

## Students' Mother Tongue in Teaching English at the Tertiary Level in Mizoram, India

Michael Lalremtluanga

*Kapthangi College*

*m10\_totalinstinct@yahoo.com*

### ***Abstract***

*This is a study done out of interest to assess the quantum of the use of the students' mother tongue in teaching English at a tertiary level in Mizoram, India. It was also the aim of the study to formulate a realistic methodology to teach English to obtain optimum learning at the production as well as the reception level. To gain the required information, a questionnaire based survey supplemented by interviews; actual class teaching and classroom observation are undertaken. The opinions of nine teachers and sixty students are elicited. The result indicates that the use of the students' mother tongue is very effective in the teaching of textual comprehension and stimulating the thought processes. This article sums up the major findings of the study and lists the conclusion drawn from it. Some recommendations for further research are put forward on the basis of the discussions arising from the study.*

**Keywords:** Mother tongue, bilingual method, second language, first language

## **1. Introduction**

The teaching of the English language in our colleges and universities was adversely affected by the then prevailing socio-political policies and attitudes after the independence in 1947. Many of the country's leaders and educationists had started to question the importance of the English language. The trend towards regionalization of the medium of instruction at the university level, the inadequate exposure to the language, unrealistic examination system and inadequate textbooks gradually led to a sharp decline in the standard of teaching English at the college level.

English, however, continued to be the 'window of the world' and 'pipeline' for the flow of endless knowledge. In the course of the time, people realized the importance of having a good command of the English language. In the competitive world of employment, the need for good proficiency in English was felt by the educationists.

There is a world of difference between the method used for teaching English in schools and at the tertiary level. The gap between the two modes is too wide for the college students to cope with. Many of the students are not able to follow the instruction in college classes nor can they cope with the text prescribed for them. They have to take the examination and pass it, so they fall back on easy techniques and grasp whatever aid they can. Being desperate, many of them start relying on readymade notes which in detail gives the translation of the text in their mother tongue with answers to stereotype questions. As a result, such students never learn to think for themselves, nor do they acquire English as a vehicle for expression. It is the defective mode of teaching in most cases which leaves their students with no choice but to rely on those kinds of readymade notes. The success of these notes has led to some teachers to use the mother tongue for classroom teaching in an unscientific and unsystematic way. Gradually the practice of using the mother tongue for teaching English started spreading and we can say that today, it is a pan-Indian phenomenon.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The study was taken out of interest to find out whether the students' mother tongue has been useful or misused and for what specific purposes. It is also the aim of the study to probe the possibilities of using the mother tongue as best as it possibly can for teaching English as a second language. Thus the study had an aim to survey the present college teaching situation, especially in relation to the use of the mother tongue at the tertiary level.

Discussions with experienced teachers of English and the author's own teaching experience in Mizoram made him presume that the mother tongue is being used by college lecturers to teach English at the tertiary level. The mother tongue is being used by different lecturers for different purposes. It is the aim of the study to find how useful the mother tongue could be for English language teaching and whether a rationale could be formed for its profitable use.

The focus of the study is restricted to the teaching of the undergraduate level in Mizoram, especially second semester General English class of a six semester degree course. The study is conducted by the teacher of English, concerned with teaching of English as a second language to the students of Mizoram whose first language (L1) is Mizo. The approach to the study is pedagogical and not linguistic. The study does not compare the relative effectiveness of the various methods for teaching English as a second language. The author does not claim to propagate any new method as such but wants to find out the effectiveness of using the mother tongue for optimum learning in English language teaching.

The present study was conducted in two parts:

- a) A survey
- b) An experiment

Part I consisted of a survey to find out the present mode of teaching English with regards to the use of the mother tongue. The survey was conducted in two phases:

### Phase 1:

A pilot survey was conducted at Lunglei on the basis of questionnaire and interview with the teachers of English and the students of two colleges. The aim of the pilot survey was to gain insight into the problem under study and to sharpen the tools for the main survey in Mizoram, based on the findings of the pilot survey.

### Phase 2:

The second phase of the survey was involved in refinement on the questionnaire of the feedback received from the Lunglei survey, to assess the current mode of teaching in colleges and the use of the mother tongue for teaching English; and also to find out the specific areas where the mother tongue is being used profitably for teaching.

Part II consisted of formulating an integrated approach in the light of insights gained from the surveys and also incorporating in it a few features of Dodson's bilingual method of teaching. An experimental try-out of the integrated approach was thus formed and tested for its effectiveness in two colleges of Lunglei in Mizoram.

The try-out yielded the results either showing the success of the integrated approach or its ineffectiveness for teaching English under experimental conditions. It is difficult to identify all the variables involved in such a controlled experiment. Still the effort was to have best control and make experiment yield unbiased results.

A proficiency test was administered and the students' performance in this test, educational background and their inclination towards English language assisted to form two matched ability groups for the experiment.

Eight weeks experimental try-out assessed the success of the integrated approach. In the control group, the mother tongue was not used whereas in the experimental group, the mother tongue was used in a systematic manner for teaching those areas of difficulty which were suggested by the opinion of the teachers through questionnaires, and the area where the mother tongue can be profitably used according to the teacher's opinion.

The items chosen for teaching were from the prescribed course of the Mizoram University syllabus. The same items were taught in both the groups by the same teacher. At the end of eight weeks, a test was held to assess the progress of both the groups. The performance of both the groups was compared to each other.

Conclusions were drawn based on the findings of the post experimental test and the author's experience during the experimental teaching and observation of the students regarding receptivity of the language.

Any theoretical findings, discussions on pedagogy are of little use unless they are tried and tested. The tryout for the integrated approach was conducted for eight weeks, which was too short for such empirical study. Such investigations under empirical circumstances are conducted in two matched ability groups and later on their performance and progress are compared.

### **3. Major findings of the survey**

After analysing and interpreting the data collected in both the surveys, a number of useful facts emerged regarding the teaching and learning situations as it exists today in our colleges. We have selected here only a few for consideration which are relevant for our present study. The following facts emerged:

- a) Majority of lecturers are of the opinion that the lecture mode of teaching is no more found to be adequate for teaching of language oriented syllabuses at the I B.A level.
- b) 90% of the subjects interviewed (students and teachers) said the learners' mother tongue is used for teaching English:

In some cases – excessively used (upto 80%)

In some cases – the use varies according to the need of the teaching item and the extent to which the students find the same difficult.

- c) Even those teachers who do not use the mother tongue for teaching, recommend judicious use of the mother tongue for the following areas of difficulty. They make it clear that the mother may be used only when it is absolutely necessary and when the simplification effort with monolingual fails. Nine teachers took part in the interview as well as in answering the questionnaire and their response to students' understanding of the target language are given in the following table.

**Table 1**  
**How well the students understand their teacher speaking in English in different situations**

Situations	Very well	Moderately well	Not very well	Do not use English at all
Lecture Period	1	6	2	
Informal talk	3	5	1	
Out of college	2	3	1	2

Looking at the table, we can see that the students can understand moderately well when their teachers speak to them in English, but there are very few who understand the lecture very well. This may be because the students are not accustomed to the lecture mode of teaching or the lecturer uses very difficult English in the classroom. This is supported by the observation that more number understands the informal talk very well, because in informal talk the teacher may be using very simple language or gestures which help them to understand better.

The teachers are also asked how well their students could speak in English in different situations.

**Table 2**  
**Information concerning students speaking English in different situations**

Situation	Very well	Moderately well	Not very well	Choose not to answer at all
Formal class discussion	1	3	4	1
Talking among themselves	3	1	4	1
In response to a question	2	5	1	1

In response to this question, some of them have mentioned that students do not take part in classroom discussion in English. As it is obvious from the last column showing the respondents choosing not to answer, they mean that students do not speak in English while talking among themselves too. But their response to a question is moderately well, which may suggest that in guided circumstances, they tend to speak English.

Sixty students took part in the study and when asked whether the teacher uses any language other than English in class such as the mother tongue, their response are tabulated below.

**Table 3**  
**Information about the frequency of the mother tongue being used in class**

Frequency of use	No. o subjects who chose this	Percentage
Sometimes	30	50
Quite often	12	20
All the time	5	8.33
No reply	13	21.67

The information is useful to the present study because we came to learn that the mother tongue is being used if not quite often, all least sometimes. Thirteen subjects chose not to answer maybe because they did not follow what is being asked or have their own reservations for not answering. The instance where the mother tongue is being used all the time, we would not consider as an English teaching class even though the author did observe such a lesson personally. However it boils down to the fact that the mother tongue is being used but in different degrees and for different purposes.

#### **4. Classroom observation**

It was already mentioned that the questionnaire study was supplemented by observation of actual classroom teaching and interviews of lecturers teaching in undergraduate classes. The researcher observed twenty-five classes in two months and the class observed was only the general English class of 1<sup>st</sup> year level. English is compulsory only up to the second semester. Of these twenty-five lessons, it was observed that the lecture mode of teaching still prevails in most classes. Teachers begin with a long introduction go on talking most of the time without stopping for feedback or ensuring whether the students are able to profit by such discourse or not.

Students' participation is very little except in grammar classes where it is more or less a repetition or revision of the teachers' words. Students usually hesitate to speak in English except when they have a base to translate and that is when they are given prompts in the mother tongue.

Most of the prose lessons are reduced to paraphrase and translation of the difficult text in Mizo. At the end of the chapter stock questions are asked by the teacher. Hardly anything as composition is ever taught in class – guided or unguided. The teaching techniques of writing is always neglected even in our schools and continued to be so even at the tertiary level. With the result, the students never seem to develop this skill.

Simplification is not attempted by the teacher while teaching. Either they tend to be very scholarly making this more difficult than the prescribed text for the students, or they take recourse to translation. Students seem to like the latter better and appreciate the teacher who adopts this easy way.

The blackboard is very sparingly used by the teachers and they never resort to drawing pictures or diagrams or maps to explain anything. Even difficult words are not written on the blackboard. All the lessons, whether comprehension, prose or grammar, seem to have the same teaching method. That is paraphrase by the teacher and closed response questions in the end. Nothing is done to encourage students to speak English.

Finishing the course within the prescribed time limit seems to be the main objective of teaching. Even students feel insecure if the books prescribed for study is not done in class. No one seems to bother about the quality of teaching or the productive value of learning a language.

#### **5. Teachers' opinion collected through interview**

During the survey in Mizoram, the author could me nine lecturers and tried to obtain their opinion about the teaching-learning situation in Mizoram. The author had detailed discussion with them regarding the present examination pattern in Mizoram, the syllabus and the course prescribed. The problems faced by them in teaching English from the social and political quarters were discussed in greater detail.

Political and social attributes to English in Mizoram are rather discouraging and to this the fatal blow was added by making English optional after the first year in college. English is taught as a compulsory subject only in the first year and the student gets as many as three attempts to clear off before he/she gets a pass. Thus students do not care to make any effort to improve their English from an

examination point of view. Another dampening effect is created by not including the General English marks for awarding the division. So good students particularly from the commerce and science streams do not bother to divide any time to General English.

Most of the colleges are understaffed. There is lack of classroom space and thus the compulsory English classes are overcrowded with large number of students. In such large classes, it is impossible for the teachers to give individual attention to the weaker students. All those ideal methods of group teachings are not possible in such circumstances. Teaching becomes a one-sided affair; many students never get the chance to speak out or get his problem solved. Written tasks are very seldom given for the fear of the bulk of correction work it would invite.

## 6. Results of the tests

After eight weeks of teaching, a test was conducted to measure the achievement, if any, made by the experimental group and compare it with that of the control group, which would be an index of the effectiveness or otherwise of the integrated approach used for teaching the experimental group as against the monolingual techniques used for teaching the control group.

The use or non-use of the mother tongue by the author for teaching constituted the variable, the effect of which was to be measured in the experiment. The other factors listed below were controlled for both the groups.

- a) Teaching materials
- b) The students, equally matched in proficiency
- c) The teacher

The results of the experimental teaching positively demonstrate the effectiveness of the integrated approach with respect to the teaching of reading comprehension and grammar at a reception level. There are enough reasons to believe that given a larger period of exposure to this kind of teaching, the achievement of the students in written composition could also be considerably improved.

The following table indicates the test score of both the groups after the experimental teaching.

**Table 4**  
**Achievement test scores- after experimental teaching**

Range of marks	Experimental group	Controlled group
91-95	2	0
86-90	2	0
81-85	4	0
76-80	2	0
71-75	0	0
66-70	2	0
61-65	4	4
56-60	2	6
51-55	10	4
46-50	8	6
41-45	10	10
36-40	14	8
31-35	0	12
25-30	0	10
TOTAL	60	60

The test achievement scores show that the students of the experimental group have performed better on the test. The group average of the control group is 42 and the experimental group is 54.5. In the experimental group, the highest score is 95 out of 100 whereas in the control group, it is 64. As it is obvious from the table in the experimental group, twelve students scored above 65 marks, but in the control group, this was the upper end in the rank order. Lowest score in the experimental group is 37 as against in the control group.

The score of the 50% of the students in the experimental group range from 35-50, and no one has scored below 35. This shows a noticeable improvement, because before the experimental teaching, the lowest score of this group was 15. The remaining 50% of the students have gone above the score of 50 up to 95. Hence the integrated approach has been able to pull up at least 50% of the students of this group to around 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, while the rest score above it, so overall improvement is found in this group. That is, each student has made some improvement. The lower end of scores is much higher in this group, in comparison to the scores of the control group.

In the control group, the scores of 50% of them range from 25-40 and about 30% of them lie in the range of 25-36. Therefore the control group is more homogenous than the experimental group. They tend to fall in the middle and lower end of the distribution. Though lower end of the score for this group also is higher than what it was in the proficiency test.

The use of the mother tongue in the integrated approach also facilitated the understanding of English grammar as the technique using contrastive analysis gave positive understanding to the learners. This conclusion emerged from the comparison of the performance of the two groups in the section of the test paper which included recognition type questions in grammar.

We can conclude that majority of the students have been benefitted by this approach. In the experimental group, the bright students have benefitted equally as well as the less brighter ones. We can logically conclude everyone in this group has benefitted and this approach suits all range of activities.

## **7. Conclusion**

The present study has attempted to work out a strategy for improved language teaching in our colleges today. The effectiveness and the need for using the mother tongue in a controlled way was assumed; an integrated approach incorporating some well defined use of the mother tongue was developed and a demonstration tryout was conducted to test its value. All the things considered, the investigation has clearly shown that a structured and planned use of the mother tongue is positively more conducive to good teaching and learning of English than a doctrinaire avoidance of it.

We learn that a controlled and judicious use of the mother tongue is possible for optimum learning. In a 45 minute class, the maximum use of the mother tongue was 15 minutes. The use of the mother tongue to convey meanings made additional lecture time available for pupils to have more active contacts with English and consequently, better learning took place, as can be seen from the results of the experimental group.

The approach proved simple and effective from both the points of view of teaching and learning. It took less time to plan the lessons for the experimental group than was required for the control group. The reason is it is much easier to drive home the point when comprehension was complete and comprehension is complete when the student is sure of the meaning which is possible only through the mother tongue.

Rapport is quickly established by using the method as the students feel at home and free of inhibitions to actively participate in classroom activities. High degrees of student participation, which is, the soul of this method can only be achieved when the learner feels free to make his effort knowing full well that he/she may commit mistakes but the teacher is always there to help them.

During the course of the experimental teaching, the author finds that the mother tongue helped a lot in summarizing effectively the teaching done after every class. The students could make important notes in the mother tongue which could be elaborated in greater detail according to their needs later on.

This approach is recommended for adoption refinement and appropriate modification, in colleges where indiscriminate use of the mother tongue for teaching English is in practice. The approach is efficient and flexible enough for use in an average classroom and holds a promise as viable ingredient to be used, and may not require the elaborate trappings of the more sophisticated models. It can safely be recommended for reading comprehension, vocabulary expansion and grammar teaching using contrastive analysis.

To test the long term effectiveness of the method, an experiment covering at least one academic session is necessary. The same teacher handling the same class for a considerable period with a rigidly controlled use of mother tongue may yield some concrete results on which positive conclusions can be made an generalizations drawn.

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