



BYE- ORBI-LINGUALISM: TEACHER VIEWS ON USING BILINGUAL METHOD IN ESL CLASSROOM

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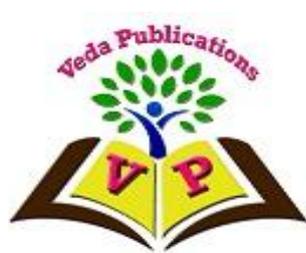
ABSTRACT

Bilingualism is making a comeback in the second language classrooms in India and it is no surprise considering that knowledge of more languages than one is the norm rather than exception in most parts of the globe while the teaching methods recommended to teach English, thanks to imports from the developed countries in the form of materials and expertise, often overlooks the simple fact that conditions under which English is taught in monolingual countries is vastly different from conditions where English is taught and learnt as a second or foreign language. It is rational therefore to interrogate the conditions under which English is taught to students learning it as a second language, particularly in light of their socio economic background. This paper is the outcome of a study that sought the views of teachers in using L1 as a scaffold to teach L2. It is predicated on the belief that L1 if used judiciously and sensibly will actually aid language learning instead of hindering it. The paper sought the views of teachers to bilingualism to establish their opinions regarding the use of mother tongue as a resource and the questionnaire was an instrument that established how well teachers were aware of using mother tongue to teach English. The conclusion reached is that some efforts must be expended towards inclusion of mother tongue as scaffolding in L2 teaching.

Keywords: *L1 Teaching, L2 Acquisition, Scaffolding, Language Learning, School Curriculum*

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INTRODUCTION

It is a truism that in India one needs to have English in their repertoire of languages if one is to make something of oneself in life! That English is seen as a passport to success and gainful employment is evidence of its indispensability to every Indian. The socioeconomically disadvantaged sections of society see in English language a way out of poverty, as captured very well in this observation by Rama Mathew (1997):

A school attached to a central university, which offers only English medium education to children of its employees (both teaching and nonteaching), tried to find out from parents how many would like a mother tongue medium stream, since experience had shown that for a majority of the students English-medium education was difficult. The response showed that the parents were not willing to accept a change, because they wanted their children to get better jobs than they had themselves (personal communication with the English teacher of the school) (p.167)

The popularity of English and the necessity of learning it have percolated to the most wretched of the earth that see English language as a saviour of the downtrodden. While there cannot be two opinions over the teaching of English as a second or third language in India, what has often bred controversy is the method recommended to teach it.

THE STUDY

The study was carried out in three schools all of which offer English medium instruction and differ only in ownership; while one is a *Kendriya Vidyalaya*— central school affiliated to CBSE— another is a *Navodaya Vidyalaya* and the third one a private school. All three schools have suitably qualified teachers to teach English and data was collected from 8 teachers regarding their views on bilingual education. This is important in that across the globe the hegemony of one or a few languages and the death or step motherly treatment to indigenous languages is being treated with alarm and measures are being initiated to give local languages the respect they deserve. The most important aspect however is

the way English is taught and learnt in schools and colleges across the country. There was a time when it was absolutely legitimate to teach English using mother tongue but with changing times and the import of materials and methods into the system, anything that bear the imprint of the UK or the USA is given attention, pushing to the backstage tried and tested indigenous ways of learning and teaching.

An example will confirm the truth of the argument. Consider, for example, the monolingual tenet imported from Britain and in vogue since the time it was introduced to teach English to natives (i.e. Indians)). The “Use-Only-English” regime that’s actively promoted in some schools even today has its roots in colonialism when the teachers of English were Englishmen who did not speak the language of Indians but who wanted the natives to learn English through English.

It suited the agenda of the British well to ask Indians to struggle in their attempts to communicate in a language that was alien to them. Unfortunately the rules of the game laid down by the erstwhile colonisers refuse to go away and are preached to this day in schools in India. This is one instance of cultural politics at work: internalising a rule imposed by an outside agency for its own selfish purposes.

The monolingual tenet condemns first generation learner to silence since mother tongue use is forbidden and the learner with little or no resources cannot fall back on anything to learn a second language. Similarly, learners who may want to use L1 in the initial stages of language learning so that they may overcome shyness or embarrassment are compelled to use L2 from the time they are taught it with the result that they may concede defeat out of sheer frustration or helplessness. Learners who are in straitened circumstance and cannot afford audio visual material needed to practise speaking may find themselves competing on unequal terms with those who have all the facilities.

Thus the outcome of using “Use only English” in the second language classroom will be learners who were unable to master a world language because of the false premise that English is best taught and learnt through English, the mother tongue being seen as unhelpful in teaching L2.



To ensure mother tongue is given the respect and place it richly deserves in the second language classroom, eight teachers employed in three schools were interviewed and asked to fill out a questionnaire about their views on bilingual method in the L2 class. Of the teachers data was collected from, two were from *Kendriya Vidyalaya*, three from *Navodaya Vidyalaya* and three from a school under private management. Those in the 25-30 age group were five in number while those in the 36-45 age groups were three. Surprisingly, only one teacher from among the 25-30 age groups had an MA while all three in the latter age groups had an MA. There was one teacher with six plus years of experience, two with three plus years while the remaining had between a few months to less than two years.

The teachers took part in a chat to voice their views on bilingualism and bilingual education; the teachers were polite, friendly, and willing to experiment with new and imaginative methods of teaching. They agreed that something needed to be done to get the weak or underperforming learners on an equal footing with their better performing counterparts and as far as language teaching went, it was very useful to use bilingual method to teach though they also cited situational constraints as the primary reason for the "non-use" of the method.

All the teachers agreed that bilingual method was highly recommended to:

- (a) Define new vocabulary
- (b) Teach new phrases and idiomatic expressions
- (c) Explain difficult/abstract concepts or ideas

When asked whether they used the bilingual method often or only rarely, six teachers replied that they used it as often as occasion demanded while two expressed reservations about using the method. Teachers who answered in the affirmative did express that it was always done on the sly, with the threat of being "found out" real and disappointing. Given below are some of the reasons why teachers claimed they needed to be very cautious in using mother tongue while teaching English, even if they endorsed its usefulness in taking English to the learners far more effectively than using only English to teach English.

SITUATIONAL CONSTRAINTS IN THE USE OF BILINGUAL METHOD

(a) TEACHERS' LIMITED COMPETENCE IN L1

Teachers expressed a startling but predictable fact: their own limited command of an L1. Those who spoke or used Telugu or Hindi said that they were themselves ashamed to find that they did not *have* - meaning *know* - all the words or phrasal verbs in their own language to be able to convey them to students. Teachers also confessed that they were themselves so used to English phrases and expressions that they expected their students to know these too.

(b) MANAGEMENT DEMANDS

The school managements in particular demand that students be compelled to use only English except in first language classes. This trend is prevalent in schools run by private management and not in Central schools or *Navodaya Vidyalayas* where the teacher has greater leeway. In schools that are run by private parties, the only rule is "English through English" and the reason given is that parents spend their hard earned money for an English medium education for their children the purpose of which is defeated if mother tongue were to intervene!

(c) HETEROGENOUS COMPOSITION OF STUDENTS

In a multilingual country; like India, teacher ability to use an L1 is stunted not only by their own limited command of the language but also by the number of languages that function as L1 for students. In *Kendriya Vidyalayas*, where children of central government employees study, the classroom one encounters is truly multilingual with the only possible L1 for communication being Hindi, which again may not live up to its promise given to geographical and other constraints.

(d) PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

Parents also harbour the misguided belief that the more English one is taught, the better the results. They have no use for teachers who seek recourse to the students' L1 since that is seen as retrogressive because mother tongue being mother tongue, is used all the time while English, a foreign language to many, needs mastering and that they



believe is only possible through extensive practice in English!

(e) LEARNER EXPECTATIONS

Students themselves are not always happy with the use of mother tongue to teach another tongue, which they see as teacher incompetence or incomplete mastery of English! Much like the rest students harbour the same misguided assumption that they were weak in English because they don't speak it or use it and the injection of Telugu or Tamil or Hindi will only make their inability to use English worse.

This phenomenon is by no means restricted only to India or Sri Lanka. Joseph and Ramani actually tried introducing the bilingual method in South African classrooms to learners in the belief that competence in one's own mother tongue was equally important, a move that backfired! This was because the attempts were resisted by the learners themselves. In their words:

While tolerating the group discussion in their own languages, they questioned the value of the written tasks. Many of them asserted 'We are here to learn English!' Our counter argument that developing literacy in their home languages was also important did not impress them. They saw time spent on structured activities in their own languages as time taken away from English (1998, pp.217-18).

CONCLUSION

Thanks to the "growing consciousness within ELT of multilingualism circles of the recognition of multilingualism, and of the hegemonic and dangerous role English plays in denying it (Joseph and Ramani, 1998, p.214), we can at least encourage some positive efforts in acknowledging the role of our own languages in helping learners cope with and master English as a second language. It is essential that some efforts be made to incorporate L1 use, no matter how limited, so that local languages thrive and students appreciate their own tongues while learning a foreign/second language. The complexity of L1 and L2 learning-cum-competency acquisition at schooling level can be summed up with the opinion of Phillipson (1996)

Multilingual schooling is a complex topic, that it is difficult to do justice to briefly, but the important issue is that in a multilingual society, education should be multilingual rather than 'X-medium' or 'Y-medium', terms which implicitly exclude or subtract languages(p.165).

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