PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES: STUDYING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING IN CLASSROOMS OF RURAL BENGAL AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

It is a widespread idea that L2 learners of English studying in the State government aided schools of Bengal (especially the rural ones) are fluent with the structures of English grammar but lack communicative competence. Such an argument calls for discussion the scope of syllabus as well as the whole teaching-learning process involving the approach and methodology in such SLA curriculum.

Following Rod Ellis's Integrated model of language teaching, language teachers (particularly those dealing with English in a L2 environment) unanimously agreed that the best way of teaching language should strike a balance between deductive and inductive methods. But for the language teachers (most often L2 speakers of English) in these rural schools of Bengal, it is really a challenge to make the learners competent in speaking English. Not only is it because of the syllabus of English (set by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education) that allows very little scope of testing a student's speaking ability, but also because of certain socio-economic obligations, lack of infrastructure and proper teacher-training courses. In such a scenario, the target of most language teachers is basically to complete the syllabus. But the enthusiastic and highly-determined ones devise certain strategies to overcome these challenges and attempt a 'different' way of EGT. This paper is an analysis of my observation of the classroom teachings of L2 grammar in a State government aided rural Secondary school of Bengal over a period of nearly three months. I studied the strategies applied by the language teacher in order to strike a balance between completing the syllabus of the course as well as making the learners successful users of the target language. Eventually I noted how inspite of theorists condemning the interpolation of L1 during SLA, L1 of the learner (if strategically used) can be used to garner communicative competence in L2.

KEYWORDS: English, Language, Teaching, Grammar, Communicative Competence

INTRODUCTION

Within the last quarter century, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been put forth around the world as the 'new' or 'innovative' way to teach English as a second or foreign language. Teaching materials, course descriptions and curriculum guidelines proclaim a goal of communicative competence. But inspite of the burgeoning concern for communicative competence all over the country with prioritization of courses like Communicative English or ESP, there has been very little change in the teaching-learning scenario in the language classrooms of the State affiliated secondary and higher secondary schools of West Bengal. English language (as L2) is still taught (in most cases) through traditional teacher-centered, syllabus-oriented, grammar translation method with a strong emphasis on rote learning. Teaching English is synonymous to teaching grammar with negligible attention to enhancing students' ability to 'speak English'. Not only is it because of the syllabus of English (set by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education) that allows very little scope of

testing a student's speaking ability, but also because of certain socio-economic obligations, lack of infrastructure and proper teacher-training courses.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

As a part of my PhD coursework, I had been observing the classroom teachings of certain State government aided rural schools of West Bengal where a clear majority of students are first-generation English language learners. It was during that period I observed how, inspite of the lack of infrastructure, time constraint (for completing the prescribed syllabus) and other obligations, language teachers effectively use classroom interactions to make those socio-economically impoverished students communicatively competent. One important thing I noted there was how the mother tongue of those students was successfully used to enhance their command over L2 English.

In this paper I will be noting my observations of the English classes of Class-X in Champsara Satish Chandra Vidya Niketan, a co-educational school 20 kilometres away from Tarakeshwar affiliated by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. Over the period of 8 weeks of English language class (of 45 minutes) that I attended there twice a week, I noted how the language teacher, Mr. S. Manna was incorporating L1 of the students (he himself is a non-native speaker of L1 English) to encourage them to communicate in L2 English. This is an extract of the conversation which was recorded in the class as the teacher was teaching the class about changing the voice of sentences. In the following excerpt, T represents the teacher and S represents a student.

T: You, Madhabi, read the sentence

S: The little boy is tea..tea..

T: The little boy is teasing

S: The little boy is teasing the dog

T: Chhotto chheleti kukurtake birokto korchhe (The little boy is teasing the dog). Do you know the meaning of tease? Tease kora mane birokto kora. Tomaay keu birokto kore? (Teasing means disturbing. Does anyone disturb you?).

S: (laughs) Naa (No)

T: Anyone tease you?

S: No

T: Acchha (OK). Now change the voice

S: The little boy tease. Er. The little dog.. na (no)…the dog is being tease..tease..

T: Teased

S: The dog is being teased by the little boy

T: Very good answer. Sit down. Now Tanmoy, do you tease dogs?

S: No no Sir. One dog…a dog…

T: Ki korechhilo? (What happened?)

S: Kaamre diechhilo Sir (The dog bit me Sir)

T: Tai? (Really?) A dog bit you? Kaamre dewa mane? (What does it mean?)

S: Bit

T: Now tell the full sentence.

S: A dog.bit.bit..me.

T: Excellent. Sit down.

Observation Analysis

It can be seen how the teacher begins by instructing in English but sensing the discomfort and difficulty faced by the student, quickly switches over to L1 (Bengali). Following him, the student too replies him back in L1. This is followed by a quick retranslation of the sentence said in Bengali back to English. The student now answers in English. The teacher begins the lesson (a continuation) with instruction-based teaching technique, using the audiolingual drill method but integrates the interactional mode mid-way. Although the target of the question was to generate a correct answer with employment of proper grammatical structures, negotiation of meaning played an important role in this extract of the conversation. The teacher went on to not only translate the words like 'tease', 'bit' into L1 but also negotiate its meaning by placing it within a context with which the student was able to relate. At this stage, the errors of pronunciation (pronounces 'teasing' as 'tesing') are overlooked. The teacher too, deliberately structures his speech for the ease of the student, for example, instead of saying the correct sentence- "Does anyone tease you?", he says - "Anyone tease you?" Once the student was comfortable, the teacher came back to the exercise of changing the voice of the sentence and helping the student at very point of difficulty, was able to make the student speak the grammatically correct sentence. Throughout the conversation, error correction continues and remains intrusive since the focus is on accuracy of the grammatical form but the aspect of communicative competence is also not neglected .

Inference

One major feature observed during the process was the recurrent use of L1 to negotiate the meaning of a particular item in L2. Such an interpolation of L1 is not negative in nature since it enables the student to interpret the meaning of that linguistic item in L2. The most important thing to be kept in mind during this point is the socio-economic background of the students and their affective filters serving as a barrier to successful language learning. L1 not only breaks the ice but also enables the lowering of the affective filter so that the learner may learn the target language smoothly. Often students tend to face difficulty in using the learnt grammatical patterns in composing a sentence, a paragraph or creating a coherent piece of written work.

Often they cannot memorise the rules and commit the error and often they know how to construct sentences but feel confused to combine two sentences to make one long sentence. The chief reason of all these problems is the traditional way of teaching- the audiolingual drilling patterns and less involvement by the students. To combat these problems, L1 can be of great help. If the students are taught to draw a "parallelism" between L1 and L2, to negotiate the interference of L1 on L2, the frequency of commiting mistakes will decrease drastically.

CONCLUSIONS

In the wake of globalization, need-based teaching has increased. The problem is that to pass the examinations (specially in those contexts where the syllabus excludes the communicative aspect of the language), the students should be taught meaning-based grammar but if the student has to apply his grammatical skills in a spoken environment, communicative competence is needed. Therefore there must be an attempt "to look at the ways of combining form and meaning in teaching foreign languages" (Sysoyev, 1999). The best way of learning a language is by contextualizing it in a meaningful and significant setting in which "explicit, direct elements are gaining significance in teaching communicative abilities and skills". At this point, this integration of L1 in L2 teaching and contextualizing it proves to be helpful.

At present, L1 (the mother tongue) enters the conversation that begun in L2 (English) but stops short because the teacher has to translate and explain before proceeding to extract information from the learner. But such interpolation may be taken a step higher by integrating the use of L1 for discussion and understanding along with an engagement with L2 (English). Initially, mother tongue helped to make the input language comprehensible but now it may be used to understand the underlying grammatical structures as well. Krashen (1985: 94) notes, "(while) concurrent translation is not effective", the use of two languages in the classroom can be "done in such a way as to provide comprehensible input in the target language using the first language to provide background information".

In contexts like this technological advancements often cannot be imbibed into curriculum design or teaching techniques due to many extra-academic factors like lack of technological aids or sociocultural barriers to English language learning or lack of teacher-training programs. In such cases, the technique that the teacher uses in this school (bringing in common metaphors in L1, role-playing) is a rather unique way of grammar teaching which may be adopted by such other rural schools too. If grammar teaching starts involving such 'fun' aspects, L2 will no longer be a 'fear factor' for the students. According to the questionnaire (that was circulated among the students to obtain their feedback), most of the students enjoy such 'small talks' that narrow the gap between the language teacher and the students but are afraid about 'grammar'. Now if grammar teaching (an essential component not only in the school syllabi but also in SLA curriculum) starts sugarcoating itself with such covert techniques and fun stuff, EGT will easily attain two major goals- teaching the theoretical grammar structures to the students for a productive output and achieving communicative competence.

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