

Bilingual teaching in the Thai EFL context: One teacher's practice

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This paper examines a short bilingual episode observed in an English lesson conducted at a Thai university, and documents that teacher's own view on his use of both Thai and English in the classroom. It was found that the teacher employed considerable skill and creativity in making English accessible to this group of low-proficiency learners. Data also highlight the role of the learner's first culture and language in learning a second language, through which the meanings of the second language become embedded in those of the first. Following discussion of this EFL episode, the paper returns to document some strategies for L1 use which have been found to be successful in the Australian ESL context.

Introduction

This paper is in two parts. In the first, I analyse a short episode of bilingual pedagogy taken from a Thai EFL context. The relevance of this episode to Australian ESL teachers lies not so much in the teacher's skilful layering of two languages as in what it reveals of the learner's mind; in particular, of the ways in which the student's first language and culture represent the foundation for all subsequent language learning.

In the second part of this paper, I revert to the Australian ESL context in order to briefly document some strategies and resources which I have used as a monolingual ESL teacher with multilingual classes in the ESL context.

L1 and L2 use

Ellis (this volume) has described the current model of an ESL teacher as being either monolingual, or one "who is encouraged to behave as if he or she is monolingual" (Ellis, 2003, p.11) and records that even for the bilingual ESL teachers in her Australian study, "disapproval of L1 had become a naturalised discourse" (p.313). Chau (this volume) has shown how changes in perception of the role played by the L1 in learning L2 have begun to impact upon classroom practice.

My own study builds upon the ideas presented in the preceding two papers, and focuses on the bilingual learner her/himself. In this respect I draw particularly

upon Cook's multi-competence model of the second language learner (Cook, 1992; 2001; 2003). Cook envisages the relationship between L1 and L2 in the learner's mind as an "integration continuum" (2003, p.6). He asserts that when a bilingual is communicating in one language, "the other language is still residually activated" (1992, p.567); in other words, that the bilingual brain has two languages simultaneously "on-line" (2001, p.408). Cook therefore makes a strong case for teachers to recognise and build upon the presence of L1 in L2 learning:

L2 users have L1 permanently present in their minds. Every activity the student carries out visibly in the L2 also involves the invisible L1... From a multi-competence perspective, all teaching activities are cross-lingual... *the difference among activities is whether the L1 is visible or invisible, not whether it is present or altogether absent.* (Cook, 1999, p.202; emphases added)

Cook's multi-competence model of the learner's brain is complemented by Vygotskian views of the learning process, where L1 is seen as *mediating* L2 and therefore functioning as an educational tool (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Brooks, Donato & McGlone, 1997). Within sociocultural theory, as Ellis (this volume) also notes, it has thus been asserted that L1 represents a learner's "most formidable cognitive resource" (Swain & Lapkin, 2005, p.181).

Background to the present study

In 1988-89, I spent a year teaching English at a provincial university in Thailand, which will be called "Isara" in this study. For the five years prior to that, I had been teaching at Cleveland St. Intensive English Centre in Sydney, during which period the main migrant groups were Vietnamese, Khmer and Lao. Going to Thailand was my first experience of Asia and was to be followed by a number of EFL teacher training projects in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam throughout the 1990s. Over those years, I was struck time and again by how inappropriate the ESL methodology which formed the basis of teacher training programs in Australia seemed to be in these EFL domains. At the same time, however, I was able to observe the ways in which L2 learning could be transformed by local teachers' capacity to draw upon the first language which they shared with their students.

Research setting

By returning to Isara some fifteen years later in 2002 and 2004, I was able to work in this familiar site to explore more closely how Thai teachers did make use of L1 and L2 in their classrooms and to what effect.

The data and discussion in the present paper form part of a larger project (Forman, 2005) in which nine English Language (EL) teachers at Isara were interviewed in English, one-to-one, on three or four occasions. One two-hour class given by each teacher was also observed in action. All interviews and classroom observations were audio-recorded, transcribed, and, where necessary, translated. Eight of the participating teachers were native Thais; the ninth was an Anglo-Australian who held a high level of bilinguality in English and Thai. It is one lesson delivered by the latter teacher – who selected the pseudonym of "Murray" – which forms the focus of the present paper. Following Thai convention, I refer to the teacher as *ajarn* (lecturer/teacher), together with first name, in this case, Ajarn Murray.

Data

Out of the total eighteen or so hours of classroom data, I have extracted below a short episode of classroom interaction and seek to show something of

the nature of bilingual pedagogy in this EFL context. The lesson itself was structured in three parts as follows:

Part 1: Teacher scaffolding and commentary

The teacher prompted students to verbalise English vocabulary for the names of different dwellings, and created a running commentary on students' responses, with his talk being in both English and Thai.

Part 2: Student group work

Students were divided into groups, with each group being allocated one room, such as *bathroom*, *bedroom*, *living room*, and directed to identify items located in that room. During this task, students spoke in Thai in order to create a list of English vocabulary.

Part 3: Student feedback and teacher commentary

Each group reported back its findings in English, and the teacher used these data as a source of further commentary, again using both English and Thai. It is in this part of the lesson that the episode presented in Table 1 occurred.

It should be noted that this was a low EL proficiency class of around IELTS Band 2 – 3, and that students' production of English was very limited, although their understanding was of course better developed. This meant that if the teacher had elected to use English only, the cognitive depth as well as the interaction possibilities of the lesson would have been significantly constrained. Instead, a bilingual pedagogy has enabled a number of positive outcomes to be achieved, and I would like to briefly look at these in terms of (i) accessing the target language, (ii) drawing upon the home culture, and (iii) overall impact on students' learning.

Accessing the target language

The extract demonstrates skill on the part of the teacher in drawing students to communicate in English in simple ways. So, for example, Ajarn Murray uses English-only for simple questions such as "Do you live in a hut?", and students are able to answer him in that language. On the other hand, when Ajarn Murray moves into more complex language, such as "Are there any other kinds of house you can think of?", he immediately glosses the message in Thai. The use of L1 here thus caters for the range of students in

Table 1: Bilingual episode taken from a Thai university English class

Teacher		Students	
English	Thai	English	Thai
How about ...	กระท่อม [transliterated as 'krathom'] Hut?		
Do you live in a hut?			
		Yes [laugh]	
Oh, do you really, Tum? [name of student] [R]			
		Sure! [laugh - ironic]	
You're lucky, because it's nice and cool, and it's easy to clean.			
	อยู่กับใคร ตุ๊กแก Who do you live with? A gecko?		
	ควายอยู่ข้างล่าง ข้างบนมีตุ๊กแกกับตุ่มสองคน Buffaloes are underneath, and you (‘Tum’) live together with a gecko in the upper floor.		
Is it a single...	ตุ๊กแก gecko? ...		
Are there any other kinds of house you can think of?			
	มีอะไรอีกมั๊ย บ้านอีกประเภทหนึ่ง นึกออกมั๊ยครับ มีอะไรอีกมั๊ย อยากจะถามอะไรครับ Anything else? Other kinds of house you can think of? Anything else you want to ask?		
		mansion	

the class, some who would have grasped the meaning of the English easily, and others who would have done so with difficulty.

Drawing upon the home culture

The inextricable link which exists between language and culture has been signified by Friedrich's (1989,

p.295) coining of the term "linguaculture". What happens in second language learning is never confined to a journey from L1 to L2, but rather is always part of a journey from Linguaculture 1 to Linguaculture 2 (leaving aside here the complexities surrounding notions of culture). This process is exemplified in the above extract where the teacher draws upon students' existing knowledge of Thai culture in order to build their English language development. I would like to focus in detail now upon the way in which the teacher dealt with the dwelling-type "hut", and the related Thai term, *krathom*.

I will examine first my own perception of these two terms, and then explore their possible meaning for both the Thai students in this study and their expatriate English teacher.

To me as an English speaker, brought up in Wales, the visual image of a hut is a small, old, stone building in a rural setting. There are subsidiary images of huts in fairy-tales, perhaps in middle Europe. On the other hand, from my knowledge of Thai, the word *krathom* gives an image of a traditional Thai wooden house on stilts with a verandah, shutters for windows, and cattle housed below. A *krathom* is to someone like me both environmentally sympathetic and aesthetically pleasing but, to Thai youth, such dwellings speak rural, unsophisticated, old-fashioned and lower class. When Ajarn Murray was eliciting words for dwellings in English, he offered *krathom* in the Thai language, giving the English translation as "hut". However, he maintained a Thai rather than English semantic, as indicated by his response: *with buffalos underneath... geckoes above*. When we later discussed this lesson at interview Ajarn Murray confirmed my interpretation, indicating that for these learners at this level, "[a]lthough I did have access to both images, I elected to stay with the Thai sense", and also noting that had this been an advanced class, he would have drawn upon the cultural difference to explain that an "English language" image was more likely to be of a *little stone hut in the mountains*. Ajarn Murray was clear on the reasons for this pedagogic choice. He asserted that when his students speak English, they will be doing so in Thailand, and from a Thai cultural base. Therefore, Thai students need to be able to "talk about profoundly Thai things using English". That is, the teacher held a bilingual, bicultural perspective that students' primary need is to be able to talk about their

own, rather than the foreign, culture through the medium of L2 – a view which clearly goes against the majority of published EFL textbooks.

It was also significant that the teacher's own bilinguality/biculturalism enabled him to perceive something of what the students perceive (i.e. the culturally-influenced visual image). This was an insight which could not be replicated by a monolingual/monocultural teacher. Similarly, the humour which the teacher was able to employ here could only be achieved through deep bi-cultural understanding, for in order to use humour effectively, one needs to know not only the specifics of what is considered humorous across two linguacultures, but also how and when humour may be appropriately communicated within each.

Overall impact on students' learning

It may be seen from this brief extract that by drawing upon two linguacultures, the teacher was able to operate on rich cognitive and cultural levels. That is, Ajarn Murray was able to link known to new, connecting students' existing semantic knowledge in Thai to new forms of English. This is a process which served to embed L2 within L1, and the extract above may be seen as a miniature instantiation of the broader process of second language learning: that is, as we enter an L2, so do its forms/meanings become embedded within our existing L1 forms/meanings. Moreover, from an affective perspective, when a teacher can personalise and localise learning as seen here, students' attention and motivation is likely to be enhanced, along with their retention of target language forms and meanings.

It may be noted that in the extract above, the teacher's balance of English and Thai is almost exactly equal, as judged by number of words and number of clauses (although the visual presentation may suggest otherwise because the Thai is transcribed in two forms). This balance was representative of the lesson overall, although it was notable that in the earlier part, when teacher and students were "fresher", the teacher's talk favoured a greater proportion of English, while towards the latter part of the lesson, Thai predominated.

Teacher's own view on L1 use

At interview with Ajarn Murray, it was possible to

explore more broadly this bilingual teacher's view on the use of L1 in the Thai context. Ajarn Murray indicated that the extent and type of L1 use in his classes was determined principally by students' L2 proficiency. For lower level students, Ajarn Murray uses Thai to explain or contextualise the meaning of new language. He pointed out that if confining vocabulary explanation to English, as is favoured by communicative methodologies, most teachers will provide students with English synonyms. However, synonyms may in fact mislead students; as Ajarn Murray put it: "the trouble is... how are they (the synonyms) different?" In my own experience as a teacher educator, this is a point not often accepted by ESL teachers, although it has been documented for some time (e.g. George, 1978; Nation, 1990), and such a belief in the value of confining vocabulary explanation to L2 synonyms can also sometimes buttress an anti-bilingual dictionary stance. Ajarn Murray, on the other hand, believes that rather than offering potentially confusing synonyms in the target language, more accurate meaning can be provided by exploration of meaning within L1. He noted that this was particularly the case when dealing with L2 words which are close in meaning: the example he gave was of distinguishing between *stubborn* and *headstrong*.

At the same time, while Ajarn Murray was entirely supportive of the value of L1 use, he was also clear about the need for maximum exposure to L2: "You have to force the students to use English or they won't". This view is also supported by the literature. Without exception, writers who are reconsidering the role of L1 have been at pains to stress that L2 must dominate classroom discourse (e.g. Butzkamm, 2003; Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2001).

Use of L1 in Australian L2 classrooms

The lesson fragment discussed above gives some idea of the richness of L1-L2 connections, and of the ways in which the target language and its associated culture are embedded in the native language and associated culture.

In the following section, I will move from the bilingual, Thai, EFL context, back to the usually monolingual Australian context described by Ellis (this volume), as well as the less usual bilingual Australian context described by Chau (this volume), in order to briefly note some ways in which I as a monolingual teacher

in Australia have drawn upon this unique resource of our learners' existing languages. For additional classroom strategies, please see Deller and Rinvoluti's *Using the mother tongue: Making the most of the learner's language* (2002), as well as a recent publication by Murray and Wigglesworth: *First language support in adult ESL in Australia* (2005).

I will suggest first three *activities*, and then three *resources* which draw upon L1 in order to support L2 learning.

1) Pair work and group work

Students may profitably work together in same-language groups for parts of lessons in order to assist each other through the medium of L1, particularly at the start and/or at the end of an activity, when cognitive depth and creativity are required. Of course, at other times, or in certain activities, exclusive L2 use will still be required, in order to stretch students' survival skill/creativity within the new language.

2) L1 Literacy

Particularly in school contexts, sustaining and developing L1 literacy is a key to positive bilingual outcomes. One way of achieving this is by supporting the presence of L1 texts in school libraries, and in reading programs such as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read).

3) Metalinguistic study

Valuing of students' first cultures and languages is a staple of ESL, in my experience, and teachers commonly learn key words from students' languages. This may be a way in to metalinguistic awareness for teacher and students, providing opportunities to compare form and meaning in class. Students may also be encouraged to discuss and write about, for example, "My languages".

Three recommended resources are as follows:

4) The Internet

Internet resources which appear in students' first languages may be accessed in those languages, and students may summarise the content for the teacher in the target language, in spoken and/or written form.

5) Bilingual dictionaries

The use of bilingual dictionaries should be viewed as a

valuable learning strategy. Learners know this, but sometimes teachers may forget. Objections which teachers may have held about the amount of time taken for a student to refer to a dictionary are now removed with the advent of electronic dictionaries

6) Bilingual ancillary staff and community members

In some educational contexts, it is possible to draw upon bilingual ancillary staff and/or community members in order to provide parallel L1 support for part of the curriculum. There is a wealth of linguistic skill available within the community.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to more clearly acknowledge positive roles for L1 in L2 classrooms. However, it does not make unbalanced claims for such L1 use; rather, it seeks to reaffirm the need for encouraging and developing the most appropriate uses of both languages in the learning process. The paper has analysed an instance of how L2 learning involves the interaction of one linguaculture with a second linguaculture. It claims that L2 is thus embedded in L1, and that bilingual pedagogy can serve to enable and enrich the learning process. Howatt (1984, p.289) has called the principle of exclusive L2 use in the language classroom "the unique contribution" of the 20th century's language pedagogy. A change in perspective amongst ELT practitioners seems long overdue.

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