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## **Role of Mother Tongue in Teaching English as Second Language in Tertiary Level**

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### **Abstract:**

*It has always been a debate among the linguists and academicians regarding how to teach English in a non-native context. Mother Tongue (MT) or the First Language (L1) plays such a role that the teachers in teaching a Second Language (L2) and the curriculum designers while formulating the curriculum often ignore that when the learner comes for learning L2, he has already formed the habit of thinking in MT. Though pedagogically it is desirable to use only English in the Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) classrooms which Dr. West's 'direct method' also stresses upon, this is also not possible in an environment where learners have a different MT background. In such a teaching-learning situation a proper assessment of the learners and learning, teachers and teaching, and content and context need to be assessed and understood for better outcome in a TESL classroom. Based on a research conducted in the under graduate colleges of Kamrup district of Assam, this paper brings forth many issues which are instrumental in TESL classrooms of the study area.*

**Keywords: direct method, first language, mother tongue, second language, TESL.**

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### **I. Introduction:**

Mother Tongue plays a vital role in the English teaching-learning situations. Its importance is noticeable in the teachers' use of Grammar-Translation (GT) method in the Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) classrooms up to the higher secondary level. The role of Mother Tongue can be perceived in two cases. Firstly, it is an important tool for the teacher in clarifying explanations, in giving instructions and in translations. In many cases, a brief explanation in the Mother Tongue can lead to a more efficient use of the classroom time. Secondly, Mother Tongue is itself a primary learning tool. To a great extent, the TESL situations involve not only the use of Mother Tongue, but the learners' already acquired knowledge of it. Again, the necessity of the use of Mother Tongue at the UG level depends much upon whether the learners have attained proficiency in English in respect of all the four skills at the end of the Higher Secondary level or not, or if they have

attained, then to what extent? Teaching of English at the UG level can be done adopting even Dr. West's 'direct method' in a TESL situation where the L2 learners have already achieved the goal of teaching English at the school level. But the problem arises when the teacher is put in a TESL situation where the learners are from a non-native context.

## **II. Objectives:**

This study, which was conducted in Kamrup district of Assam, aims at achieving the following objectives:

- a. Making a study on the necessity of using MT in a TESL classroom at the UG level
- b. The advantages and the disadvantages of the use of MT in L2 learning.
- c. The role of a teacher in using the L1 resources in the TESL classrooms.
- d. Analysis of the prevailing scenario of the teaching-learning situation in the study area.

## **III. Methods Applied:**

The present study is concerned with the issues relating to the use of Mother Tongue in the TESL classrooms of the U.G colleges, which belong to Kamrup district of Assam. A number of U.G colleges are located in this district. These U.G colleges were grouped into two categories: Provincialized and Non-Provincialized ones. In the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of the study, all the 12 Provincialized colleges, out of which 7 are located in the northern part and 5 are located in the southern part of the district, were selected for collecting necessary data. The colleges, which are situated in the northern part of the district, are: Pub Kamrup College, Puthimari College, Rangia College, S.B.M.S. College, S.D. College, Damdama College and Saraighat College. The colleges, which are situated in the southern part of the district are: D.K. College, D.K. Girls College, Chaigaon College, J.N. College and B.P. Chaliha College. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase, the study was concentrated on the teaching conditions in these colleges. Special emphasis was given on the study of student-teacher ratio and students' educational background, the demography and geographic setting of the district. Since the present study is concerned with the use of Mother Tongue in the TESL classrooms, so the English departments of these colleges were visited to collect information required for progressing the study. A number of students and a few teachers were interviewed to get their views regarding the TESL classroom situations. In each of these colleges 25 - 40 questionnaires were distributed among U.G. level students and these questionnaires were later collected for study. In this way, factual information was collected from 325 students. Random sampling procedure was adopted for interviewing and in the distribution of questionnaire.

Factual information, such as, the number of students in a TESL classroom, the number of teachers in the dept of English etc., were collected from college sources. To know the views of English teachers, a few English teachers were selected by following systematic sampling procedure. Questionnaires were made bilingual so that the students could easily comprehend the questions and write the answers without being puzzled. The relevant supplementary information was collected from all the available secondary sources.

#### **IV. Findings and Analysis:**

The study focused on six vital points. These are student-teacher ratio, background of students, impact of L1 in a TESL classroom, learners' views regarding the use of L1, students' proficiency in English and opinions of some teachers of English concerning the use of L1 in a TESL classroom.

In a teaching-learning situation, proper student-teacher ratio is one of the primary requirements in a classroom. It enables the teacher to give, as far as possible, individual attention to the students. In some schools (mostly private schools) 20 - 40 students are allowed to sit in a classroom, which allows greater individual attention. This kind of classroom situation has not been materialized so far in the Under Graduate colleges of the district in question is concerned. In the TESL classrooms in the study area up to 285 students are seated against a teacher. Such a large gathering of students in a TESL classroom results in three basic inconveniences for both the teachers and the students. Firstly, the presence of such a large number of students in a classroom turns the teacher practically into a speaker. Teacher-student interaction is very less in such a situation. These rural colleges are without microphone and loudspeaker system. So, the voice of the teacher becomes inaudible to the backbenchers, since the teacher cannot speak aloud beyond a certain limit. Secondly, it is practically impossible for the teacher to give individual attention to the students. Individual care and attention are very important in a classroom situation, though each student possesses a different degree of learning capability. This varied degree of the student's learning capability becomes perspicuous, if the feedbacks from the students are taken. Such feedback is extremely helpful for both the students and the teachers. On one hand, it helps the teachers in finding out the strength and weaknesses of the students and, on the other hand, the students become aware of their shortcomings. It also lets the teacher think upon the strength and the weaknesses of him as a teacher and formulate an effective way of teaching. But the presence of too many students in a classroom forces the teacher to follow the lecture method and, practically, it becomes impossible for him to take sufficient feedbacks from the students. As a result, on one hand, the students fail to get the total classroom benefits and, on the other hand, the teachers' techniques are also crippled. **Thirdly**, in such an unscientific classroom situation, the students may have confusion about the meaning of something explained or told by the teacher, but has to depend upon it, since there is little opportunity and time in the classroom to eliminate any confusion about anything. In such situations the prospective students are always at a disadvantage as they do not get adequate attention from the teacher.

The students of the UG colleges of the district are from various communities, such as the *Bodos* and the *Rabhas*, non-tribal communities and the Muslim community (Taher). Hence, a multiplicity of cultural and linguistic environment prevails in the district. But the students, from various Mother Tongue backgrounds, are to study through Assamese as L1, since the colleges, situated in the district, have adopted it as the medium of instruction.

The medium of instruction ‘has always been a key issue among educational institutions across the world’ (Ebad). In the vernacular medium schools, the language used as L1 is the State or Regional language. Therefore, the learners are bound to depend on their knowledge of L1 to learn another language. In Kamrup district, a very limited number of English medium schools are located in comparison to the number of Assamese medium schools. From this fact it can be understood that most of the UG students are from Assamese medium schooling background. The study conducted in the UG colleges of the district has shown that more than 90% of the UG students are from Assamese (vernacular) medium background. Out of 325 students, who were distributed questionnaire, 94% are found to be from vernacular medium schooling background and only 6% are found to be from English medium schooling background. Again, out of 325 students 95% were educated through vernacular medium of instruction at the Higher Secondary level against 5% having English medium background at the same level. Regarding the quality of the students on the basis of marks secured in the Matriculation and the Higher Secondary level final examination, the study has shown that in the Higher Secondary final examination out of 325 students only 3% of the students secured marks in English above 80%, 22 % students secured marks between 60-80%, 44 % students secured marks between 40-60%, and 31 % secured below 40%. In Matriculation, out of 325 students, 3% of the students secured above 80% marks in English, 30 % students secured between 60-80%, 52 % students secured between 40-60%, and 15 % secured below 40%. From this data one can arrive at the point that the UG students in these colleges are from a varied degree of learning ability. Hence, in a TESL classroom, the teacher has to consider it to make the teaching-learning situations more effective.

This study has shown that the students could learn English at the end of the Higher Secondary level in varying degrees. In the view of the students the range of learning in case of 30 % students were below 40%, in case of 44% students it was between 40-60%, in case of 21% it was between 60-80% and it was above 80% for 5 % students only. This data provides a glimpse of how much the students could learn English at the end of the H.S. level. This is not the final way in judging a student’s command over English, but it was to find out a general impression of their attainment of proficiency in the language. Language learning and passing in the examination are two different entities; the proficiency in a language cannot be judged from passing in the examination. One may pass examination, but he may not be able to learn the language properly. In the present examination system, even up to the UG level, there is very little provision for testing students’ skill in listening and speaking. Reading with comprehension and writing skill are tested by means of questions from an unseen passage. Some textual questions, from prose and poetry, are also given to test students’ ability to write. But, for passing in the examination, it is not necessary to answer all the questions given in the question papers. Out of 100, more than 25 marks are allotted on simple grammatical questions, such as, ‘fill in the blanks with appropriate prepositions’, ‘fill in the blanks with correct form of verbs’, ‘fill in the blanks with articles / determiners’, ‘framing of sentences using the given phrases and idioms’ etc.

A close scrutiny of some old question papers shows that very often the similar questions are repeatedly asked in the examinations. Such repetitions help the students to select some possible questions for the examinations and a student by answering these questions correctly can pass the examination easily. In the evaluation system of the Matriculation and the Higher Secondary examinations, under some conditions, 'grace marks' (additional marks) are provided to the students who fail to secure 30 marks (pass marks) in the English subject. Hence, a student can pass the Matriculation and the Higher Secondary examination without answering other questions from the question paper. This kind of examination system helps a student to pass in the examination, but it does not test students' skill in the language. So, the proficiency in English of a student cannot be evaluated from the marks secured in such kind of examinations.

To test language proficiency of the students, a few questions were asked. It was found that the range of understanding and learning English is below 40% in case of 10% of the students. In case of 45% students the range of understanding and learning English is between 40-60%, in case of 31 % it is between 60-80% and it is above 80% in case of 14 % of the students. When a teacher teaches English in the TESL classrooms using direct method, the range of understanding and learning English in case of 33% is below 40%. The same is between 40-60% in case of 33 %, in case of 20% it is between 60-80% and it is above 80% in case of 14 % of the students. However, when TESL classrooms involve use of L1 predominantly none said that they understood and learnt English below 40%, 15% said that their range of understanding and learning are between 40-60%, 33 % said that it is between 60-80% and it is above 80% in case of 52 % of the students.

There is a lot of ground to believe that a student's learning of L2 in the ESL classrooms depends much upon the teachers' use of L1. This point has been ascertained from the responses to the question whether they understand English more when a teacher uses Mother Tongue to teach English in the classroom. To this question more than 95% students replied in affirmative. When English is taught through bilingual method none said that they understood English below 40%, 13 % said that their understanding and learning range was between 40-60%, 50 % said that it is between 60-80% and it is above 80% in case of 37 % of the students. This data shows that the students can learn English more when L1 is used predominantly in the TESL classroom. Again, it has been found that the students' level of learning bears a relationship with the teachers' use of L1 in a TESL classroom. The teachers who uses L1 relatively more in a TESL classroom has got high ratings in comparison to the teachers who do not use L1 for teaching L2.

It is generally assumed that the L1 of a person comes to influence the quality of learning and use of L2. The interference of the mother tongue or L1 is widely accepted as a fact by most of the linguists. As S. Pit Corder says, 'language acquisition' takes place during the period when the infant is maturing physically and mentally' (Corder). According to Baruah, Children gets ample scope to converse in MT in his day-to-day environment and he is bound to learn MT, otherwise some of his basic needs are likely to remain unfulfilled. In other words, there is a strong motivation in favour of learning one's MT (Baruah). Data has

shown that 80% students speak or write English 'thinking first in his Mother Tongue and then translating it into English', 3% students speak or write English thinking only in English in terms of English structure, 17% students speak or write English comparing the structure of English with the structure of the Mother Tongue. A student who has to think first in Mother Tongue and then translate it into English is because of the influence of the Mother Tongue, which is too deep-rooted in him to avoid. The student, who chooses the third option, is, on one hand, unable to avoid the influence of his Mother Tongue and, on the other hand, he has poor command over how to form English sentences. It again shows the interference as well as the influence of L1 in L2 learning.

If we look into the learners' views regarding the use of L1 in a TESL classroom it has been found that 10% of the students are of the belief that the teachers should teach English using only English in a TESL classroom; not a single student viewed in favour of teachers' use of only L1 in a TESL classroom. About 90 % of the students are of the view that the teachers should teach use both L1 and L2 in a TESL classroom. Not a single student considered the use of only L1 in a TESL classroom as useful. From this data it is understandable that the majority of the students want to learn English through Bilingual Method. In this regard 20 % students said that the teacher's use of L1 in a TESL classroom should be below 40%, 60 % students said it should be between 40-60% and 20 % students said that it should be above 60%. An analysis of the suggestions given by the students regarding the use of Mother Tongue in TESL classrooms, it has been found that more than 90% students prefer to learn English without getting detached from the Mother Tongue. The majority of them argues that they have formed the habit of learning English through their Mother Tongue, therefore, the teachers should teach English using it at the Under Graduate level also.

The teachers are the persons who are the witnesses of the problems and the prospects in a classroom teaching-learning situation. Hence, their opinions are very important. In this regard five teachers were also interviewed. From an analysis of these views a lot of things have come to the forefront. The problem of the students in learning English at the UG level is because of their failure to attain proficiency in the four language skills at High School and Higher Secondary level. The improper teacher-student ratio causes problems for the teachers in collecting necessary feedbacks from the learners and so the teachers are forced to adopt 'lecture method'. The Majority of the students are not proficient enough to follow 'Direct Method' and so in a TESL classroom situation they prefer to use L1 since it seems more effective.

Thus, this study has shown that the necessity of Mother Tongue in TESL classroom at UG level in the colleges of Kamrup district of Assam is inexorable. Most of the UG level students are from vernacular medium teaching background and majority of them failed to attain good command over English language up to H.S. level. So, the advantage of using MT at the U.G. level in such circumstance is that TESL becomes more practical and effective. The disadvantage of the use of MT in TESL classrooms is that, the interference of MT becomes stronger.

The study has shown that the prevailing scenario of TESL classroom situation at U.G. level in the colleges of the district is not congenial. This is mainly because of unscientific student teacher ratio in the TESL classroom, lack of proper approach to ESL teaching right from the school level, lack of guidance and training to the English teachers and faulty examination system.

#### **V. Concluding Remarks and Future Directions:**

Though it is 'desirable to teach English mostly through the medium of English', but 'this may not always be practicable' (Yardi). In a homogeneous society where there is an ideal 'speaker-listener' relationship (Chomsky), Dr. West's 'Direct Method' can be applied in a teaching-learning situation. But problem arises in a non-native context where there is a heterogeneous speech community as well as heterogeneous 'sociolinguistic competence' (Hymnes) on the part of the learners. Hence the use of Mother Tongue or L1 will help the students learn English better. But in using L1 in L2 classroom, the teacher has to use L1 judiciously in a controlled manner. The English teachers can use learners' MT and L1 resources in teaching L2, but in doing so L1 should not be overused. The percentage of MT and L1 use should be reduced towards the end of the session. Teachers should use the MT and L1 concepts in a positive way to explain something, which is otherwise difficult to define.

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