CHALLENGES IN TRANSLANGUAGING IN CLASSROOMS IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

A common feature of English classrooms in Government-run schools in Kerala is that a vast majority of children have Malayalam as a mother tongue and the teacher of English, being familiar with the mother tongue, regularly switches from English to Malayalam to teach the target language viz; English. The investigator, a teacher educator found that in most government-run schools, teachers of English, liberally translates words and phrases in English to Malayalam and relies regularly on 'local texts' for teaching English. Of late, a new approach to pedagogy viz; 'Translanguaging' has captured the imagination of teachers. One reason being that it is actively promoted by a leading organization, 'Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages'(TESOL). According to its advocates, 'Translanguaging' emancipates learners from the adverse impact of second language learning pedagogies. Some teachers of English are of the opinion that 'Translanguaging' helps learners understand the content. They also see no harm in enabling learners utilizing their available linguistic resources to make sense of a given content of a language like English which they are trying to learn. The investigator drawing on own experience of teaching English for two decades have noted that leading private schools in Kerala State, usually insist on students speaking in English inside the campus. The teachers of English in such schools, unlike in government-run schools, seldom translates English words into Malayalam nor relies on 'local texts' in Malayalam. Data collected through interaction and informal interviews with students who have completed secondary level in both type of schools revealed that those who studied in private schools which insisted on compulsory use of English in the campus had a better command of the language particularly in speaking and writing unlike those who studied in Government-run schools. The investigator attributes the difference in ability to two major flaws in the pedagogic process employed in Government-run schools. First to the liberal use of mother tongue and excessive focus on enabling the learner to grasp the content, secondly the flawed decision to abstain from teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. So the attempt to welcome 'Translanguaging' as a pedagogic strategy in classrooms in Kerala, the investigator argues is likely to be both a challenge and a fiasco as it only aids in developing an understanding of the content in English and not in fostering a mastery in the use of English. To overcome this challenge, the investigator proposes a change in existing Course books which abound in writings by British and American authors set in European settings which is unfamiliar to learners of English in schools in Kerala. This the investigator suggests should be replaced by English translations of content from ancient Indian and vernacular literature. Such a strategy, the investigator affirms will not only make learning English more user friendly by matching the pedagogic strategy of 'Translanguaging', but also help fulfill the prescriptions for an India-centred pedagogy advocated by the National Education Policy (2020).

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Introduction

Imagine someone travelling by road from the southern tip of India-Cape Comrin to the national capital New Delhi, by stopping occasionally at restaurants and motels. Even before one crosses the State border of Tamilnadu to Kerala, one would have heard at least half a dozen languages spoken on the streets as Kanyakumari is a tourist destination. And by the time one reaches the final destination one would have come across people speaking at least two dozen languages.

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For communicating with the waiter or hotel manager, the traveller, a native of New Delhi, whose mother tongue is Hindi, would have invariably used English as the lingua franca. And in instances where either the waiter or the hotel manager knows Hindi, the traveller would use Hindi for communicative purposes. But then, the waiter (usually a migrant worker from Bengal) may have Bengali as his mother tongue, would have learned the local language Tamil to survive in Tamilnadu and would also have a knowledge of English. For, the waiter knows, to communicate with customers he should have a knowledge of English, failing which his employer might replace him to ensure that business flourishes. That is to say, India is a multilingual society and matches the Cambridge Dictionary definition of people or groups of people using more than two languages for communication.

If one looks at schools in Tamilnadu or its neighbouring state, Kerala, one would find learners living near the border speaking both Tamil and Malayalam though their mother tongue is either Tamil or Malayalam. Many learners will be familiar with words, phrases, popular slogans, songs, festivals and several cultural ethos of both Tamilnadu and Kerala. And as part of the three language formula proposed by the national policy, school children are expected to learn the mother tongue, English and Hindi. But owing to the existing political decision to abstain from teaching Hindi, children in State run schools in Tamilnadu are not taught Hindi while their counterparts in Kerala State are taught three languages. That is to say, children studying in government-run schools in Kerala State can be classified as 'Multilingual' while their counterpart in Tamilnadu can be classified as 'Bilingual' as they are using two different languages only.

Now, if fluency is a criterion for considering the ability to use a language neither the learner in Tamilnadu nor Kerala is a 'bilingual' or 'multilingual' in the true sense of the term because they are learning a new language (English in the case of Tamilnadu and English and Hindi in the case of Kerala) which is not their mother tongue and they seldom use it for communication. We know that a language can be mastered only through use in different contexts and as learners, particularly in Tamilnadu and Kerala seldom find the necessity to converse in English or Hindi, they never pick up the nuances of the language and so they rarely become fluent users of the language.

However, the teacher of English in Government-run schools in both Tamilnadu and Kerala has a mastery of two languages - the mother tongue of the learner (Tamil in the case of Tamilnadu and Malayalam in the case of Kerala) and the target language assigned to teach, viz; English. So for teaching the prescribed Course Book in English, the teachers in both the States can fall back on the linguistic repertoire of the learner for teaching English. So Code switching is quite common and the investigator, a teacher educator has also noted liberal use of translation of English words, phrases and large chunks of the content in the textbook to the learner's mother tongue to aid comprehension.

Background

Of late, task based language teaching following Constructivist principles are being followed for teaching English in schools as per the prescriptions of the National Curriculum Framework. So when learners are given language learning tasks as pair/group work, they draw on available linguistic resources to make sense of the content/ task. This learner exchange will not be necessarily in the target language, English and if by any chance it is in English, it may not be grammatically correct. Here, the learners will be drawing on the repertoire of linguistic knowledge from own mother tongue, and from those picked up from friends in the neighbourhood who may have a different mother tongue. Besides this, they will also fall back on dialogues picked up from films in English, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam etc.

Bilingual Education we know, is centuries old and was popular both in Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Linguists however have theorized and have come up with the term 'Translanguaging' particularly in multilingual contexts which of late have been promoted by one of the largest organizations of teachers viz; Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages – TESOL.(Wikipedia) To Professor Ofelia García, an eminent visionary thinker of Bilingual education, 'Translanguaging' or engaging in bilingual or multilingual discourse practices, is an approach to bilingualism that is centered not on languages as has been often the case, but on the practices of bilinguals that are readily observable. (García, 2009, p. 44) (1)

A few years ago, at an annual conference, held by the largest association of Teachers of English in India –ELTAI, a special invitee, sponsored by the British Council, presented a session entitled "Translanguaging in English language classrooms in India, Why, when and how?" In the words of the presenter, many who attended (teachers of English in India from different States), the session foresaw translanguaging as a natural and authentic practice of the future realities of their learners.(2)

Problem

A main objective of teaching English in India is to enable students to acquire a command of the language for communicative purposes and also to aid in Higher Education which is invariably in English. The National Curriculum (2005) suggested learning a second or foreign language by using it for pragmatic purposes which includes not only social use of language but also for academic purposes.(3)

With Globalization, many have begun to perceive in English a language of social mobility. So when mastering the language became a top priority, the investigator noted that in the English classroom at different levels-secondary, higher secondary, Under Graduate and adult learners, a pronounced tendency to use a mixed variety of language during group work which is not in any way accurate. The mixture of words from local languages did aid in completion of a given language task, but in no way helped acquire correct language use. That is to say, fostering 'Translanguaging' only nurtures the tendency to make learners pitch on task completion and not the ultimate aim of acquiring the ability to use English both fluently and accurately.

Method

Data regarding learner performance during pair work and group work in the English language classroom was collected by the investigator during actual classroom teaching at Secondary and Higher Secondary level. Additional data from learners at Under Graduate (UG) level and adult learners were collected while teaching short term courses in Communicative English. The data collected was then compared with course end performance. This data is mostly qualitative in nature and was collected over a period of six years from schools in Kerala and during short term courses offered by the Centre for Adult Continuing and Extension Education of the University of Kerala and the Centre for English Language Teaching, University of Kerala.

The data collected regarding learner performance was then matched with studies on 'Translanguaging' practices to draw conclusion regarding the advantages and potential flaws if any. Then based on own experience of developing course materials, the investigator suggests appropriate content for English Language Course Books to ensure that translanguaging practices if employed results in learning thereby transforming the 'interlanguage' phase or 'process' in which the learner engages, to be more meaningful leading to developing competence in the target language, viz; English.

Brief Review of Studies

Translanguaging is perceived by many as a dynamic process in which multilingual speakers navigate complex social and cognitive demands by making use of multiple languages to communicate.(Garcia & Wei,2014) Researchers had perceived that second language learners are often pressured to surrender their own language practices while learning a language like English. So many teachers welcomed translanguaging as emancipating learners from adverse second language pedagogies. Johns(1990) Scholars like Lewis et al.,(2012) perceives translanguaging as advantageous for multilingual students because it promotes a thorough understanding of the content and help develop the weaker language for the bilingual or multilingual speaker.

Another argument favouring 'Translingualism' is the inability of non native speakers of English to achieve native-speaker status even after years of study. Such proponents opine that a more supportive space is essential to foster language acquisition in all varieties instead of a single dominant variety. (Canagarajah,2011; Cushman,2016) But then, such an argument indirectly accepts types of English- Indian English, African English etc. which employs words and usages common in their culture for communicating in English which can result in speakers having to negotiate between a variety of Englishes.

Materials and tasks for Translanguaging have been suggested by many. Anderson quoted two tasks proposed by two teacher trainers. The first one by Julu Sen of EFL University involves students from different cultures bringing toys or artifacts from own culture and engages in a conversation with students from different cultures explaining to each other the toy or artifact using available language. Following this, the correct version is learned through teacher scaffolding.(4) The second version by Heera Rajwani involves the use of a topic chosen from social media, based on which students making use of available resources and writes five sentences in any language they are familiar with. The following day, with teacher assistance they learn the correct way to write the five sentences in English. (5)

Findings

The study conducted on learners who have Malayalam as mother tongue but possesses a certain degree of familiarity with words and phrases in English. They could easily draw on snatches of dialogues and language use, picked up from regular watching of TV, Films and videos on social media.

*Learners at Secondary, Higher Secondary, UG level or adult learners were found to be comparatively relaxed when permitted to draw on available linguistic resources for completing tasks given for pair or group work. Many were found to be liberally using the mother tongue and snatches of phrases and usages picked up from the Media. In most cases, it aided in completion of the task though the actual use of the target language, English, tended to be flawed in terms of grammatical accuracy.

*Good learners are ones who rely on plethora of resources for language learning and don't fully depend on the English taught in the classroom. They tend to read a variety of texts-magazines, newspapers, short stories and fiction besides watching TV programmes and films with subtitles in English. Such learners were found to show a marked improvement in performance than those who were mostly passive learners during group work which relied heavily on 'Translanguaging'.

Suggestions

The National Education Policy (2020) in its vision statement (2019) specified a focus on an India centred education, and in the final version attempted to balance the rootedness and pride in India and at the same time accept the best ideas and practices in the world of learning.(Naidu) An article that appeared in the Voices Magazine of the British Council drawing on recommendation of educationists suggested that when the learner's home language is employed for learning English, learners are more likely to engage in the learning process.(Kioko,2015) Such a strategy makes possible the use of the interactive learner-centred approach which allows learners to ask questions and use language with confidence and enthusiasm.

In this study, the investigator would like to suggest the use of ancient Indian texts or vernacular texts in English translations for content of Course Books in English. [Please see appendix for an extract of an ancient text in Sanskrit translated into English with questions for exercises] The advantage is that as the content is closely related to the learners' own culture (unlike stories and articles written by American and British authors set in European milieu). This helps learners to associate quickly with the content and the translations in English matches their linguistic preference for multilingual language use with ease in comprehension leading to learning with less difficulty. But mastery in communication skills do not come merely by memorizing an endless amount of vocabulary, completing grammar exercises or reading books in English from cover to cover. And learning to speak like the native speaker will take time besides regular practice (The Language Gallery) (6) In fact, one who wishes to improve own communication skills should be highly motivated, be receptive to verbal and non verbal communication and take the extra effort to learn words, phrases and sentences. And rather than being a passive learner, should utilize every available opportunity to speak and write in English. Here, it's worth quoting Bacon: 'Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.'

Summing up

The sense of urgency which Western academics are creating by promoting 'translanguaging' gives one the impression that the vital life breath for English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms rests on it   and failure to use it can lead to feelings of frustration which can negatively affect learning of English. This paper based on field experiences of the investigator suggests that focusing on 'translanguaging' in classrooms in Kerala where teaching of vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar is seldom attempted can turn out to be a fiasco. It underscores the fact that, the via medium of 'translanguaging' in a mixture of English and Malayalam can reach a point of stasis resulting in students erroneously assuming that a broken variety of English that helps in communication is a sign of achievement. So, if translanguaging is attempted in classrooms, following the 'inter-learning' phase, the learner has to take the initiative to acquire, words, correct grammar and regularly use English for improving own ability to communicate fluently and accurately.

References

1.   To Garcia et al. Translanguaging, refers to the way that bilinguals use their language repertoires, from their own perspectives, and not from the perspectives of the national or standard languages. (García et al., 2017, p. 20) Such a perspective is well in tune with current thinking that learners of English as a second language (ESL) should break free of

repressive pedagogic practices. Thinkers like Garacia welcome the idea of learners drawing on own linguistic resources (which may include all kinds of language use including snatches of words and phrases of other languages picked up from TV,Film or social media).

2.   Jason Anderson during his session suggested four ways of Translanguaging: (i)Framework tasks which involves classroom management, discipline (ii)Using L1 as scaffolding resource by explaining to students or allowing students to use the first language (iii) Crosslanguaging which involves translation or use of bilingual dictionaries and (iv) Meshing which involves mixing language when speaking using texts with mixed languages.(Anderson,2017)

3.   The National Curriculum Framework 2005 proposed the following objectives for language teaching-learning for high school: The competence to understand what one hears (b)Ability to read with comprehension, and not merely decode (c)Expressing effortlessly (d) Writing coherently (e) Having a control over different registers (f) Scientific study of language (g)Creativity (h) Sensitivity.(Syllabus for Secondary Stage, NCERT 2005,Languages pp6-8)

4.   The strategy suggested by Julu Sen classified as 'Culture share', makes learners tell each other about the cultural items they have brought, and why and how it is related to their culture. In this phase, they talk about and explain about the items using both L1 and L2 and make a brief presentation of the item in English. (Ideas for Translanguaging)

5.   The task proposed by Heera Rajwani during the translanguaging phase makes learners write five sentences on the chosen topic in a shared language, not necessarily English. The following day, with teacher assistance the task is repeated but they write the five sentences in English. On the third day they try to recall the sentences in English and again draws on L1 for support as necessary. (Ideas for Translanguaging)

6.   A post in 'The Language Gallery' suggests steps for developing good communication skills:

7.   *Slow down speaking speed and choose the words   for the best possible response.

8.   *Learn sentences instead of words.

9.   *Ask questions to keep the conversation going. How about?   What do you think?...

10.   *Concentrate on the body language, look into the eyes of the speaker, watch your body pose while engaging in conversation and avoid trying to give the impression that you   are not interested.

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31.   https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/nc-framework/nf2005-english.pdf

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Appendix

Specimen extract from story entitled 'The Hermit's Daughter'. The extract is from chapter 3 and 4. The king while hunting in the forest sees Mana Kanaka, the wood cutter's lovely daughter Kadali-Garbha and asks for her hand in marriage.

Chapter III

"I would have your daughter for my wife," said the king; "and if you will give her to me, she shall have no wish ungratified. She shall have servants to wait on her and other young girls to be her companions; beautiful clothes to wear, the best of food to eat, horses and carriages as many as she will, and no work to do with her own hands."

Chapter IV

What Kadali-Garbha did was to cling closely to her father, hiding her face on his arm and whispering, "I will not leave you: do not send me away from you, dear father."

Mana Kanaka stroked her hair, and said in a gentle voice:

"But, dear child, your father is old, and must leave you soon. It is a great honour for his little girl to be chosen by the king for his bride. Do not be afraid, but look at him and see how handsome he is and how kind he looks."

It did not take long for the matter of the marriage to be settled. For Mana Kanaka, sad though he was to lose his dear only child, was glad that she should be a queen, and have someone to take care of her when he was gone.

[Source: Hindu Tales From The Sanskrit/The Hermit's Daughter by Siddha Mohana Mitra]

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Hindu_Tales_from_the_Sanskrit/The_Hermit%27s_Daughter

Exercise

Level: Under Graduate/Higher Secondary

Complete the following tasks:

- Kadali-Garbha has no idea of life in a palace and is likely to be uncomfortable. Give plausible reasons for her father Mana Kanka to give her in marriage to the King.(Discuss in pairs)

- If you have a sister who is of marriageable age what kind of soft skills training would you suggest for your sister before getting married? (Discuss in pairs)

- With reference to the story, list down the advantages and disadvantages of monarchial rule.(Discuss in pairs)

- Recently there is talk in the air of raising the age of marriage from 18 to 21. With reference to Mana Kanka and Kadali-Garbha, suggest the advantages and disadvantages of raising the marriage age. (Discuss in pairs)

- In modern times through social media sites, boys and girls meet and get married. They seldom care for their parent's consent. With reference to the story list down the advantages of an arranged marriage. (Group work-the leader to make the presentation)

- This is story of ancient times. Do you think in the modern age, a rich man would marry a poor girl? Cite instances by collecting data from the Internet. Make a presentation with visuals, citing source.(Weekend task).

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