ENGLISH ONLY CLASSROOM IN EFL CONTEXT: A NECESSITY OR A BURDEN

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ABSTRACT: *In many parts of the world it is widely accepted that in the language classrooms the use of L1 should be minimal, if not totally prohibited. While such practice is strongly advocated by a number of educationists and practitioners, there are others who think that a pragmatic use of L1 is not only unavoidable but also quite beneficial. Besides, in EFL context, the justification of English only classroom is questionable on practical grounds as the classrooms mostly consist of students and teachers who share the same L1, and show a poor knowledge of their L2, as in the context of the English classrooms of Bangladesh. This paper thus investigates the positive and negative effects of L1 usage in the language classroom and suggests the adoption of an appropriate stand in the EFL classrooms of Bangladesh.*

KEYWORDS: English-Only, Classroom, EFL Context, Practical Constraints, Principled Usage of l1

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion or exclusion of L1 in EFL context is a debated issue for ages and it is a topic of attention of various researchers (Alshammari, 2011; Harmer, 2007; Kafes, 2011; Rayati, Yaqubi, & Harsejsani, 2012; Cook,2011; Wells, 1999). The majority of these scholars and educationists put forward arguments regarding the positive and negative roles of L1 in second language teaching. For hundred years bilingual teaching was considered as the 'norm' and students were taught language basically through translation. However, with the development of new methodologies of language teaching, the role of L1 began to be questioned and in some cases it was thought that L1 plays a detrimental role in the acquisition of a second language. Consequently, in many parts of the world it was assumed that in the language classrooms the use of L1 should be minimal, if not totally prohibited. While such practice is strongly advocated by a number of educationists and practitioners, (e.g. Chaudron, 1988; Krashen, 1982; Macdonald, 1993), there are others (e.g. Cook 2011, Harmer, 2007) who think that a pragmatic use of L1 is not only unavoidable but also quite beneficial. Besides, in EFL context, the justification of English only classroom is questionable on practical grounds as the classrooms mostly consist of students and teachers who share the same L1, and show a poor knowledge of their L2, as in the context of the English language classrooms of Bangladesh. This paper, thus, investigates the positive and negative effects of L1 usage in the language classrooms and suggests the adoption of an appropriate stand in the EFL classrooms of Bangladesh.

Historical Perspective of the English Only Stand

The justifications of English only classrooms are made on several grounds and often in not very clear terms. First of all, the role of L1 has been viewed quite differently in different teaching methodologies. The Grammar Translation Method, (GTM) which has been used for decades in the past, totally depends on the usage of the first language, as Harmer (2007, p 63) puts it,

"The use of L1 is almost tantamount to the emergence times of GTM because sentences had to be translated from the target language (L2) back to the students' first language (L1) and vice versa"

However GTM was ineffective in making learners communicate in the target language (TL) and consequently methods that emphasized on communication such as the Direct Method (DM) became popular. In the Direct Method, as the name suggests, language was taught directly using only the target language. In DM everything was done in the target language such as grammar was taught inductively, focus was given on speaking and listening, and only useful 'everyday' language was taught and "the target language" was "the language of the classroom" (Richards and Rodgers 2002, page 39). The Audio lingual method also rejected the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. It advocated the idea that learning of the target language is more effective if the target language is used. Those caught using the first language were often punished or rebuked for doing something wrong (Phillipson, 1992, p187) and the idea of bilingual education was perceived as unnatural or inefficient (Pennycook, 1994, p136).

Another reason for English-only classroom is given on the ground that the use of L1 limits the students' exposure to L2 input. The teacher was seen as the primary source of the L1 linguistic input and thus it was assumed the more exposure learners get in the target language, the better it is for them (Harmer,2007). When the teacher gives instruction or explains grammar using the L2 learners are exposed to the true communicative use of the language and therefore if these activities are carried out in the first language it "would deprive the students of genuine experience of interaction through the second language." (Cook, 2011, 181)

Another possible justification that Cook (2001 p.181) mentions is the thought that "the two languages should be kept separate in the mind" as it is assumed that second language can only grow properly if it is developed independent of the first language and learners must develop the ability to think in their L2. Avoidance of the L1 will help to keep the two languages apart and eventually will become advantageous for the L2 learners. This argument is based on the idea that Weinreich (1953) put forward when he distinguished between compound bilinguals whose mind link the two languages and coordinate bilinguals who keep them separate. "Thus the policy of avoiding the first language assumes that the only valid form of L2 learning is coordinate bilingualism." (Cook, 2011, p.182). But Cook further notes that however different the two languages are in theory, they are interwoven in their phonological, vocabulary, syntactical and sentence processing systems.

A practical justification which is often mentioned by many educationists and practitioners (for example Cook, 2011; Harmer, 2007) is that, in many English language classroom learners use different first language and thus it becomes impossible for the teacher to take account of all these languages. This usually takes place in an English speaking country where learners are mostly immigrants from non-English speaking countries. On the other hand, many expatriate native teachers who teach in EFL context cannot avoid the use of L2 as they not likely to speak the first languages of the student.

Justifications for the Bilingual Classrooms

Even though some L2 advocators (e.g. Chaudron, 1988; Krashen, 1982; Macdonald, 1993) are on the side of exposing significant amount of L2 input to develop learners' L2 proficiency and strongly disagree in using the L1, there are others like Macaro (2005) who argues that the avoidance of L1 results in increased usage of input modification like repetition, speaking more

slowly, substituting complex words, modifying sentences etc. and thus can create a frustrating situation for both the learners and the teacher. Interactionists, similarly, believe that only exposure L2 input is not enough. Brooks and Donato (1994) argue that L1 enables learner to negotiate meaning and communicate successfully. In line with the interactionist learning theory, Ellis (1984) also suggests that input alone is insufficient for the fluency of L2. Moreover, the use of L1 may reduce the affective barriers and increase the students' ability to successfully comprehend the L2. In a study Liao (2006) found that in English only classrooms students remain silent and nervous. In contrast, if both of the languages are allowed, students participate and engage in meaningful communication willingly.

Besides, Cook also pointed out that using only L2 in the classroom will make it appear less real. This classroom is not a real L2 situation where learners are learning to communicate using L2 but rather a pretended monolingual situation. Also, Cook (2011) in her Multi-competence Theory stated that, the L2 learners possess their own language system and should be considered as successful multilingual speakers rather than deficient native speakers. In this respect it can also be added that unlike the real life communication situation, in classrooms learners do not get the help of the context clues to understand the meaning of the conversation. A total avoidance of L1 in these unreal communicative situations seems hardly justified. Schweers (1999) also encourages teachers to incorporate the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic and suggests that "starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves (p.7)

Also the use of L1 can provide scaffolding. During pair or group work the intermittent use of L1 with L2 allows students to work within their ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) as put forward by Vygotsky (Wells,1999) in performing tasks such as, evaluating written language or writing essays. At the beginning level, student's limited vocabulary may not allow them to reach higher level of understanding if they use L2 to process ideas. In this regard, Cook (2001) also thinks that the student's first language can provide scaffolding to assess each other when learners need to build understanding concerning a language task. It helps students to clarify communication such as in the case of writing task, when they need to decide on the content or the use of vocabulary to complete the task.

The EFL Context of Bangladesh

Before taking a stand, various factors need to be taken into consideration such as learners' first language, their age, proficiency level, duration of the course, purpose for learning, the pedagogy policy of the institute, educational background of the learners and the social context in which the teaching learning is taking place. In Bangladesh, students are found to share the same first language as the majority of people in this country speak the language Bengali. The state run schools and colleges which enroll the majority of students in the country, are of Bengali medium. English is taught in the primary and secondary levels of education as a compulsory subject. More specifically, at every grade learners study two papers in English. However, in 1995 the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) introduced the communicative language teaching approach replacing the age old practice if teaching English through grammar and translation. These changes was made with a view to developing the students with "communicative competence" and thereby strengthen the development of the human resources in the country (Hamid and Baladauf, 2008). One of the major characteristics of this syllabus is to use English as the sole medium of instruction. (Farooqui, 2008). The government has also arranged in-service training for the teachers of schools and colleges to facilitate the use of the new textbooks written specifically for developing communicative

competence. Learning of grammar structures is positively discouraged and students are encouraged to learn English in a way they can use it in real life situation. In the English classrooms both teachers and learners are expected to communicate solely in English. Again, in the tertiary level, especially in the private universities (including the university where the authors teach) English is the medium of instruction and teachers are strictly prohibited to use Bengali in any classroom. In practice though, teachers find it quite challenging to maintain this English-only stand as students, especially those coming from the Bengali medium show a poor knowledge of English. Teachers are usually found in a dilemma as they need to give them instructions in English and at the same time make them understand the lessons which students find difficult if they are taught entirely in English.

Taking a Stand (in context of Bangladesh)

'Monolingual Approach' and 'Bilingual Approach' both represent extreme views and have their positive and negative sides. In certain classroom situations, as in the case of the Bangladeshi classrooms mentioned earlier, teachers need to develop some principles to use the L1 optimally and at the same time provide the leaners the valuable input in the L2. They need to recognize the L1 of learners and not take it as inferior compared to English. At the same time learners need to understand the benefits of maximizing the use of L2 in the classroom.

Many educations (such as Harmer, 2007, Gebhard, 2006; Cook, 2001; Burden ,2000) provide guidelines regarding the careful usages of L1 and also the cases where it needs to be avoided. An amalgamation of the principles of using the L1 and abstaining from its usage is presented in the following section.

- Classroom activities: Teachers can switch to L1 for activities including translation exercises, comparing and contrasting the areas of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and discourse. However, teachers need to restrict its usage in such activities as speaking practice where the usage of L1 can be counterproductive.

- Teaching difficult ideas: L1 can be used to teach some difficult points such as, meta language, abstract ideas, and complex linguistic expressions which learners are likely to find difficult to understand. However, they need to be cautious of its overuse. If it is possible to make the meaning understandable by using such techniques as miming, drawing pictures, paraphrasing, giving context clues, etc. then they should avoid the direct usage of the L1.

- Classroom instruction: Teachers can use the first language to give instructions, to announce important dates for exams, to explain the rules and regulations as misunderstanding of these can create serious problems for the students.

- During group/pair work: teachers can use the L1 intermittently during pair or group activities as it allows learners to work within their Zone of Proximal Development. In these cases the first language of the learners can provide scaffolding to help them reach an understanding concerning the language task.

- Motivating learners: A classroom needs to be a place where learners feel comfortable when they engage in any activities. Teachers may use L1 to motivate learners when practicing the listening and reading skills so that learners can practice without getting stressed.

- Creating rapport with the students: In a mixed level classroom there can be the less proficient learners who might get intimidated at the thought of using English all the time. Teachers can create a less threatening atmosphere by chatting with the students in their native language or by sharing a joke or anecdote.

- During the initial stages of a language course: At the beginners' level, a learner's limited vocabulary may not allow him/her to process ideas. Use of L1 at this stage may facilitate communication. However, when students reach the later stages of language learning, use of L1 should be minimized or prohibited as then they need to learn how to function in the language properly.

CONCLUSION

We need to reconsider the English-only stance in the EFL contexts such as the context of Bangladesh as the recent views of the existing literature indicate that the learners' first language has a necessary & facilitating role in classroom instruction and learning activities. But at the same time teachers need to use L1 judiciously and cautiously as the unprincipled usage is likely to lead to lack of communication skills. Teachers need to come up with clear guidelines considering the age, proficiency level, attitude towards the target language, the needs, as well as other relevant factors relating to the learners and communicate these to the students so that everyone has a clear understanding how much the L1 usage is permissible. The guidelines for the L1 usage presented in this paper is not exhaustive and are presented considering the classroom situation of Bangladesh. However, they can be helpful in any contexts where teachers feel the need to use the L1 as "a facilitating factor" and "not just an interfering factor". (Brown 2001, p 68)

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