

Empowering Rural Learners through the Bilingual Method in College English Classrooms

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Abstract: The dominance of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in global higher education poses substantial challenges to college students in India, especially those from rural and semi-urban areas who typically transition from vernacular-medium secondary education. These learners frequently suffer from English language deficiency, which leads to reduced comprehension of academic subjects, anxiety regarding communication, and a lack of confidence. The Bilingual Method (BM), first developed by C.J. Dodson in 1967, addresses these issues by utilizing the learner's mother tongue (L1) as a systemic aid in acquiring the target language (L2). The judicious and moderate use of L1 facilitates understanding of complex concepts, significantly reduces cognitive load on working memory, and fosters affective growth such as confidence and self-reliance. Drawing upon research evidence, particularly from contexts involving native speakers with L2 deficiency in science and higher education, this research essay investigates how the strategic application of the Bilingual Method in college English classrooms serves as a critical pedagogical tool to empower rural Indian learners by promoting accuracy, fluency, and clarity in communication, thereby mitigating the barriers imposed by strict English-only instruction.

Keywords: *Bilingual Method, Rural Learners, College English Classrooms, Mother Tongue (L1), Target Language (L2), Cognitive Load, English Medium Instruction (EMI), Confidence.*

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Introduction

English is universally recognized as the lingua franca for international communication, trade, and industry in the scientific and technological landscape of the contemporary world. In India, English holds a crucial position as a common communication language, a link language, and a necessary "window to the world". Consequently, proficiency in English is often viewed as a "passport for a better prospect" in the employability arena.

However, the pursuit of higher education, often delivered through English Medium Instruction (EMI) policies in non-English speaking regions, presents a severe pedagogical dilemma. Many students entering college, particularly those emerging from rural and semi-urban educational settings where instruction primarily occurred in the vernacular (L1), are afflicted by insufficient English proficiency. These students frequently lack the confidence to use English as a tool for communication, instead treating it primarily as a subject to be passed in examinations. This pervasive deficiency can lead to the "silencing" of learners in the classroom, inhibiting their development and preventing them from expressing valuable thoughts or opinions due to a fear of making grammatical errors or general lack of English knowledge. The transition to advanced scientific and academic content taught exclusively in English exacerbates this language barrier, leading many students to struggle significantly, even after completing preparatory language programs.

The Bilingual Method (BM) is proposed as a vital solution to bridge this educational gap. Developed by Prof. C.J. Dodson in

Wales in 1967, BM fundamentally allows the strategic utilization of the mother tongue (L1) to achieve proficiency in the second language (L2), English. The method champions the idea that the first language is the child's basic asset. This approach contrasts sharply with purely monolingual methods that often deem the use of L1 "undesirable". This essay explores the mechanisms through which the Bilingual Method, when implemented effectively and judiciously in college English classrooms, can empower rural learners by fostering essential linguistic qualities—accuracy, clarity, and flexibility—and building the psychological foundation necessary for academic success.

Foundational Principles and Pedagogical Framework of the Bilingual Method

The Bilingual Method (BM) is rooted in the principle of leveraging existing linguistic and conceptual structures in the learner's mind. The method relies on the use of L1 as an aid for learning L2, permitting "judicious freedom" in its application. BM streamlines the learning process by directly utilizing the "real life situations already created in the learner by the mother tongue" rather than expending effort to create artificial situations in L2 to explain meanings.

The methodology focuses on the teacher using L1 primarily to explain the meaning of new words, phrases, idioms, grammatical items, and sentences. This targeted use of the mother tongue saves significant instructional time and energy, which can then be rigorously allocated to practice. This systematic practice,

particularly in sentence formation and sentence patterns, is a key characteristic of BM and distinguishes it from the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), where L1 translation is pervasive and often word-to-word. The fundamental structure of language teaching in BM follows the traditional three stages: presentation, practice, and production (the three P's).

The Bilingual Method's suitability for Indian contexts, where college students often transition from L1-medium instruction, is pronounced because it makes use of linguistic habits already formed during the learning of the mother tongue. Where students are unfamiliar with English, the first language serves as the effective medium of teaching English, promoting both the quantitative and qualitative acquisition of language skills.

Cognitive and Academic Benefits: Addressing L2 Deficiency

A critical function of BM is its capacity to mitigate the significant cognitive challenges faced by students who lack sufficient L2 proficiency when engaging with complex academic content. In a study comparing monolingual (English-only) and bilingual (Arabic and English) instruction among university students in a science course, the bilingual approach resulted in a statistically significant higher gain in knowledge acquisition.

This effectiveness is grounded in the Cognitive Load Theory (CLT). According to CLT, a learner's working memory is constrained, capable of retaining and processing only a limited amount of information at a given time. When highly specific scientific or academic concepts are taught exclusively in L2, the dual burden of processing the unfamiliar language and the complex content can overload the working memory. Using the native language (L1) alongside English helps reduce this cognitive burden, allowing the student's working memory to dedicate more resources to understanding and retaining the taught material, thereby enhancing comprehension and learning efficiency.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework supporting BM includes Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency Hypothesis (CUP), which suggests that proficiency in L1 positively transfers to L2, especially relating to cognitively demanding academic language proficiency (CALP). For students studying academic subjects like science without adequate CALP skills, understanding scientific knowledge is negatively affected when only English is used. The strategic use of L1 to explain concepts and translate difficult terms drives conceptual understanding in the target language. Studies show that when L1 is used to clarify grammar, vocabulary, and concepts, students learn L2 quickly and accurately.

Affective Empowerment and Classroom Dynamics

For college students, especially those from rural backgrounds who possess a pervasive fear of making mistakes in English, the Bilingual Method provides crucial affective empowerment. The approach offers a sense of security and creates an amicable environment for learning, thereby helping to motivate students.

Research in college settings indicates that the use of bilingual instruction leads to higher levels of student engagement and participation compared to monolingual instruction. When students lack confidence or are struggling to understand concepts presented only in English, they are prone to distraction, look confused, and engage in side talks outside the classroom content. However, when instructors utilized L1 (Arabic in the analogous

study) to explain concepts or translate terms, students reported significantly reduced distractions and improved understanding. Interviews with students confirmed that a bilingual classroom established a good rapport with the teacher, which in turn improved their confidence level in learning English. This finding reinforces the view that L1 serves as a tool to gain confidence and enhance learning effectiveness among English language learners.

The method also benefits the relationship between the instructor and the student. When the teacher utilizes the local language, it instills a "concrete thought in the minds of the Students that the Teacher is one among them," fostering discipline and deserved respect. Mutual empathy, where both the teacher and student recognize each other's efforts, makes the learning process enjoyable.

Implementation Challenges, Teacher Competence, and Mitigation

While highly effective, the Bilingual Method requires careful management to prevent degeneration into less effective models, like rote translation seen in the Grammar Translation Method (GTM).

A significant challenge is the potential for student over-reliance on the L1. This dependency can lead to students constantly "filtering" concepts through their mother tongue, hindering the direct development of L2 fluency. Furthermore, linguistic differences can cause "confusion and errors and blunders in the long run," as no two languages are perfectly alike.

Successful implementation heavily depends on teacher proficiency and training. The teacher must be proficient (bilingual) in both the Native Language (L1) and the Target Language (L2) to provide correct interpretations and effective scaffolding. Teachers must ensure the L1 remains strictly an aid to achieve L2 proficiency, and that its usage is "judicious," "moderate," and "channelized". This strategic control is crucial to maximizing the benefits of the saved time—time which should be dedicated to training students in all essential language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Although some perspectives suggest BM is mainly useful at lower stages, this is contrasted by extensive research supporting its application at the tertiary level, particularly when students suffer from L2 deficiency in specialized content areas.

The findings emphasize that policy changes in universities relying on EMI are necessary to allow the use of the L1 alongside English instruction, especially for first and second-year undergraduates who are still acquiring English. Studies in Saudi Arabia demonstrated that bilingual faculty were significantly more likely to favor the bilingual approach (65%) because it improved student understanding and addressed their lack of English proficiency (31% and 21% of responses, respectively). Conversely, monolingual instructors often opposed it, fearing it would make students deficient in English and citing conflicts with institutional policy (37% and 19% of responses, respectively). This highlights that administrative policies and faculty preferences must align with the demonstrated needs of the students from vernacular backgrounds.

Conclusion

The Bilingual Method stands out as a highly effective and necessary pedagogical strategy for empowering rural learners in college English classrooms, especially within the Indian

educational landscape. These students, frequently hampered by L2 deficiency and anxiety upon entering higher education, require instructional methods that validate and utilize their existing linguistic strengths.

BM achieves empowerment by offering simultaneous cognitive and affective advantages. Cognitively, it aligns with modern learning theories by significantly reducing the cognitive load associated with learning complex concepts in an unfamiliar language, directly enhancing comprehension and knowledge acquisition. Affectively, the judicious use of L1 reduces the fear associated with English, builds student confidence, and fosters a collaborative, engaging learning environment, thereby preventing learner silencing.

For the Bilingual Method to realize its full potential, teachers must be trained as proficient bilingual practitioners capable of moderating L1 usage so that it remains a supportive aid rather than becoming an obstacle or a source of over-reliance. By adopting the strategic, targeted approach of the Bilingual Method, educational institutions can provide the necessary linguistic scaffolding, ensuring that rural learners successfully transition to, and thrive in, the college environment, ultimately granting them their desired "passport for a better prospect".

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