

Factors to Consider: Promoting Speaking Competence of National Languages of Sri Lanka

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Abstract- Incompetency of verbal communication in national languages is a national-level problem in Sri Lanka when the two main language groups do not use a common language or when the citizens do not know both national languages of the country. In that context, the objective of this research is to identify the factors that hinder verbal communication between two linguistic communities in Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil, and to explore the factors that can motivate the process of improving the number of speakers who are competent in Sinhala and Tamil. The aim is to facilitate harmonious co-existence among ethnicities and to increase the intercultural understanding for peaceful reconciliation in Sri Lanka. The explorative study adhered to the inductive reasoning approach. Based on the cross-sectional sampling method, 09 professionals constantly involved in verbal communication were selected, representing government and non-government institutes. The sample was collected from four provinces, particularly regarding the highest density of the multiethnic community in Sri Lanka. Interview-based qualitative data were analyzed and presented through thematic analysis followed by the themes that illustrate the aspects of educational, political, cultural, and professional. The findings suggested closely monitoring the policies and practices related to national language learning, using career advancement strategies for language learning motivation and conducting mandatory language development programmes for Sinhala and Tamil and implementing them for primary, secondary and tertiary education to build verbal communication among people to link people from different linguistic groups.

Keywords: *Speaking Competency, National Languages, language education, harmonious co-existence, reconciliation in Sri Lanka*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, an island situated at the southern tip of India, comprises two major ethnic groups; Sinhala and Tamil, who are inhabitants of the island for centuries (Wyss, 2020). Based on "language, religion, ethnic origin, culture, and ancestral territory," each ethnic group has established a

distinct and strong identity (Kearney1978; Herath, 2015, pp.246). However, due to the different Language usage in communication among the ethnicities: there is a language barrier among ethnic groups in Sri Lanka in terms of communication and understanding, which led to the language bill of 1956, the massacre of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers in 1983 and the Black July incident led to the 30-year armed conflict between the Sinhalese-drove government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam 2004) in Sri Lanka (Imtiyaz, 2008). The presentation of linguistic arrangements that created divisions along ethnic and phonetic lines, which ignited the war, contributed to the conflict's leading cause. As evidence for the following cause of the conflict, a former militant of the conflict, and present member of the Tamil National Alliance political party, Suresh Premachandran, stated that, "This has been a historical grievance. Though one of the national languages, the Tamil language's applicability has been largely confined to the areas where Tamil-speaking people are the majority," (OCHA, 2012) In addition, the Table 1 presents the recent statistics of language skills of Sri Lankans.

Table 1-Speaking Competency (Age 10 years and above) by ethnicity - 2019

Ethnic group	Population aged 10 years & over	Ability to Speak		
		Sinhala	Tamil	English
Sinhalese	12,764,681	12,701,932	812,738	3,033,659
Sri Lanka Tamil	1,871,960	614,169	1,835,657	390,676
Indian Tamil	671,378	412,685	664,541	87,435
Muslim	1,467,956	862,397	1,442,875	446,146
Malay	36,567	34,899	28,975	24,202
Burgher	33,170	29,277	12,738	24,412
Other	22,113	14,880	10,060	13,053

Source :Department of Census and Statistics, 2019

Table 2-Speaking Competency (Age 10 years and above) by population Sectors - 2019

Population Sectors	Population aged 10 years & over	Ability to Speak		
		Sinhala	Tamil	English
All	16,867,825	14,670,239	4,807,584	4,019,583
Urban	3,130,283	2,665,689	1,294,442	1,381,251
Rural	13,021,416	11,540,351	2,853,275	2,566,240

Source :Department of Census and Statistics, 2019

According to the statistical records of national statistics, English, the link language of Sri Lanka, is higher than Tamil usage. Even though Sinhala and Tamil are the two national languages of the country, the use of one national language is superseded by the link language. However, the statistics also reveal English, the link language, is not spoken by most of the country and is identified as a disturbing factor for interethnic communication, which is integral for peaceful co-existence.

II. Research Problem

Sri Lanka, an island which was baffled by "30 years of inter-state level conflict, due to main three matters of identity, which have been the most common causes of conflict, unrest, and violence in Sri Lanka—religion, ethnicity, and language" (Soherwordi, 2010, pp. 29-49). Language barrier is a national-level issue in Sri Lanka regarding interethnic communication and understanding among different ethnicities; it is acknowledged to be a crucial component in ethnocentric conflicts. Therefore, it is believed that "Ensuring language parity is as important as resettlement and rehabilitation" (UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, 2012), by increasing the competence of verbal communication in both national languages among main ethnic communities. Further, it is believed that making them mindful of verbal correspondence on both public dialects among networks would be an instrument for a more noteworthy reconciliation (OCHA, 2012).

III. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify the factors that hinder verbal communication between two linguistic communities in Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil, and to explore the factors that can motivate the process of improving the number of speakers who are competent in Sinhala and Tamil.

- To identify the recommendations and suggestions commended by the experienced professionals to develop speaking competence in the national languages of Sri Lanka.
- To explore the factors that hinder the learning of both national languages through the experience and

viewpoints of individuals who are already competent in both national languages of Sri Lanka.

- To investigate their positive experience and demonstrate their language competence to foster reconciliation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This exploratory research was carried out through 09 focus group interviews. Qualitative data was gathered, and the responses were analyzed and presented in thematic analysis. Bennett's Developmental of Intercultural Sensitivity (DIMS) model provides the theoretical reflection to this study. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the prevailing travel restrictions during the research data collecting period, the interviews were conducted as a virtual and one face-to-face physical interview. The sample population was 08 individuals and a representative from the society, a businessman. The sample population contains individuals from both the public and private sectors. Through the interviews, personal opinions and suggestions were collected. Each interviewee was given a customized questionnaire according to their designation. More emphasis was given to predominantly homogeneous provinces with most speakers of one national language.

Table 3. Sample: the listed interviewee

Designation	Location
Brigadier/ Director multipurpose development task force	Western Province
Turkish Red Cross representative	Northern and Eastern provinces
Police officer	Northern province
Police officer	Western Province
Teacher of Tamil Language	Western Province
General Public (Corporate Representative)	Northern province
General Public (Corporate Representative)	Northern province
General Public (Sinhalese individual living in Jaffna, businessman)	Northern province
General Public (Tamil individuals living in Mathara)	Southern province

Table 3 demonstrates the individuals in the sample who have large-scale public relations and constant engagement in social activities recognized by the State. The basic rationale for selecting the sample population was their frequent social interaction and vocal communication ability. Some individuals are state officials for specific specified social roles and activities. For example, 'the Turkish Red Cross representative acts as the liaison

between the Red Cross and Sri Lanka, where he conducts social projects in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Therefore, he/she must have the ability to communicate appropriately, to get accurate data and information from village civilians for administrative purposes. The Academic and the Teacher were essential for this research because they teach students from various language backgrounds, where they confront the communication issue. Businessmen/Corporate representatives were also selected since they handle different communities where language communication plays a massive role in business interaction.

Further, the Police Officer and the representative from the general public were two other individuals who belonged to this category, representing communication with society. Further, the four public members were added to the sample to inquire about their opinions about the research topic. Therefore, the following selected population is the most suitable to address the research issue. Two provincial locations were selected to gather the sample population: a homogenous- single ethnic community-based province, while one heterogeneous-multiethnic- community. This is to ensure and receive accurate data and information, as well as different opinions and views based on regional influence.

Data Collection Methods and Tools

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to gather qualitative data. To ensure accuracy and capture the notes of the interviews, audio recordings were used in conjunction with notetaking during each session. All participants provided informed consent for audio recordings. The reason for selecting semi-structured interviews was to provide a balance between structure and flexibility for the interviewee, which helped us create a set of predetermined questions while also allowing for spontaneous follow-up questions with the interviewee, which enabled us to gain an in-depth exploration of participants' responses, leading to richer data. Further, the semi-structured interviews helped us to gain richer qualitative data, which allowed interviewees to share their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives in their own words, leading the results in rich qualitative data that can capture nuances, emotions, and complexities that might not be easily captured through quantitative methods. Finally, to gain a contextual understanding, which allowed us to delve into the contextual factors surrounding interviewees' experiences. This helped us interpret and understand participants' responses in a broader social, cultural, or personal context. Accordingly, we added nine questions, which covered the areas of their career expertise, career background, experiences, knowledge and relevancy to the research topic. Following the qualitative data handling practices, the anonymity of the data was maintained. The

respondents' professional positions were only used to identify the respondent, the names were not revealed. They were informed about it and made the respondents confident about the information they provided, which was an added quality to ensure high-quality qualitative data.

The questions for the interviews were formed in accordance with the research objectives. The questionnaire validity was tested based on face validity. Translators were used to translate on certain occasions of the interviews in terms of having efficient communication. In terms of interview procedures, the interview time duration was based on the interviewees' responses. For instance, four of the interviewees, which were the Director of the multipurpose development task force during the research period, the Turkish Red Cross representative of North and East provinces and the two Police officers from North and West provinces had one hour of interview time duration, while the rest of the interviews had a time duration of half an hour.

Ethical Considerations

This topic covers a controversial and ethnically sensitive topic. Department-level ethical permission was given to conduct this research for the partial fulfilment of the Bachelor of Science Degree. Formal consent was obtained from all the participants in the data collection process through a consent form. The study was completed avoiding the possibility of any ethical harm to human participants involved. The study was also conducted in such a manner as to protect anonymity and confidentiality, avoiding deceptive practices and providing the right to withdraw. Therefore, research participants were pre-notified. The online recordings were not published elsewhere.

V. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

As per the thematic analysis method, five themes emerged through the data gathered. These were classified as follows,

1. Benefits of bilingual speaking skills
2. Political Aspect: Influence of political aspect
3. Educational Aspect: From the point of view of education
4. Professional Aspect: Experience and requirements in the professional aspect
5. Cultural Aspect: Impact on culture on language and vice versa

Findings are presented according to five themes.

1. Benefits of bilingual speaking skills

This section mainly presents the reasons found from the selected research sample for developing speaking skills in national languages in Sri Lanka. Most respondents agreed that learning both national languages has given them an

added advantage while living in Sri Lanka. This includes the various professions the respondents are engaged in.

“An added advantage when working in Northern and Eastern Province, especially for civil

(By the respondent – Police Officer- Colombo)

Further, a similar idea was given by a representative member from the armed forces, who is on duty in the Northern and Eastern provinces, who stated the importance of learning a second language to improve communication between the residents. For him, the second national language is Tamil. Learning a Second national language has also brought economic advantages to some respondents by making it their career to teach the second national language.

“I’m Sinhalese but I learnt Tamil, Economic benefits and the ability to teach Tamil to Sinhalese for Sinhala children.”

(The respondent- The teacher who teaches Tamil, based in the Western Province)

The respondents have also stated that learning the second national language has reduced the cultural gap in between the two communities. Thus, according to the responses given by the sample population, it is clear that learning the two national languages bring added advantage to their lives in different ways. Moreover, learning a second language extends their communication capacities while enhancing the possibility of speaking to any Sri Lankan citizen irrespective of their ethnic or language group. Consequently, this is the common and one of the best methods to improve mutual understanding between communities where two languages are used.

As per the data gathered, the preference for national languages other than a lingua franca is essential here due to the attitudinal changes and as well as for the 'acceptance of the other language group'. The selected sample of respondents shared their ideas and experiences of being actively engaged in verbal communication using both national languages in a society where two different languages are in use. Therefore, it is presented in the model that ethnic relativism, which is the turning point, begins from 'Acceptance'. It is the acceptance to learn the other national language, i.e. Tamil for Sinhalese and Sinhala for Tamils. Accordingly, we observe this move as a positive move, a peace-friendly change that facilitates the reconciliation process in the country.

- Political Aspect: Influence of political aspect

Regarding political aspects, most interviewees suggested strengthening the constitutional amendments of language communication and recognition of the national languages. In terms of educational elements, all the respondents (100%) expressed that the present education system is not efficient and supportive in increasing the speaking competency of the national languages of Sri Lanka. According to our findings based on our interviewees' respondents, the population gap plays a huge role in the hindrance due to the majority and minority thoughts and attitudes towards each other, for instance,

“Majority community has to accept cultural differences, Eradicating Sinhalese Chauvinism. Initiate the LLRC and Maxwell Paranagama Report” based on the interviewee Turkish Red Cross Representatives response.”

(Turkish Red Cross Representative)

Regarding cultural aspects, respondents have shown that increasing competency of speaking skills in two national languages is essential for the reconciliation in different ways. It is also the first step in understanding the culture of the two communities in the sample population. It has also pointed out that learning the alternative national language helps eradicate interethnic hostilities between the two communities. To quote the respondent's words,

“We can't understand a culture of a particular region, by just understanding a speaking competency. to increase the competency in all aspects of communication and develop cultural meritocracy but it helps in developing the acceptance and intercultural understanding”.

(By the Respondent Tamil Teacher)

Furthermore, racial superiority between the ethnicities in the country is also known to be another critical preventive factor. Further, according to the respondents, lack of opportunities to learn the alternative national language or improve speaking competency are commonly found as critical barriers. Also, lack of exposure towards learning both national languages, at least achieving speaking competency, is prevalent. As per the data gathered, it was due to families' lack of encouragement or motivation to learn the alternative national languages. Particularly, as per the opinions shared by the respondents, most of the parents do not see their children getting any educational or career-related advantage of learning both national languages. Their preference was to learn English rather than learning the alternative national language. Further, they highlighted the parents' preference to spend extra time learning English but not on the alternative national language. Moreover, they added that this condition may be used on the economic and social factors of families, as well as the

parents' lack of broader knowledge of learning both national languages and limited personal contact with the members of other communities where they feel there is no requirement or need to learn the alternative national language. Thus, two major implied ideas are derived. One is the necessity of promotional campaigns to educate the general public about the advantages of learning both the national language. The other is the need of adequate benefits to encourage students and parents to learn both national languages from educational and career perspectives.

- Educational Aspect: From the point of view of education

All the respondents have agreed that the present education system is not efficient in increasing the speaking competence of the national languages of Sri Lanka. Respondents have shown that the lack of educational competencies throughout all the educational levels in learning is the main reason for such hindrance. For example, in the current educational system, priority is not given to the improvement of Tamil and Sinhala speaking skills. The individual's intention to get a Credit pass in the General Certificate Examination (Ordinary Level) and lack of attention to Tamil language speaking competence curriculum in schools. Further, even though there were certain curricular subjects, certain limited time periods were allocated for the specific subject based on the interviewees' school experience back then. Further, according to subject experts, school textbooks mainly promote written language, focusing less on the speaking aspect of the language.

“speaking Tamil, is not based upon pure speaking Sri Lankan Tamil language (Speaking Dialects based on regional area of the Northern and Eastern Province), for the textbooks were based on only one aspect, which is the writing aspect”

(The teacher who teaches Tamil, based in the Western Province),

These are the difficulties for teachers to teach students in improving Tamil language speaking competency. Therefore, educational hindrances are major preventive factors for furthering national-level recommendations and implementations. Furthermore, Educational tutors, and the majority of government language teachers (Sinhala and Tamil) have stressed that there are inadequate number of teachers, especially in the north and east parts of the country, to teach the second language i.e., Sinhala.

"Lack of Sinhala teachers. Only 3 teachers are there. People make an effort to learn however, it is not possible as there are not enough teachers to teach". Therefore, the issues should be addressed in a national level, by raising awareness and call-upon action for the Ministry of Education towards the issue."

(According to the teacher who teaches Tamil, based in the Western Province),

Textbooks were based on only one aspect, which is the writing aspect. These are the difficulties for teachers to teach students in improving Tamil language speaking competency. Therefore, educational hindrances are major preventive factors for furthering national-level recommendations and implementations. Furthermore, Educational tutors, and the majority of government language teachers (Sinhala and Tamil) have stressed that there are inadequate numbers of teachers, especially in the north and east parts of the country, to teach the second language, i.e., Sinhala.

Moreover, racial superiority between the ethnicities in the country is also known to be another critical preventive factor. Further, lack of opportunities to learn the alternative national language and fewer options and motivation to improve speaking competency of both national languages are also commonly found critical barriers according to the respondents. Also, lack of exposure towards learning the speaking competency of a second language is mainly due to parents' discouragement or not prioritizing it for their children due to surrounding economic and social factors of families, as well as a particular effect on minimum interaction with diverse community friends among them. Incompetent bilingual language competency, as well as some of the Sinhalese interviewees, are not competent in Tamil language speaking competency. Therefore, such factors are known to be preventive towards national-level recommendations and implementations.

- Professional Aspect: Experience and requirements in the professional aspect

In terms of career aspects, respondents have expressed the importance of learning the alternative national language based on their different professions,

“Now living alone in Jaffna, where there aren't many Sinhalese here, but by learning the Tamil language, it helped me to understand the Tamil culture and change my opinion about the Tamil population”.

(By the representative general public member, a Sinhalese living in Jaffna).

The sample population contains individuals from the public and private sectors, so they have identified the importance of learning national languages. The two police officers interviewed stated that learning the two national languages is necessary while on duty in the North and East. His words are quoted below.

“Yes, as a police officer, it is an important tool to be useful by doing service in the North and East”.

(By the respondent Police officer).

- Cultural Aspect: Impact on culture on language and vice versa

Respondents have shown that increasing competency in speaking skills is essential for the reconciliation from different aspects. Some have pointed out that it is a key requirement for various job opportunities in the Northern and Eastern provinces. The sample has also pointed out that it effectively improves communal understanding and develops respect between the two communities. It is also the first step in understanding the two communities' cultures. The sample population has also pointed out that learning national languages helps eradicate intercultural hostilities between the two communities. This is seen from the responses of the three public members, who stated that their preconceived negative perceptions of other communities were diminished after learning the second language.

“Now living alone in Jaffna, where there aren't many Sinhalese here, but by learning the Tamil language it helped me to understand the Tamil culture and change my opinion about the Tamil population”.

(By the representative general public member, Sinhalese living in Jaffna)

Similar ideas were given by the general public member (representing corporate representative) selected from the Tamil ethnicity background,

“As Tamils especially during the war, we had a completely different idea about the Sinhalese community, but after I came to Colombo in 2008, I learned the Sinhalese language and all my prior perspectives of the Sinhalese community changed. They were kind-hearted and helpful. This was a life changing opportunity for me as I experienced the openness of the Sinhalese community”.

(By the respondent, general public member, corporate representative Jaffna)

Furthermore, some respondents have argued that culture does not directly connect with speaking competency. However, they have agreed that increasing speaking competency can help the two communities improve the intercommunication between them.

“Experience by serving in the Batticaloa region, didn't even understand the language, therefore language understanding before cultural understanding for an effective community understanding”.

(By the Respondent Police Officer, Northern province).

VI. DISCUSSION

Accordingly, the summary of the findings is presented as follows. The first point is that all the interviewees believe that achieving a second national language competency is an advantage and an added advantage for the future reconciliation process. Secondly, the interviewees expressed that social institutions and racial superiority play a massive role in improving speaking a second national language. However, there was a disparity of the ideas based upon the opinions; 75% of the interviewees pointed out that learning both national languages is crucial in understanding the alternative ethnic communities, while 25% of interviewees pointed out that speaking competency is not required.

Further, findings show that educational factors such as making both national languages compulsory and increasing and follow-up parent-student motivation are promotional factors to learning both national languages. Similarly, the data showed that the absence of such motivations hinders the respondents' potential and tendency to learn both national languages, at least the speaking competence. Almost all the respondents agreed that the present education system does not provide the necessary background for students to learn and develop speaking competency in both national languages. They pointed out various factors that hinder the learning of both national languages, such as inadequate teacher allocations, the subject is not considered 'very important' in competitive exams at the school level, both national languages are not compulsory for primary, secondary or tertiary level of education, the second language is only taught up to grade 11 in the school curriculum, not educating about the benefits of learning both national languages and absence of any motivative factor to learn both national languages. Moreover, the respondents pointed out the fact that the school syllabus is only based on the reading and writing aspects of language learning. Finally, they also stated that, though they are interested in learning the second national language, there is teacher scarcity, especially among Sinhala teachers in the Northern province. There were

slightly related answers for improving the speaking competency of a second national language to eradicate the unity gap among communities, which was based on the suggestions Cross Representative, 'LLRC and Maxwell Paranagama Report suggestions' were well related to the suggestions and recommendations for the research problem, for most of the suggestions were based upon the State and Government's role in implementation. The eighth question, towards the research problem. As per the Turkish Red which was based on the experiences of the respondents and their usage of the second national language, suggests that learning both national languages plays an integral role in the communication aspect of the workplaces of the interviewees. It seems that it is common in Governmental organizations and institutes as well as Non-Governmental Organizations, to use one language throughout the workshop or meetings, whether they initiated the workshop in link language or using both languages. All the interviewees mentioned that translators were required to fulfil duties and responsibilities in their use of communication in the alternative national language, Tamil or Sinhala. Considering the theoretical aspect related to communication for the reconciliation process, Bennet's DIMS Model, the transition from Denial to Integration takes place if the communication prevails only. Finally, upon the reconciliation efforts, all interviewees agreed with the fact that national languages play a huge role in the peace-building and reconciliation effort; even though many of them were not much aware of the greater benefits or long-term benefits of national reconciliation, many of them have realized the need of the daily necessities of people to use both national language speaking competence when they interact with the society.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study evaluates the factors to consider: promoting speaking competence in both national languages of Sri Lanka. This study was conducted to achieve one main research objective and two specific objectives. Each of the specific objectives directly impacts enhancing the speaking competence of both national languages of Sri Lanka. The research was conducted on context-based analysis of the responses of the research participants.

The interviewees have experienced the research problem due to their career and social background in Sri Lanka. The information gathered from the interviewees was based on their daily experience and knowledge of using both national languages, with particular concern towards speaking competence. The findings provided a clear path to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the factors to promote speaking competence in both national languages of Sri Lanka.

The research findings were analyzed through content analysis, and each theme provided specific factors. The majority of the interviewees' statements relate to the issues in the educational sector, which are derived from the secondary school educational system. In addition, schools and universities are suggested to be the most effective learning places for individuals where the majority prefer to teach both national languages and speaking competencies mandatory. The respondents believe that it is effective to build the process by teaching the speaking competency of national languages, further strengthening the efforts.

Furthermore, in terms of cultural and ethnicity-related aspects, lack of respect among inter-cultures and ethnicities is identified as a major barrier in implementing the speaking competency programs among the ethnicities. Thereby, based on the findings, through social blending, educating on interethnic/intercultural respect and the increase of diversity inclusion may lead to an effective mechanism for the reconciliation efforts. According to most interviewees, once a person accepts that there is a difference and acknowledges it, then the process of integration becomes easy. Therefore, mutual respect must be maintained among the ethnicities, which will give a main incentive towards learning speaking competencies of national languages cross-culturally and communities Vice Versa.

In terms of the professional aspect, another major driving incentive towards the increase of speaking competency is promoting the speaking competence of both national languages via job recruitments and increased intensity of career-related promotions. Most individuals fulfil specific qualifications or requirements to achieve their career or labour goals but do not bother to continue language competence there. Therefore, through this aspect, effective follow-up programmes and introducing incentives on improving both the national languages, at least the speaking competency programmes, can be identified as motivational factors cooperating with the employer aspect. For instance, according to interviewees who are in the public sector, the Department of National Languages in Sri Lanka conducts National Language written exams to implement an effective government administrative method (Department of Official Languages, 2023) (Not allowing individuals to be appointed for higher level positions if failure to build both National languages competency in the writing aspect). To strengthen the aspect, added salary bonuses, promotions and recognition towards the employees are identified as further motivational factors to improve speaking competency in both national languages. Therefore, with the above implications, the scope of this study is narrowed down to five factors: benefits of bilingual speaking skills, political, cultural, educational and professional. Therefore, it is proposed to enhance the

following suggestions and recommendations raised by the research outcome based on the first-hand experience of the interviewees and the theoretical models based on the field.

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