

Research on L1 Use in ELT in India- Advancements and Limitations

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ABSTRACT

Given that India has a multilingual society with strong regional languages, Indian researchers of ELT have addressed the issue of the use of learners' L1 or own language in EFL/ESL teaching in a large number of works. This article undertakes a literature review of such studies to explore the advancements and unique findings, by analysing their utility in bringing to fore the contextual, social and linguistic aspects of L1 use in ELT or English medium teaching. It also identifies gaps that exist, vis-à-vis research designs and paradigms. This review aims to guide and encourage future researchers to explore new designs, research questions and methodologies.

Key words: L1, ELT, literature review, India, mediating language

Introduction

Foreign language (FL) pedagogy, including that used in English Language teaching (ELT) has thrown up challenges like no other. One of the most challenging areas has been the decision on the use or rejection of learners' first or other language repertoire in ESL/EFL teaching.

English language in India holds an ambiguous position: it has been a part of the three-language policy while it is not a listed language in the eighth schedule of the constitution. This ambiguity coupled with its position as a language of upward mobility, as an ostensible lingua franca, the existence of very strong regional languages and a large number of local dialects along with a socially, linguistically and economically stratified society, makes decision making on the use of learners' own language in ELT or English medium teaching (EMT) extremely challenging.

Naturally, Indian researchers researching in this field have been prolific in their research. However, such works have remained by and large

scattered and it is time for a comprehensive review to identify advancement and gaps to take studies forward in this field.

This paper aims at a brief analysis of the research approaches and paradigms used for investigating the use of L1/other-languages (OL) in ELT/EMT in India as well as the effect of English medium (EM) and non-EM instructions in content classrooms on learning outcomes. It explores the advances and unique findings in such research by analysing their utility in bringing to fore the contextual, social and linguistic aspects of mediating language use in India. It also identifies gaps that exist, vis-à-vis research designs and paradigms as well as determines originality of research questions and hypotheses.

Methodology

In this paper I have reviewed and analysed some investigations in this field which have been selected by the following methods: search in data bases such as Jstor home, abstracts in leading publications, Google scholar search using key

words like ELT, EFL, ESL Indian classrooms, codeswitching, multilinguality etc. Particularly, emphasis and importance have been laid on publications of conference proceedings by the British council of India and major theoretical and experimental works. I have also chosen more recent works (last ten years) and avoided those frequently referenced in other literature reviews unless they are of seminal importance. For simplicity and cohesion, I have analysed the works under two categories: a) issues in focus and b) paradigms and approaches.

Issues in Focus

Vis-à-vis issues in focus, most studies have focussed on teachers and learners' attitudes towards codeswitching/codemixing in different study fields and contexts. Contexts have included social environments like urban, rural and tribal areas. Fields have been diverse with schools with different mediums of instruction (MoI) and learners from different socio-economic-cultural environment being chosen to diversify research fields.

Different studies revealed mixed attitude of teachers towards language alternation whereas almost always learners preferred or used codeswitching/codemixing. While Meganathan's (2018) work in an urban area showed that teachers preferred to use only English, Aggarwal (2013), working with rural children demonstrated that teachers were more likely to use learners' OL. Rahman's (2013) work in a tribal area in Assam demonstrated a positive attitude of teachers towards use of learners' L1. Teachers felt that there was no harm in using L1 to help students acquire the L2. Sadananda Meher's (2013) work is unique in that it delves even further, on the use of an L1 (Sambhalpuri) which is a non-scheduled language (a dialect in Odisha). Based on a survey carried out in a rural area, the

study demonstrates the benefits of the use of L1 for the learners where the L1 is not a language of the eighth schedule of the constitution. However, teachers, even those belonging to the Sambalpur community, manifest a negative attitude towards the use of L1. Meher uses the term "hostile" while concluding on the teachers' attitude to L1 use.

The ramifications of the use of mother tongue in teaching English or in content classrooms with English as a MoI, to communities speaking tribal or indigenous languages or dialects not covered in the eighth schedule have been analysed in the monumental works of Agnihotri (2017), Mohanty (2019), Boruah & Mohanty, (2022). The first foundations to this domain of research were set as early as the 1990s with path breaking works on tribal and indigenous community and multilingual learning and teaching by the likes of Pattanayak (1981), Kundu (1990, 1994), Agnihotri & Khanna (1994), Mohanty (1994).

Agnihotri (2017), Mohanty (2019), Boruah & Mohanty, (2022) focus on the problems of language hierarchy in a multilingual society like India. Mohanty (2019) speaks of a 'double divide-between the most dominant language(s) and the major languages, on the one hand, and between the major languages and 'other' languages, usually the indigenous, tribal, minority and minoritised (ITM) languages, on the other' (p. 141) in his study on Konds. He further discusses, what he calls the 'Mathew effect' (p. 366) in his study on English medium schools catering to children of different socio-economic strata. Agnihotri (2017) traces the historical roots to the conflict of language interest and the distorted power relationship between dominant and minority languages. In the same vein Boruah & Mohanty (2022) speak of the role of English language hegemony in establishing a neoliberalism

in education, detrimental to the foundation of a robust multilingual education policy.

Another issue in focus is the functional use of learners' and teachers' L1. Rahman (2013) and Kumar, Nukapangu & Hassan (2021) demonstrated that L1 was used primarily for explanation of abstract concepts, giving instructions and translating English words. Lightfoot et al (2022) statistically analysed the frequency of the exclusive use of English, the vernacular language and language mixing in both English and a Mathematics class. This work is particularly significant in that codeswitching and codemixing were studied in a content classroom along with an ELT class, with multilingualism and language alternation being studied and compared in different language environments.

Lightfoot et al (2022) found that English was primarily used in activities involving text books, as well as story-telling, board-work and verbal instructions. Language mixing was frequently used in other activities including class discipline, verbal interactions, giving feedbacks etc. Anderson (2018) identifies the use of L1 as a scaffolding resource, for crosslinguaging, meshing and framework tasks. The functional use of L1 as demonstrated in the studies can be categorised as follows: namely ideational functions (explain and elaborate key terms, texts etc); textual functions for explaining technical terms and interpersonal functions of "negotiating frames and footings, role-relationships and identities..." (Lin 2013, p.278).

Research paradigms and approaches

The theoretical basis of most research works, irrespective of the methodology used has been a socio-constructivist and ethnographic approach. Durairajan's (2017) analyses 19 studies, which follow the constructivist orientation, irrespective

of whether theories have been manifestly articulated, or have been inferred from the content of the research report. Issues in focus were the use of L1 as a scaffolding resource in the L2 class, and use of interventionist paradigms. Readers are recommended to read in details her review of these works for its depth of analysis on L1 use as a resource in the classroom.

Aggarwal's (2013) work, which analyses the theories of second language acquisition, is also an undertaking in interactional sociolinguistics with a socio-constructivist approach. Though, Meganathan (2018) does not articulate his theoretical basis, his work, centred on the use of the English language in different contexts in a multilingual school can be inferred as taking a constructivist approach.

Another aspect has been the shift in paradigm from simple codeswitching and codemixing to that on translanguaging which implies a more complicated and nuanced approach to translanguaging practices. Anderson and Lightfoot (2018) (apart from recording teachers' attitude and reasons for using OLs) compared translanguaging practices within the classroom and that which exists in extra-classroom environments. They demonstrated that the existence of translanguaging practices in the community around the school extends to the classroom as use of language mixing by learners.

The extensive study conducted by Tsimpli et al (2019) in their Multilila (Multilingualism and multiliteracy) project, is interdisciplinary, multi-dimensional and longitudinal, with a large amount of quantitative analysis. Some works that have been based on the Multilila project have been those of Mukhopdhyay (2020) and Lightfoot et al (2022). Both works go on to show the effect of preparedness and planning by the teacher vis-

à-vis the use of language mixing in helping students in knowledge construction.

Multilingualism and language power play in ELT and English MoI, have been thoroughly investigated through ethnographic and anthropological research in works cited above (Agnihotri (2017), Mohanty (2019) etc). Similarly, Deepa & Durairajan (2022) bring in a fresh perspective by examining the reasons for lower English language proficiency of sections of students. They bust certain myths that exist regarding EL in the context of the tertiary level EL classrooms through 'examples or case studies' including an interesting survey conducted on domestic helps.

Advancements

It is obvious from the above discussions and examinations that problems of ELT in India cannot be dealt with through a simple pedagogical perspective. It assumes socio-cultural and political dimensions, given the multilingual complexities of India. However, Indian researchers on OL use in ELT have established an identity of their own. Recognising the difference in contextual diversity between India and the West, where most early studies were concentrated, they have shown maturity in bridging the paradigmatic gaps which exist between a largely monolingual and a highly multilingual and multicultural society.

Many studies, have adapted western methodology and measuring tools to the Indian context. In the Multilila project (Tsimpli et al, 2019) all instruments have been modified to suit learners who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. For example, the verbal fluency task did not include a letter fluency task "because of the difficulties involved in creating equivalent tasks across English, Telugu and Hindi" (p.64).

In most studies that I have analysed above, and even those that I could not mention here, due to the limited space of an article, a marked feature was the use of a really large data base, using diverse contexts and fields of study. A large number of studies have been carried out on in rural and tribal areas (Meher, 2013; Aggarwal, 2013; Rahman, 2013). Anderson & Lightfoot (2018), Tsimpli et al (2019) have made comparative studies between urban and rural areas with the former comparing translanguaging practices in the classroom to that outside it.

Similarly, paradigm shifts and new issues in focus, including pride in Indian languages, the problems of hierarchisation of languages, elitist approach to language teaching and problems of learning amongst indigenous people whose languages remain outside the eighth schedule have been addressed (Mohanty 2019, Agnihotri 2017, Boruah & Mohanty, 2022). Contextual factors relating to outside reality influence differences in teachers' attitude and practices vis-à-vis OL use. Meganathan's (2018) study takes into consideration the socio-economic background of the children and finds that the same plays an important role in learning and influencing the attitude of learners towards use of English. In utilising the socio-cultural contexts Meher (2013) found that "learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds were strong determiners of marks awarded" (p.206).

Gaps and Limitations

While researching code-switching in ELT classroom, this author was struck by the dearth of such research in content classrooms with some exceptions like that of Chirimala (2017) and Tsimpli et al (2019). Selati et al (2002), [cited in Lin (2013)] mentions the importance of "teacher's input on scientific content..." (p.206), so that students may not "suffer from a lack of input in

the English academic discourses required to talk about science topics or writing extended texts in English” (p. 206). There was almost no attempt to research on multilingual education at the tertiary level, even though University education in India, particularly in science, is almost always primarily in English.

Though Tsimpli et al’s (2019) work takes a multi-disciplinary approach; it is one of its kinds. Lack of pluri-disciplinary approach is another area where research in India has scope for expansion. Investigation of diversified backgrounds of learners requires a pluri-disciplinary approach involving psychology, philosophy, education and linguistics. Given the fact that quite a few works have taken socio-economic factors, and social interactions into consideration, use of analytical tools using interactional sociolinguistics that adopt an ethnographic approach to classroom communication, would probably yield richer results. There is also a dearth of longitudinal studies, so important in disadvantaged societies where the drop-out rate is high and learning outcomes inadequate.

Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research

On analysing the studies above, one can attempt to group them according to the context of studies, the research questions investigated and approaches used. Where contexts are considered, almost all Indian studies investigated in this paper have taken learner-background into consideration. Most studies have considered urban, rural and tribal contexts as well as the socio-economic status of learners. The MoI in schools have also been a key factor while analysing the learners’ and teachers’ use of OLs in teaching English. Some researches (Meher, 2013; Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018) have specifically linked the culture, language and

regional backgrounds to learners’ performance and found that such factors influence the cognitive performance of learners. Researchers have also concluded that a well-planned lesson including the use of OLs could have a positive effect on English language learning and that use of learners’ previous language resources be recognised as a legitimate practice (Rahman, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2020). Seminal studies have also been conducted on language hierarchisation with focus on minoritised languages.

No doubt, research on ELT in India has moved forward with its own paradigms and methodologies, taking into consideration the complex realities of Indian society. Studies have shown that strategies of ELT in India have taken a leap forward, with teaching-learning becoming learner-centric and use of other languages being positively viewed by teachers. For many teachers it is no longer the “guilty multilingualism” (Anderson & Lightfoot 2018, p.16) as demonstrated in works such as those of Aggarwal (2013), Tsimpli et al (2019), Mukhopadhyay (2020). Translanguaging has become an accepted process of teaching in many English language and English medium content classrooms. Multilingual teaching, instead of bilingualism has started dominating research paradigms and theories. By and large, investigators in India have avoided the imitation of western methods and parameters in their research, in recognition of grassroots multilingual realities, or have tried to adapt Western paradigms to the Indian context, a case in point being the use of an additional “inclusive position” (p.5) to the three positions on codeswitching of Macaro by Anderson and Lightfoot (2018).

Despite the formidable explosion of ELT research with new paradigms and approaches

this author suggests areas in which there is scope for expansion:

- 1. Inter-disciplinary approach:** Studies agree that the classroom environment reflect the multilingual contexts that exist outside the classroom (Tsimpli et al, 2019; Mukhopadhyay, 2020). Language acquisition, particularly second language acquisition is an extremely complex process. The explanation of such a process needs support from different disciplines. Any research related to language acquisition should ideally involve a multi-disciplinary approach. Although ethnographic research conducted on tribal and indigenous communities have taken a multidisciplinary approach, Indian research on ELT could further utilise the same in urban areas for richer results. In fact such an approach could lead to research of more factors and variables which are related to L1 use: e.g. learner motivation and anxiety as related to OL use.
- 2. More longitudinal research and variety in research design:** We have need of more longitudinal research. “In a longitudinal design, the comparability issue is avoided because bilinguals are their own controls: the main focus is on within-group developments over time.” (Tsimpli et al 2019, p.57). Different research designs including teachers as researchers and surveyors and interventionist programs should be used along with more diverse analytical tools like those of interactional sociolinguistics with an ethnographic approach to communication in classroom discourse analysis. Researchers also need to work with larger data-base to reflect diversity in society.

We can thus conclude that the urban-rural divide, power play in language hierarchy, poor socio-economic conditions of children particularly in government medium schools make teaching

English and teaching in English far more challenging. Whereas the NEP (2020) aims at promoting Indian languages, language policy makers need to ensure that English is placed on an equal (rather than superior) platform along with other Indian languages and that learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are exposed to the same quality of English language learning using a multilingual approach. Thus research on ELT in India needs to come up with new paradigms and approaches, if findings from the same are to be effective in easing the English teacher’s task, preventing the bilingual divide and influencing Government educational policies vis-à-vis medium of instruction.

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