# Psychological Challenges in Maximizing Target Language Use in ESL Classrooms in Sammanthurai

## S.Rifa Mahroof

Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language,

South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka

srifa@seu.ac.lk

*Abstract-* Psychological challenges have a great potential in influencing Target Language (TL) usage in the English as a second language classroom in the rural context. The objective of this study is to examine the psychological challenges encountered in maximizing target language use in the ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai. The study adopted a qualitative approach, drawing data from forty teachers and 50 junior secondary students using semi-structured interviews in the Sammanthurai Education Zone. The findings reveal that language anxiety due to teachers' low efficacy together with their less than adequate English language proficiency is the greatest psychological challenge in using adequate TL for classroom instruction. The anxiety is caused by the lack of confidence and fear of being negatively judged. It was reported that only a few regular learners are motivated to learn English while the majority are demotivated. The negative attitude of teachers on students' ability was found as a threat for learners and such attitude greatly impacts the students' motivation to learn English. The teachers' misconception about students' motivation and their perceived lack of confidence in students' ability was expressed as barriers for teachers to use the TL. It was evident that students' limited English proficiency is linked to negative stereotypes. As a result, the learners express a negative attitude to English language and English Language learning. The study concludes that teachers' perceived incompetence founded on low efficacy together with negative stereotypes of learners inhibits them to communicate in the TL. The use of language, whether it is L1 or TL is greatly influenced by the psychological mindset constructed by the teaching ethos in the study context.
The study urges the need to increase teacher efficacy through an attitudinal shift towards the use of TL. What is essential to become positive agents of change is 'confidence to use the TL'. This attitudinal shift is perceived to have a greater influence on TL use rather than their limited proficiency level.
*Index Terms*- TL use, psychological challenges, ESL, teaching ethos, rural classrooms

## I. INTRODUCTION

Generally, teaching English as a second language is a challenging task for rural teachers, yet the psychological challenges the low proficiency teachers face during target language (TL) use are more challenging. Against this backdrop, learners' first language (L1) and target language use for instruction remain topics of controversy in rural classrooms. The choice of language used for instruction in the classroom is one of the key decisions that have a huge impact on the success of learning (Levine, 2011). Littlewood & Yu, 2011 claim that teachers' language use plays a significant role in determining how students perform in ESL classrooms. A number of studies have discussed the challenges encountered in teaching English. However, studies related to psychological challenges have not been adequately addressed in the rural contexts of Sri Lanka. This study attempts to fill this gap by identifying the psychological conditions that inhibit the ESL teachers from using TL in the ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai. The ESL classes in Sammanthurai have Tamil medium instruction and the ESL teachers have a shared mother tongue. Tamil, the first language (L1) of the learners is invisibly present everywhere within and beyond the school context. In schools, it is the language for administrative purposes, assembly, communication, and public announcements. The socio-political space in the study context attributes more power to the Tamil Language (Mahroof, 2020). The requirement for communicative language teaching to fulfill policy goals is to have interactive classrooms with more student opportunities to use the target language, but given the sociolinguistic realities, Mahroof's study found that the affordance for TL use is constrained in the ESL classrooms in Sammanthurai. Another study conducted by Mahroof (2015) found unrestrictive use of L1 by the teachers in the ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai. Due to the socio-cultural construct and situated practice that is specific to the context

of Sammanthurai, teachers face very particular psychological challenges in using the TL in the ESL classrooms. The challenges faced by the teachers would yield significant pedagogical insights into this learning context. Hence, the objective of this study is to examine the psychological challenges encountered in maximizing TL use in the ESL classrooms of Sammanthurai.

### A. *Methodology*

The study adopted a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm. Data was drawn from the data collected for a larger study conducted in the Sammanthurai Education zone, involving 40 teachers who teach ESL to junior secondary level classes and their students. The larger study obtained data through classroom observation, audio recording, and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. The interview data relevant to this study was gathered from the teachers and 50 students to examine the psychological challenges encountered by teachers in using TL in ESL classrooms. As the interviews with students and some teachers were in Tamil, the response by respondents during interviews given verbatim in the finding section are translations from Tamil to English.

## II. RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

Different theories in second language acquisition and growing trends in English language teaching have changed dramatically and this has affected the code choice in the classroom. (Hall & Cook, 2012). The consequences of these developments have resulted in conflicting views. While there are two opposing views on using L1 in the second language (L2) classroom, there is consensus that teachers need to navigate between L1 and L2. Ellis (1994) points out that the two conflicting views of using L1 in L2 classrooms have been perceived from two different theoretical underpinnings. Interactionism and socioculturism. While the interactionists favour the monolingual policy of using only TL with the total exclusion of L1, the proponents of socioculturism claim for the inclusion of L1. The proponents of the monolingual assumption favour the TL only policy and they assert that the learners should have maximum exposure to the TL. Their assumptions are based on the stance that the learners need to use the TL during their learning process to negotiate meaning and make attempt to comprehend all that is heard (Ellis, 2005). The researchers have identified TL input as the fundamental concept that underlies all SLA theories (Ceo-Difrancesco, 2013). However, the monolingual assumption stance has been strongly questioned by researchers Stern (1992), Cook. G (2010) as well as Hall and Cook (2012).

### *Advantages of maximized TL use in Sammanthurai*

With the rise in the popularity of communicative language teaching, there was a decline in the practices of the Grammar-Translation method. Nevertheless, traces of this method are still seen when teachers overuse L1 for instruction. When teachers rely heavily on L1, students are deprived of target language affordances and this becomes a missed opportunity for students whose exposure to the TL is limited both in the classroom and beyond. For this reason, teachers should maximize their TL usage. Higgs (1982, as cited in Polio & Duff, 1994) states that 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 it available through the natural unconstrained use of it in the classroom. The teacher as an expert need to provide a rich TL environment to achieve the fullest competence in TL (Nilsson, 2013). Supporting this view, Ellis (2005) refers to the TL provided by the teacher as a 'valuable input' and asserts that overuse of L1 in the ESL classroom does not give students the opportunity to interact in the TL.

### *TL Exclusivity Vs. L1 Inclusivity*

There is an established body of L2 research on the cognitivist view of learning that creates the need for learners to be exposed to comprehensible input for language development (Krashen, 1982; Cook, 2001). While some researchers propose to use TL exclusively during classroom instruction to increase the comprehensible input for communication and student output, several studies have also confirmed learners' L1 as a cognitive tool (Macaro, 2000; Hall & Cook, 2012; Makulloluwa, 2013). However, emphasis is laid on the need for high quality and quantity of L2 use in the classroom (Ellis, 2005). Turnbull (2001) believes that the maximized use of the TL during instruction can take off the possibilities of the heavy reliance on the L1. In using the TL, the ESL teachers encounter various forms of challenges, yet the language anxiety (Horwitz et al. 1986) faced by the language teachers is unique and may exist in different forms in different contexts. Kim's (2008) study ascribed increased language anxiety levels of Korean teachers when using TL in English medium classes. The monolingual policy mandating only TL in Korea has been viewed as a 'psychological barrier' (p.53) for low proficiency teachers while the language proficient teachers with more teaching experience have reported less anxiety.

### *Bilingual Approaches: TL and L1 usage*

With the emergence of bilingualism and monolingualism, there arose a need to recognize learners' bilingual repertoires (L1 and TL), their identities as well as pedagogies (Walker, 2018). Canagarajah (2013) stresses the importance of pedagogies that help to leverage the ability to shuttle between the learners' L1 and TL, which he claims has offered new concepts in translingual practices (Garcia & Wei, 2014). The proponents of translingual practices reject the reliance on the TL exclusivity stance and develop L1 inclusive approaches that strike a balance between learners' L1 and the TL use in the ESL classroom. Thompson & Harrison (2014) report that researchers have predominantly focused on the teachers' use or learners' use of language in the classroom but have failed to connect the two linguistic behaviours within the classrooms to understand fully how the language choice can influence the dynamics of language learning in the classroom. L2 researchers have long acknowledged the positive influence of the use of TL in the classroom to promote interaction

between the teachers and learners because of the limited exposure to L2 beyond the classroom setting (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). According to Stern (1992), learners' L1 use in the ESL classrooms acts as a natural reference system and a pathfinder to learn the target language. In light of an increasingly widespread belief in bilingualism, judicious integration of the L1 within the framework of L2 is promoted to encourage teachers to adopt a bilingual pedagogy (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009). Supporting this claim, Mahroof's (2020) study asserts that TL should be made the regular mode of communication within the framework of bilingual pedagogy in Sammanthurai.

### *Psychological Factors*

Second language researchers have shown that teaching is closely associated with psychological factors (Krashen, 1981; Oxford,1999). Juhana (2012) states that variables such as fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, and motivation act as speech barriers. The author added that teachers' attitudes have a direct effect on students' affective factors such as motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety level. According to Nunan (1999), motivation is an important psychological factor that has influence on students' reluctance to speak in English. In a similar vein, Freeman (2008) opines that motivation is a building block of teacher efficacy that influences the performance of teachers and learners. Freeman's study has found that teacher efficacy has a great impact on student achievement. As defined by Freeman, teacher efficacy is the expectation that one possesses the talent and abilities to bring about student learning. Moreover, Lee (2002, as cited in Freeman, 2008) states that teacher beliefs and practices have a great influence on students' success. Bandura (1977, as cited in Freeman, 2008) states that teacher efficacy level reveals teacher behavior such as self-organization, proactiveness, self-regulation, self-reflection, goal selection, the anticipation of outcomes, and stress management.

   Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) claim that anxiety caused during language learning situations acts as a psychological barrier, which makes learning difficult for language learners, especially in a classroom setting. Ilyas et al. (2021) state that the anxiety limited to language acquisition situations is categorized as a specific anxiety reaction. As defined by Ariyanti (2016) anxiety is a 'natural psychological feature containing the emotion of fear that is sometimes uncontrollable' (p. 81). Moreover, Horwitz et al. (1986) outlined a theoretical framework to define foreign language anxiety (FLA) and describe its specific effects on foreign language learning. The authors claim that FLA is related to performance in the academic and social context and they identified three performance anxieties such as communication apprehension; test anxieties, and fear of negative evaluation. Foreign Language anxiety related to Language teaching is communication apprehension which is a type of shyness characterized by fear of communicating in a language that they lack proficiency in. This causes difficulty for them to use the TL in classrooms or with others as they are conscious of being monitored by others. This gives them a sense of inhibition to speak in the TL. The second type of performance anxiety is test anxiety (Gordon & Sarason, 1955 as cited in Horwitz et al. 1986), which refers to anxiety stemming from the fear of failure. The third type is fear of negative evaluation, "defined as 'apprehension about others' … evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Watson & Friend, 1969 as cited in Horwitz et al.,1986). As stated by the authors, FLA is not limited to the combination of the three types of fear evoking situations in using the foreign language, it is rather a conception of 'FLA as a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning classrooms' (p. 128) that is unique to each context.

<p align="center">III.  FINDINGS</p>

#### A.   *Limited English language proficiency*

Low English Language proficiency of students was reported as one of the major challenges by the majority.
"*with regard to English , they are very weak...*". (T 31)
"*You know, no madam, they can't do English*" (T 1)
"*We teach them with difficulty, but they are weak*" (T 22)

Less than adequate language proficiency and lack of fluency were noted as challenges for many. Teachers' inability to hold on to a conversation in English was observed as a serious concern.

A graduate teacher reported that "*actually speaking, I can't speak English continuously, so I like to use more English to improve my knowledge. At first, I used English but later, when students and teachers told me that English is taught in Tamil, I use Tamil in class, still, I use English to give instructions. We need training on teaching methods*" (T 27)

This view of a teacher reveals the perceived lack of language proficiency of the teacher who feels that the use of TL in the class will help to improve her fluency in language and help her to sustain TL use when teaching in the class. However, the cultural norm constructed by the hierarchy restricts her. The need for training to create awareness of teaching methodology was also emphasized.

The extracts below show the inhibition the teachers and learners have in speaking English They have the fear of whether they will be negatively evaluated by others.

"*I feel scared when I speak English*" (S 24)
"*When I speak English, I don't feel comfortable*" (T19)
"*My friends will laugh at me when I speak English*" (S 16)
"*I don't know whether I was speaking correctly*" (S 3)
"*I like to teach in English, but it is difficult for me and in an English class, we have to know English well*" (T 29)

Using the TL was greatly influenced by anxiety caused by the lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes. The anxiety caused by these challenges was reported by many in the study context.

A committed teacher, who took much effort to use the TL during classroom observation, though, did not display personal fluency, reported:

"*I use more L1 when I feel learners are losing attention in the lesson*" (T 27)

It was also reported by this teacher that there is a form of inhibition within her, whether she was speaking English correctly. This view of the teacher though not revealed by others was there in many when teaching. They were seen to have a low esteem of themselves and a sense of withdrawal, mostly seen as reluctant to communicate. This type of anxiety as defined by Horwitz et al. (1986) is communication apprehension. This also causes "apprehension of others' evaluation" which shows that they would be negatively evaluated when they make errors in TL amidst the learners. This negative judgment can pose a threat to their role as an expert. Nevertheless, some teachers strategically switch their code to L1 or use L1 to teach the English content in the pupil's text in order to overcome this situation (Mahroof, 2020). Many teachers' anxiety was seen in their artificiality in articulating the TL who seem to have a quick pace with deviated intonation patterns and pauses.

B. *The negative attitude of students in teachers using the TL*

The views of teachers given below show the perceived difficulty of the subject for the learners and the negative attitude they have towards learning English. They also highlight how some teachers perceive students' frustration as challenges, restricting them to use the TL. Students' negative attitude from teachers' point of view was expressed as:
*" In an average class of thirty, there will be only four-five who can read well, ten will be average, and in my view, the rest of them have a bitter feeling towards English*". (T 4)

As reported by another teacher:
"*the biggest challenge is students' resistance to using the TL. When students, especially boys want us to use L1, we 're forced to do so. Because we are teachers, we must look into students' needs, so we have to speak in Tamil as students lose attention in the lesson*" (T 17)

C. *Lack of learners' motivation*

There were mixed perceptions of learners' belief in their own English ability. Only a very few do not perceive English as a difficult subject whilst the majority perceive it as difficult. Of the participants who reported English as difficult, there were some who said that they have an interest in learning English. This can be seen in the students' views given below.
"*English is difficult…. but I like to learn*" (S3 )
Another student reported:
"*I like English…… I try….it is hard*" (S8)
This contradicts the opinion held by most of the teachers who feel that learners lack the interest to learn English. To give an example:
"*Students here are not interested in English…. they are weak*" ( T 17)
This contradictory view of the teachers exists because the teachers equate less proficiency in English with a lack of motivation.
Teaching a language that is not the mother tongue of the learners is also a challenge. This was revealed from a student:
 "*English is not our mother tongue…. I don't think that we can speak nicely*" (S 25)
The extract above shows that it is not possible to achieve fluency in a language that is alien to them.

Lack of contact with the L2 was expressed by both teachers and students. Some examples are highlighted below:
"*Though we are teachers of English, we don't use it because we don't get chance …… it is a sorry state that we lack contact with people who use English*" (T 7)

"*Learners here are immersed in a Tamil environment .... they see only the academic value, just study it as a subject to pass the exam*" (T 2)
"*I don't like learning English because it is difficult……. only if I have to go abroad, I will need English…. My father is a mason, so I need only a certificate to follow mason course at Tech*" (S 41)

The monolingual family background of students as well as the homogenous linguistic nature prevalent in their mainstream activities does not create the need or motivation for the majority to learn English. However, as reported by a teacher below, the homogenous linguistic environment enables them to maintain a good rapport between students and teachers.
"*Though I'm able to speak English, I use Tamil as this gives me a feeling of closeness to students. When I use English, learners get distanced and detached from the lesson*". (T 2)

The few participants who have a higher perception of learning English than the general trend placed high regard for English. The students of schools in the town locality are more motivated to learn English than the students from the remote area schools. However, this cannot be accepted as the general trend as students with an educational advantage in the family are more motivated than the others, irrespective of the locality of the school. More importantly, the more proficient students (clever students as expressed by teachers) were seen to be more motivated due to their ability to perform well in all subjects. Students' motivation also depended on the students' nature of being sociable. When the students are more sociable and outspoken, they demonstrate an eagerness or desire to learn English. It was also reported that girls are more motivated than boys.

*D. Teachers' lack of confidence in students' ability*

This quote of an experienced teacher teaching at a remote area school shows the motivation the teacher has in using the TL:

"*For students, English is difficult, and they feel that they can survive without English, so to get them to work, we have to use more Tamil*". (T 31).

Some teachers, however, while accepting that they favour TL use, reported that it is impossible. As said by one teacher:
 "*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*". (T 14)

The negative attitude of teachers on students' ability was found as a threat for learners and this greatly undermines the students' interest, which in turn could influence their motivation. The perceived lack of confidence of teachers in students' ability was the greatest barrier for teachers to use the TL. This convinces some teachers to use L1 or use translation as the strategy to compensate learners' lack of comprehension and accommodate their low language proficiency.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The language anxiety due to teachers' low efficacy and less than adequate English language proficiency is the greatest psychological challenge in using adequate TL for classroom instruction. The psychological factors that exist in the context are influenced by the teachers' and learners' psychological profiles, which in turn shape and govern the teaching practice in the ESL classrooms in Sammanthurai. The teachers' perceived incompetence founded on low efficacy together with negative stereotypes of learners inhibits the teachers to communicate in the TL. The teachers' misconception about students' motivation also contributes to determining a divide among the students. The use of language, whether it is L1 or L2 is greatly influenced by the psychological mindset constructed by the teaching ethos in the study context. This study urges the need to increase teacher efficacy through an attitudinal shift towards the use of TL. What is essential to become positive agents of change is 'confidence to use the TL' and an 'I can attitude'. This attitudinal shift is perceived to have a greater influence on TL use rather than their limited proficiency level.

## REFERENCES

Ariyanti. 2016. Psychological Factors Affecting EFL Students' Speaking Performance. Journal of ASIAN TEFL Vol. 1, No. 1, p.77-88.

Butzkamm, W., Caldwell, J.A.W., 2009. The Bilingual Reform: a Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching. Tübingen: Narr

Canagarajah, A. S. (2013). Translingual practice. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Ceo-DiFrancesco , D. (2013). Instructor target language use in today's world language classrooms. 2013 Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1-21.

Cook, G. (2010). Translation in language teaching: An argument for reassessment. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. Canadian Modern Language Review. Canadian Modern Language Review, 57(3), 402-423.

Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. System, 33(2), 209-224.

Freeman, C, Teacher Efficacy and its Impact on Student Achievement (2008). All Regis University Theses retrieved from https://epublications.regis.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=theses

García O., Wei L. (2014) Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education. Palgrave Macmillan, London

Hall, G., & Cook, G. (2012). Own-language use in language teaching and learning. Language Teaching, 45(3), 271-308.

Horwitz, Elaine K., Michael B. Horwitz, & Joann Cope. 1986. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 70, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 125- 132.

Ilyas, M, Putri, M, E, Nurani, I. (2021). Psychological Problems Encountered by EFL Students in Speaking Class at Universitas Islam. J-SHMIC: Journal of English for Academic, 8(2) retrieved from https://journal.uir.ac.id/index.php/jshmic/article/view/7484

Juhana (2012). Psychological Factors That Hinder Students from Speaking in English Class (A Case Study in a Senior High School in South Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia). Journal of Education and Practice 3(12).

Kim, S. (2008). Five years of teaching English through English: Responses from teachers and prospects for learners. English Teaching, 63(1), 51-70

Kim, S. (2008). Five years of teaching English through English: Responses from teachers and prospects for learners. English Teaching, 63(1), 51-70

Kim, S. (2008). Five years of teaching English through English: Responses from teachers and prospects for learners. English Teaching, 63(1), 51-70.

Levine, G. (2011). Code choice in the language classroom. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Littlewood, W., & Yu, B. (2011). First language and target language in the foreign language classroom. Language Teaching, 44(1), 64-77.

Macaro, E. (2000). Issues in target language teaching. In K. Field (Ed.), Issues in modern foreign language teaching (pp. 171-189). London: Routledge.

Mahroof, S. R. (2015). Using learners' mother tongue in teaching English as a second language: A study conducted in Ampara district. In 5th International Symposium-2015 South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka: South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

Mahroof, S, R. (2020). Target Language Affordances in the English as a Second Language classroom in Sri Lanka: A case study of the Samanthurai Zone [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Colombo.

Makulloluwa, E. (2013). Code switching by teachers in the second language classroom. International Journal of Arts & Sciences, 6(3), 581-595.

Marungudzi, T. (2014). Deploying a Sense of Plausibility in Language Choice: The Role of English-Shona Code Switching in Zimbabwean Classrooms. International Journal of English and Education, 3(2), 462-477.

Nilsson, M. (2013). Target Language in the Primary Classroom: Teachers' beliefs and practices (Master's thesis, Stockholm University, Sweden). Retrieved from http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A651103&dswid=-8800

Nunan, D. (1999). Second Language Teaching & Learning. USA. Heinle&Heinle Publisher.

Oxford, R. (1999). Anxiety and the language learner: New insights. In J. Arnold (Ed.), Affect in language learning (pp. 58-67). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Polio, C. G., & Duff, P. A. (1994). Teachers' language use in university foreign language classrooms: A qualitative analysis of English and target language alternation. The Modern Language Journal, 78(3), 313-326.

Stern, H. H. (1992). Issues and options in language teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, G. L., & Harrison, K. (2014). Language use in the foreign language classroom. Foreign Language Annals, 47, 321-337.

Turnbull, M. (2001). There is a role for the L1 in second and foreign language teaching, but?. The Canadian Modern Language Review, 57(4), 531- 540.

Walker, U. (2017). Community building and translingual practice in an international eGroups telecollaboration. ALSIC, 20(2). doi: 10.4000/alsic.3161

## AUTHORS

**First Author**- Mahroof, S. R., PhD, MA in Linguistics, BA. Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, South Eastern University

of Sri Lanka