

TEACHER BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS OF MAXIMIZING SECOND LANGUAGE USE IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM WITH REFERENCE TO SAMMANTHURAI EDUCATION ZONE

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ABSTRACT: *Maximizing second language in ESL classrooms is a growing concern as teachers hold definite beliefs about teaching and learning and these stem from their own experience of language learning, the characteristics of their learners, syllabus or content they are supposed to teach, their actual teaching experience and teacher training (Borg, 2003). Given the realities of teaching ESL in rural schools of Sri Lanka, ESL classroom is the only domain for learners to hear and use the L2. The appropriate use and choice of using the L2 and L1 by the teacher has great impact on their attitudes toward the TL and language teaching (Cameron, 2011). The study examines teachers' beliefs and perceptions of using L2 in ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai education zone, adopting a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm. Data was drawn from the data collected for a larger study in the Sammanthurai zone, involving 50 teachers who teach ESL to junior secondary level classes. The interview data was used to examine teachers' beliefs and perception of L2 use in the ESL classroom. The finding reveals that the ideal amount of TL that should be used in ESL classroom indicated a higher percent than their reported use. In the continuum of L1 and TL, the ideal proportion of TL that was perceived to be ideal ranges from 25-100%, with an average of 62.4% and the self-reported TL use range from 20-75%, with an average of 38.6%, a higher value than the actual use of 27.7%, as reported in Mahroof (2015). Though the beliefs and perceptions of teachers suggest an overwhelming consensus about the need to maximize the use of TL, there is variation in their motivation, which was reflected by their beliefs. It was found that the beliefs of most teachers are shaped by their perceived incompetence, lack of determination, and perceived low language proficiency of learners.*

Keywords: ESL, beliefs, perceptions, L1, L2

INTRODUCTION

Aiming to maximize second language use in ESL classroom is a growing concern in teaching ESL. It was pointed out by Mahroof (2015) that the excessive use of L1 in rural contexts was unjustifiable as it does not provide opportunity to hear and use L2. However, teachers hold definite beliefs about teaching and learning and these stem from their own experience of language learning, the characteristics of their learners, syllabus or content they are supposed to teach, their actual teaching experience, teacher training and so forth (Borg, 2003). It is also noted that, teachers' beliefs are "working principles or maxims which teachers consciously or unconsciously refer to as they teach" (Richards, 1992 cited in McMillan and Turnbull, 2009, p.19). According to Borg,

(2003), the practice of teachers is guided by teacher cognition, which means what the teacher think, know and believe and this subsequently plays a crucial role in determining their practice in classroom context. Teacher cognition and their classroom practices reflect the characterizations of the teachers and their teaching. In a study on TL use by Polio and Duff (1994) where the learners' first language (L1) is English, there came to light an actual "... lack of awareness on the part of the teachers as to how, when, and the extent to which they actually use English in the classroom" (p. 320). Even though most of the teachers gave very similar estimates to the amount of the L1 that they thought they used, in practice, they tend to use to varying degrees. They further state that the use of L1 in many administrative and other situations deprived students of many good opportunities to hear and process TL for a range of communicative functions. They also note that, in line with beliefs about the pedagogical value of the L1, they feel L1 seems to interfere with L2 learning or use. As teachers may be unaware of the extent to which they use L1 and L2 during teaching, their goals and reported own use may be overly high estimates. This shows that there is discrepancy between their beliefs and actual use.

Given the realities of teaching ESL in rural schools of Sri Lanka, ESL classroom is the only domain for learners to hear and use the L2. Hence, there is a need to find how teachers perceive the use of L2 by interpreting teachers' beliefs about using L2 in ESL teaching. This study examines teachers' beliefs and perceptions of using L2 in ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai education zone.

The research questions that need to be addressed are:

1. What are teachers' beliefs of L2 use in ESL classrooms?
2. How are teachers' perceptions shaped by their beliefs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' role in language Choice

Given the realities of teaching English as a second language (ESL) in rural schools of Sri Lanka, the teacher is the only source of second language (L2) affordance. This claim is supported by Higgs (1982 cited in Polio & Duff, 1994) in "making the unavailable available" (p.8) the teachers' role is to facilitate the active use of the TL by presenting the best possible model and making available TL through the natural unconstrained use of it in the classroom. It

has been found that teachers produce around 70 % of all utterances in the average language classroom (Chaudron, 1988). The appropriate use and choice of using the L2 and L1 by the teacher has great impact on their attitudes toward the target language (TL) and language teaching (Cameron, 2011). Hattie (2012) confirms that the success of learning is greatly influenced by the perceptions and quality of teaching. Cameron states that the choice of language made by teachers are greatly influenced by their beliefs about the ability and expectations of the learners rather than their own ability and confidence.

Teaching ESL is significant and unique in several aspects, especially in rural contexts. While speaking the TL the teacher uses it as a communicating tool to communicate with the learners as well as a pedagogical tool to teach the content. Hence it is vital for teachers to make the right choice of language for organizing and delivering the lesson, classroom management and interpersonal relationship, while taking into consideration the consequences that may follow by overusing each of the two (Cook, 2008).

Aiming to maximize the use of L2, English in ESL classroom is a growing concern in teaching ESL (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002), especially in the rural parts of Sri Lanka as the learners' first language (L1) is invisibly present in all spheres of life. It has been found that L1 use in schools of Sammanthurai education zone ranges from 23-83%, with an average of 72% across the selected junior secondary classes (Mahroof, 2015). Cameron (2011) states that the shared L1 of both teachers and learners is an invaluable teaching resource, which is readily available and can be used without much effort to aid ESL teaching. However, L1 and TL are often used to varying degrees and how much of each should be used is controversial. While many empirical studies have found the positive role of L1 for both communicative and pedagogical purposes (Van Lier, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Cook, 2001; Jinxia, 2010), researchers have also cautioned teachers to use it appropriately and judiciously as overuse of it can be harmful and demotivate learners (Turnbull, 2001). Turnbull (2001) points out that "licensing teachers to speak the L1 will lead to an overuse of the L1 by many teachers" (P. 536). Reiterating this view, Cook states that L1 should be used when "the cost of the TL is too great", whenever it is too difficult or time consuming for the students to process and understand (p.418). Though L1 is acknowledged as a beneficial tool in teaching TL, the national policy of several Asian countries like Korea, China and Taiwan, where English is a foreign language recommend that the use of L1 be kept to an absolute minimum (Lu et al., 2004). It is the responsibility of

teachers to integrate L1 within TL framework in a strategic and balanced way. While teachers' routine use of TL in ESL classroom will help learners to develop a positive attitude towards TL and motivate them to use the language (Cameron, 2011), exclusive use of it might make learners feel "disoriented and powerless" (Littlewood & Yu, 2011, p.70), which can also demotivate them. This shows that maximizing TL does not mean to undervalue the role of L1. Hence, maintaining a balance between the TL and L1 in ESL classrooms is a timely need especially in the context of rural areas where ESL classroom is the only place for the majority of students to be exposed to and practice the TL.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm. Data has been drawn from the data collected for a larger study conducted in the Sammanthurai Education zone, involving 50 teachers who teach ESL to junior secondary level classes and their students. The teacher interview data from the larger study was used to examine teachers' beliefs and perception of L2 use in the ESL classroom.

As suggested by Stern (1992), the use of L1 and L2 was considered as a continuum to examine teachers' beliefs by obtaining teachers' thoughts on the ideal amount of TL use in ESL teacher talk, and what they believe their actual TL use to be in ESL classrooms.

FINDINGS

The ideal amount Vs reported use of L2

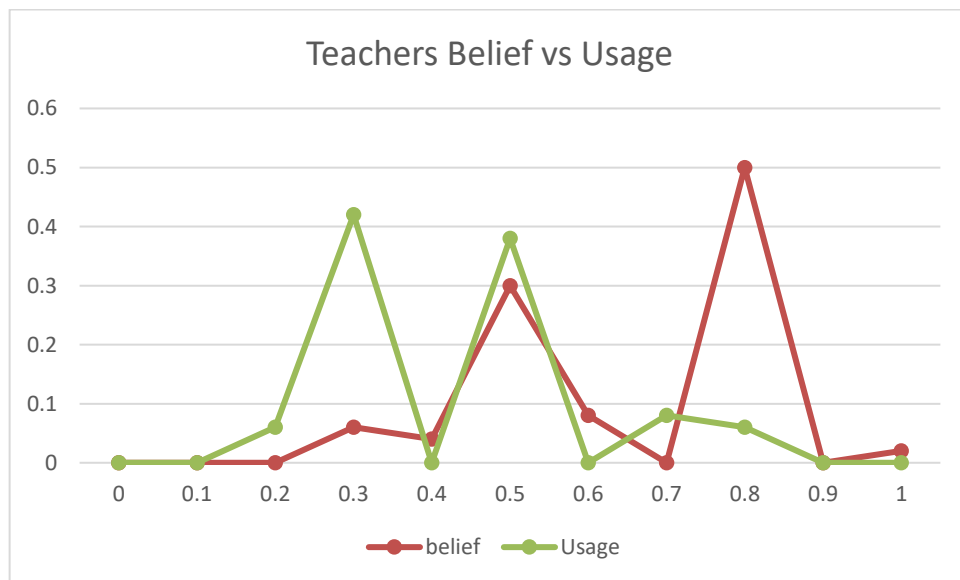
No	Teacher code	L2 Ideal %	L2 usage %
1	TAB 1	75	75
2	TAB2	75	70
3	TAB3	75	50
4	TAB4	75	50
5	TAB5	60	20
6	TAB6	75	75
7	TAB7	75	25
8	TAB8	75	50

No	Teacher code	L2 Ideal %	L2 usage %
26	TT26	75	50
27	TT27	50	50
28	TT28	50-75	50-75
29	TT29	50	50
30	TT30	75	25
31	TI 31	50	25
32	TI 32	75	70
33	TI 33	75	25

9	TAB9	50	50
10	TAB10	75	50
11	TC11	40	25
12	TC12	25	25
13	TC13	25	25
14	TC14	40	20
15	TC15	75	50
16	TC16	75	50
17	TC17	25	25
18	TC18	60	30
19	TC19	50	50
20	TC20	75	50
21	T221	50	25
22	TT22	50	50
23	TT23	50	50
24	TT24	100	50
25	TT25	75	50

34	TI 34	50	25
35	TI 35	75	70
36	TI 36	60	20
37	TI 37	75	25
38	TI 38	75	25
39	TI 39	50	25
40	TI 40	75	25
41	TI 41	75	25
42	TI 42	50	25
43	TI 43	75	25
44	TI 44	60	20
45	TI 45	75	25
46	TI 46	50	20
47	TI 47	50	25
48	TI 48	50	20
49	TI 49	75	70
50	TT50	75	25

Initially, the data reported by teachers as ideal and actual use was plotted on a histogram as shown in fig.



The visual illustration of the data shows that the respondents are a collection of groups. Analysing the overall beliefs together will not reflect a pattern of variation among the samples in the context of language use in ESL classrooms. This created a need for classification methodology. In order to

execute classification, a single dimensional K means clustering methodology was used.

The reported amount of TL being used by all respondents is less than the ideal and for the reason that the ideal amount and reported use of TL are correlated, the multiplied value of reported use percent and ideal percent was used as an index to cluster the data. The data was aligned in descending order and k means clustering was carried out.

DISCUSSION

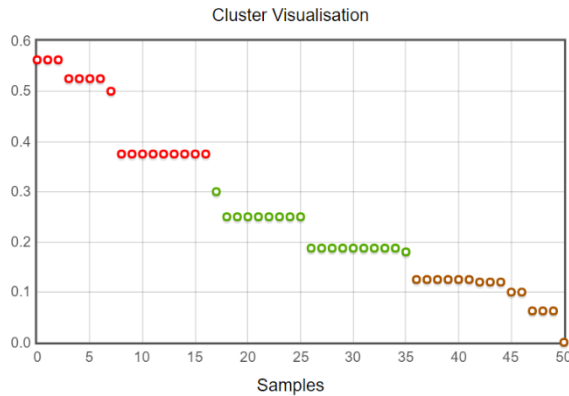


Fig 1 cluster

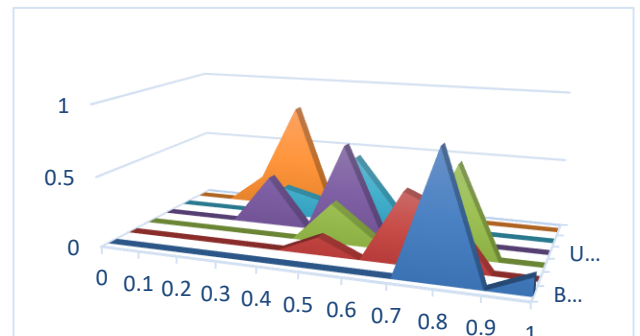


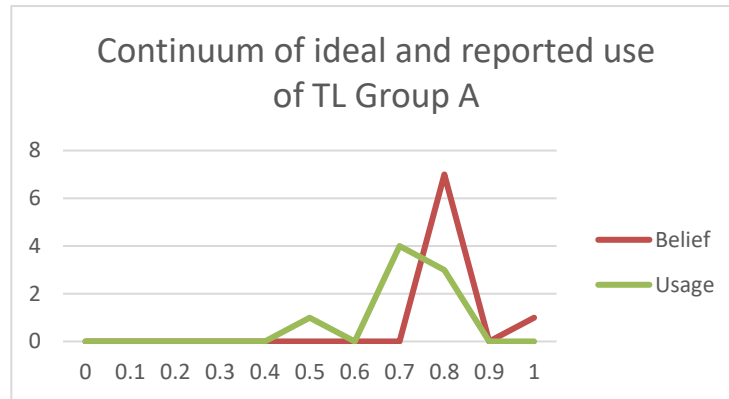
Fig 2 belief and usage in each

cluster

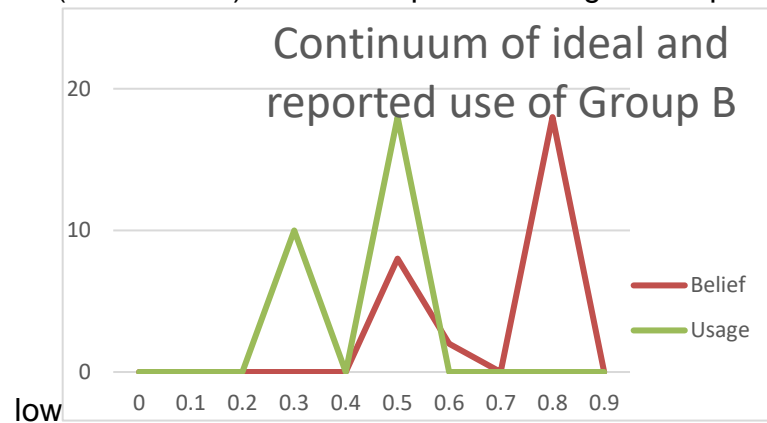
According to the graphical representation in fig 2, the respondents in each group share common thought in their beliefs and self-reported use. The x axis is the continuum of L1 and L2 and the Y axis is the probability of teachers.

In comparing the pattern of distribution the respondents fall in to three groups:

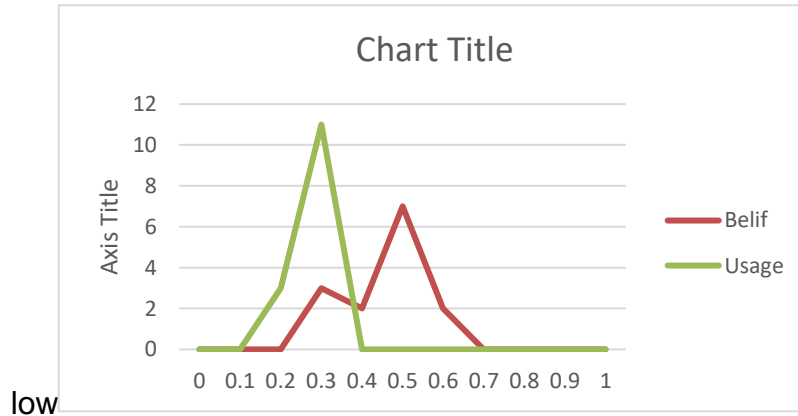
1. Group A (8 teachers) - Their ideal percent is high and reported use is high



2. Group B – (28 teachers) Their ideal percent is high but reported use is



3. Group C – (14 teachers) Their ideal percent is low and reported use is



The three groups A, B and C as illustrated in -, -, - respectively depict three categories of teachers. A group represents teachers whose ideal percent is high and reported use is high; B group represents those whose ideal percent is high but reported use is low; Group C, the ideal percent is low and reported use is low. Though the three groups of teachers differ considerably in their

reported ideal amount and TL use, within each group they show commonalities in their belief.

As revealed by the interview data, the ideal amount of TL that should be used in ESL classroom indicated a higher percent than their reported use. In the continuum of L1 and TL, the ideal proportion of TL that is ideal ranges from 25-100%, with an average of 62.4%. and the self-reported TL use range from 20-75%, with an average of 38.6%, a higher value than the actual use of 27.7%, as reported in Mahroof (2015). This conforms Polio and Duff (1994) where the estimates of the reported use of English (L1) by the majority were contradictory to their practice. Even though most of the teachers gave very similar estimates to the amount of the L1 that they thought they used, in practice, they tend to use to varying degrees. Based on the self-reported ideal proportion of TL use of the respondents, it can be seen that 72% of respondents indicate a higher ideal percentage. A significant finding is that, though a majority believe a greater percentage of TL to be ideal, only 16%, who belong to group A reported that they use a higher percent and 56% of them who belong to group B, though believe a higher percent to be the goal feel restricted to use. A substantial minority of 28% who belong to group C do believe that the ideal percent of TL should be low as - % which correlates to their self-reported use, which is also low. The difference between the teachers' goals and reported use can be attributed to both internal and external influencing factors.

Perceptions on maximizing L2 in ESL classrooms

Maximizing L2 use in pedagogical practice is challenging and the extent to which this will be practically possible varied among the teachers. Using the L2 in the classroom appeared to be a sensitive issue for some teachers, with almost one fourth of the sample appearing to feel guilty of not using a substantial amount of TL during teaching. While a few teachers make an admission of their failure personally attributing it to their lack of fluency in the target language or their lack of determination, most of them attributed it to the lack of language ability and confidence of the learners, whom they feel will find it difficult to cope up when teacher uses English and some feel that ignoring the learners' mother tongue will widen the distance between the teacher and students and create an artificiality in the teaching process as the students are used to learning English through L1. They feel that, maximizing L2 will be a challenge for both teachers and students to communicate in a language that they are not so familiar like their L1.

In contrary, a very small group of committed teachers believe that they should use as much TL as possible and expressed their grievances over the unrestricted use of L1 to deliver the contents of text books written in English. This group of teachers feel that TL use will provide affordance for learners to use it. Two teachers reported that they drew inspiration to use TL from their English teacher. One of the teachers said “my English teacher is my role model” while another stated that “My English teacher, X is my inspiration” This shows that teachers’ use of language is shaped by their own personal experience of learning ESL. Regardless of activity and the skills focused, it was mentioned that commitment to use English in ESL classroom has been advocated in their training Colleges and they generally support this view in principle. These teachers were not in favour of the baseless arguments they claim to be the reason for teachers not using more TL in the classroom. This group was strongly committed to make the TL as the communicative norm in ESL classroom as over 90% of learners have no opportunity and access to hear and use English beyond the classroom. They are confident that the students will cope up when it becomes the norm and both teachers as well as the students will benefit by making it an opportunity to use the TL with confidence. One of the respondents interviewed accused the institutional influence from the system. “Even our officers do not encourage or support the teachers to use English, and because of this there are some teachers who can’t speak English, so they teach English in Tamil”. In the perspective of this teacher, it is claimed that it is the responsibility of the officers in charge of English education to support and direct teachers to be on par with the changing needs and create opportunity for both teachers and learners to use the TL naturally and spontaneously. Many teachers noted that they are not given training on teaching techniques or methods and they self-select a method they feel is appropriate to deliver the lesson. It is also noteworthy that a committed teacher, who takes much effort to use the TL, though, does not display personal fluency, reported “I use more L1 when I feel learners are losing attention in the lesson”. Another teacher also admitted that the use of L1 is unavoidable “when I have to present ideas that I can’t express in English and sometimes I use L1 to get learners participate in discussion. This shows that teachers use L1 as a strategy to maximize learner participation and accommodate teachers’ as well as learners’ low language ability. It was also reported by another teacher that “we must use simple English sentences in the classroom as learners get used to pronunciation and learn new words”. The views of this group show that simple English routine interaction could and should take place through the TL regardless of the activity and pedagogical purpose.

Some teachers, however, while accepting that more TL use is favourable for normal classroom instruction reported that it is impossible as “most of the students are very weak and they don’t like English and when we speak English, they simply lose attention in the lesson” According to this view, the nature of the students with respect to their ability and motivation is also a governing factor. They also reported that too much of L2 will be difficult for low proficiency learners to cope with. Considering the need for more TL use, they too supported, but feel that it would be difficult to make it as a general practice unless it is imposed by the institutional system.

According to the views on maximizing TL in ESL classrooms, there is a quarter of the respondents at one extreme who feel that TL use is impossible and at the other is the minority who feel it is possible. In between the two is the majority who feel it is desirable but impossible. Based on teachers’ beliefs and perceptions, the respondents can be categorised into three distinctive groups:

1. The teachers who are committed and need to maximize the use of TL
2. The teachers who are enthusiastic to maximize TL, but feel restricted
3. The teachers who are resistant and lack motivation to maximize TL use

CONCLUSION

The beliefs and perceptions of teachers suggest that there is an overwhelming consensus among teachers about the need to maximize the use of TL. Though most of them feel it is necessary, with some believing that using more TL is the most effective way to learn ESL, they were uncertain about how realistic it would be to implement it against the cultural norm in practice. Though the majority favoured the use of TL, there is variation in their motivation, which was reflected by their beliefs. It was found that the beliefs of most teachers are shaped by their perceived incompetence, lack of determination and perceived low language proficiency of learners.

The study demonstrates that positive attitude complemented with determination and confidence become prerequisites to overcome the challenges in maximizing TL use in a strategic way. Use of English for communication has become a great need and this has widened the ever growing gap between the rural and urban learners. Bridging this divide is the responsibility of policy makers and agents who implement at zonal levels. This was confirmed by the committed teachers, who feel the need for effective training and support.

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