

L1 Integration in the English Classroom: An Exploration of Inclusive Language Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The use of the mother tongue (L1) in the English classroom has long been debated. Traditional English-only approaches often consider L1 a barrier to second-language learning. In multilingual contexts such as India, students naturally use more than one language to understand ideas, express emotions, communicate, and make sense of their learning. In such contexts, L1 can function as a helpful bridge to English rather than an obstacle. It also explores the role of L1, particularly Tamil, in the English classroom and examines how its purposeful use can support English language learning. The study was conducted among students of the Department of English, focusing on their experiences and perceptions of using Tamil while learning English. Particular attention was given to whether L1 helps students understand difficult concepts, clarify vocabulary, participate actively, communicate confidently, and overcome learning difficulties. The findings suggest that students generally view L1 as a supportive tool in learning English. They particularly appreciate its use for explaining difficult concepts, clarifying unfamiliar words, discussing complex ideas, and reducing hesitation. At the same time, students recognize that excessive dependence on L1 may limit their exposure to English and reduce opportunities for practising the target language. This research paper examines the value of a balanced approach in which Tamil is used purposefully alongside English. Such an approach can support better understanding, encourage active participation, build confidence, and make the English classroom more inclusive and learner-friendly while respecting the multilingual realities of Indian students...

Keywords: L1 integration, English language teaching, mother tongue, Tamil, bilingual pedagogy, translanguaging, inclusive pedagogy, ESL classroom...

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Learning a new language does not mean forgetting the language that a learner already knows. For most students, the mother tongue is the first language through which they understand their family, culture, emotions, relationships, and surroundings. It becomes part of how they think and make sense of the world. When students enter an English classroom, they do not come as blank learners. They already possess a rich linguistic and cultural background that can influence the way they learn English. In the Tamil-speaking context, Tamil naturally occupies an important place in students' everyday lives. Students use Tamil at home, with friends, and in their communities. When they encounter a difficult English word, grammatical structure, abstract idea, or unfamiliar cultural reference, they may naturally relate it to something they already understand through Tamil. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of English proficiency. Rather, it can be a natural way of constructing meaning. For many years, the use of L1 in English language classrooms was discouraged. English-only approaches were often considered more effective because they were expected to provide learners with greater exposure to the target language. The mother tongue was sometimes viewed mainly as a source of linguistic interference. Early discussions of learner errors and L1 influence contributed to this concern, although later developments in second-language research have presented a more complex understanding of bilingual learning. Contemporary approaches to bilingualism and multilingual education recognize that learners' languages can work together rather than functioning as completely separate systems. Baker (2011) discusses bilingualism in relation to cognition, education, identity, and classroom learning. Swain's (2006) concept of languaging also highlights the role of language in thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative learning. Similarly,.

translanguaging approaches question the strict separation of languages and recognize the ways multilingual learners draw upon their complete linguistic repertoire. This shift is particularly relevant to Indian English classrooms. Students frequently move between languages in their everyday communication. They may discuss an idea in Tamil, explain it in English, ask a question in Tamil, and then return to English. Such movement between languages can be viewed not simply as code-switching but as a meaningful resource for learning

RESEARCH DESIGN

The researcher adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to explore students' perceptions of integrating their first language (L1), particularly Tamil, into the English classroom. The study was conducted among 30 students from the Department of English, Nazareth Margoschis College at Pillaiyanmanai, Nazareth. The subjects were students of the Department of English who had experience learning and using English in an academic setting. Their responses were collected to understand their experiences and perceptions regarding the use of Tamil while learning English. The study focused on students' views on the usefulness of Tamil in understanding difficult English concepts, its role in encouraging classroom participation and its influence on English communication. It also examined how students perceived the use of Tamil for clarifying vocabulary and grammar, as well as their understanding of translanguaging. In addition, the study considered both the advantages and potential disadvantages of using L1 in the English classroom. The students' responses were carefully examined and organized to identify common experiences and perceptions. The study mainly focused on four areas: understanding and comprehension, confidence and classroom participation, communication and interaction, and the possible limitations of L1 use.

Hypotheses

L1 use improves students' understanding of difficult English concepts.

L1 integration increases students' confidence and classroom participation.

Use of L1 supports effective English communication and learning.

Balanced bilingual and translanguaging practices are more supportive than rigid English-only instruction.

Research Questions

How does L1 use influence students' understanding of English?

Does L1 use improve students' confidence and classroom participation?

How does L1 support communication and interaction in the English classroom?

Can translanguaging provide an effective approach to English language learning?

DISCUSSION

For the first research question, students indicate that the mother tongue can act as a useful bridge when students encounter difficult English concepts. They expressed that certain grammar rules, unfamiliar vocabulary, abstract ideas, and complex texts become easier to understand when the teacher briefly explains them in Tamil. For example, students indicated that they could understand the meaning of a difficult English word more quickly when it was connected with a familiar Tamil equivalent or explanation. Similarly, when a complex literary or grammatical concept was explained first in a familiar language and then in English, students felt that they could follow the lesson more comfortably. One recurring response was essentially that *Tamil helps us understand the idea first, and English helps us express it later*. This reflects the role of L1 as a cognitive support rather than a substitute for English. The responses also suggest that L1 can reduce unnecessary confusion. Instead of spending a long time struggling with a concept, students can use their existing knowledge to establish meaning and then return to English. This supports the view that bilingual learners can draw upon their existing linguistic resources while developing their L2.

For the second research question, students' responses reveal a connection between L1 use and confidence. Some learners hesitate to speak in English because they are afraid of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes. When they are allowed to use Tamil briefly to clarify an idea or begin a discussion, they feel less anxious about participating. Students reported that they were more willing to ask questions when they knew that the teacher would understand their ideas even if they could not immediately express everything in English. This is particularly important in classrooms where students have different levels of English proficiency. The responses suggest that L1 can provide a psychological safety net because it gives students a familiar linguistic space from which they can gradually move towards English. Instead of remaining silent because they cannot find the right English words, students can first express an idea in Tamil and then work towards expressing the same idea in English. Thus, L1 integration may encourage students who are normally quiet to participate more actively in classroom discussions.

For the third research question, students' responses indicate that L1 can make classroom interaction more natural. Students often use Tamil when discussing difficult topics with their classmates, particularly during group activities. They may discuss an idea in Tamil, identify the appropriate English vocabulary, and then present their final response in English.

This process demonstrates that students do not necessarily see Tamil and English as competing languages. Instead, they use both languages according to the demands of the situation. Students also felt that L1 was useful when they wanted to clarify doubts quickly. For instance, a student might ask a question in Tamil but listen to and understand the explanation in English.

Such interaction allows the classroom to remain primarily English-oriented while still acknowledging students' linguistic realities. The findings suggest that controlled L1 use can strengthen teacher-student relationships. When teachers recognize the linguistic background of their students, learners may feel that their identities and experiences are valued rather than ignored.

For the fourth research question, students' responses show a positive attitude towards translanguaging when it is used purposefully. Students naturally move between Tamil and English while thinking, discussing, interpreting, and presenting ideas. Rather than treating this movement as a weakness, translanguaging views it as a resource. For example, during group discussions, students may initially discuss a complex topic in Tamil, identify important ideas, and then formulate their final response in English. Similarly, students may use Tamil to understand a difficult literary passage before discussing its interpretation in English. Such practices can help learners connect their existing knowledge with new English-language knowledge. Swain's (2006) concept of languaging is relevant here because language is not only a means of communication but also a tool for thinking and constructing knowledge. However, the students also recognized an important limitation: L1 should not become a replacement for English. Some students felt that excessive Tamil use could reduce their opportunity to practise English. Therefore, the most effective approach appears to be a balanced one. The classroom should provide substantial exposure to English while allowing L1 when it genuinely contributes to understanding, clarification, confidence, or participation.

The responses of the English Department students can be broadly understood through several important observations. The students felt that the use of L1 (Tamil) helped them clarify difficult concepts, unfamiliar vocabulary, and complex ideas in English. They also indicated that brief explanations in Tamil could make difficult grammar rules easier to understand. In addition, the use of L1 appeared to improve students' confidence by reducing hesitation and the fear of making mistakes while communicating in English. When L1 was used strategically, students were more willing to participate in classroom activities and discussions.

Further, the students observed that L1 could support communication by helping them formulate and organize their ideas before expressing them in English. In group work, the movement between Tamil and English helped students discuss topics, exchange ideas, and develop their understanding more effectively. These responses reflect the practice of translanguaging, in which students naturally draw upon both languages to support learning and communication. However, the students also recognized that excessive dependence on L1 could reduce their exposure to English and limit opportunities for English-language practice. Overall, the students preferred a balanced approach, rather than either complete English-only instruction or excessive use of L1. These responses point towards an important pedagogical insight: the question is not whether L1 should be present in the English classroom, but how, when, and why it should be used effectively.

L1 as a Bridge to Learning

The findings of the study indicate that the mother tongue (L1) can serve as a useful bridge between students' existing knowledge and new concepts introduced in English. Students may find it difficult to understand certain grammar rules, unfamiliar vocabulary, complex concepts, abstract ideas, and literary texts when they are explained only in English. In such situations, a brief explanation in the mother tongue can make the content easier to understand. L1 can also be helpful when teachers give classroom instructions or encourage students to participate in group discussions. It can reduce unnecessary anxiety and make students feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom. The use of L1 does not mean that English should be replaced as the main language of instruction. Instead, the teacher can provide a short explanation in L1 when necessary and then gradually shift the discussion back to English. In this way, L1 can function as a scaffolding tool that supports students while they develop their ability to learn and communicate in English.

Advantages and Challenges of L1 Integration

The integration of L1 in the English classroom offers several advantages. It can improve students' comprehension by helping them understand difficult concepts more clearly. It can also increase their confidence and encourage them to participate actively in classroom activities and discussions. The appropriate use of L1 may strengthen teacher-student relationships because students feel that their linguistic background and learning difficulties are understood and respected. Moreover, L1 can help teachers connect language learning with students' cultural experiences and support collaborative learning among learners. It also contributes to the development of multilingual competence by allowing students to make meaningful connections between their languages. At the same time, the use of L1 may present certain challenges if it is not carefully managed. Students may become overly dependent on their mother tongue and may hesitate to communicate in English. Excessive use of L1 can also reduce students' exposure to English and may sometimes lead to interference in pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar. In addition, students may avoid practising English if they know that difficult explanations will always be provided in L1. Therefore, teachers need to maintain an appropriate balance between L1 and English. The findings suggest that L1 integration should be planned, purposeful, and limited according to the learning objective. L1 can support rather than replace English learning and can create a more comfortable, inclusive, and effective learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study shows that the mother tongue should not automatically be treated as a barrier to English language learning. For students in a multilingual environment such as Tamil Nadu, Tamil is closely connected with their everyday communication, thinking, culture, and identity. Completely excluding it from the English classroom may therefore create an

unnecessary distance between the learner and the learning process. The responses of the students suggest that the careful use of L1 can improve comprehension, confidence, participation, and classroom interaction. Students particularly value L1 when they encounter difficult vocabulary, grammar, abstract concepts, or complex texts. However, they also recognize that excessive dependence on L1 may reduce opportunities to practise English. The study therefore supports a balanced approach to L1 integration. English should remain the primary target language, while Tamil can be used strategically when it helps students understand, think, participate, and communicate. Translanguaging offers a useful framework for understanding this flexible movement between languages. Ultimately, effective English teaching should not ask students to leave their linguistic identity at the classroom door. Instead, it should build upon what they already know. When the mother tongue is treated as a resource rather than a problem, the English classroom can become more inclusive, confident, and meaningful. Hence, the findings of the study validate the proposed hypotheses....

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