

An Investigation on the Constraints Encountered by Lower Secondary Learners with Reference to the Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka

DGK Amunugama, EMAN Ekanayake, NN Welgama, NP Wickramage and
DU Wickramasinghe#

Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

#dilumi.u14@gmail.com

Abstract— The Bilingual Education Policy was implemented in Sri Lanka in 2001 through Amity School Programmes in which English is the medium of instruction in selected subjects from grade 6 to grade 11. This study aims to investigate the constraints encountered by lower secondary learners with reference to the Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka. The secondary objective of the study is to identify the attitudes and perceptions of Sri Lankan lower secondary learners towards the Bilingual Education Programme in Sri Lanka. Thus, a group of fifty grade eight students of two local schools were selected as the sample of the study based on the purposive sampling method. The data collection was done by integrating a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted using a mixed approach where the quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel while the qualitative data were analysed using content analysis. The analysed data of the study elucidate three significant constraints encountered by the learners such as primary education being conducted in the learners' first language, extensive subject contents and terminologies as well as the unsatisfactory exam results and teaching methods. The majority of the selected sample appeared to possess positive attitudes and perceptions towards the Bilingual Education Programme in Sri Lanka.

Keywords— *bilingual education policy in Sri Lanka, constraints, lower secondary learners*

I. INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism can be defined as the expertise in two languages, where both languages are used in regular discourse. According to Kokturk et al. (2016) "Bilingualism is basically defined as having been brought up with two languages and being

more or less equally competent in using both languages" (p. 72). Madawattegedera (2015) states that "the concept of learning subject matter in a language that is not one's own in order to learn both the subject and another language can be traced back many centuries" (p. 40). Thus, according to Mahawattha (2012) Bilingual Education is an educational program, which uses any two languages in school, by teachers / students, or both, for a variety of social and pedagogical purposes. In 2001, Sri Lanka implemented the Developmental Bilingual Program through Amity school programs. Hence, according to the proposals of the National Education Commission (2003),

"Bilingualism should be promoted by using English as the medium of instruction in selected subjects such as Mathematics, Science and Technology including Computer Literacy, Social Sciences in secondary grades, year by year, from Grade 6, depending on the availability of teachers. It is expected that students will reach acceptable level of proficiency in English at the end of junior secondary education without jettisoning Sinhala and Tamil which will continue to be the medium of instruction in selected subjects" (Bilingual Education, Teacher Development Manual, 2007).

Therefore, the aforementioned Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka signifies that English is the medium of instruction in selected subjects from grade 6 to grade 11 and several other subjects must be taught in the learner's native language to retain its value while adhering to the standards of a language policy. By introducing this initiative, it was presumed that all learners would have an analogous access to linguistic capital while expanding equality. Yet, many researchers including Madawattegedera (2015) state that the unresolved tensions regarding the Bilingual

Education Policy in Sri Lanka with reference to the demand and clamour for English induce far-reaching consequences in terms of socio-economic and pedagogical contingencies. As such, this study primarily investigates the constraints encountered by the lower secondary learners with reference to the Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the secondary objective of this study is to identify the attitudes and perceptions of Sri Lankan lower secondary learners towards the Bilingual Education Program in Sri Lanka. The scope of this study addresses the constraints confronted only by the lower secondary learners who represent two local schools of a selected Educational Zone. Moreover, the fact that no researcher has investigated the constraints encountered by lower secondary learners concerning the Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka has been identified as the research gap of the study. Hence, this research gap led researchers to conduct a profound analysis of the asserted domain.

The overall design of the study took a qualitative and a quantitative data analysis, using a formal, objective, and systematic process where the gathered data was utilized to test the following research questions:

- What are the Constraints encountered by Lower Secondary Learners with reference to the Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka?
- What are the attitudes and perceptions of Sri Lankan Lower Secondary Learners towards the Bilingual Education Program in Sri Lanka?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

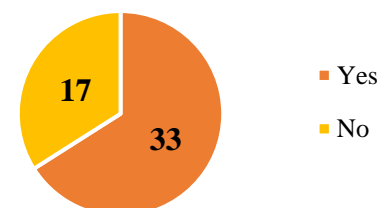
“Bilingual education reform has affirmative consequences for the educational and linguistic achievement of student” (Ozfidan & Aydin, 2017). Ensuating the aforementioned citation, the evidence can be found that L2 students have language difficulties throughout their learning process, and as a consequence, they may have lower academic performance (Lin & Lee, 2019). Sert (2008) explains that students may find difficulties in comprehending subject content clearly, which will eventually become a barrier for them to develop their critical thinking abilities. Lo & Lo (2014)

conducted a study using bilingual learners in Hong Kong and found that when compared with other countries, these learners’ failure of academic achievements was caused mainly due to their insufficient training and lack of teachers’ pedagogical skills. Calderón and Morilla (2014) explain that the affective factors such as attitude, motivation and anxiety can influence learners when studying in a second/foreign language. The motives of a learner to select bilingual education can also factor in the difficulties encountered by them. Huang (2013) expounds that “in parents’ opinion, they like their children to learn more than one language, as the children grow up with two languages, which is having more opportunities for career and maintain first language” (p. 1). However, in contrast to these, Yan and Xu (2015) detail that learners who underwent English Medium education have achieved higher scores in the content learnings and English proficiency tests. “It is now widely accepted that bilingual education can be a great advantage for the child, because the advantages outnumber the possible disadvantages” (Köktürk et al., 2016, p. 82). Köktürk et al. (2016) further clarify that “bilingual education causes misery or frustration” to the learner. Henceforth, it is a crucial aspect to investigate the constraints encountered by the lower secondary bilingual learners of Sri Lanka and their attitudes towards the Bilingual Education Policy.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Population and Sampling

The participants of the study were Grade eight students who represent two local schools of a selected Educational Zone. Fifty students were selected as the sample of the study according to the purposive sampling method. The sample was determined on the basis of their school, medium of instruction. Therefore, five were respectively sample thirteen.



can be placed between University Test of English Language (UTEL) benchmark level 3 and 4. The aforementioned benchmark levels of the sample were determined by analyzing their grade seven English language end term test results.

B. Data Collection Tools

The study was primarily composed of two data collection tools including a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Hence, the questionnaire was designed with the incorporation of five demographic questions, six multiple choice questions, six dichotomous questions and two opinion-based questions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by directing five opinion-based questions to the selected sample. The foremost objective of distributing a questionnaire and conducting semi-structured interviews for the selected sample of students is to gather the primary data for the study.

C. Data Collection Process

Firstly, the questionnaire was distributed personally to the selected sample of students where fifteen minutes had been allotted to fill the questionnaire. Subsequently, after collecting the required data from the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ten students who were selected according to the random sampling method. Ten minutes were allocated for each of the interview which was conducted by directing five opinion-based questions to the selected sample.

D. Data Analysis Procedure

The mixed approach has been used to analyze the data where the quantitative data analysis of the study was implemented by using Microsoft Excel. Thus, the collected data is represented using pie charts and a bar graph in order to analyze the findings of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. Consequently, qualitative data analysis approach was executed by using content analysis to analyze the data which was gathered through semi-structured interviews.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Questionnaire and the Semi-structured Interviews.

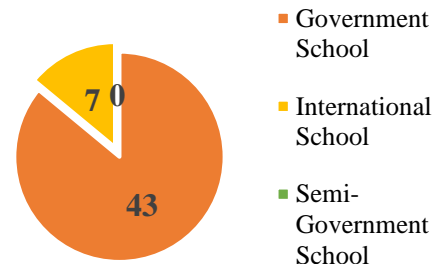


Figure 1. Question 06: I attended a ___ school from grade 1-5.

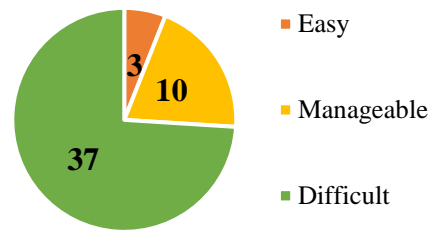


Figure 2. Question 08: How do you feel about learning the core subjects such as Mathematics, Sciences, Computer literacy (Information and Communication Technology (ICT)) and Social Sciences (Geography and Citizenship Education) in English?

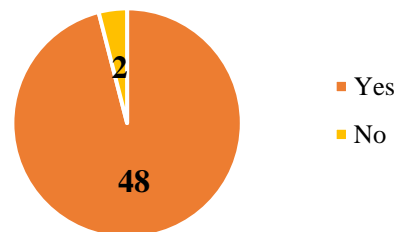


Figure 3. Question 16: Do you think that you have to put an extra effort in learning those subjects in English medium?

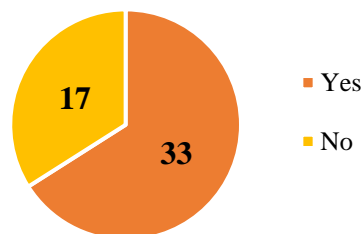


Figure 4. Question 17: Do you want other subjects such as Religion and History to be taught in English medium?

V. DISCUSSION

According to the statistical analysis of the findings of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews, it is apparent that majority of female students were more concerned about their studies in English medium than the male students. Crucially, the aforementioned gender disparity in the context of bilingual education may occur as a consequence of childhood training and experience, ability, motivation, parental resistance and the quality of secondary education. The gathered data from the semi-structured interviews indicate that the students who attended International schools for their primary education prefer the subjects such as, History and Religion; that are currently taught in their mother tongue to be taught in English can be identified as the first constraint. According to the perceptions of those students, the initial reason for this issue is the difficulties that they encounter in comprehending the terminologies which is incorporated in the lesson content of those two subjects and to switch between two languages; mother tongue and the second language, English. Concurrently, the fact that the students have identified the core subjects such as Science, Mathematics and ICT to be difficult due to the extensive subject content and the difficulties that may occur in comprehending those subjects can be demonstrated as the second constraint. Hence, it can be clearly evinced by the fact that 5 students out of the sample of 50 students attend tuition classes which are conducted in their mother tongue for the subjects that are taught in English medium. The foremost reason for this is, they believe that learning the same subject content in Sinhala medium will play a satisfactory role in mastering and comprehending English medium subjects. The third constraint is contingent on the unsatisfactory term test results and the teaching methods and the style integrated by the teachers in the bilingual classroom. Hence, the results of the questionnaire indicate that 12 students were unhappy about their decision to study in English medium as they did not score well in the previous term tests and they have encountered comprehension and linguistic difficulties as a consequence of the conventional teaching methods and the style exerted by the teachers in the bilingual classroom.

VI. CONCLUSION

The data analysis of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews vividly demonstrate the constraints confronted by lower secondary learners of two local schools in a selected Educational Zone with reference to the Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka. Henceforth, it was evident that the foremost reason for these constraints is the fact that the majority of the students have attended a state school for their primary education, where the medium of instruction is Sinhala. Thus, in this context, the language diversity has affected the cognitive and metacognitive capacities of the students which can cause language, linguistic and comprehension complexities. Although, the majority of the students chose English as the medium of education merely due to the influence of their parents, they possess positive attitudes and perceptions towards the Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka. Ultimately, it is noteworthy that, the syllabus and the policymakers in Sri Lanka should exert conscious efforts in eliminating the above discussed constraints. Additionally, as the participants mentioned, it can be recommended that extending the prevailing Bilingual Education Policy to the subjects which are currently taught in the mother tongue of the students can be beneficial. Ultimately, teachers should be trained using innovatory teaching methodologies, strategies and techniques to enhance the linguistic and comprehension skills as well as the academic performance of the bilingual learners in Sri Lanka.

REFERENCES

- Bilingual Education. 2007. Teacher Developmental Manual.
NIE, Maharagama, Sri Lanka.
- Calderón Jurado, B, & Morilla García, C 2018. Students' attitude and motivation in bilingual education. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 317-342, DOI:10.17583/ijep.2018.3558.
- Huang, E 2013. The Benefits and Challenges of Bilingual Education. pp. 1-12.
- Köktürk, Ş, Odacıoğlu, MC, & Uysal, NM 2016. Bilingualism and bilingual education, bilingualism and translational action. *International journal of linguistics*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 72.

Lin, MH & Lee, JY 2019. Pedagogical suitability of data-driven learning in EFL grammar classes: A case study of Taiwanese students. *Language Teaching Research*, vol. 23, pp. 541-561.

Lo, YY, & Lo, ESC 2014. A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of English-medium education in Hong Kong. *Rev. Educ. Res*, vol. 84, pp. 47-73.

Medawattegedera, VV 2015. Kaduwa or Manne? Issues and Tensions Related to Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka. *OUSL Journal*, vol. 8, pp. 39, DOI:https://doi.org/10.4038/ouslj.v8i0.7317.

Mahawattha, MDNMU 2012. Bilingual education in Sri Lankan schools: An analysis of difficulties in speaking English experienced by students in selected schools in Sri Lanka. *Journal of education and vocational research*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 107-114.

Ozfidan, B & Aydin, H 2017. Curriculum Related Issues in Bilingual Education. *Higher Education Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, DOI:10.5539/hes.v7n4p25.

Sert, N 2008. The language of instruction dilemma in the Turkish context. *System*, vol. 36, pp. 156-171.

Yan, L & Xu, H 2015. Research on the theory and practice of bilingual teaching in the course of welding metallurgy in scientific universities. *Autom. Instrum*, vol. 1, 209-210

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Dewmini Amunugama is a final year undergraduate at University of Kelaniya, currently reading for the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. She is interested in and has conducted several researches under the fields of Second Language Acquisition, Language Anxiety as well as Language teaching and learning.



Anuththara Ekanayake is a final year undergraduate at University of Kelaniya, currently

reading for the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. She is interested in the researches fields such as varieties of English and Sociolinguistics and conducted several researches regarding them.



Nilakma Welgama is a final year undergraduate, currently reading for the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language at University of Kelaniya. She has conducted various researches under the fields of Sociolinguistics, Second Language Acquisition and Computer Assisted Language Learning in which she intends to further pursue her interests.



Nilupama Wickramage is a final year undergraduate at University of Kelaniya, currently reading for the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. She is hoping to continue her future research in the fields of Curriculum and Syllabus designing, Computer Assisted Language Learning in Second Language classrooms, Discourse roles, Gender and Language.



Dilumi Wickramasinghe is a final year undergraduate, currently reading for the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language at University of Kelaniya. She is pursuing the fields of Sociolinguistics, Language teaching and learning as well as Sociology and Gender Studies to continue her future researches.