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Advantages of not Knowing your Students' Language: A Case Study of a Multilingual Group of English Language Learners

Abstract

The paper describes a case study carried out at Akaki Tsereteli State University, Georgia and aiming to identify characteristics of the language teaching process in a class where a teacher and students have no common language apart from the target language, English. The study, although limited in scope, aims to contribute to better understanding of the educational context where academic staff with limited experience of dealing with multilingual classes, have to ensure that students achieve desired learning outcomes successfully without the help of their native language for explanation, clarification, encouragement, and also without sharing cultural background. Some of the challenges the teacher face are: difficulty of introducing and practicing new vocabulary items, especially more abstract ones; lack of comprehension of presented grammatical structures due to insufficient mastery of the language/languages used for explanation; students' overreliance on dictionaries in their mobile devices; tact required in dealing with students, especially when this affects their self-esteem.

The participants of the study were 6 speakers of Turkish, 1 speaker of Russian (with a little Turkish) and 1 speaker of Georgian who form a lower-intermediate/intermediate level group of English learners. The methods of research included lesson observation, analysis of lesson recordings and interviews with the learners. The findings of the study were contrasted with observations of monolingual groups of Georgian learners. Although the results cannot be considered conclusive, the research has identified certain areas where the teaching process might benefit from teachers' inability to communicate with students in their mother tongue. These include the ratio of English versus other languages in an ELT class, mastery and frequency of use of communication strategies, increasing language practice at the expense of deductive grammar presentation, need for exchanging information due to the natural information gap between the teacher and students based on their cultural difference.

Key words: *multilingual class, ELT, communication strategies, target language.*

Introduction

Although Georgia in general is a multiethnic and multicultural country, Imereti region is overwhelmingly monolingual. Thus, multilinguality is not something that many teachers and educators from Kutaisi have to deal with. However, the situation has been changing lately at the university level with the growing number of international students at Akaki Tsereteli State University. Majority of these students are enrolled in programs where the medium of instruction is English, a language that is foreign to them as well as their instructors and professors. Thus, we are dealing with a classroom where a teacher and students share no language apart from English.

In a sense, this situation, although unusual for the educational context the present study focuses on, is quite common throughout the world. This is certainly true for the world of English language teaching, e.g. ESL classes in English-speaking countries for learners from all over the world, or English speakers teaching English in various corners of the world in a variety of settings (Harmer 2007, p.132). In fact, it could be said that quite a few characteristics of modern ELT methodology, e.g. exclusive use of the target language, are products of the kind of environment where native-speakers taught English to classes with a mixture of language backgrounds. Exclusion of L1 from the process of teaching is one of such characteristics and a topic of much debate over the years. Thus, when dealing with multilingual classrooms in teaching English there is a wealth of experience and research we can rely on.

Literature Review

Lack of a common first language among learners or between learners and teachers is the issue most commonly discussed in relation to multilingual classrooms (Harmer 2007, Collis 2015 inter alia). A natural consequence of this is use of target language as the language of instruction, i.e. using English to teach English. Exclusion of learners' mother tongue has its logical justification even apart from being the only option available in multilingual classes. Most importantly, it increases learners' exposure to the target language. As Harmer (2007) puts it "if ... the teacher is a principal source of useful comprehensible input, then the more time we spend speaking English, the better" (p.134). However, Harmer himself admits that there is a growing body of evidence confirming usefulness of learners' L1 for teaching a foreign language. Among the possible benefits he lists

- advantages of drawing students' attention to differences between L1 and the target language;
- ease of discussing learners' needs and in general, helping them with learner training in their mother tongue;
- affective factors linked with using L1 for socializing and building rapport.

(Harmer 2007, 133)

*Cook (2001) summarizes all the possible reasons for avoiding L1 use in the EFL classroom, but still argues that "b*ringing the L1 back from exile may lead not only to the improvement of existing teaching methods but also to innovations in methodology".

In agreement with this viewpoint Nation (2003) claims that L1 has an important role in English language teaching and should be used in, what he calls, "all four strands" of a course, which practically encompasses all

*areas of language teaching (productive and receptive skills as well as language systems and fluency practice). At the same time, he suggests ways of increasing the use of target language through applying it for classroom management and overcoming learners' reluctance to speak in the target language in fluency-based activities. Like many others, he calls for a balanced approach "*which sees a role for the L1 but also recognises the importance of maximising L2 use in the classroom" (Nation, 2003, p.7).

*In a similar vein Haines (2015) suggests guidelines for using L1 at three levels: functional, strategic and discourse levels aiming "*to encourage teachers to make principled use of the L1 in their classroom without feeling guilty about doing do so, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls that are often associated with its use".

Thus, having no option of using learners' L1, as is the case with most multilingual classrooms, can be seen as an advantage by those who support L2-only approach, but as detrimental by many others.

In addition to the challenges of having no common language, Collis (2015) identifies two other important issues to consider when teaching English in a multilingual classroom:

1. differing cultural backgrounds of learners;
2. difference in learners' mistakes.

In fact, cultural differences are a key aspect as in the last decade language teaching has come to be viewed more as the process of developing intercultural competence rather than simply building language skills. This view claims that memorizing some facts about target language community and culture is not sufficient; the aim is to prepare learners through reflection, analysis and comparison for dealing competently with intercultural encounters (Tolosa et al 2018). Clearly, the process of teaching and learning will be qualitatively different between the two classes if in one the only unfamiliar culture is the target language culture and in the other a teacher's and learners' cultures contrast with one another and that of the target language community.

Another direct effect of differences in learners' L1s is a greater variety of typical errors that we encounter in class. Mother tongue interference determines many features of learners' interlanguage and its effects on L2 acquisition have been studied for decades. Teachers of monolingual classes have quite a clear idea of what to expect in terms of 'problem areas' whether it is phonology, grammar, any particular vocabulary item or concept. They can plan their classes accordingly. This is especially true if teacher and learners share a mother tongue. This is a benefit multilingual classes do not allow, and

as a result, teachers face a challenge of reconciling a much greater variety of needs and demands of their students. An interesting additional side effect is described by Collis (2015): "Students in a monolingual classroom often understand each other not because they speak correctly, but because they all make the same mistakes". Thus, she believes, learners in multilingual classes face a greater challenge of making themselves understood by people with different linguistic backgrounds and so, they have a greater chance of improving their competence.

This brief discussion of the three important aspects of multilingual classrooms shows that each of them can be seen as an advantage or as a challenge. These challenges are especially evident when teachers who have only had experience with monolingual classes find themselves in a completely different environment without any special training or support. "What do they find particularly daunting in teaching English to multilingual classes with whom they share no language apart from English (target language)?" and "Are there any positive effects of the situation?", this is what our study has tried to identify.

The Study

The case study was conducted at the English Philology Department of Akaki Tsereteli State University. The participants of the study were 6 speakers of Turkish, 1 speaker of Russian (with a little Turkish) and 1 speaker of Georgian who form a lower-intermediate/intermediate level group of English learners. They are students of English language and literature Bachelor's program. The four teachers who were involved in the study had from 10 to 20 years of experience of teaching the English language at university level. However, for all of them it was their first encounter with students whose first language was not Georgian.

Although the department has some experience of working with international students, this is the first group where majority of students has practically no Georgian. Unlike Georgian citizens, who are a majority in the program in general, according to Georgian legislation foreign citizens are allowed to enroll in the program without passing any form of entrance examination. In the case of our study participants it means that they came to the course with no or starter level English. Thus, teachers of this group found themselves in an unfamiliar situation for two reasons. For one thing, the level of the students' language competence was lower than expected for the university level. More importantly, they had to adapt their teaching method to a multilingual class. The study was conducted in the beginning of the third year of

their studies and it emerged after a cycle of peer observations that had been carried out in 2016 as part of the staff development project. The areas that were felt to require improvement were as follows (Nijaradze, Zviadadze 2017):

- number and quality of communicative activities used in teaching;
- focus on pair and group work
- managing teacher talking time
- use of inductive presentation techniques
- techniques of error correction and peer correction

Interestingly, some differences were discovered between the multilingual group and other groups in terms of the characteristics of the teaching process. This case study was designed to look more thoroughly into what these differences were and what their effect on the process of teaching was.

Methodology and Findings

Four teachers who worked with the group during the last year were interviewed. Semi-structured interview was used as a method of data collection. The initial questions were the following:

1. How is this group different from other groups in the program?
2. What were the biggest challenges of working with this group? Can you give an example?
3. How did you deal with these challenges?
4. Are there any advantages to teaching this group?
5. Have you as a teacher benefitted from this experience? How?

However, the interviewers expended and asked more details and examples wherever they felt the need. Next, four classes were observed and three more were recorded (with the agreement of both teachers and students). All these sessions focused on practical language skills development.

Interviews

The interviews identified several common themes.

While answering the first question all the teachers mentioned low language competence of this group and difficulty of working with them due to the language barrier. They referred not only to the difficulty of handling the course material, but also frequent misunderstandings in relation to administrative issues. Students required more help from teachers with questions concerning timetable, exam schedules, relationship with the dean's office and secretaries, etc. Two teachers spoke about the students' low self-confidence and their belief that they could not

learn English as well as Georgian students. A lot of this could probably be attributed to their awareness of Georgian students' higher initial competence. However, this is an interesting area for exploration as self-esteem and level of inhibition are so closely linked with success in language learning. The teachers also noted students' frequent use of mobile devices, mostly English-Turkish bilingual dictionaries, during the lesson, which they try to restrict. This does not happen at all with monolingual classes of Georgian students, supposedly because Georgian students have even quicker access to teachers' translations whenever they face a problem with a word or concept.

In response to the question concerning the biggest challenges, the teachers unanimously spoke about problems caused by their inability to use Georgian at certain points in a lesson. They mentioned difficulty they had encountered in

- explaining grammar points, e.g. tense forms, II conditional
- presenting new vocabulary items, especially more abstract ones
- understanding what students' problem is caused by
- assessing whether students understand a language point or not.

In talking about what tools they used for dealing with these challenges the teachers focused on several ideas that need to be discussed in more detail.

All the teachers spoke in a lot of detail about their difficulty in explaining various grammatical items. Although prevalent methodology in the programme is communicative language teaching, where emphasis is more on building communication skills and less on deductive grammar teaching, explanation of grammatical items is still an important part of the teaching process. Every grammatical item is presented explicitly and then practised in a variety of activities. Although recommended language for explanation is English, often teachers use students' native language claiming that it helps make complex concepts easier to understand. This strategy was denied to them with the multilingual group, student's level of English was not sufficient for understanding some of the explanations in this language and consequently, the teachers felt their students were at a disadvantage compared to Georgian students. They looked for strategies for compensating for this discrepancy and their suggestion included the following strategies:

For one thing, they all thought very carefully about the language of explanation, tried to simplify it as much as possible, paraphrase to make sentences shorter and easier to understand.

Another strategy the teachers mentioned was substituting or complementing verbal parts of explanation with visuals. They spoke of using board regularly, drawing charts, timelines, writing examples on the board to highlight or underline relevant parts. One of the teachers commented that she often asked students themselves to the board to analyse examples and clarify some points. Of course, all of this happens with regular classes of monolingual Georgian students but all the teachers emphasised that in this multilingual class the use of such techniques was much more important.

The third technique the teachers spoke about was more extreme – they said they tried to avoid explanation altogether wherever possible. One even commented that she felt she was wasting time on explaining grammar when she could be doing something more beneficial for students. She felt the students understood very little of the message that she was trying to convey. It emerged from the interviews that the teachers made quite frequent use of inductive grammar presentation, they provided students with texts, stories or other types of context and had them infer rules for themselves. This type of presentation was felt to be more productive as very often student feedback confirmed that they had really understood the meaning of this or that grammatical structure better than after traditional deductive presentation. The teachers also said they preferred to spend time on language practice activities instead of presentation as it was of very little value. So, they made their explanations simpler and very much briefer than usual and dedicated the remaining time to doing various controlled and free activities on the same topic.

Another major area of the teachers concern was feedback stage after presenting new material. All the teachers mentioned that it was not easy to diagnose how well students had understood the new material whether it was a grammatical or vocabulary item/items. The teachers claimed that they spent more time on eliciting feedback from international students than with Georgian students. They said they had to ask concept-checking questions, rephrase these questions or ask additional ones, ask students to give several examples for each language item. One commented: "Sometimes they seem to have understood and even start explaining to each other in Turkish. So, I think 'yes, we've done it", but then I ask for an example and it turns out they've got it all wrong and then we start again." So, the teachers all agreed that they had never before paid so much attention to ways of getting feedback from students, exact phrasing and most suitable techniques.

An interesting observation was made by one of the teachers who stated that she

regretted not knowing the students' mother tongue, because it would have helped her understand what their difficulties stemmed from. When the students interpreted a new word incorrectly she was not sure if it was due to her explanation, the technique she used and her language, or the fact that students' language lacked a similar concept. This links to the question of mother tongue interference and desirability of drawing parallels between the first and target languages.

One way of handling difficulties with students' understanding of new material was letting them do a kind of 'peer teaching' i.e. students translating and explaining to their friends who they thought needed help. The teachers said that this kind of student mediation was sometimes helpful, but could not be relied on. Often student feedback showed that they had misled their peers. So, the teachers emphasised once again the role of eliciting feedback from students at every stage.

A strategy teachers mentioned next is more general as it is not linked only with presenting and understanding new material; rather it can be applied to all stages of the teaching process. This refers to the importance of recycling. The teachers emhasised that with this group in particular it was crucial to go back to the material covered in the previous lesson and do some more practice. This gave the students a chance to do some work at home, whether it involved looking for similar structures in their mother tongue and finding translations of words and phrases or applying to their new knowledge in various contexts. For the next lesson they came back with either clearer understanding or more questions. So, the teachers felt it really beneficial to provide similar activities which gave them more detailed feedback on students' mastery of the new form and remaining problem areas.

Another strategy mentioned in answer to the question about ways of handling difficulties was trying to motivate them. "Giving positive feedback and reinforcement was also efficient as it increased students' satisfaction and encouraged positive self-evaluation", said one of the teachers. As low self-esteem was identified as one of the distinguishing features of this group, it is natural that the teachers all expressed similar concerns and spoke of the need for frequent praise and encouragement.

Answers to the question on the advantages of teaching this group were not as diverse and detailed. One main benefit that all the teachers agreed on was that limited use of their native language in class helped the students to improve their English. Another positive aspect that was identified linked to the difference in students' cultural backgrounds. The teachers felt that due to this difference some

discussions and presentations were livelier and required less encouragement from the teacher. Also, whatever the topic of the lesson, a question on the difference in this respect between Georgia, Turkey and Uzbekistan always generated interest. So, the teachers found it required less planning to find topics for free language use and personalizing the material.

In answer to the final question of the interview, the teachers spoke more about the difficulty of teaching this group than benefits for the teachers. However, certain themes did emerge from the discussion. Most importantly, they felt that the pressure of reaching desired learning outcomes with a group whose language competence was much lower than expected offered them an opportunity or even pushed them to improve overall organization of the teaching process. In particular this referred to time management during the lesson and prioritizing the material. They saw it as beneficial to their practice. Another area they mentioned was more imaginative and creative use of motivation techniques.

Lesson observation and recordings

The second data-collection tool was lesson observation, whose results largely confirmed the findings of interviews. However, it was felt that more detailed record was required to identify some characteristics of student language that were thought to be specific to this multilingual group. Consequently, with the consent of teachers and students recordings of three lessons were made. Findings of lesson observations and lesson recordings will be discussed together as there are several common areas. The themes consistent with interview data were the following:

- teachers put a lot of effort put into clarification and explanation; they used paraphrasing or examples to clarify a point;
- they used variety of techniques for presenting new material, including an inductive presentation which was the only example of this approach throughout the series of observations conducted under another research project mentioned above (Nijaradze, Zviadadze 2017)
- frequent use of elicitation techniques was observed including various types of questions, giving a definition, opposite, giving an example, etc.

  e.g. "What is opposite of 'tense'?, "Which of you is 'punctual'? "Is Elif punctual?" and similar questions follow after a student gives the definition of a vocabulary item.

The relevance of these features becomes evident when this data is compared with the

data obtained through a study described above, where 30 observations of various teachers working with monolingual classes of Georgian students did not produce a single example of inductive presentation, very few concept-checking questions and teachers taking shortcuts by accepting Georgian translations when they tried to check students' understanding of new language items.

Observations also confirmed the teachers' claim that students engage in discussions with more eagerness due to differences in their backgrounds. One of the observations occurred during a lesson that dealt with the topic of university education. The question and answer session started immediately after a student's presentation of the Turkish educational system, the number of student-initiated questions was impressive and it was evident to the observer that the students were involved in sharing meaning to the extent that they completely forgot to focus on language accuracy. Similar case was observed in another class where the students were asked to discuss character traits valued in their cultures and discussion spontaneously moved to how they perceived Georgians, their classmates and themselves.

A major area that was not mentioned in interviews but attracted the researchers' attention during observations and was studied in more detail through lesson recordings, was the students' use of communication strategies. Strategic competence, an important aspect of communicative competence, was defined as "made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (1980 p.30). Thus, English language learners will need to use communication strategies (in this interpretation of the term) as long as they experience difficulties in communication due to limitations in the mastery of the target language.

Observations as well recordings of the lessons identified that the students used a number of such strategies:

1. Circumlocution (paraphrase), which could include exemplifying, illustrating or describing the properties of the target object or action via physical characteristics, constituents, function, e.g.

   "ashamed -when making ... for example, I made a cake but it wasn't good; we have a guest and I don't want to bring it for them and … I ashamed" or

   "punctual – mean is - our Elif is not punctual"

2. Approximation, which refers to using a single alternative lexical item.

   E.g. convince – like persuade, yeah?

generous - it is good, sharing

This finding was particularly informative as it contrasted with the results of another study carried out at ATSU, which argued for inclusion of strategy training into English language teaching programmes and identified specific strategies that would most benefit language learners (Nijaradze, Dogonadze 2015). This study showed that the students claimed that most frequently they used achievement strategies: circumlocution, approximation, clarification requests and self-repairs. However, the teachers stated that the students frequently used other types of strategies: paralinguistic devices, code-switching, literal translation, topic avoidance and message abandonment. Thus, majority of students were not aware of giving preference to avoidance strategies and achievement strategies based on non-linguistic or native language tools.

Although a more thorough quantitative analysis is required, it can be safely claimed that lessons with the multilingual group of participants of the present study demonstrated more frequent use of achievement strategies. As code-switching and translation strategies were of no use to them, they had developed the ability to overcome language difficulties through the use of strategies that "are oriented towards encouraging language use, taking initiative and dealing with challenges in communication through activation of existing language competence" (Nijaradze, Dogonadze 2015, p.2)

Conclusions

The limited scope of the study prevents us from making any far-reaching generalisations, but several tentative conclusions can still be made.

Although the teachers see working with multilingual classes as a challenge, the teaching process might benefit as a result. The findings of the study suggest a number of advantages for both students and teachers, in particular if the results of this study are viewed against the background of the previous studies conducted in the same context.

1. Certain features that are consistent with communicative language teaching methodology are more prominent in multilingual than in monolingual classes where the teacher shares students L1.
    - Teachers' preference for inductive presentation in this study contrasts with observations from the research mentioned above (Zviadadze, Nijaradze 2017), where not a single instance of such a presentation was observed.
    - The share of language practice increases at the expense of deductive presentation as teachers feel that

explanation in the target language is of little benefit for students due to their limited language competence.

Both these findings are interesting as they suggest that teachers use L1 for explanation in monolingual classes even though they used the target language when observed. This can be the only explanation for the fact that similar need for using inductive presentation or cutting down on explanation does not arise with their regular classes, even if the students' language level is comparatively high.

2. Learning English in a multilingual class sharing no language of communication with the teacher increases students' mastery and use of communication strategies, especially achievement strategies, which can be seen as conducive to improving their overall communicative competence. Proficiency with these strategies emerges naturally, based on the need and without special strategy training that is required for other types of language classes.
3. Differences in students' cultural backgrounds create a natural information gap, which motivates student-initiated exchange of information and contributes to making lessons more communicative.
4. An area that definitely requires a more detailed study is students' self-esteem in a multilingual class. It would be interesting to look into the teacher's role in dealing with this issue and investigating if greater integration of these students with their Georgian peers would have improved their self-confidence.

Overall, it can be claimed that teaching multilingual classes offers teachers opportunities for expanding their repertoire of teaching techniques, increases the ratio of English versus other languages in class and makes the lesson more communicative, all of which ultimately benefits the students.

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