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Linguistic Diversity and Classroom Issues - A Case Study of International Classrooms of the International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan

Fauzia Janjua, Ph.D.

Abstract

The problems of foreign students in classroom discourse in English have triggered a question, “how do the learners and the teachers deal with the classroom discourse in a multilingual teaching learning environment in times of linguistic complexity?”

Several African and Chinese students come to the International Islamic university with the linguistic proficiency over their native and national languages, for which they find no use in classroom; they have no knowledge of Urdu, that is the language of their peer group and they may not possess the required level of English language proficiency (in listening, reading and writing) even after the completion of the English language proficiency courses. As a result they miss out on several things happening in the classroom.

This study was planned to investigate the problems of a multilingual classroom and to propose solutions to deal with the issue. This paper has two objectives; the explanatory purpose, to help foreign students and teachers by understanding their difficulties. The second purpose is normative, to point towards better teaching-learning strategies by conceptualizing the linguistic problems associated with the classroom issues of international students. The research employs a case study methodology with the data collected through questionnaires from foreign students and

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their teachers. 110 students from different faculties of the university and 20 teachers from the same faculties constituted the sample of the study. The study found that Pakistani teachers may not always stick to English and may recourse to Urdu to deal with problems of the native Pakistani students, so the foreign learners need to learn Urdu (not a university requirement) in order to fit into Pakistani classrooms and the teachers need to devise strategies to address the linguistic issues of the foreign learners.

Key words: Linguistic Diversity, International Classroom, Learner's difficulties, teaching strategies

Introduction

“Linguistic disability puts me into hot water; my classmates often leave me helpless because I cannot speak what I exactly want to say. I easily get lost in the classroom discourse, just because of missing a word. The worst situation occurs when I hear only sounds in the class without knowing what is going on”. These are the words of one of my foreign students in response to my question, how do you deal with the classroom discourse in a multilingual teaching-learning environment?

Foreign enrollment is an integral part of International universities, and so is of the International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI). A large intake of foreign students in different programmes of IIUI has been recorded since the birth of the university. A large percentage of foreign learners are likely to have difficulty in understanding the course contents, discomfort in class participation and find a heavy work load.

Most of the foreign learners joining IIUI have not even acquired those reading and writing abilities in English language, which Pakistani students have acquired by this level. They are, therefore, supposed to join the English language teaching classrooms where they start from a Basic English course, then intermediate and after the successful completion of the advanced English course they are allowed to join their respective faculties.

Asian versus Asian Problems

There has been a rapid increase in the number of overseas students over the last 5 years. The diversity in the university's population is enhanced by foreign students and also adds value to the overall experience of teaching and learning contrary to the normal teaching learning experiences.

However this diversity and value brings with it a lot of issues and challenges which need to be investigated and addressed. Many studies have been done in the European and Australian universities identifying the linguistic and cultural problems faced by Asian students as they are foreigners there, but little has been done to investigate the difficulties of Asian (mostly Chinese) and Arab students in an Asian country (Pakistan).

This study shows that there are Asian versus Asian problems, because cultural and linguistic

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diversity is not restricted to the east and the west but is subject to linguistic differences. In its very raw form it can even occur within a small community. This research is meant to investigate the linguistic issues in multilingual classrooms and the way they are taken up by the teachers and the foreign learners.

A case study research method was employed and the data was collected through interviews and questionnaires. The data collected was analyzed and the findings draw attention to dimensions of the problems and issues in multilingual, international classrooms, and could have implications for teaching and management of this diversity. The findings may also have relevance to countries with similar cross linguistic student populations. The final sections discussed the implications of the findings and presented the conclusions of the study.

Linguistic Issues of the International Classroom Teachers

English as a language of cross boarder communication has shifted the focus of language teaching from writing competency to oral communication. However, English language teaching pedagogies in South Asian countries have not yet been able to meet the need of an expanded emphasis on oral communications. These pedagogies enable the learners to read documents, books and other texts, they can even write comprehensive essays and letters but usually lack effective communication skills in the English language. Students schooled with such an approach to language teaching tend to use the language they feel comfortable with, usually the language of use, whether it is their native language, the regional or the national language.

Many teachers feel discomfited when it comes to teaching multilingual classrooms, as they are not able to work in a diverse linguistic environment due to their incompetent professional development to deal with these classrooms. Reagan (1997) and Zeichner (2002) talking about the issue of linguistic diversity in classrooms, discuss the need of training teachers in applied linguistics. Snow (2000) outlines the requirement of the knowledge of language and linguistics, language acquisition and development, cultural diversity and sociolinguistics by the teachers teaching international classes with a diverse linguistic environment.

Linguistically Diverse Classrooms and Teaching Strategies

Language is the vehicle for negotiation and discussion. In international classrooms where multiculturalism creates a lot many classroom issues, linguistic differences make the situation more critical for the learners as well as for the teachers. Teachers get nervous when the students speak their native languages which are not understandable for them as it is not humanly possible for a teacher to learn the native language of every student sitting in the class. These drain the teacher's energies and affect his/her teaching. To implement professional expertise in a multilingual classroom, the teachers need to address the increased cognitive and affective demands of the learners in order to cross the linguistic barrier in cross communication during classroom discourses.

Students, when they feel discomfort in interpreting classroom discourses, lose interest and their

motivation level drops. They feel bored, lazy and become non-responsive in classroom discussions. This difficulty in the present situation is due to poor English language competence. It is important to find ways to engage the learners by the use of appropriate language learning activities. Elizabeth (2003) while discussing linguistic diversity and classroom management says, “visual support is essential to help contextualize classroom discourse for English Language Learners”.

These aids, according to her, include chalkboard, realia and all other visual aids. Teachers working in diverse linguistic environments can augment their lessons by the use of visual aids, as these can sometimes serve as a replacement unit of the spoken language thus making the learners able to comprehend the target language easily. Teachers can make extensive use of gestures, expressions, increasing eye contacts and use of sign language.

Peregoy and Boyle (2000) suggest that teachers can ease their foreign learners by assigning a personal buddy who knows their language to facilitate and support him or her inside and outside the classroom. Krashan and Ternel (1983) discussed the importance of lowering the effective filter of the learners, which according to them can be a barrier to language learning. Goffman (2001) lists the ways to learn about the countries from which the foreign learners belong, making it a point that such information can foster student teacher relationship which in turn will make teaching learning environment more conducive.

Method of the Study

The purpose of the study was not to test a hypothesis or any other already formulated theory, so qualitative research seemed appropriate. The research employs a case study methodology with the data collected through questionnaires from foreign students and their teachers. 110 students and 20 teachers constituted the sample of the study.

The aim of the study was to build up a picture from the students’ perspective, where they become consumers rather than producers of the institution and from the teachers’ perspective where they have to act as the producers of the system. Focus group interviews were conducted with day scholars/the classmates of the foreign learners of the study to investigate their rate of participation in class discussions, group activities and during projects as interviews are considered to be an effective research tool to collect qualitative data (Karthwohl, 1997).

Four focus groups were interviewed by the author for approximately 30 minutes each in January 2009. This activity provided the researcher with the basis for the development of questionnaire for the foreign learners. Questionnaire was based on the analysis of the interviews from the peer groups of the foreign students, so the categories formed out of the analysis of the both remained the same. Questionnaire developed was administered to the target population. This tool provided the researcher with an authentication of detailed data regarding the problems faced by foreign learners of IIUI.

Another questionnaire was developed for the teachers teaching multilingual classes on the basis

of the personal experience of the researcher as a university teacher of international classrooms. The teachers engaged in teaching the classes where there is relatively high strength of foreign learners, like in preparatory non credit English language classrooms, were requested to fill this questionnaire which was primarily about the difficulties they face, and the strategies they develop while teaching foreign learners in multilingual classrooms.

The Cohort for This Study

International Students of different faculties and different batches (fall 2004 to spring 2009) with the students enrolled in a variety of disciplines coming from different countries of the world to study in Pakistan formed the cohort of the study. The sample contains male and female international students of IIUI (usually from a non-English speaking background) data were collected from 50 local students (25 females and 25 males) and 110 international students (60 females and 50 males). Thus overall, 85 respondents were females and 75 males. 20 teachers from different faculties formed an informant group of the study to identify linguistic issues of multilingual and multicultural classrooms and the strategies employed to overcome those difficulties.

Data Analysis

Different issues emerged from the data, although some issues were common. But the present study concerns only about the linguistic problems faced by foreign students in IIUI. This paper is based on an analysis of the questionnaires filled by the students and interviews of the faculty members. Analysis revealed that majority of the foreign learners requires a lot of struggle on their part to cope with this particular barrier of language. The students said that all Pakistani teachers make use of Urdu language and even while speaking in English they end in mixing up both languages which perplexes foreign students and makes them uncomfortable. Students feel discomfiture when teachers communicate in Urdu while delivering lecture in the class. It was also analyzed that the use of the Urdu language in a multilingual class creates a lot of ambiguities and despair for the foreign learners who need to adjust linguistically and academically both in an alienated environment where there are more differences than similarities.

Another problem identified by the foreign learners, especially of the first and second semester was the speed of teacher's speech. They said teachers speak fast and give no time to the beginners in English language classes to get adapted to their manner of speaking. They added that they cannot sometimes understand the vocabulary of the teacher which sounds high for them as beginners.

“In order to get high marks, I always struggle to get involved in class, whereas local students dominate most of the time”. (Foreign female, BS 4years programme). This problem was highlighted as a linguistic issue because the local students are used to the speed and the accent of Pakistani teachers so they usually lead classroom discussions leaving the foreign learners behind despite their hard work.

With regard to English language issues, the foreign students in our university are required to qualify in a language proficiency test before joining the faculty but those who qualify in the test also face problems because of the difference between the evaluation criteria and the requirements of the classrooms.

Unfortunately, listening and speaking skills tend to receive much less attention in tertiary contexts (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Dooley, 2006). A classroom requires accuracy in listening skills and is not evaluated formally, which not only hinders the note taking activity but also deprive the learner from participation in the classroom discussions. Some of the students said that their listening is good but they are weak at writing, so they face difficulty in taking notes of the lectures and miss out many important points during this exercise. All students said that this problem can be handled the best by providing them with lecture notes by the teachers prior to the class so that they might get the difficult words checked for the meanings in the dictionary and prepare for listening before coming to class.

An analysis of the questionnaires filled up by the teachers showed that Pakistani teachers may not always stick to English and may recourse to Urdu to deal with problems of native Pakistani students, so the workable solution to deal with the issue may be a need to learn Urdu by the foreign learners, not as if it is a university requirement for admission but to fit in Pakistani classrooms and to develop a social circle that can help them adjust easily and communicate within the new culture where they have planned to spend a longer and important time period of their lives with an ultimate objective of getting knowledge and enhance learning. On the other hand, teachers need to device strategies to address the linguistic issues of foreign learners.

Conclusions

The data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews seems to support the earlier studies describing the problems faced by the international students in the course of obtaining their degree. The primary linguistic concern was related to the English language issue. Other concerns of foreign learners included lack of the knowledge of the languages in contact (Urdu and other Pakistani languages), the fear of speaking out in class, not understanding the spoken language of teachers and class mates, having to work in multinational student groups and lacking the linguistic support from the environment.

The research led to the conclusion that Pakistani teachers may not always stick to English and may take recourse to Urdu to deal with problems of native Pakistani students, so the foreign learners may need to learn Urdu (not a university requirement) in order to make their fit in Pakistani classrooms and the society around. Teachers need to device strategies to address the linguistic issues of foreign learners. We found that students entering the university were determined to learn, but the linguistic challenges obstruct their rate of progress and demands an extensive hard work. Major issues identified as potential difficulties included the unfamiliarity with English and Urdu languages, and the speed of speaking English and the use of Urdu by the teacher. These primary difficulties give rise to the problem of jotting down of lecture notes,

increased workload, time management issues and above all lowering of the CGPA.

Implications of the Study and Suggestions for the Teachers

In conclusion, the need for the teachers and classmates to assist foreign learners in achieving their goals is highlighted. The implications of the present study are to be considered only in terms of enhancing teaching and learning process of the international classrooms, specifically with reference to linguistic difficulties foreign learners of IUI are encountering in a complex multilingual classroom environment.

Following are some of the suggested implications drawn out of the study:

To address the issue of speed of the teachers' speech in the class, the findings of the present study suggests that teachers may encounter learning and teaching difficulties while dealing with international classrooms but these should not be considered as abnormal linguistic and academic situations, rather these should be the expected part of the learning process in international classrooms.

The present study suggests that the problems can be handled strategically in several ways as listed:

Preparation of handouts for foreign learners with the hints of the contents they are to be taught can minimize their listening and note taking problems. The distribution of the handouts should be made possible a day before the delivery of the lesson with the instructions to find out the meanings of difficult words and the relevant details from the recommended books so that when they enter the class they have a cognitive map of the knowledge they are going to be exposed to. Otherwise it will be a futile effort.

The second implication that emerged from the study involves the need to provide opportunities for the foreign learners to communicate freely in order to get them acquainted with their teachers and classroom. Managing at least one extra hour per week for the foreign learners to make them confident and to strengthen the teacher-student bond is recommended. This hour can be a teaching hour, a counseling hour or a motivating hour, to overcome the feeling of alienation in a culturally new environment because the foreign learners not only encounter linguistic problems, but also have other issues, like free communication outside the class. Allowing foreign students to communicate freely and informally will definitely help them overcome the fear of communication barrier and will eventually find a comfortable adjustment in a foreign academic environment.

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