

Balancing Regional Language Use: Potential Parameters for English Language Teaching

Narji Baruah¹

Abstract

This study explores the strategic use of regional languages in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in the multilingual landscape of Indian higher education contexts. Based on insights from reflective journals and interviews with ESL teachers in Assam, the research identifies key considerations for balancing regional language use without compromising English language learning. Drawing on the frameworks of Prabhu's Communicational Teaching Project and Kumaravadivelu's Postmethod Pedagogy, findings highlight how regional language support enhances learner participation, comprehension, and confidence. The study offers a set of practical guidelines aimed at promoting flexible, context-driven English instruction in multilingual settings.

Keywords: Regional; Parameter; Strategic; Language.

INTRODUCTION

Achieving proficiency in English speaking skills is a key goal for many learners of English as a second (L2) or foreign language. As a result, learners frequently assess their language learning progress and the effectiveness of their English courses based on the extent to which they perceive improvements in their spoken language abilities (Richards, 2008). The primary objective of language teachers in higher education English as a Second Language (ESL) multilingual classrooms is, therefore, to equip learners with the ability to use the language effectively across diverse contexts and situations. In such classrooms, where English is the target language but regional languages dominate the linguistic landscape, balancing the target language and regional languages during classroom discourse poses a challenge. It becomes the primary duty of teachers to navigate when and how to incorporate regional language support without compromising English language teaching and learning.

In the context of using the mother tongue or first language (L1) in the classroom, Griffier (2017) argues that it is essential to leverage all the knowledge a student brings into the classroom to support their learning effectively. According to Durairajan (2017), the first language can serve as a medium for thinking and reflecting, aiding in the planning and organization of ideas to be

expressed or written in English. In addition, Macaro (2001) notes that incorporating L1 into L2 or bilingual classrooms allows teachers to simplify their explanations, clarify or expand on course concepts, and make key points more accessible and understandable. Larsen-Freeman (2000, pp. 101–102) claims that learners' native language is used in the classroom to create a sense of security, bridge the familiar with the unfamiliar, and clarify the meanings of target language words. Richards (2008) differentiates talk into three types: interaction, transaction, and performance. Learners may not be proficient in all three types of talk. Some learners are good at talk as "transaction" and "performance" but not at talk as "interaction." Similarly, others may be more comfortable with talk as interaction than as performance.

From a student-centred perspective, the "problem" often does not stem from the student's knowledge but rather from the teacher's, who may sometimes lack the required language proficiency, hindering their ability to fully support the student's learning potential (Griffier, 2017). According to Cook (2001), teachers with even a basic understanding of their learners' shared mother tongue often incorporate L1 while teaching. Dawson (2010) acknowledges that while teachers may discourage the use of L1 in the classroom, learners cannot avoid using it

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of English, Tezpur University, Assam ✉ narjiengtwc@gmail.com

mentally. He points out that the journey into a foreign language starts at home, with the mother tongue serving as the linguistic foundation for learners. In this connection, Braun and Crumpler (2004) suggest that teachers who find it difficult to reflect on their daily practices are more likely to rely on ineffective teaching strategies. Salmani-Nodoushan (2006) claims that reflective teachers can bring about positive changes in their teaching practices. Farrell's study (2016) revealed that engaging in group reflections enables ESL teachers to overcome the challenges they face during their first semester, providing valuable insights and supporting their ability to navigate early teaching experiences.

Therefore, reflective journals are used in research and teacher education to encourage reflective thinking in teaching practices across numerous disciplines. These journals help educators critically evaluate and improve their teaching strategies and interactions with learners (Dymont & O'Connell, 2003; Moon, 2006; Göker, 2006a; Lee-Davies, 2007; Bolton, 2010, as cited in Göker, 2016).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the theoretical framework, the present study draws on the principles of language teaching in ESL classrooms proposed by N.S. Prabhu and B. Kumaravadivelu. Prabhu's concept of the "Communicational Teaching Project" and Kumaravadivelu's "Postmethod Pedagogy" both give importance to contextual adaptability. They focus on the judicious use of learners' regional languages to facilitate English language acquisition in ESL classrooms.

Prabhu (1987) emphasises real-world communication and learner engagement. Although Prabhu's approach primarily focuses on communicative competence, it allows for the use of regional languages as scaffolding tools. Kumaravadivelu's (1994) postmethod pedagogy emphasises the importance of teacher autonomy and context-sensitive strategies. This approach is guided by three pedagogic parameters: particularity, practicality, and possibility. In the context of ESL classrooms, these principles support the integration of regional languages. By drawing insights from Prabhu and Kumaravadivelu, this framework supports the incorporation of regional languages in ESL classrooms strategically. It recognizes the

potential of these languages as enablers of learning while also emphasising the importance of transitioning learners toward effective English usage, thereby justifying the study's focus on using regional languages strategically to support English acquisition.

RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The researchers in this paper argue that if the teacher is able to give input using the regional languages of the learners, it has a positive impact on learners' ability to participate in talk as interaction, transaction, and performance. In other words, it enhances the learners' ability to speak English in any situation or circumstance. Previous research reveals that L1 should be given importance in ESL Classrooms (Cook, 2001; Rolin-lanziti & Varshney, 2008; Kelly and Bruen, 2015). Some studies reveal the problems that might stand as hindrances if the teachers are not aware of the appropriate amount and timing of language support to be given to the learners. Atkinson (1987) points out the danger of overuse of the mother tongue in language classes, which possibly leads to the translation of most language items into L1. Bose (2005) stated that most of the pronunciation errors are due to interference from the mother tongue. However, there is an absence of substantial research that clearly defines the parameters for the appropriate use and extent of regional languages in Indian classrooms (where there are numerous regional languages in a single classroom), which remains a significant gap in the field. Therefore, this study makes an attempt to define the parameters for teachers to facilitate them in terms of using regional language in higher education level ESL classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

Sample: The study was conducted with fifteen teachers from different degree colleges of Assam. These teachers were engaged in teaching a course named Ability Enhancement Course (AEC) to the learners of the second semester enrolled in the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme. They are proficient in the local languages of the learners, which are Assamese, Hindi, and Bengali.

Tools: The following two research tools were used in this study to gather data:

- **Teachers' Diary:** Following institutional regulations, each teacher was asked to maintain a teacher diary to document details such as the date, topic, methods used, tasks

assigned, and reflections for every class they conducted. As part of the research, the teachers were also instructed to record instances when they used the regional language during classroom teaching. The teachers maintained these records for six classes each, providing insights into their practices over three months.

- **Interview:** To complement the data collected through teacher diaries, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen teachers from various degree colleges in Assam. The interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into their experiences, perceptions, and challenges regarding the use of regional languages in teaching the Ability Enhancement Course (AEC) for second-semester learners in the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUGP). Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes and was conducted either in person or via online platforms, depending on teacher availability. Responses were recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis, offering a qualitative perspective on the role of regional languages in ESL instruction.

Data Analysis: The researcher employed qualitative methods to analyse data obtained from the teacher diaries and the interviews. Specifically, the study focused on identifying patterns, themes, and critical instances related to the use of regional language in ESL classrooms. The insights gained from the reflections and interviews were synthesized to develop a set of parameters for the effective and contextual use of regional language support.

Ethical Considerations: All participants gave informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings highlight specific instances where regional language use supported English language learning in higher education ESL classrooms. Teachers reported that incorporating regional languages—Assamese, Hindi, and Bengali—helped learners to participate in L2 in ESL classrooms. The thematic analysis led to the identification of patterns of language use that enhance student learning outcomes:

Classroom Silence

Teachers noted that there are certain points when learners don't speak at all. This, according to them, indicated confusion rather than disengagement on the part of the learners. The confusion was whether the learners had understood the material or whether their reluctance to speak was due to fear of using the English language. In such situations, teachers either switched to a regional language for questioning or allowed the learners to respond in regional languages. A reflective journal entry mentioned: "When I asked learners if they understood the topic 'Telephone Etiquettes,' they remained silent. But when I asked them in Bengali, some of them admitted the topic is difficult for them to understand." This suggests that switching to a language familiar to the learners can serve as a prompt to gauge their level of comprehension. This approach aligns with Prabhu's Communicative Teaching Methodology, which suggests that comfort in the learning environment enhances engagement. When learners hesitated to respond to questions asked in English, teachers allowed them to answer in their mother tongue; that is, an alternative form of communication was provided to promote learner-centred teaching.

Another reflection stated: "At first, none of the learners answered my question in English, so I allowed them to respond in Assamese. Once they started sharing their thoughts in Assamese, I guided them to speak the same in English." This approach follows Prabhu's Interactive Approach, which suggests reducing pressure on learners. The learners, when encouraged to express their ideas in their L1, appeared more confident, and the participation ratio increased. Over time, this facilitates a gradual transition to using English more frequently in the classroom. It also highlights Kumaravadivelu's concept of learner confidence as an essential factor in language learning. Encouraging learners to initially use the regional language to express themselves builds their confidence to speak, gradually promoting English use.

Faces of Confusion

Teachers frequently observed learners' facial expressions to check their comprehension. According to the teachers, reading facial expressions is something they acquire through continuous interaction with learners and

accumulated teaching experience. This non-verbal cue helps teachers assess the level of understanding of learners during classroom teaching. One teacher wrote: "While explaining the definition of a CV, I could tell from their expressions that they were facing difficulties in grasping the concept, so I explained in Hindi. Their expressions immediately changed, indicating understanding." This moment illustrates how experienced teachers use their perceptiveness to make immediate yet informed instructional decisions, such as switching to their L1 or any language that is more familiar to them to support comprehension. Teachers know that learners find it difficult to speak in English, which, in most cases, is the result of fear of the language. Otherwise, learners are not reluctant to speak in each other's local languages apart from their L1s. That is why using any language that is familiar to the learners makes them comfortable.

Such an approach is consistent with Prabhu's Language Awareness Approach, which emphasises adapting instruction based on student reactions. In other words, though there are fixed lesson plans, teachers need to adapt their instruction to meet the needs and demands of the real-time class to address learner needs, which leads to effective teaching and learning. This, again, is something that can be acquired through experience.

Encouraging Participation of Learners

The participation of learners in classroom discussions and activities often serves as a clear indicator of how effective the teaching has been. When learners engage, ask questions, and share their thoughts, it reflects their involvement and understanding of the lesson. Given the linguistic diversity in classrooms, teachers found it helpful to acknowledge multilingual responses. One teacher reflected in a journal entry: "Some learners answered in Hindi, others in Assamese. I repeated their responses in English to create a bridge between languages." This aligns with Prabhu's Learner-Centred Teaching Approach.

Another entry: "Initially, I allowed learners to express their thoughts in Assamese. Over time, they started responding in English," aligns with Kumaravadivelu's emphasis on learner confidence in language acquisition. Teachers found that allowing learners to explain concepts in their regional language improved retention. A

teacher noted: "After summarizing a topic in English, I asked a student to explain it in Assamese, and s/he did so confidently." This aligns with Kumaravadivelu's Autonomy and Identity framework, which promotes student-led learning. By giving learners space to use their languages, teachers empowered learners to take ownership of their learning journey along with better comprehension. Using the numerous L1s present in the classroom helps build a classroom culture where multilingualism is seen as a strength, not a barrier, and where learning becomes a collaborative and inclusive process.

Dealing with New and Complex Concepts

Teachers observed that the strategic use of translation often helped learners understand abstract or difficult concepts more effectively. For example, while dealing with challenging grammar rules or unfamiliar sentence structures, a brief explanation in the learners' L1 made a noticeable difference. One teacher wrote in a reflective journal: "For difficult grammar rules, a brief translation into Hindi made it easier for learners to grasp before we continued in English." This example highlights how flexible teaching methods, as emphasised in Kumaravadivelu's Postmethod Pedagogy, can support learners by adapting instruction to their immediate needs.

Translation also proved effective in clarifying task instructions when learners struggled to follow directions given entirely in English, as opined by the teachers. This practice aligns with Kumaravadivelu's Pragmatic Approach, which encourages practicality and responsiveness in the classroom. In vocabulary instruction, many teachers adopted a similar approach, connecting new English terms with familiar words in the learners' regional languages. This made the meaning of new vocabulary clearer and more relatable. A teacher recorded: "While teaching the word 'courteous,' I first explained its meaning in Assamese and Bengali before using it in English sentences." This technique is in line with Prabhu's Contextualization Approach, which emphasises connecting new knowledge to existing cultural and linguistic frameworks to support new language acquisition.

Increase Accessibility

Code-switching was used by the teachers very strategically to enhance classroom accessibility. They had to shift between English and regional

languages like Hindi, Bengali, or Assamese to ensure that all learners could follow the topic being explained. This practice, however, was not random; rather, it was intentional and thoughtful, aimed at reinforcing understanding and minimizing language-related barriers. One teacher reflected: “I explained the main content in English but occasionally repeated the main points in Bengali for clarity.” Such instances were common across different classrooms, especially when teachers introduced abstract or difficult topics. By highlighting the main points in the languages familiar to the learners, teachers ensured that meaning was not lost and that learners were not diverted from the main topic. This approach of using the L1 or the languages in which learners were comfortable aligns with Prabhu’s Cognitive Approach, which acknowledges the importance of bilingual thinking in the learning process. Instead of secluding English instruction from learners’ existing linguistic knowledge, code-switching allowed learners to make cognitive connections between languages. Teachers also noted that code-switching played a crucial role in minimizing student anxiety and maximizing participation. For many learners, listening to explanations in their L1 helped them feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom. As one teacher shared during an interview, “There are many learners who hesitate to ask questions in English, but when I speak in their language, they open up without any kind of hesitation. This happens mostly when we make mistakes while speaking their language.”

KEY PARAMETERS FOR USING REGIONAL LANGUAGES IN ESL CLASSROOMS

Based on the findings, this study outlines the following parameters to guide teachers to effectively integrate regional language/s in higher education ESL classrooms:

1. Assess silence as potential confusion; use regional language/s to clarify doubts.
2. Observe learners’ facial expressions to identify confusion and modify instruction using regional language accordingly.
3. To reinforce comprehension and longer retention, learners should be given a scope to explain concepts in their regional language depending on the context.
4. Allow regional language responses if learners hesitate to speak in English and guide them toward English.
5. Introduce new vocabulary by first explaining its meaning in regional language/s.
6. Translate complex ideas briefly in regional languages/s if required.
7. Clarify difficult task instructions in regional languages to ensure inclusion.

CONCLUSION

The present study reaffirms previous research (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 1994) that strategic use of regional languages in ESL classrooms can enhance English language learning in multilingual classrooms by promoting participation, understanding, and self-confidence. According to the findings, contextual flexibility in language instruction promotes student participation and lessens cognitive overload, which is consistent with Prabhu’s (1987) Communicative Teaching Project and Kumaravadivelu’s Postmethod Pedagogy. Importantly, the study acknowledges that learners vary in their strengths across the three communicative modes outlined by Richards (2008)—talk as interaction, transaction, and performance. However, the conscious and strategic use of regional language/s will help to bridge these gaps, enabling learners to express themselves with ease before transitioning to English.

Next, the study highlights that classroom silence often indicates comprehension barriers rather than disengagement, echoing Dawson’s (2010) argument that L1 remains a cognitive tool for learners. Teachers who used regional languages to clarify concepts, encourage participation, and reinforce vocabulary observed improved student interaction and retention, consistent with Larsen-Freeman’s (2000) assertion that L1 connects familiar and unfamiliar language structures. However, as Atkinson (1987) warns, excessive reliance on L1 may hinder English proficiency, highlighting the need for a balanced approach. The parameters identified in this study offer a structured framework for ESL teachers to incorporate regional languages without compromising English acquisition. The study confirms that strategic regional language use enhances ESL learning in multilingual classrooms. By applying the defined parameters, teachers can balance regional language support with English immersion, ultimately fostering student engagement and proficiency in English.

To improve the reliability and generalizability, future research should include a larger and more diverse group of educators. The parameters identified in this research can serve as a foundation for a detailed and practical checklist for ESL teachers.

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