USING LEARNERS' MOTHER TONGUE IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A STUDY CONDUCTED IN AMPARA DISTRICT

S.Rifa Mahroof

Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language,
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

rifahome@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The current study focuses on teaching ESL to junior secondary learners in the schools of Ampara District where the L1 of the learners is Tamil. One of the strategies adopted by teachers to assist low proficiency learners is to use L1. When there is unrestricted use of L1, the learners receive little or no exposure to English in the ESL classrooms. Data was collected through classroom observation and the classroom discourse was audio recorded. Twenty five junior secondary ESL classrooms in Ampara district were randomly selected from 1 AB and 1C schools for observation. In the perspective of teachers, they need to be made aware of their own perceptions and practices of using L1 through reflective practice and be convinced of the benefits of maximizing the use of target language to improve the learners' proficiency while improving their own proficiency in English.

Keywords: First Language; English; Classroom Observation

INTRODUCTION

The methodological shifts of teaching ESL have brought about new outlooks on the role of the MT, hereafter referred as first language (L1) of the learners and it is no longer the doctrine of compromise but acknowledged as a beneficial pedagogical tool to scaffold second Language (L2) learning, also referred as target language, TL (Atkinson 1987, 1993; Harbord 1992). Given the realities of the ESL classrooms with limited opportunities to be exposed to target language affordances, the validity of this assumption is debatable as there is a risk of teachers overusing the learners' L1 (Turnbull 2001), depriving the opportunity of learners to get target language affordances (Cook 2001; Ellis 2008). The ESL classroom is often the only place where L2 learners receive L2 affordances as their immediate environment has the invisible presence of L1 in all spheres of life. While there is justification that L1 assists limited L2 proficiency learners, particularly in ESL contexts, researchers have also warned against the risk of overusing L1 by teachers (Turnbull 2001) and warranted 'principled' use of it to facilitate L2 learning. Reiterating this view, Nation (2003) also cautions against overusing L1, as this might cause students to lose their motivation to use the L2. In another line, Van Lier (2001) claims that linguistic affordances should be provided to facilitate L2 learning. In these lines, Turnbull (2001) argues that exposure to TL affordances is the strongest theoretical rationale for maximizing the teacher's TL use.

The current study focuses on teaching ESL to junior secondary learners in the schools of Ampara District where the L1 of the learners is Tamil. One of the strategies adopted by teachers to assist low proficiency learners is to use L1. When there is unrestricted use of L1, the learners receive little or no exposure to English in the ESL classrooms. This study aims to address the following research questions with a view to explore the extent to which the students are provided target language affordances via teacher talk to facilitate L2 learning.

1. What is the dominant language used by the teacher in the ESL classroom? Do they code switch when they use L1 or L2?
2. To what extent do teachers use L1 in teaching ESL?
3. Given the realities of the ESL classrooms in Ampara District, is the use of L1 a scaffold or a restriction for L2 learning?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative design. Data was collected through classroom observation and the classroom discourse was audio recorded. Twenty five junior secondary ESL classrooms in Ampara district were randomly selected from 1 AB and 1C schools for observation. The sample consists of language episodes (LE) collected from the selected ESL classrooms, where students' L2 proficiency was considerably low.

The data was transcribed and analyzed using Myers- Scotton's (1993) Matrix Language-Frame model. This model was employed to differentiate a switch from one language to another within a sentence (intrasentential code switching) and a switch between sentences or at the end of a sentence.(inter sentential code switching). A word count of one hundred and fifty words of a lesson was considered to gauge the variation of language use and this was used to quantify the L1 and L2 use in the classroom.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table1: L1- L2 distribution in the ESL classroom

classroom	English (L2)	L2 %	Tamil (L1)	L1 %	Classroom	English (L2)	L2 %	Tamil (L1)	L1 %
T1	27	18%	123	82%	T 14	28	19%	122	81%
T 2	36	24%	114	76%	T 15	28	19%	122	81%
T 3	116	77%	34	23%	T 16	45	30%	105	70%
T 4	35	23%	115	77%	T 17	44	29%	106	71%
T 5	36	24%	114	76%	T 18	41	27%	109	73%
T 6	44	29%	106	71%	T 19	27	18%	123	82%
T 7	27	18%	123	82%	T 20	36	24%	114	76%
T 8	47	31%	103	69%	T 21	43	29%	107	71%
T 9	46	31%	104	69%	T 22	45	30%	105	70%
T 10	50	33%	100	67%	T 23	36	24%	114	76%
T 11	44	29%	106	71%	T 24	42	28%	108	72%
T 12	42	28%	108	72%	T 25	26	17%	124	83%
T 13	48	32%	102	68%	Average	27.71%		72.29%	

As per the word count on the use of L1 and L2, shown in table 1, all teachers except one used more than 67% of L1. A great deal of variation was found across the teachers and classroom contexts. Of all teachers, whose classrooms were observed, the classroom with teacher T3 used 77 % of L2, whose usage was the highest and six used between 30%- 33% and the rest used as low as 17- 30%. Despite the guidelines given for teaching and learning English in the Teacher's Instruction Manual

(National Institute of Education 2009, p.25) "target language should be the language of the classroom and mother tongue could be used sparingly, where necessary to make meaning clear", the average amount of L2 used in each classroom was as low as 27.71 % which did not afford opportunities for learners to use L2 in the classroom. While there was substantial variation in the use of L1, the overall average use in the classroom was 72%. This reflects a greater percent in the overall language used in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

The significant finding was the overuse of L1 by the majority of teachers as reflected in table 1, indicating 23-83 % of L1 use which shows an average of 72% of the selected LE. This clearly indicates that the teachers use L1 as the dominant language and often switch from L1 to L2 who perhaps teach English language as any other content subject. This confirms the study conducted by (Karunaratna 2003) who found teachers excessively depending on L1.

Though L1 is certainly acknowledged as a pedagogical and communicative tool in the ESL classrooms by scholars in Second Language Acquisition (Cook 2001; Van Lier 2000; Swain & Lapkin 2000;Anton & dicamilla 1998; Watanabe 2008; Guthri, 1984; De la Campa Nassagi 2009), the findings of this study show that L1 in the study context was not used in a judicious way to act as a scaffold but was used in an unrestrictive way and did not offer target language affordances to facilitate interaction in L2. Based on this claim the researcher argues that there is no justification for promoting L1 use in ESL teaching, considering the ESL contexts in Ampara district. The basis for this argument is to maximize L2 affordances, given that the learners have no other source or opportunity beyond the classroom (Cook 2001; Ellis 2008; Turnbull & Arnette 2002: Swain & Lapkin 2000;Turnbull 2001) While scholars consider the pedagogical value of L1 as a teaching tool, they have also cautioned the pedagogical implication of over using it in a way that is detrimental to ESL teaching.

Turnbull argues that "if teachers are 'licensed' (cook 2001, p.410) to use L1 in their teaching, it will result in overuse of the L1"(Turnbull & Arnette 2002, p. 207). While Atkinson (1987) offers three reasons for using L1 such as a Learner preferred strategy, humanistic approach and time saving strategy, justifying it to enhance teacher, learner interaction when both teacher and learners have the same L1 also warns about the negative consequences of over using it (ibid).This view is echoed by Ellis (2008) and Nation (2003) on the ground that learners will lose their motivation to use L2. In a similar vein, Macdonald (1993) and Wong- Fillmore (1985) claim that TL use will increase motivation to learn the L2.

Polio and Duff's (1994) qualitative analysis on target language and L1 alternation in 13 University in USA whose L1 was English backs up the claims of Nation(2003) and Ellis(2008), arguing that not using the L2 takes away the valuable opportunities for the learners to hear and use the L2. This study provides a further insight on Duff & Polio (1990) who examined how much foreign language (TL in this study) was there in thirteen foreign language classrooms. Polio & Duff (1994) argue that affective factors are not the most important goal and had there been more L2 in the classroom there would have been more L2 acquisition. They also argue that learners are not expected to understand 100% of what a teacher says and by not using L2, the teachers rob the opportunity for learners to figure out what is going on.

The finding of the quantity of use of L1 in this study is consistent with Turnbull's (1999) study with 9-89% of L1 on French as a second language in a secondary school in Canada, Duff and Polio's (1990)finding of 0- 90 %, Liu et al (2004) 10- 90% where L1 is Korean in thirteen secondary ESL classrooms in South Korea and Kim & Elder's

(2005) study with 12-77% in seven secondary L2 French, German, Korean, Japanese classes in New Zealand whose L1 was English. It is also notable that this finding is inconsistent with Guthri's finding on teachers' speech in French University classes that reported 2- 41%% of L1 with a median of 13%, Wing's study of secondary classes with mean of 46% of L1 and Mitchell and Johnstone's case study of roughly 30% of L1 (cited in Chaudron (1988), p. 124)

One of the proposals of the National Policy Framework on General Education (2003)was to "strengthen ESL in the junior secondary levels ". However, the implementation of this proposal at junior secondary level of ESL have been less successful as revealed by Wijesekera (2012) and Perera, Gunewardena and Wijetunge (2003). The finding in this study justifies their view as the teachers in Ampara district are not made aware of the pedagogical implications of overusing L1. In considering the amount of L2 used by teachers in the study, it was 18-33% with an exception of one teacher who used 77%. The overall use of TL was considerably low thus limiting learners' production of L2 and exposure to it. Hence, the overuse of L1 significantly limited the target language affordances to facilitate L2 learning.

Though this finding is limited by the context of the study this may be applied to classrooms with similar contexts. Furthermore, the small sample size and the method used to quantify the distribution of L1 and L2 is a limitation that needs to be validated in further studies.

CONCLUSION
Weighing up the potential benefits of being immersed in target language affordances for genuine learning (Van Lier 2000), there is a need for teachers to become active participants of classroom activities. In the perspective of teachers, they need to be made aware of their own perceptions and practices of using L1 through reflective practice and be convinced of the benefits of maximizing the use of target language to improve the learners' proficiency while improving their own proficiency in English.

REFERENCES
ATKINSON, D (1987). The mother tongue in the classroom: A neglected resource? *ELT Journal,* vol. 41, no.4, p. 241-247
COOK, V. (2001), 'Using the first language in the classroom',*Canadian Modern Language Review*, vol.57, no..3 , pp.402-423
DUFF, PA & POLIO, CG (1990). 'How much foreign language is there in the foreign language classroom'? *The Modern Language Journal, vol.74*, no.2), pp. 154-166.
NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK IN GENERAL EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA (2003) Envisioning Education for human development, Nawala, National Education Commission
TURNBULL, M (2001), There is a role for the L1 in second and foreign Language teaching…
The Canadian Modern Language Review, vol. 54, no.4, pp. 531- 540