

The Use of Mother Tongue in the English Classroom

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Abstract: *The controversy about the use of mother tongue in English language classrooms persists and changes within pedagogy. This has been an issue which many linguists, academic scholars, teachers, students, etc. have voted for and against on. This paper aims to discuss the different views presented by various research scholars and academicians on whether to use the mother tongue in the English classroom or not. This study presents an understanding on the way they bring in the importance of using mother tongue in a balanced way in an EFL classroom by understanding the needs of the learners, the sociolinguistic aspects to it, to what degree should mother tongue be used in an EFL classroom, a distinction between what stands as EFL and ESL, and lastly, the importance of judicious use of mother tongue, a powerful tool, to promote participation, engagement, productive learning environment and understanding for the learners..*

Keywords: target language, mother tongue, sociolinguistics, English classroom, etc

I. INTRODUCTION

It is fascinating to note how Prof. Dharmanand Joshi starts his research study titled “*Judicious Use of Mother Tongue in EFL Classroom: Some Considerations*”. He titles the first section as ‘My Story’ and paints us a picture of an unforgettable event that he experienced in his life. Being a student who migrated to an urban setting from a rural area, he shares his experience about how difficult it was to adjust to a classroom where English was the only language used as a medium of teaching and communicating. Walking the extra mile to fit in and excel, a thought awoke in the process – “*What if Nepali equivalences are used for incomprehensible words?*” (Joshi, 2020). After sharing this thought along with the amount of difficulty experienced in learning, with the respective professor, the professor helped by giving some Nepali equivalent terms to make understanding and learning happen.

This incident perfectly presents to us the plight of innumerable students who face this kind of difficulty at various levels of education. In this incident, the use of the mother tongue in an English classroom seemed to have helped the student in better understanding and learning. This raises many questions in need of immediate discussion – Should mother tongue be used in an English classroom? If not, then why not? And if yes, then to what degree?

The issue revolving around the Mother Tongue:

There has always been a debate revolving around the use of the mother tongue in an English classroom. Many linguists, academic scholars, teachers, etc., have different opinions regarding the same. On one side, some are against using the mother tongue in an English classroom, emphasizing the fact that maximum use of the target language can optimize learning and make this process itself very quick. Hence, the students are expected to move towards the imposing presence of the target language exposure with no difficulty. On the other side, some are totally in favour of the idea of using the mother tongue in an English classroom. Rinvoluceri, in his study, doesn’t fail to explicate the difficulty faced by many teachers to come up with creative, unique, engaging, and tiresome ways and methods to explain the meaning of a certain word. American linguist Stephan Krashen (1981) argues that “*the use of mother tongue in English language teaching should be minimized since it may sometimes mislead in the process of learning the target language*”. Here, we have a view against the use of the mother tongue in an English classroom. Similarly, on the other hand, we have



American novelist David Freeman (2001) stating that, “*The native language of the student is used in the classroom in order to enhance the security of the students, to provide the bridge from the familiar to unfamiliar and to make the meaning of the target language words clear*”. Here, we have a view presented for the use of mother tongue in an English classroom, which states that allowing the use of mother tongue in the English classroom will lead to a better understanding and comfortable learning of the target language.

By presenting to us these two differing views of experts dealing with the issue, we have with us a clear picture as to how this issue has been perceived at hand. Danish linguist Otto Jespersen states that, “*Translations ought to be used sparingly and in case of all events, it is not necessary to translate sentences and it should be translated only at the word level when it is absolutely required*”. This view clearly explains that, to inculcate the judicious way, the degree to which the use of the mother tongue is encouraged in an English classroom is very necessary to be taken into consideration.

Difference between EFL and ESL:

To understand what suits best, let us take into consideration the different and necessary aspects concerning a typical English classroom, in a country like India. A classroom full of curious students coming from different parts of the country with their own languages and dialects, the medium of education that they come from (English, semi-English, etc.), the board that they studied in (SSC, CBSE, ICSE, etc.), their exposure to the English language through different forms of media, their social and economic backgrounds to access such materials, their different levels and speed of understanding and grasping the language, the type of learner that they are (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, etc.) and the mother tongue of the teacher teaching in the classroom, to just name a few. In such state of affairs, what suits best and how to implement it?

Prof. Dharmanand Joshi, in his study, explains to us the difference between EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) and how the use of mother tongue or not is directed by our understanding of these aspects. In simple words, ESL indicates using the English language inside as well as outside of the classroom. EFL, on the other hand, represents learners learning the English language inside the classroom but making use of their mother tongue outside of the classroom. Here, there is a wider acquaintance with the mother tongue besides the regular exposure while communicating with the family, friends, etc. While learning a foreign language, complete elimination of the mother tongue is not possible and is also not just. Prof. Dharmanand Joshi highlights this point in his study by presenting to us the essence of a study undertaken by Prof. C. Schweers (1999), from the Spanish perspective in Puerto Rico. It was found that almost 88.7% of the students felt the need for the Spanish language to be used in a classroom.

It is also necessary for the teachers to know that the use of the mother tongue should be done judiciously, whenever absolutely required. Sometimes, English as a language and as the only medium of communication is strictly imposed upon the students. Prof. Dharmanand Joshi, in his article, states a study undertaken by Australian linguist David Nunan (1999), which reports cases from China where students, on speaking Cantonese (a spoken language in south eastern China), were forced to pay fines and were seen to be very discouraged and unmotivated during class activities. This reminds me of the environment in which I too studied and was a part of. Coming from an English convent school, the same rule was imposed upon me and my classmates during my school days, where the consequence of using any other language except English was punishment. This isn't exactly helpful in any way, as it hinders the learning process.

Judicious use of Mother Tongue in an English classroom: An effective tool in Learning

Using of mother tongue in an English classroom is said to have a lot of benefits. It makes the learner feel comfortable and motivated in learning a foreign language. A teacher should be careful and aware of the degree to which the use of the mother tongue takes place in an English classroom. This requires special skills and knowledge on the part of the teacher, where the importance of right, just, and proper teacher training can be highlighted. Translation at a word level is perfectly acceptable and all right. Giving cultural equivalences for better understanding leads to desired achievement. If English is imposed as the only medium of communication, it creates a lot of problems at the part of the learners. Issues such as being scared of the teacher, being scared of the subject, Phobia, lack of motivation, etc., are faced by many students. These issues are to be faced and solved by the teachers, which is actually not an easy task to undertake.



Hence, judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classroom seems to be the key to unlock the path of productive language learning.

Touching upon this topic, Prof. Dharmanand Joshi, in his study, presents to us a diagram which states the primary areas in which the use of the mother tongue in an English classroom is required, and which is included below:



Fig.1: Reasons for Judicious Use of Mother Tongue.

With Judicious use, it becomes very easy to build a healthy rapport with the students and fabricate an environment where they find comfort in learning the unknown. A place free of judgement and welcoming to errors, where students are not shy nor embarrassed to speak up and learn. Judicious use of the mother tongue also makes it very easy to teach and explain difficult concepts or ideas. As a teaching professional, finding the exact equivalent of the same word in the target language, which gives the same meaning in a specific context, is indeed a herculean task. Judicious use of the mother tongue helps in explaining as well as understanding new vocabulary by correlating it with the source language. Students are alert, active, and interactive as they seem to feel like they already know the new unknown and do not fear contributing to the teaching-learning process. Every learner, before entering a language class, carries along the learned weight of a native language/mother tongue/first acquired language, and there is always a natural tendency to use it. The use of the mother tongue seems to encompass a sense of security and comfort for the learner learning a foreign language.

II. CONCLUSION

Language is not just a means of communication; it is a way to understand not just one another but also ourselves, create bonds, and revel in the beauty of the complexities of this world. The discourse around whether to use the mother tongue in the English classroom is not just a theoretical matter, but a way to understand the real, practical scenarios of English language classrooms. Judicious use of the mother tongue is not a sign of weakness in language pedagogy — rather, it is a thoughtful, learner-centred approach that acknowledges linguistic realities and needs. Change through time is necessary. It creates a classroom environment where students feel heard, seen, and encouraged. Whether through the use of translation, varied cultural references, or code-switching, the mother tongue, when used wisely, can become a trusted friend in the learner's journey rather than a hindrance. As educators, the goal is not merely to teach English but to make students love learning it, and sometimes, listening to a familiar and comforting word in their own language can make all the difference. The main objective/goal should be attained, and that is of learning taking place, whatever the



method by which the teaching is done. The heart of effective teaching lies not in rigid rules, but in understanding, and sometimes, understanding begins in the language of home.

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