or sociological perspectives as well as from a linguistic one and that the three approaches could well support each other was the message of a seminal study of the early fifties, *Languages in Contact*. Under the concept of language contact Weinreich considered first the linguistics of language contact, interlingual interference, i.e., the influence of one language, dialect, or other linguistic variety upon another, its phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. He, then, viewed the same problem from the point of view of the individual in a situation of language contact, in other words, the psychology of the bilingual person. Lastly he studied contact as a social problem of communities in language contact. In the same year as Weinreich's work on language in contact was published (1953) another study on bilingualism appeared which was equally influential in paving the way to a sociology of language, the *Norwegian Language in America* by Haugen termed as ecology of language. He defines language ecology as the study of interactions between a given language and its environment and describes it as the kind of study that 'has long been pursued under such names as psycholinguistics, ethnolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and the sociology of language'. Fishman, who has been foremost in the investigation of language patterns in multilingual societies, has evolved categorizations for the diversity of language situations. He uses the term bilingualism for the dual language command of the individual and the term diglossia to characterize 'the social allocation of functions to different languages or varieties'. Accordingly, four possible patterns can be recognized:

- Both diglossia and bilingualism
- Bilingualism without diglossia
- Diglossia without bilingualism
- Neither diglossia nor bilingualism

The third type, diglossia without bilingualism, can be illustrated by the position of English in Indian colonial days. The expatriate English officials operated through the medium of English without using the language of India for conducting administration; hence, in this diglossic society the English expatriates were monolingual, and most of the populations which they governed were monolingual in an Indian language. Lastly, neither bilingualism nor diglossia, is the position cultivated as the 19th century ideal of the unilingual state in which the

notion prevailed that a single standard language should be the only means of all communication at all levels. It is not surprising to find that India with its many languages and dialects and corresponding regional, religious, and social divisions faces a particularly difficult language situation. The awareness shared by policy makers and sociolinguists of the complexity of language in a society has led to a demand for comprehensive reviews of language use in the society and, on the basis of this information, to plans for policy decisions. Language teaching can be looked upon as a deliberate intervention into ethnolinguistic relations which can be planned more or less effectively and which, in this way, can contribute to the bilingualism of a society. In most of the studies and discussions on the psychology of language it was tacitly assumed that the individual is a monoglot, operating in a static and unilingual environment. Apart from a few exceptions, the acquisition of more than one language and bilingualism were treated as unusual, and relatively marginal phenomena like language pathology (aphasia, stammering, etc.). The aim of studying bilingualism was to find out how damaging it is to intellectual growth if a child operates with two languages rather than one. This implicitly negative approach to bilingualism has prevailed until recent times and is not uncommon even today. A study by Peal and Lambert in 1962 which claimed that bilingualism was not necessarily a disadvantage and could in fact be beneficial to the individual ushered in a major change to a prevailing view.

Second language learning and bilingualism were thus given a distinct place in this scheme of psycholinguistics. What, from our perspective, is particularly interesting is (a) that in this first mapping out of psycholinguistics, second language learning and bilingualism were treated as interrelated psychological phenomena, and (b) that they were not treated separately but placed squarely into the theoretical framework of a psychology of language. The main question raised in the brief treatment by Ervin and Osgood (1954/1965) of second language learning and bilingualism was how an individual, who can use two languages (the bilingual or second language learner), stores the two linguistic codes and brings them into action. Two different systems were envisaged: sometimes two languages are handled by individuals as two separate entities which operate independently. This mechanism, referred to as co-ordinate bilingualism, according to Ervin and Osgood, is typical of the 'true' bilingual 'who has learnt to speak one language with his parents, for example, and the other language in school and at work'. In the other case the two languages are linked, and the meanings of one language are interpreted through the medium of meanings in the other (compound bilingualism). The compound command is cultivated by learning two languages in the same social environment or by translation equivalent in the first language. Different speakers of two languages do not fall absolutely into one or the other category, but they are likely to vary in degree of 'coordinateness'.

Conclusion: Using L1 in the ESL classroom has long been considered an important issue among researchers. Some of them believe that use of L1 develops the L2 learning process and emphasizes its systematic,

cautious and restricted inclusion into the classroom practice. The L1, when used, has been primarily for purposes of translation, explanation or classroom management. It is hypothesized that learners' knowledge of L1 can be used as a scaffolding device to enable the learning of an L2. L1 can be used as a resource to teach L2, develop vocabulary, enable reading capabilities, for punctuation rules, emphasizing grammatical differences across two languages etc. It does not use the aid of simple translation of words in the new language but uses a cross-referencing method that can be learnt by a teacher who teaches all the subjects in a village school, a common scenario in a country like India. In all these, however, it should be ensured that the class does not look for translation all the time and for all items taught. The most of English classrooms contain multilingual students who want to add English to the language they already speak. However, since these students are not always able to realize their strengths as multilingual and 'bring one language to another,' they often need guidance to develop their linguistic and pragmatic knowledge to the learning of the new language. The EFL teacher's indispensable role is to underscore and actively make use of the abilities that multilingual students possess.

References :

- Atkinson, D. *Teaching Monolingual Classes*. Longman, 1993.
- Cook, V. *Using the first language in the classroom*. Canadian Modern Language Review, 57(3), 2001.
- Ellis, Rod. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Kramsch, C. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Krashen, S. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Prentice Hall, 1988.
- Richards, J.C. and T. S. Rogers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.



I Know And Do Not Know

- P. Raja

What urges me
to write this poem?
I do not know.
Only thing I know
is that I am not
what I was.

Yet the pen moves
swifter as usual on paper
making smudges all over
with twists and turns.

I do not know
what I will be
when my poem is done.
Only thing I know
is that my pen
will hold back its tongue.
And the white paper
will remain immaculate.

