

Perceptions of the Lecturers on the Use of Translanguaging in Teaching English for the University Students

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Abstract

The ideology that the First Language (L1) of an individual improves the competence in a foreign or a Second Language (L2) gave rise to various bilingual pedagogies. Translanguaging (TRL) is the latest concept that was coined to the field as a result. The concept, TRL involves of switching between languages and it always revolves around a systematic use of two or more languages in language teaching pedagogy. Perceptions of lecturers engaged in teaching English language to the first year students of the Buddhist and Pali University were examined with reference to the purpose of application of TRL in English Language teaching. The investigation aimed to figure out the purpose behind the use of TRL. The participants of the study were seven lecturers who work in the capacity of permanent and visiting lecturers attached to the Department of English Language Teaching in Buddhist and Pali University in Sri Lanka. The results showed that the lecturers' perceptions of the use of TRL were positive in most of the occasions where they use L1 as a TRL technique but they seem to be reluctant to allow the students to use L1 in the form of TRL technique.

Keywords: translanguaging, first language, second language

Introduction

Use of L1 in ELT has been a topic of intensive debate in the field of teaching English as a second Language. The experts deal with all aspects influencing effective language teaching and learning. One of these aspects is using the appropriate language during lessons. Since the 19th century the approaches to using the L1 or the L2 have changed dramatically (Canagarajah, 2011; Garcia, 2009). Similarly, the methods used for teaching languages also have changed. The topic of the proper language choice is still often discussed. It seems that nowadays we have already overcome the period of various radical approaches, methods and opinions of using the L1 which used to be either highly promoted or cursed. TRL which uses L1 as a strategy in L2 teaching is comparatively a new teaching practice that was coined to the field.

In the process of teaching a L2, the use of learners' L1 can influence their acquisition of the target language (TL). Some explicitly rejected the use of L1 in L2 instruction. Linguists like Krashen and Seliger argued if the use of L2 would be reduced in the L2 teaching classroom it will be disadvantageous as the input in L2 would be less. (Krashen, 1981; Seliger, 1979) But some scholars advocate an intra-lingual strategy. Linguists like Cook believe that a second language could be learnt in the same manner as a first language is learnt. (Cook, 1999)

The key with the Lecturers' use of L1 with the tertiary level students is that it be used for clarification purposes, after an attempt has been made to communicate ideas in L2 and students still appear to be confused. Some are in the view that L1 plays a supportive role in this

regard. Thus, throughout the history of ELT and L2 Learning, the role of L1 has been an important issue.

The word TRL emerged in the 1980 s in Bangor, North Wales. The word has come from the word, ‘trawsieithu’ which basically means using two languages in the bilingual learning process. This was a result of investigating different strategies to use two languages in one lesson. The word was initially originated by Cen Williams, an educationalist and he used the word ‘trawsieithu’ to describe a language practice that brought out the systematic use of two languages within the same lesson. The term was later translated as ‘translinuifying’ which was changed to translanguaging by Baker in 2000. This simply means the use of multiple languages consciously in order to make it easier for the students grasping the TL. Later on, it was developed into a linguistic process by adding different opinions by various Linguists and educationalists. (Baker, 2011, Garcia and L. Wei., 2014)

In Sri Lanka English is taught as a L2 in schools. The role that English plays in various spheres in Sri Lanka has always been very significant. According to what the researcher has witnessed after twenty years of experience in the field, in spite of the fact that Sri Lankan students learn English as a L2 for several years in the school from primary to advanced level their proficiency in the language remains very low. Some of them are unable to write a simple sentence correctly or they find it difficult to express themselves in simple, correct English. Reasons for this failure or the minimal success of the process have always been discussed and researched (Walatara, 1965, Kumarage, 2015). Even after entering the university the students are being taught English, still their proficiency remains low. According to what the

researcher has witnessed after teaching ten years in the Buddhist and Pali University is that the situation is not different in Buddhist and Pali University. Thus, this research attempts to investigate the perceptions of the lecturers of Buddhist and Pali University with regard to the use of TRL as a technique in teaching the first year students of the university.

Statement of Problem

Though there seem to be an interest towards learning English in the students of Buddhist and Pali University in the recent years, competency level of the majority remains low. Despite the various efforts of English language lecturers, the problem remains the same. Various issues have been discussed regarding the problem and using L1 in teaching English as a L2 is one of those phenomena, discussed vastly.

The real problem lies whether the L1 should be used in teaching a L2 and where the line of limitation lies. So, it should be investigated the validity of the use of TRL as a pedagogical tool in support for the success of the English Language learners and to see whether it would become a motivating factor in the teaching process. Thus, the effectiveness of the use of learners' L1 through TRL practices in teaching ESL should be explored in related to the perceptions of the lecturers.

Thus, investigating the perceptions of the lecturers who are engaged in the process of teaching English would give an insight to the matter.

Literature Review

For over 120 years, the prevailing attitude in language teaching has been anti-L1 and discouraging the use of students' L1 in language teaching (Cook, 2001). The main principle of language teaching was monolingual or intra-lingual, rather than cross-lingual (Cook, 2001). The prevailing method of instruction was the Direct Method, which did not encourage the use of comparative analysis between the L1 and the Target Language. Researchers have concluded that translation provides an easy avenue to enhance linguistic awareness (Cook, 2001).

The term TRL consists of two components, 'trans' and 'linguaging'. García and Wei (2014) have defined 'linguaging' as "the simultaneous process of continuous becoming of ourselves and of our language practice, as we interact and make meaning in the world" (p. 8). The prefix trans- means 'between' or 'across.' From this perspective, TRL can be identified as the use of language resources (across previously established boundaries) by the bilingual or multilingual individuals for their own identity and for interaction with others. As it is described by the prefix, 'Trans' when the terminology trans-cultural and trans-language are used it is clearly understood that the phenomena of culture and language are not fixed or static. Garcia (2014, p. 45) explains trans-language is used for "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds" to construct and co-construct meanings. The individual uses more than one language for his/her communication from a single linguistic repertoire. Canagarajah (2011) referred this as an integrated system.

The concept of TRL promotes the use of L1 in L2 teaching. According to MacSwan, TRL emerged as a new concept within bilingual

education which changed ideologies. (MacSwan, 2017). In early ESL classrooms students' L1 and the TL were treated separately and the L1 was considered less valuable. TRL promotes the use of different languages including learner's L1 and treats both the languages equally. Thus, through this relatively novel concept, a single linguistic repertoire is built with the use of students' L1 and L2.

Vogel and Garcia (2017) express that TRL brings out a distinct theoretical insight into bilingualism and multilingualism. According to Cummins (2008) languages were treated as “two solitudes” in ESL or multilingual teaching where the learner's L1 was regarded less valuable. Contradictorily TRL promotes the use of different languages including learner's L1. Garcia (2009) expresses that TRL refers to multiple discursive practices which are used by the bilinguals in order to make sense of their bilingual world. Researchers have investigated the use of one's full linguistic repertoire in order to ease the process of learning a new language. Garcia and Wei see language practices of bilinguals not as “two autonomous language systems” but as “one linguistic repertoire” (Garcia and Wei, 2014, p.2).

Though there have been number of researches conducted on the perceptions of the teachers based on other institutions around the world (García, & Wei, .2014; Portoles, & Marti, 2017), no such research had been conducted in related to the Buddhist and Pali University.

Methodology

The current study aimed to gauge ESL lecturers' perceptions and practices towards the use of the students' L1 which is Sinhala in their lectures. Seven ESL lecturers, attached to the department of English

Language Teaching in the Buddhist and Pali University were utilized as the sample. These lecturers were chosen by the researcher after questioning nine lecturers who work attached to the university on the question whether they use TRL techniques in teaching. Out of nine lecturers only seven lecturers expressed that they are using the TRL techniques in teaching the first year students. Thus, only the lecturers who accepted that they were using TRL techniques were used in this research. All the participants have working experience between 1-10 years. Two of them were female and five were male.

A questionnaire was used to explore lecturers' attitudes and practices towards TRL. It included items to collect general information about lecturers' age, gender and years of experience. Only three main questions were probed. First question was used in order to examine the TRL practices used by the lecturers themselves in the aim of improving the students' competency and the second question aimed at examining how the students are allowed to use L1 as a TRL technique. Two questions were based on the Likert-Type scale items to examine how the use of students' L1 which is Sinhala by the lecturers. With the questions the researcher tended to figure out in what situations the use of Sinhala in the class is beneficial or detrimental and to expand on their answers regarding their perceptions of TRL in their classes. Then one open ended question was probed in order to get further insight into the perceptions of the lecturers on TRL techniques used in the lesson. The main aim of this question was to see whether the lecturers actually use L1 as TRL techniques during the lessons.

Results and Discussion

The answers for the research questions addressing the perceptions and practices of the lecturers towards TRL practices were analyzed.

Question- 01

According to your idea how often do you use Sinhala in the following situations in teaching English for the first year students?

	often	sometimes	never
To help low proficiency students	5	2	0
To clarify during activities	6	1	0
To build bonds with students	4	2	1
To describe vocabulary items	6	0	1
To explain	4	3	0

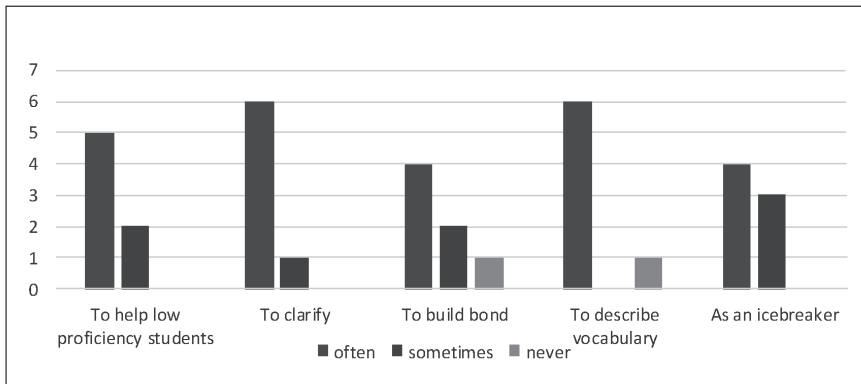


Figure 1

The first research question addressing the perceptions and practices of ESL teachers towards TRL was analyzed by calculating the numbers in descriptive statistics. The first Likert-type question was about how

often they use Sinhala in the classroom at different specific occasions. As shown in Figure 1, 5 participant lecturers use Sinhala to help lower proficiency students whereas 2 lecturers use Sinhala in order to help low proficiency students which makes clear that all the participants use the L1 of the students to help low proficiency students. And all the lecturers seem to use L1 in order to clarify certain matters while teaching (6 lecturers often use L1 in that case while 1 lecturer sometimes uses). 4 lecturers often use L1 for building the bonds with the students while 2 lectures sometimes use L1 in that purpose. 1 participant never uses L1 for building bonds with the students. 6 participants often use Sinhala in order to clarify vocabulary but 1 participant never uses for that purpose. All the lecturers seem to use students' L1 as an ice breaker (while 4 participants often use 3 participants sometimes use).

When the percentages are considered 100% participants get the use of Sinhala which is the L1 of the students often or sometimes in order to help the low proficiency students. Similarly, 100% lecturers use the L1 in order to clarify certain matters in the lesson. Only 14% of the participants that is only 1 person does not use the L1 for building bonds with the students, 84% seem to use the L1 for building bonds. Majority get the use of L1 in order to clarify vocabulary for the students while 14% does not use the L1 for that purpose. 100% lecturers use the students' L1 as an ice breaker often or sometimes. Thus, it was obvious that the lecturers attempt to use students' L1 as TRL techniques for the above purposes.

Question-02

How often do you encourage the students to use Sinhala in the classroom for the following purposes?

	often	sometimes	never
To describe content or activities	0	0	7
To promote assistance to peers	0	1	6
To brainstorm during class activities	0	2	5
To explain problems not related to content	0	2	5
To respond to teacher's questions	0	2	5

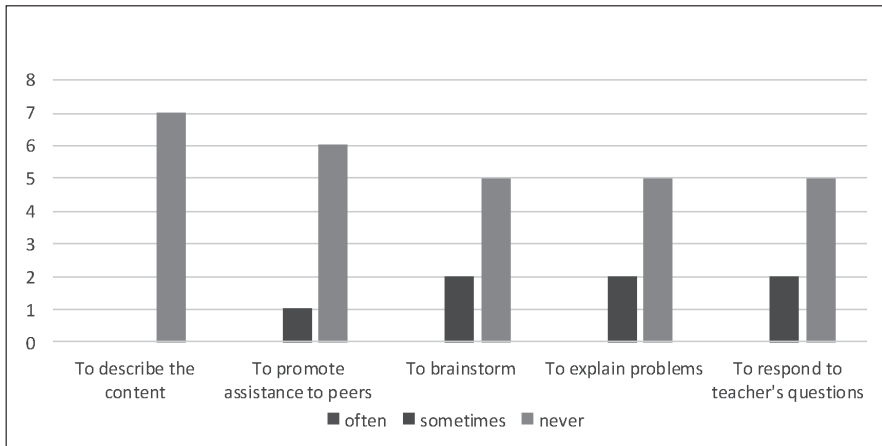


Figure 2

The second question probed in order to investigate how students are allowed or made to use TRL techniques in the class. The question was about how often the students are made to use Sinhala in the classroom at different specific occasions. As shown in Figure 2, no participant lecturer allows students use L1 to describe or discuss the content

related matters. No lecturers allow the students to use L1 in order to promote assistance to the friends except for one lecturer. Only 2 lecturers seem to use L1 in order to brainstorm the students. 5 lecturers do not allow the students to explain problems and only 2 lecturers let the students explain using L1. Similarly, 5 lecturers do not allow the students to use their L1 to answer the questions while 2 lecturers allow to answer using L1.

When the percentages are considered 100% participants do not allow the students use L1 for describing purposes. 85.7% lecturers do not let the students use their L1 in order to promote assistance for their friends only 14% allow to assist the friends. 71.4% lecturers never use L1 to brainstorm the students, to let the students explain their problems or to allow the students to respond the questions asked by the lecturer while 28.5% lecturers allow the students to use their L1 which is Sinhala to explain problems, to brainstorm and to respond the problems asked by the lecturers. Thus, it is visible that the lecturers do not want the students to use their L1 in the class except for very few occasions.

Question- 03

Do you plan in which occasions TRL techniques should be used during the lesson when you prepare the lesson plan? Please explain how you decide when to use TRL techniques during the lesson.

For this question only three participants answered positively expressing that they decide when to use TRL techniques before the lesson while the others expressed that they decide the use of L1 during the lesson as the need arises.

Conclusion

Translanguaging, the systematic use of L1 in the teaching of a foreign language, has been increasingly embraced by researchers in the field of foreign language teaching because out of 9 lecturers, 7 lecturers use TRL techniques in their teaching pedagogy. The purpose of the current study was to explore the ESL lecturers' perceptions and practices of TRL in their teaching. In considering the figure 1, the most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that ESL lecturers were positive with the practices of TRL techniques. The majority of the participants seem to feel that the use of Sinhala by the lecturers was important in teaching the first year students and they attempted to use the students' L1 in their classes. However, when examining the figure 2, it is clear that the lecturers do not encourage the students use L1 as a TRL technique in their activities in the lecture hall. In considering the answers given for the open ended question it can be understood that the participants did not seem to have a systematic way of TRL to increase students' performance in English. Garcia and Wei (2014) suggest that TRL that improves metacognition and deeper thinking skills of students requires the systematic use of students' existing linguistic repertoire. A program for the professional development of the lecturers to enhance ESL lecturers' knowledge and practices of TRL might be a fruitful area for future work. It may be an attempt to deconstruct traditionally accepted monolingual approach of foreign or second language learning. A further study could assess the long-term effects of TRL activities on students' academic success.

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Biographycal Note

Kosala Kumarage obtained her B.A. degree specializing in English from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. She completed her M.A. degree in Linguistics from the University of Kelaniya. Currently she is reading for her PhD in the University of Kelaniya and employed as a Senior Lecturer attached to the Department of English Language Teaching in Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka.