



THE USE OF BENGALI IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING CLASSES: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: In Bangladesh students learn English for about twelve years, but the proficiency level they reach is very low. For this reason, we tried to investigate whether the use of first language - the Bengali, is helpful in teaching English in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes in Bengali Medium Schools and Colleges of Bangladesh. This study was conducted among the teachers and students of 10 schools and colleges in Dhaka city through questionnaire survey. It revealed that that Bengali plays an important role in ELT classes and most of the teachers and students consider it helpful in learning English.

Key words: Communicative English, ELT, teaching language, Bangladesh

Introduction

It is believed that the learner's first language strongly affects the learning of second language. Pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of second language are affected by the learner's first language. It is also believed that the role of the first language in learning second language is a negative one. This idea is supported by a number of linguists. Marton (1981; in Ellis, 1985) says-

“Taking a psychological point of view, we can say that there is never peaceful co-existence between two language systems in the learner, but rather constant warfare, and that warfare is not limited to the moment of cognition, but continues during the period of storing newly learnt ideas in memory “.

A brief discussion about teaching foreign language methods is presented below which might help to understand the role of Bengali in ELT classes.

The Grammar-Translation Method: The Grammar-Translation Method, also called the classical method, was first used in teaching classical languages - Latin and Greek. In this method, through studying grammar of the target language, students would become more familiar with the grammar of their first language. Thus students are able to read and write both the target language and their first language better (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

The role of the teachers in this method is very authoritative and that of the students is very passive. Students do whatever the teacher asks them to do in the classroom. Students are taught to translate materials from one language to another. For this case, students study grammar deductively, i.e. they are given the grammar rules and examples for memorizing and then they are asked to apply the rules to other examples. They memorize the vocabulary through bilingual process. Vocabulary

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and grammar, reading and writing are emphasized and this method giving much less attention to pronunciation, speaking and listening (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students' native language. The language that is used in the class is mostly the students' native language. The students are asked to translate the written text from their native language to the target language or vice versa. On the other hand, students should not translate idioms literally, but in a way that shows that they understand their meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

The Direct Method: It is a method of teaching language in the classroom. In preparing students to use the target language communicatively, Direct Method is very popular. In this method no translation is allowed; rather the meaning is to be conveyed directly in the target language through the use of demonstration and visual aids, with no recourse to the students' native language.

Thus, students learn the target language directly. When a teacher teaches something, he demonstrates its meaning through the use of realia, pictures or pantomime and never translates it into the students' native language. Students speak in the target language a great deal and communicate as if they were in a real situation. This language is primarily spoken, not written. Therefore, students study common, everyday speech in the target language and emphasis on vocabulary, not grammar (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

In this method, a teacher can ask a number of questions to a student in the target language and s/he can also ask both individual and collective questions to the students. At first, these questions are contained in a particular grammar structure and later the students are asked for using the same grammatical structure. Unlike the Grammar Translation Method, the grammar is taught inductively. For this method, it requires the target language speakers (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

The Audio-Lingual Method: It is an oral-based approach and is most applicable for learning a language hurriedly. It is particularly helpful in learning languages without alphabet. In this method students learn to use the target language communicatively, without stopping to think. Here a teacher is like an orchestra leader who controls everything. Whatever the teachers say, the students must follow. Through dialogues, new vocabulary and structural patterns are presented and the students learn these dialogues through imitation and repetition. In the class room, most of the interaction is between the teacher and the student which is initiated by a teacher, and student-student interaction is teacher directed. (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

The habits of the students' native language are thought to interfere with the students' attempts to learn the target language. Therefore, only the target language is used in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method: It is a modern and systematic language teaching method. It was introduced for the reason that students, despite knowing the rules of linguistic usages, often cannot use them in target language. It is clear that communication requires that students perform certain functions, such as promising, inviting and declining invitations within a social context. According to Hymes (1971; in Larsen-Freeman, 2004) ability to communicate requires more communicative competence than linguistic competence. Some of the characteristics of this communicative view of language are (Richards and Rodgers, 1986):

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- The primary function of language is to perform interaction and communication.
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional communicative meaning as exemplified in and discourse

The goal of this method is to enable students to communicate in the target language for which students need the knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings and functions. In this method students are actively engaged in negotiating meaning and in understanding others when their

knowledge of the target language is incomplete and a teacher is a moderator facilitating communications in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

In CLT method, only the target language is used during communicative activities and for explaining the activities to the students or in assigning home works. From the classroom management students realize that the target language is a vehicle for communication, not just an object to be studied (Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

From this brief review of language teaching methods, it becomes clear that the role of students' native language is important only in case of the Grammar Translation Method, which is an incomplete method of teaching a foreign language - a student can develop skills only in reading and writing – out of four language skills. In other methods, students' native language is completely forbidden.

So the use of Bengali in the ELT classes is likely to create some problems. Firstly, it can hamper natural environment of teaching and learning system for ELT. Secondly, it can affect right pronunciation practice. As a result, the learners are likely to be weak in speaking and listening skills. Thirdly, it will take a lot of time to learn English Language. Last, the use of Bengali in the ELT classes may reduce the natural creativity of the learners. Present study was undertaken to assess the perception of teachers and students of ELT classes.

Materials and Methods

Dhaka region was the study area. From Dhaka city 10 schools and colleges were selected randomly. They were Dhaka Residential Model School and College, Dr.Md. Shahidullah Adarsha Uchcha Madhyamik Bidypith, Monipur High School, Mirpur University College, Mirpur Girls' Ideal Lab. Institute, Dhanmondi Govt. Boys' High School, Dhaka City College, SOS Hermann Mainer School & College, New Model Degree College and Govt. Bangla College.

The students reading in nine to twelve classes and the teachers teaching them English were the samples of this study. A total of 100 students and 50 teachers were surveyed using separate questionnaire (Appendix 1 and 2) during the period September-November, 2006. Sometimes they were also asked to comment on some particular problems and prospects of using Bengali in ELT Classes.

Descriptive statistics and tabular forms were used to analyze the data and to present the result.

Results

Findings of this study have been in Table 1-7. Table 1 indicates that Bengali is very frequently used in ELT classes. Both teachers and students consider occasional use of Bengali in ELT classes as helpful. Despite that Bengali is quite frequently used in ELT classes, a considerable part of the teachers (36%) consider that using Bengali is not helpful in delivering lecture in ELT classes.

Table 1. General status of using Bengali in English language classes

| Research questions | Respondent (%) | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|---------|------------|---------|----------|---------|----------|---------|
| | Sometimes | | Many times | | Always | | Never | |
| | Teachers | Student | Teachers | Student | Teachers | Student | Teachers | Student |
| How frequently Bengali is used in ELT classes? | 92 | 70 | 8 | 20 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Is Bengali helpful in ELT classes? | 76 | 59 | 18 | 15 | 6 | 19 | 6 | 7 |
| Does Bengali help in delivering lecture in ELT classes? | 56 | * | * | * | 8 | * | 36 | * |

* , Not applicable

Table 2 indicates that use of Bengali in ELT classes is considered helpful because of the poor background of Bangladeshi students in English. Only a small fraction of the students (4%) reported that it helps them learning the lesson easily. In a supplementary question 76% of the teachers mentioned that students cannot learn English without the use of Bengali in ELT classes.

Table 2. Teachers' and students' perception about the benefits students may obtain from the use of Bengali in ELT classes.

| Perceived issues | Teachers (%) | Students (%) |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| a) Students can understand the lecture properly | 36 | 13 |
| b) Students can not understand English lecture | 80 | 10 |
| c) Students can give attention to the lecture | 20 | 17 |
| d) Students can understand the meaning of difficult words and concepts easily | 16 | 46 |
| e) They can enjoy the lecture | 8 | 10 |
| f) Students learn the lesson easily | * | 4 |

Table 3 indicates that teachers are generally confident in delivering lecture in ELT classes without using Bengali however, students are not. Table 4 indicates that teachers are very concerned about the poor background of students in English, which is also recognized by 72% (54% + 18%) students.

Table 3. Difficulty experienced by teachers and students when only English is used in English classes

| Level of difficulty | Teachers (%) | Students (%) |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
| a) No problems | 58 | 25 |
| b) Some problems | 40 | 65 |
| c) Many problems | 2 | 10 |

Table 4. Problems perceived by teachers and students when Bengali is not used in English classes

| Perceived problems | Teachers (%) | Students (%) |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| a) Students do not understand meanings of difficult words or concepts in English | 60 | 54 |
| b) Students can not follow lectures | 38 | 18 |
| c) Teachers are not habituated to taking classes in English. | 2 | * |
| d) Students do not get interest in English lecture | * | 18 |

Table 5-6 indicate that teachers and students of Bengali medium schools and colleges were also aware about the negative effect of using Bengali in ELT classes. Gross majority of the teachers (80%) were concerned that use of Bengali in ELT classes is likely to have some negative effect on the English skill of the students. However, 60% of the students did not anticipate any problem. Table 6 indicates that use of Bengali in ELT classes is likely to affect over all English skill of the students and will surely reduce the skill in spoken English.

Table 5. Teachers' and students' concern about the negative effect of using Bengali in ELT classes in improving students' English skill

| Level of concern | Teacher (%) | Student (%) |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Many problems | 6 | 4 |
| Some problems | 80 | 36 |
| No problem | 14 | 60 |

Table 6. Perceived problems for using Bengali in English classes

| Perceived problems | Teacher (%) | Student (%) |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| a) Students do not learn the correct pronunciation of English words | 34 | 17 |
| b) Sometimes students become confused | 36 | 35 |
| c) Students feel encouraged to speak in Bengali | 12 | 18 |
| d) Students do not want to speak in English | 10 | * |
| e) Students' English speaking skill is hampered | 8 | 30 |

Table 7 indicates that the gross majority of the teachers (68%) and students (87%) were in favour of mixing Bengali in ELT classes. In answering a supplementary question 87% of the students opined that they could not learn English without using Bengali. However, both the teachers and students preferred a mixture of language with 'more English and less Bengali'.

Table 7. Language preferred by teachers and students in a English class

| Language/language combination preferred | Teachers (%) | Students (%) |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| a) More English and less Bengali | 64 | 81 |
| b) Only English | 32 | 13 |
| c) More Bengali and less English | 4 | 6 |
| d) Only Bengali | 0 | 0 |

Discussion

This study revealed that Bengali is quite frequently used in ELT classes and both teachers and students considered that some use of Bengali in ELT classes is helpful (Table 1). A careful examination of Table 2 and Table 4 would reflect that the root causes for using Bengali in ELT classes are poor vocabulary and listening skill on the part of the students. However the data do not exclude the possibility of incompetence on the part of teachers. Table 3 exhibits that 40% of the teachers faced some difficulty when only English is allowed in ELT classes. Table 6 revealed that even when Bengali is used in mixture with English in ELT classes, it caused general degradation of English skill on the part of students. Though teachers and student preferred a mixture of Bengali and English in ELT classes (Table 7) and they found some utility of the system in learning English (Table 2), which is in practice in Bangladesh for many years without producing considerable improvement in students' skill. Rather, concerned people opine that on an average English skill of educated Bangladeshis is diminishing.

There is no reason to accept that as teachers and students preferred a mixture of languages in ELT classes so the system is efficient. Table 6 gives a reflection of the harmful effect of using Bengali in ELT. To learn a foreign language, it is recognized that if the learner is compelled to use the language as being in an exotic environment, the learning process will be fast and efficient. As Bangladesh is a monolingual country, people have little opportunity or necessity to practice English skill. Considering all these, it is recommended that both teachers and students use only English in ELT classes. With this, it is unavoidable that at the beginning both teachers and students might experience some difficulty, however, they will recover from this very quickly and their English skill will improve.

Conclusion

From this study it is obvious that Bengali is extensively used in ELT classes in Bangladesh. Teachers and students in general considered using a mixture of Bengali and English in ELT class helpful, however it is not necessarily an effective system. It is recommended that English should be the only language in ELT class.

References

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Appendix I: Questionnaire for teachers
(Please check appropriate box)

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|--|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|--------------|--|
| 01. | Do you use Bengali in your English Classes? | Sometimes | | Many times | | Always | | Never | |
| 02. | Do you think Bengali helps your students in your English classes? | Sometimes | | Many times | | Always | | Never | |
| 03. | (If yes) What benefits students may obtain from Bengali in ELT classes? (You can choose more than one answer) | Students can understand the lecture properly | They can understand English lecture | They can give attention to the lecture properly | They can understand the meaning of difficult words and concepts easily | They can enjoy the lecture | | | |
| 04. | Does Bengali help you in your lecture? | I can make them understand any difficult words or concepts easily | | I can make the students understand my lecture easily | | I feel comfortable if I use Bengali in my lecture | | | |
| 05. | (If yes) How does it help you? (You can choose more than one answer) | I can make them understand any difficult words or concepts easily | | I can make the students understand my lecture easily | | I feel comfortable if I use Bengali in my lecture | | | |
| 06. | Do you think that the use of Bengali in your English classes creates any problems in improving your students' English skills? | Some problems | | No problem | | Many problems | | | |
| 07. | (If yes) What are the problems they may face if Bengali is used in English classes? (You can choose more than one) | Sometimes I cannot make my students understand meanings of difficult words or concepts in English | | Students do not understand my lectures always | | I am not habituated to taking classes in English | | | |
| 08. | Could students learn English without using Bengali in ELT classes? | (Write your comment) | | | | | | | |
| 09. | Do you have any problem if you use only English in your English classes? | Some problems | | No problems | | Many problems | | | |
| 10. | (If yes) What are the problems you may face if you do not use Bengali in English classes? (You can choose more than one.) | Sometimes I can not make my students understand meanings of difficult words or concepts in English | | Students do not understand my lectures always. | | I am not habituated to taking classes in English | | | |
| 11. | Which language do you think you should use in your English classes? | More English and less Bengali | | Many times | | More Bengali and less English | | Only Bengali | |

Appendix II. Questionnaire for students

(Please check appropriate box)

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|--|--|--|---|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 01. | Do your teachers use Bengali in your English language Classes? | Sometimes | Many times | Always | Never | | |
| 02. | Do you think that Bengali in ELT classes helps you? | Sometimes | Many times | Always | Never | | |
| 03. | (If yes) What benefits you get from Bengali used in ELT classes? (You can choose more than one) | I can understand the meanings of difficult words and concepts easily | I can give attention to the lecture | I can understand the lecture easily | I cannot understand English lecture | I can enjoy the lecture | I can learn the lesson easily |
| 04. | Do you think using Bengali in your English Language classes creates problems in improving your English skills? | No problems | | Some problems | Many problems | | |
| 05. | (If yes) What are the problems you face if Bengali is used in ELT classes? (You can choose more than one) | My English skill is hampered | If Bengali and English are used at the same time I become confused | I feel encouraged to speak Bengali instead of English | I cannot learn the correct pronunciation | | |
| 06. | Could you learn English if Bengali were used in ELT classes? | (Write your comment) | | | | | |
| 07. | Do you have any problem if your teacher uses only English in ELT classes? | Some problems | No problem | Many problems | | | |
| 08. | (If yes) What are the problems you face if the teacher does not use Bengali in English classes? (You can choose more than one) | I cannot understand meaning of words or any concepts | | I cannot follow English lecture. | I do not get interest in English lecture | | |
| 09. | Which language do you think your teacher should use in your English language classes? | More English and less Bengali | Only English | More Bengali and less English | Only Bengali | | |