

TEACHERS' USE OF HYBRID LANGUAGE IN THE ESL GRAMMAR TEACHING CLASSROOM: SITUATIONS AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

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Abstract

The objective of this descriptive study is to look into the situations and attitudes of the undergraduates towards the teachers' use of Hybrid Language (HL) in the ESL grammar teaching classroom. HL is identified as one common practice used by the language teachers to tackle the communication difficulties while teaching English. It seems that the students bear different attitudes towards this practice. The present study employed grammar teaching classroom observations to identify the situations, student attitude questionnaires and also a focus group discussion with ten randomly selected students to investigate the students' attitudes towards the teachers' use of HL during the lessons. The findings reveal that the majority of the learners bear positive attitudes towards teachers' HL practices; however, there are also a very few negative sentiments. Based on the findings, it is concluded that the use of HL judiciously act as a facilitative tool for both teachers and students in the language teaching-learning process.

Keywords: English language, ELT, ESL classroom, Hybrid Language

Introduction

Background

Research studies have found out that the English proficiency levels of the undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities are very low. In addition, Samarakoon¹ points out that in general, most of the undergraduates come from rural backgrounds and they have very little exposure to the target language. Similarly, Edirisinghe² reveals that the English language proficiency of the undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities is at the UTEL 3 or 4 standards which are the basic levels of language proficiency. Due to this, much dependency on the teachers is visible especially in the ESL classrooms^[3]. Therefore, the learners cannot comprehend when the instructions are given only in English. Hence, the teachers employ various strategies to enhance the proficiency level of students in their teaching learning process. One such strategy is the use of HL for maximizing the language acquisition i.e.; instructors switch codes to Sinhala or Tamil as a means of facilitating the process of learning. The research findings of Makulloluwa³ show that students' L1 is used for pedagogical, administrative and interactional purposes in the ESL classroom and those instructors teaching in lower proficiency levels use the HL practices in significant quantities as a strategy to accommodate student's low language proficiency and also as a strategy to create a less threatening classroom environment.

Especially, this practice is used as a pedagogical strategy by many teachers in Sri Lankan universities to ensure that the students understand what is taught especially when teaching grammar rules. Grammar is one of the basic skills in English Language that needs through understanding ^[4]. As stated by Attanayake⁵, “With new policies being introduced to make English the medium of instruction in the education system, and with the awareness that there are challenges to face, it is our understanding that the analysis of the existing curricula and pedagogical strategies in relation to ELT in the Sri Lankan university system is of prime importance for improving undergraduate ELT in Sri Lanka”.

Previous studies

According to the research studies of Samarakoon¹, Edirisinghe², Makullolwa³, Karunarathne⁶ HL practice is often done in various situations in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms such as when explaining meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary, explaining language structures, in situations when invoking humor, to create a learner friendly environment, in situations that seems too difficult for them to handle in English and so on.

Spahiu⁷ revealed that most of the teachers and students believed that it was necessary and acceptable to use native language in teaching. He points out that the arguments presented by the students to justify the use of the native language inside the classroom for teaching and learning ESL include:

- Native language gives a sense of security and helps feel less stressful.
- By being able to use both languages they are less confused.
- They feel the need to express their ideas and thoughts in their own language.
- They prefer translating difficult context and words.
- They feel necessary the teachers’ use of native language in grammar explanations.

In the same vein, Edirisinghe² in his research study related to Sri Lankan University context, claims that the students confirmed that their teacher’s use of HL is an effective teaching strategy which facilitates their learning. Majority of the students are of the view that the use of HL to illustrate complex grammar points helps them comprehend grammar rules better and more easily ^[4]. Most of the students participated in his study are of the view that the teacher’s shift to L1 assisted them to follow the given instructions successfully as they are clearer to them. Further, they insist that the teacher’s HL will assist them to understand the lesson content easily and clearly and avoid misunderstandings. Moreover, they say that HL helps them to be less stressed, more self-confident and relaxed in the classroom. In contrast to the above positive views, there were some negative attitudes as well towards this practice. For example, Parthasarathy⁸ states that even if the teacher uses English and L1 concurrently, it will not serve the purpose and will produce negative results. Hence, it is clear that there are heated arguments towards this practice.

Research Questions

The current study examined the situations and the attitudes of the students towards teachers’ use of HL in the ESL grammar teaching classroom. It is important to expose the situations where the teachers use HL practices in the ESL classroom and the attitudes of the students regarding this use. In line with the objectives of the study, two research questions were presented:

1. What are the situations of the teachers' use of hybrid language in an ESL grammar teaching classroom?
2. What are the attitudes of the students towards the teachers' language hybridization between L1 and L2?

Methodology

The design of this study is descriptive in nature.

Data collecting instruments

This descriptive study employed three types of data collection tools; classroom observations, questionnaires and a focus group discussion to collect data from the sample. The data were collected using the above three tools in order to identify the situations and the attitudes regarding this use.

Data Analysis

A mixed-method approach was employed using both qualitative and quantitative data analysing techniques. Data gathered through observations and questionnaires were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively where as data gathered through the discussion were analysed mainly qualitatively to meet the expected purposes of the study.

Classroom observations

Through the classroom observations, the particular situations of the teachers' use of HL were identified. They were coded under different categories in order to find out the amounts and the situations of using HL. The percentages of the occurrences were calculated and the findings are represented graphically.

Student attitude questionnaires

Focus group discussion

Students' responses were first summarized, categorized under emerging themes and then translated into English. The newly identified situations were also summarized and categorized.

The percentages of responses or the views given by the students for each statement were calculated and categorized under different situations. Answers given for the open ended question were also analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings are illustrated in tables and bar graphs.

Participants

Student participants

Fifty-first-year science undergraduates were taken with average proficiency levels in English who take the English intensive course of the Faculty of Applied Sciences of the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka. Almost all the undergraduates of the class were Sinhalese.

Teacher participants

Two instructors of English from the Department of English Language Teaching of the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka were selected as per the convenience.

Results

It was identified that both teachers used HL practices in the following six situations when teaching grammar in their language classroom.

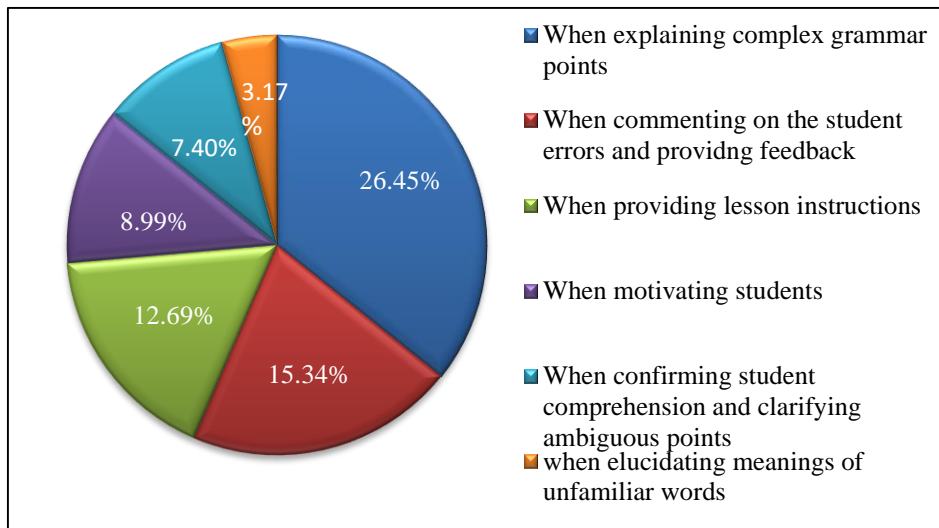


Figure 01. Situations and percentages of occurrences of HL.

Table 01. Percentage of preferences of the students for the identified situations.

Situation	Percentage of preference				
	Totally disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Totally agree
When explaining grammar points	0	0	8	30	62
When commenting on the student errors and providing feedback	0	4	18	44	34
When providing lesson instructions	0	6	10	64	20
When motivating students	6	12	30	28	24
When confirming student comprehension and clarifying ambiguous points	0	6	14	66	14
When elucidating the meanings of unfamiliar words	0	6	6	30	58

The above table shows the percentages of attitudes of the students towards the identified situations.

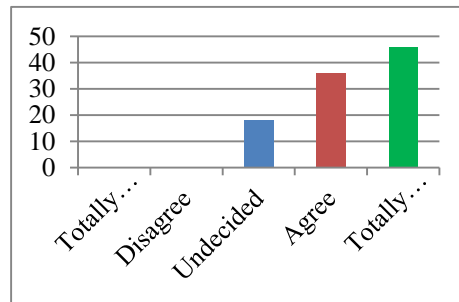


Figure 02. Attitudes of the students whether HL practice, a good teaching technique or not.

The above graph represents the attitudes of the students whether the HL practice is a favorable/effective technique to be employed in the language teaching-learning process.

Table 02. Students’ other preferred areas for the use of HL.

Situation	Frequency	Percentage
1. Evaluation and feedback	20	40%
2. When outlining main facts after the lesson	16	32%
3. In comprehension exercises	12	24%
4. When exemplifying differences between L1 and L2 grammar	9	18%
5. In rapport building (making jokes/evoking humor, showing concern to students)	8	16%
6. Scaffolding and peer learning	7	14%
7. When giving instructions for assignments/projects and presentations and assigning and checking homework	5	10%
8. When elaborating the course/lesson objectives and transmitting lesson content before the lesson	5	10%
9. To talk about administrative information (course policies, announcements and deadlines, etc...)	3	6%
10. Classroom management	3	6%
11. To communicate with students outside the class	3	6%

The table given above presents the other preferred areas of the students where they like their teachers to employ HL.

Discussion

Research question 01- When do teachers use HL in the ESL grammar teaching classroom?

As shown in figure 01, both teachers used HL when explaining complex grammar points, commenting on student errors and providing feedback, giving lesson instructions, confirming student comprehension and clarifying ambiguous points, and when elucidating the meanings of unfamiliar words. In addition, they used HL practices to motivate the students during classroom activities in order to encourage the students and to build up their confidence to learn.

Research question 02- What are the attitudes of the students towards the teachers' use of HL?

According to the data represented in table 01, it is clear that the majority of the participants are in agreement that the teachers' use of HL in the identified situations facilitates their language learning. And they have expressed eleven other preferred areas that they expect their teacher to employ this technique as given in table 02. Further, figure 02 shows that it is viewed as a good teaching technique by the students. In addition, the study made an effort to find out the preferred amount of teaching time where HL should be used. The results indicate that no one had preferred the use of HL above 50% of the class time. Even in the focus group discussion students claimed that the HL practices are necessary only when the situation demands it. In short, excessive and haphazard use of HL practices should be minimized. Thus, the fair use of this teaching strategy should be permitted when and where it is necessary.

Conclusion

It was identified that the teachers use HL practices when teaching grammar in situations such as, when explaining complex grammar points, commenting on student errors and providing feedback, giving lesson instructions, motivating students, confirming student comprehension and clarifying ambiguous points, and also when elucidating the meanings of unfamiliar words. The students confirmed that the teachers' use of HL is an effective teaching strategy which eases their learning. Hence, it can be concluded that not even a single participant who involved in the study negate the idea of using this phenomenon in their language classroom. The results of this study too indicate that many of the undergraduates view this technique as a means of facilitating the teaching-learning process and also they view this as a tool which plays a crucially important role in the university grammar teaching classroom. Further, it can be concluded that the use of HL judiciously not only act as a facilitative tool for teachers in their teaching process but also act as a facilitative tool for students in their learning process as well. Also, it can and should be employed as a teaching strategy in the realm of language teaching.

Considering the limitations of this study, this study was only focused on the university level grammar teaching. The sample size is relatively small and it does not represent the whole population of ESL teachers and students in universities. Hence, the results cannot be generalizable. Further, the variables such as learners' different learning styles, Socio-cultural backgrounds, gender and attitudes to language and the teachers' teaching styles, personality and experience were not taken into consideration. Therefore, future research should consider using a wider sample and also may consider about the above aspects as well.

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