



Code switching : a positive strategy

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Abstract

The present paper investigates how code-switching by the English teachers in a graduation level classroom has proved to be a student-friendly strategy which helps the learners shed fear of the subject and inhibitions to express themselves. The paper attempts, through questionnaires, personal observations and interviews, to get a deeper understanding of the English teachers' ideas and opinions about the use of mother tongue in the classroom.

The author in this paper, aims to establish the positive role of code switching even in graduation level where the majority of the students are from vernacular medium having low English proficiency level. The author will also like to discuss some of the strategies the teachers have experimented in the above mentioned class which can be attempted for the communication practice of the students.

Keywords: Communicative english, code-switching, linguistic, proficiency, strategies.

1. Background

Multilingual classrooms are places where students of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds study together. Teaching English to such students can be challenging on the part of a teacher. There are several difficulties and dilemmas a teacher encounters in the class and their impact on the standard norms or rules of the target language. Code switching/mixing is a common practice in multilingual society and more so in a multilingual class. The disadvantage in the class is that students communicate with their peers mostly in their respective mother tongues having the same linguistic background which can act as a hindrance as they do not practice in English in the classroom and very rarely outside the class. That greatly reduces their exposure to and practice in English. Students speaking different languages face different problems in their learning; be it grammar, pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary. Students coming from different schools and sociocultural backgrounds learn at different speeds

and may divide the classroom. Teaching language skills like writing, speaking, reading and listening in a class of such diversity prove ineffective as the teachers are also not trained to facilitate teaching and learning of English in a multilingual class. Explaining a problem to one student to the whole class proves unproductive as others do not experience the same linguistic or conceptual difficulty. The problems sometimes compound when learners do not even communicate among themselves with the fear that no other language is permissible in English classroom. The teacher finds it difficult to break the psychological barrier created by the students themselves and their surroundings.

It is a matter of concern for all that in spite of students in India, spending so many years of learning in school, the majority of students in college level are still below average in English. It is important here to look at the state as well as the status of English in the present school education system of India. Though the

government has decided its language policy in clear terms, all states do not follow the standard policy. The Planning Commission unequivocally states out that one of the key focus areas in secondary school education in the country in the 12th Plan period (2012-17) is “Implementation of a common curricula and syllabi of nationally acceptable standards for Science, Maths and English in all schools in the country”. The incoherent language policy, the lower level of learning in most of the vernacular schools and the non-participative, non-interactive approach to teaching have led to this poor performance of the students. In the present context of Indian higher education, the majority of students after +2 undergo professional courses and struggle to grasp the content of their courses which are taught in English. The majority of the students do not have communicative competence in English as they have passed +2 with only a qualifying marks in English. English teachers as well as other teachers in Technical and Management Institutes predominantly use English in the form of either stock technical phrases or theoretical explanation. There is also frequent shifting to native language in the classroom as and when required by the students and also by the teachers including teachers of English.

2. Multilingual class in Odisha

Odisha, has been witnessing phenomenal growth in the education sector in the last few years. The state has become an educational hub where Technical universities and colleges have come up in large numbers which attract students from the neighboring states of West Bengal, Assam, Jharkhand, Bihar, etc to join different courses like BTech, MBA etc. The students cover a syllabus in which Communicative English, Business Communication, Corporate Readiness Communication or similar courses run through four/six semesters with the aim to enhance communicative competency of the students for employability, to prepare them to face a professional life ahead. Language development sessions to build vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, etc. run parallel as part of placement and training to make the students qualify for campus selection. In the regular course outline, the students deal with phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, along with the skills like reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They are also engaged in various communicative activities like group discussions, mock interviews, simulation, role play etc. in the digitalized language labs.

In a normal classroom of 50-60 in any given

Institute in Bhubaneswar, a good number of students are from different states like West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab who speak mostly in their own native languages. The majority of students are Odias. A handful of students in the class is from English medium schools, with better speaking abilities in English. The rest of the learners have either no grasp or at best very little proficiency in English. The ability to learn the course also varies as per their standard of English which further divides the class. This division puts considerable pressure on the teaching-learning process.

Teaching English for Communication to the above multi-lingual and multi-layered class is a real challenge on the part of the teacher cum facilitator. This is equally difficult, especially for the vernacular schooling learners who are trying to learn English in reference to their respective mother-tongues. The result of this mix is a situation in which both the learners and the teachers are not exactly engaged in meaningful communication with each other. The teacher in an English classroom, as he/she admits, switches from English to Odia or Hindi for the benefit of the majority of the students. There may be various purposes for code-switching, but Holmes writes that a speaker may switch to another language as a ‘signal of group membership and shared ethnicity with the students. In this context, language is a carrier of ethnic identity and culture’ (Holmes, 2008). This also creates multi-culturalism in the classroom. It is quite often observed that the interaction between the teacher and students in the above situation almost becomes unproductive unless the teacher uses the students’ language partially and the students their own languages frequently. The process and outcome of this sometimes becomes frustrating leading to disillusionment on the part of both the teacher as well as the learners.

This paper likes to identify the existing problems and practices in a multi-lingual class in Centurion University of Technology & Management, Odisha. It also explores to find out the reasons for code shifting, the extent and the pattern of the shift on the basis of a survey over a sample size of two hundred fifty BTech students, twelve teachers, the author’s personal observations and interactions.

3. Use and role of mother tongue in English classroom

The proponents of target language exclusivity in the classroom like Ellis (1984), Chaudron (1988), and Lightbown (2001) said that teaching entirely through

the target language makes the language real and allows the student to develop an inbuilt language system. They argued that this should expose the students to as many language functions as possible in the target language. On the other side, researchers like Stern (1992), Cook (2001) are of the opinion that there may be a time for cross-lingual strategy as the learner inevitably learns the target language from his/her native language reference base so that he/she can compare and contrast between L1 & L2. Cook was of the opinion that the tradition of excluding L1 from the English classroom has limited 'the possibilities of language teaching' to a great extent. He believed that to let the students use their mother tongue is a humanistic approach as it permits them to say what they want to say, and what he calls a "learner preferred strategy" (Cook, 2001). The teaching of English in Indian classroom using the mother tongue is not new. The use of the mother tongue is justified by many. They argue that teaching through mother tongue with sufficient attention, will be of greatest value in connection with the learning of English. This theory resulted in teaching English through translation method in the past, resulting in excessive use of mother tongue. It reduced the scope for any productive communication in either of the languages. So, the language experts on the other extreme suggested that the use of mother tongue in English classroom should be removed completely. The advantages of teaching English through English were pointed out, but several disadvantages were and are still being discussed. As Allen Maley rightly points out that if we look at our past experiences and ideas, we find that many of those ideas, which we think innovative, have already been experienced. "*We have very often re-invented or re-discussed them rather than created them out of nothing in the present instant*" (Maley, 2001).

A conscientious teacher, therefore, should find ways of overcoming the limitations or challenges he/she faces in the English classroom. If the teacher is not able to teach English in English and, it is mostly because of the existing level of knowledge of the students, even in graduation level. If he/she does so, the students do not understand him fully. A resourceful teacher, therefore, has to carefully plan activities and innovate strategies where he/she can provide opportunities for the learner to understand as well as use the target language meaningfully and creatively. As Srinivas writes that there is also the "possibility of positive transfer of linguistic and communicative skills from one language to another" (Srinivas, 2009). This can take place if literal word by word translation

method is avoided. According to Jessner and Cenoz, second language acquisition has a lot common in the acquisition of the first language. The students can develop different learning strategies. They argued that, "... in contrast to monolinguals, bilinguals and multilinguals have a different knowledge of their first language and their second language as well as a different kind of language awareness and language processing system" (Jesnor & Cenoz, 2007).

There is a near universal agreement that students use grammar unconsciously in their talking. If the students have knowledge of the grammar of their mother tongue, they learn English grammar more easily because, if the grammar of the mother tongue is well-known, it forms a background of knowledge, to which new grammar may be linked. When the teacher explains the rules of grammar relating to the usage or structure, the use of mother tongue will help in making a comparison or contrast between the grammatical forms of their native language and English.

4. Use of native language in communicative English class

Communicative language teaching is an approach in language teaching, where the students are supposed to be engaged in interaction and meaningful communication which arises when students work with content, as Richards says: "...relevant, purposeful, interesting, and engaging... Effective classroom learning tasks and exercises provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, expand their language resources, notice how language is used, and take part in meaningful interpersonal exchange (Richards, 2006). He further feels that to learn Communicative English, learners need activities which not only teach them grammar and words, but also the opportunities to reflect upon the target language so that they can analyze it for effective learning and communication strategies. The learners should be given the opportunity to engage in collaborative learning which is directly related to their own surroundings, situations and needs. The students draw from their own experiences as well as from their own experiences of learning their first language and in the process they use first language expressions and switch to their first language at some point or other. Speaking in English depends so much upon the expressions in mother tongue. If the students can narrate themselves freely in their mother-tongue, they will try to narrate their ideas in English. If a student has acquired well-graded practice of mother-tongue, it helps them in arranging

ideas, thoughts and information in English. In a multi-lingual class, it is easier for the learner and the teacher to find new topics of conversation, because the students get to discuss culture, traditions, holidays, cuisines and landscapes of their respective states. In a multi-lingual class, it is easier to stimulate discussion on a variety of topics.

English learners in a multi-lingual class study the correct pronunciation amidst diversity of accents. The learners have difficulty in producing some of the sounds of English and the way English is produced. For this reason, instruction on pronunciation begins with helping students develop their phonetics awareness: the ability to perceive sounds and subtle differences between sounds. The teacher realizes that it is not possible to correct the 'problem sounds' of students arising out of mother-tongue interferences without the use of the learners' native language and the sound system of his/her language. The students from Bihar and Jharkhand will keep on uttering e-school, whereas a Bengali student will say 'sh' for soup or for any 's'. For Odia, 'f', 'v' sounds are difficult to correct. In this situation of diverse accents, the teacher finds the class extremely challenging while explaining the complex system of vowels, especially diphthongs and intonation to Indian students as Indian languages do not have diphthongs.

5. Code-switching : an on-going practice

Code-switching, one of the unavoidable teaching-learning situations has been there in multi-lingual classroom. It started having its impact after 1980. Before that, researchers, like Ellis (1984), Chaudron (1988), Lightbown (2001) and other advocates of using English in English classroom believed that teachers should aim at creating an environment and did not accept code-switching concept as it would result in negative transfer in the second learning. Researchers, in support of code-switching argued that the first language can promote the learning of the target language and that code switching is a strategy to be adopted efficiently in an English language classroom.

Code switching in an English language classroom has recently been the subject of considerable debate. The concept of 'code' was put forward by Bernstein (1971) which refers to any system of signals like numbers, signs, words, charts or graphs, which carries concrete meaning. The term 'code-switching', Gumperz refers to in his book, *Discourse Strategies* as 'the juxtaposition where the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different

grammatical systems or subsystem" (Gumperz, 1982). Cook came up with the definition that it is 'the process of going from one language to the other in mid-speech when both speakers know the same language' (Cook, 2001). In brief, it also means the use of English and also the first language by teachers of English by means of communication with the learners in the class. Of the different types of code-switching, the most commonly used are tag switching, inter-sentential and intra-sentential. In tag switching, the teacher inserts a tag phrase in another language. In inter-sentential code switching, code is used after the completion of a sentence, whereas intra-sentential, code is used within a clause or sentence. Cook believed that the teacher should let the students use their mother-tongue and calls it a "learner-preferred strategy". Stern (1992) suggested that the use of both L1 and L2 (Target language TL) can be helpful to the students as the students unconsciously learn from their own native language base. This paper presents the empirical evidence and practice of switching code in Communicative English classroom in Centurion University of Odisha and also the students' responses to this.

6. Students' responses and expectations

The subjects of the study, both teachers and students of Centurion University, Odisha, are selected in order to have a genuine reflection on learner-teacher's code switching practices in selected with the objectives of finding out the students' difficulties and expectations. Through this, we get to understand the teachers' roles and strategies in a multi-lingual Communicative English classroom. The author presents an empirical survey done through a questionnaire for a sample size of two hundred and fifty B.Tech students studying in Centurion University of Odisha. Apart from that, classroom observations, recording, personal interviews and group discussions are conducted as different research methods.

An overwhelming majority of students support the use of mother tongue or an alternative language to de-clog their doubts and are dependent on such methods. Out of 250 students, 220 students are used to having English teachers using Odia or Hindi in the classroom either often or very often during their schooling period.

Almost all the students agree that the teachers' use of native language helps them in understanding the concepts of phonetics and grammar. It also helps them shed their inhibitions to ask questions in case of

doubts. It definitely facilitates their understanding of grammatical rules as they understand the difference in rules and structures from the reference of their mother tongue. Most of them said that they were not motivated to attend vocabulary building class if the teachers were not willing to give them equivalent words in their mother tongue. All the students agree that their understanding of the sound system of English language becomes clear when the teacher draws similarities or dissimilarities between English and their mother tongue although it is difficult to imitate the intonation of English. Moreover, the students voiced that the teacher should use mother tongue in the class to bridge the gap between them, English being synonymous with higher status. Ninety percent students say that the teachers do at times insist them to speak in the target language. The non-Odias, (around 20%) students feel at times isolated in the classroom where Odia is predominantly used for academic and also non academic interaction between the teachers and students.

7. Code-switching patterns & situations : An empirical analysis

The author presents an empirical investigation of the code switching situations and patterns in Communicative English classrooms and labs in the first year of BTech. The study was carried through questionnaire for teachers, classroom observations, in-depth-interviews and discussions with faculty members of English. The profile of the faculty members varies from Assistant Professor to Professor having two to twenty years of teaching experience, imparting the course both in theory class and language labs.

All the twelve teachers say that they do not use English at all in the theory class. In the lab, since the teaching-learning methods are different, there is scope for code switching. The labs are conducted mostly on interactive mode where the students are engaged in group activities and are given sufficient opportunity to break his/her inhibition and speak. From the surveys, it is established that eleven teachers out of twelve switch code to the native language in almost all the lab classes, although most of them do not believe that English classroom is a normal code-switching situation. Eight teachers believe that native language has a place and should be used in the classroom to teach the target language. The teachers admit to be using native language either while explaining grammar, training in phonetics, giving feedback, clarifying doubts and on many more different occasions. The learners' poor proficiency level in English is the major factor for code

shifting. Code shifting usually is high with the change of participants and their educational background. The teachers do not follow any particular pattern of using code, but most of them say that the code switching pattern differs from subject to subject, participant to participant. Tag switching and intra-sentential patterns are not mostly used, but shifting takes place either after the completion of one or two sentences or at the end of a theoretical explanation. Ten out of twelve teachers believe that the students learn a new language from their mother tongue reference. Code switching takes place frequently to translate unknown vocabulary terms when the teacher realizes that the new term might not be in the students' repertoire. The teachers are conscious of the pattern of code switching and sometimes not.

Almost all seem to agree that multi-lingual class can be a resource than a barrier to teach the subject, but admit they do not know how and when to switch code for better results. All the teachers agree that the use of native language bonds the teacher and the students. The ideal frequency of code switching shows that the students as well as the teachers use the native language occasionally in the theory class but quite often in the lab classes. The most significant point which comes out of this survey is that the students' poor proficiency level in English is the first factor which leads the teachers to switch code and the teachers lack of innovation, training and awareness to initiate new strategies in a multi-lingual class.

8. Conclusion

We agree that linguistic and cultural diversity in an English classroom present tremendous challenge for teachers and students. The above study proves that the use of native language and code-switching practices benefit the students even in higher class. Through teachers' training and education programmes, the challenges can be turned into resources to make the class activities effective and inclusive. Multilingual class gives students an opportunity to get to know many 'Englishes' that provides the students a psychological comfort and confidence. It is always possible to use more than one language creatively and meaningfully enriching the target language. On the part of the teacher, he/she needs to be educated and trained on multi-lingual awareness programmes so that he/she develops a better understanding of language related barriers. The teachers should be innovative in approach and methods, and share their experiments and ideas in different forums and deliberations.

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