

**INSTINCT OR STRATEGY?
USE OF MOTHER TONGUE BY UNIVERSITY ESL TEACHERS**

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The Abstract

The debate regarding the use of students' mother tongue in the second language classroom has long been a controversial issue and has generated a multitude of research in different linguistic contexts. One school of thought promotes target language exclusivity in the classroom while the other believes students' first language does have a part to play in the second language acquisition process.

This study investigates the phenomenon of codeswitching to learners' mother tongue by teachers in the second year English proficiency course classrooms in the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. The study seeks to find answers to three research questions: why do teachers code switch to students' mother tongue in the classroom, is there a difference between the amounts of mother tongue used in lower and higher proficiency classes and do teachers' perceive mother tongue as a tool that facilitate target language acquisition.

The study revealed that student's mother tongue is used for pedagogical, administrative and interactional purposes in the English classroom. Teachers teaching in lower proficiency levels used the mother tongue in significant quantities as a strategy to accommodate students' low language proficiency and also as a strategy to create an enjoyable classroom environment whereas in higher proficiency levels it was used mostly for the latter purpose. However, in general, the majority of the respondents demonstrated a favourable disposition towards the use of mother tongue in the classroom since they believed it facilitates language acquisition by making the input more comprehensible and also by lowering the students' affective filter making them more receptive to the input they receive.

In the light of the findings of the study, it is posited that the students' mother tongue might be a potential strategy that would enhance target language acquisition. Thus, the study recommends that teachers be educated on the potency of mother tongue in the classroom and how it should be utilized at different proficiency levels to maximize language acquisition.