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STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ABOUT BILINGUAL METHOD IN THE ESL CLASSROOM: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

While the benefits of multilingual Education are numerous and beneficial to students, the tendency to teach a second Language using limited or no recourse to the students 4 continues to remain a mystery. As far back as 1992, Phillipson brought this to light and termed it *monolingual fallacy*, a term that is not just appropriate but on accurate description of what obtains in schools and colleges, where English is used to teach English despite there being a common language that teachers and learners share; it is rather ironical that the stakeholders who matter most in the teaching-learning process- students themselves- are often left out of the equation. To determine the opinions of students themselves to idea of using bilingual method in the classroom, a survey was undertaken and the results analyzed for discussion. Data analysis reveals that students are inclined favourably to the idea of bilingual method as they believe it aids comprehension better. The article also looks at some of the putative but misguided excuses for swearing allegiance to monolingual fallacy.

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The study

To gauge the reaction of students to the use of bilingual method by teachers in the ESL classroom, a study was conducted which saw the active participation of 44 students, drawn from Kendriya Vidyalaya, Navodaya Vidyalaya and a private school offering education in English medium. The *raison d'être* for the investigation emerged out of an unexpected incident the researcher had when teaching a prose piece for students. The researcher who is a teacher in a private school decided to use Telugu and occasionally Hindi to explain difficult or abstract passages in the lesson and reaction/response of students to this was pleasantly surprising. They welcomed it if their enthusiastic response to questions

asked was any indication. Their delighted faces was proof positive that using the mother tongue was not a bad idea at all.

The study was conducted in a systematic manner with personal interviews, questionnaires and classroom observation comprising instruments of data collection. In general information was sought on the students' "general background in English, aspects of learning English that they liked or did not like, the advantages that fluency in English would bring them,..." (Ramanathan, 1999, p.218) as well as the occasions and people they got to speak English with, the sources they relied on to hone their spoken and written English and the idea of teaching English through mother tongue/4.

The learners were in the age group of 12-14 years and were middle school students. While 27 were male learners, 17 were female. Learners had been learning English as a second language for 7 years and their competence in spoken English did not attest to their Longevity in using English. One of the reasons could be that it was the teachers who used English extensively while the learners had been restricted to using English to prepare for exams, and spoken English is not a tested component.

Classroom observations prior to data collection revealed that while many students seemed able to Comprehend the text, there was a general opinion among them that the teacher could have used L1 to explain the text and invite greater and more meaningful participation from students. Informal chat was followed by administration of the questionnaire, the analysis of which I presented in the following sections!

When asked who they mostly used English with to communicate, the majority of learners replied that they used English to communicate with the teacher; only 6(13.8%) claimed they used English with friends and classmates. Personal observation reveals that in Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas which has students from across the country, Hindi is the preferred language of communication. English is only used when the speaker is unable to follow Hindi or when there is conscious attempt to use English alongside Hindi and/or local language.

When asked their main source of input for second language learning, 90% of learners claimed that the classroom was the primary source. This implies that any improvement in learning English or motivation to use it needs to come from the teacher. Teaching methods will have to necessarily factor in the socio-economic and financial conditions of learners and aim for a method that is eclectic. This is one important observation that flows from analysis.

Surprisingly only 10(22.72%) said they watched TV that telecast programmes in English while 6(13.6%) said they read books. This is understandable considering that Hindi and regional channels are

popular among the young and old with few showing interest in English Programs.

Learners were next asked how important it was for them to learn/know English. 43(99.98%) said it was very important for them to have working knowledge of English while one said it was important. As has been very oppositely observed by Tharu (2008):

A job market and work force with a board social base together with the prominence of spoken English skills at work has made the relevance of the language highly visible to large segments of the population. Hence the clamour for more English from ordinary people (p.98)

Learners are aware how important English is for them from what they hear from teachers and parents, from relatives and well-wishers, from social media and the internet, about how revolutionary changes are taking place in every sphere, particularly on the job front. They intuitively know how indispensable English is for their professional growth and career. It is no surprise therefore that learners believed that learning English was important for them.

Learners were then asked to summarise their response to the prospect of using English in their everyday life ; 30(68.14%) reported they felt greatly elated on being able to learn English; the remainder-14-said they were excited to use English. It is pertinent to note that no learner claimed that they found the idea of using English anathema to them.

The next question sought to know if they were comfortable with the idea of learning English through mother tongue. It will be in order to mention in this context there was an informal chat with students regarding their opinions about allowing L1 as scaffolding. No attempts were made to influence their opinion. They were just asked if they would welcome the teacher using Telugu/Hindi to explain a lesson or poem. Some students said it would be a good idea to translate lessons and poems into mother tongue to ensure greater enthusiasm from teachers while others said it was enough if tough or challenging passages were explained. But it did emerge that students were

not at all averse to the idea of English being taught through a local language, be it Hindi or Telugu.

Many students-particularly those from the historically marginalized communities were heartily open to the idea of being taught in mother tongue as these learners from disadvantaged backgrounds had none to help them with English outside class hours. All the exposure to English they got was during the time spent in school and they needed motivating to keep them going. The one sure way to get them interested was to start the opening gambit in their language.

The next question then wanted learners to specify the exact occasion bilingualism ought to figure prominently. All the learners were unanimous that it would be greatly useful to use Telugu/Hindi when (a) introducing new vocabulary, particularly if the term(s) was/were abstract or beyond comprehension despite elaborating the meaning in simple English.

Learners added that it would also be useful to use mother tongue when crucial rules pertaining to grammar and usage were explained. They also welcomed the method when a difficult to comprehend idea could be made easier to comprehend through L1 use.

Annamalai (2008) hits the nail on the head when he says:

If the learning of English has to move from universal preference to universal achievement then it is essential to have an integration of the teaching of English with the teaching of the mother tongue and have to have innovation in methodology appropriate to learners who come from adverse backgrounds (p.112)

Teaching English to students “whose parents and grandparents were denied access to this language by socio-political factors, and who now want to equalize their opportunities in the newly opening Social and economic systems,” (Annamalai, 2008, p.112) is always a challenge and one of the innovative ways is to use mother tongue judiciously.

In informal talk learners expressed an eagerness to hear their mother tongue employed as a

means to get the meaning across to a class with a heterogeneous mixture.

When learners were asked if bilingual method would in any way help them learn the target language better, 43 learners (99.9%) replied that it would while there was only one who said it would help only sometimes. Almost all the learners maintained that bilingual method is a useful tool because they themselves code-switched in and outside classroom; teachers themselves used both English and one other language when talking to colleagues and subordinates, and that using a language that both learners and teachers operated in would be helpful to teach English.

Conclusions

Some important conclusion may be drawn from the study:

- (a) Learners actually have a preference for bilingual method though they seldom have the courage to recommend this as a teaching method to teachers.
- (b) Teachers are willing to use bilingual method if administrative bottlenecks and prejudices are removed. It came through from informal talk with teachers that there were strict instructions for English teachers to use only English and compel students to speak only in English throughout the time that English class was in progress. But the experience of one teacher of English who taught English as a foreign language, gives the lie to this assumption.

In a number of instances, L1 proved to be an asset in class, not a liability. As such, I firmly believe that monolingualism needs to be re-examined in terms of its effect in helping learners develop positive attitudes towards L2, motivating them, and providing them with the basis necessary to build solid foundations. (Jenkins, 2010, p.459).

Unless there is a change in mindset of curriculum designers and administrators

about the use of L1 in English classroom, English teachers will continue to teach English through English, Leading to some sections of English being left uncared for and ignored by the system.

As has been tightly observed by Annamali (2008):

Method and materials of teaching English to urban middle class children from homes where English is in the air may be not be universally applicable to all learners from different backgrounds.(p.112).

This clearly implies that indigenous methods need to be employed to teach English and bilingualism is an ideal method.

- (c) The monolingual fallacy is ingrained in the minds of both teachers and students who believe that more English means better English and more hours of exposure implies enhancement of fluency and accuracy in learners. This is not always the case and there are several parameters that need factoring in before any such assumption is proved true.

In conclusion it may be safely summarized that bilingual method far from stunting language learning actually aids it. PremaKumari (2008) observes that:

The English language learner, in India has always visualized himself in the role of a receiver. He has accepted whatever he has been told despite his awareness that most of what he has received been imported. In the role of a critical learner, he examines the relevance of this knowledge to his own growth as a language user in a specific social context, and tries to find ways to assert himself (Dheram, 2008, p.20)

This paper attempted to do precisely that by trying in its own modest way to empower learners by seeking their views on learner friendly methods. And bilingualism emerged a clear winner.

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