

Second Language Acquisition in English Medium Classes in Jaffna

Dr. T. Karunakaran

Senior Lecturer in English Language,
English Language Teaching Center,
University of Jaffna

***Abstract:** This paper deals with the impact on the acquisition of English in the English medium classes in Jaffna and analyses the different perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the English medium classes. Methodology and the tools used for data collection are also elaborated with adequate information. This study reveals the outcomes which show the levels of learner's performance after they have opted for English medium education. The findings of the study are presented based on the data gathered from two schools: Jaffna Hindu College (JHC) and J/Vembai Girls' High School (VGHS).*

Key words: English medium, Vernacular medium, Tamil, English

English as Medium of Instruction

English was reintroduced as medium of instruction to General Certificate of Education of Advance Level (G.C.E.A/L) in Sri Lanka after using two of the country's indigenous languages, Sinhala and Tamil for nearly half a century. This action came into effect in 2001 and English was allowed to be used as medium of instruction along with the two other national languages in some selected schools. Different competing theories, such as the conspiracy theory and the grassroots theory, present reasons for the world wide spread of English as medium of instruction at present. The advocates of the conspiracy theory argue that there is a deliberate effort by both British and American agencies give emphasis to the dominance of English and to convince other countries to recognize it as superior to any other language. Grassroots theorists say that English has an economic role in the world that makes its spread independently of the political and cultural hegemony of one nation or nations. Policy-makers of Sri Lanka permitted English as the medium of instruction after several rounds of discussion with many stakeholders related to the education system of the country in secondary schools in 2002. The ministry of education asked the principals to bring in English as the medium of education to secondary education. English medium education is not a compulsory one, that is to say, those who wish to learn their subjects in English medium can continue their education in the English medium once they finish their primary education in vernacular. The parents and the students of Jaffna welcomed this step of the government. In Jaffna peninsula initially some national schools and missionary schools started

the English medium education and the first batch of students in English medium sat the General Certificate of Education of Advanced level (G.C.E. (a/L) in December, 2011.

Methodology and Context of the Study

This study is both descriptive and interpretive in nature. Data was collected from two schools: Jaffna Hindu College and Vembaddi Girls' High school. The reason behind the selection of those two schools was that not all schools offer the English education programs in Jaffna. These two schools are not only the national schools administrated by the central government but also well-equipped and well-established schools that offer the English medium education. Two distinct student-groups were selected from each school as sample for this study, one of which was an English medium group, and other a vernacular group. The purpose of choosing these two groups was to judge the performance level of the learners after they were admitted to English medium education. The participant and non-participant observation and informal interviews were used to collect the data. This study was carried out in Jaffna Hindu College and Vembadi Girl's High School. These two national schools are very reputed in Jaffna Peninsula. These two schools have learners from upper middle class, middle class and lower middle class of Jaffna society, i.e. learners admitted to these schools come with varied sociolinguistic backgrounds.

Language Input

All the scholars agree that language usage in schools differs in some pivotal respect from the language usage in home setting. Cummins (1981) says that language usage in school is context-reduced and cognitively demanding. Snow (1985) cited in Genesee (1987) views language usage as a continuum ranging from contextualized to decontextulized with latter emphasis in school settings. Wells (1981) and his colleagues carried out a longitudinal study of language development and use in the home and in primary school and Wells drew a conclusion:

There is little in the nature of interactional demanding which will not already become familiar with at home at the level of conversational structure (Wells, 1981:237 cited in Genesee, 1987:174).

Language researchers commonly agreed on one fact that language experiences of an essentially interactional nature establishing the basic for development of school relevant language Skills. Wells is of the view that the importance of experiences with oral language in everyday life:

---while part of the facilitating experience of the more successful children involved the shared activities of being read to, and looking at and talking about books, equally important was the way in which every day events were picked up in talk, and meanings developed and made more coherent through extended conversation(Wells,1981:263 cited in Genesee.1987:175).

A lot of valuable researches have been done on the development and use of language in the home and in school. Serious and systematic efforts have been made to distinguish the school setting from home setting. The task of recognizing particular categories of language usage in school seems to be very complicated. As such, the curriculum designers require a proper curriculum which can develop the skills necessary for school settings (Genesee, 1987).

Data Analysis

The data gathered from observation and informal interviews were analysed taking the fact the researcher himself from the context where the research was carried out.

▪ Lessons Observed in VHGS

In VHGS, the History teacher taught a lesson-The arrival of British in Sri Lanka- to English medium class which was grade 9B. She began the lesson without any brainstorming activity. She called upon some learners and asked them to read the particular paragraphs in the textbook. Afterwards, she explained those paragraphs both in English and Tamil. Learners also interacted with the teacher in Tamil most of the time. The teacher fumbled when she illustrated in English in the classroom. This made her use Tamil to explain the lesson to children. For example, she started explaining the topic:

Teacher: There was a number of reasons for the British to focus their attention on Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a strategic location. British had some reasons to come over to Sri Lanka. There would be some reasons for us to capture a place. Similarly, British had some reasons to capture Sri Lanka. The first one is the importance of the natural location of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was located at the center of the sea routes in the Indian ocean. What do you mean by sea routes?

What she wanted to explain was:

There were number of reasons for British to focus their attention on Sri Lanka. In the sense, British had some reasons to come over to Sri Lanka. There would be some reasons for us to capture a place. Similarly, British had some reasons to capture Sri Lanka. The first one was the strategic location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean because it was at the center of the sea routes. What do you mean by sea routes?

This type of dialogue was being used in the English medium classes. Code switching from English to Tamil might be useful to weaker learners of English but it discourages the competent learners of English, and in the English medium classes majority of them are competent enough to grasp the lesson in English. The teacher does not seem to be using English very competently. Her

use of vernacular discourages the use of English by competent learners, and this makes the learners interact in vernacular:

Learners: flw;ghijfs; (Sea routes)

Teacher:mjhtJ ,e;JrKj;jpuj;jpd; flw;ghijapy; Sri Lanka ,Ue;jjhy; [*Since Sri Lanka is in Indain ocean*] That is also one of the reasons to the British to focus their attention on Sri Lanka. Second reason, From Sri Lanka, a European power would be able to maintain naval and trade affairs of the West coast and the East coast of India. ,e;jpahtpd; West and East mjhtJ>fpof;F>Nkw;Ftpahghuelbtf;ifia Nkw;nfs;tjw;F ,yq;ifapy; ,Ue;J Nkw;nfs;tJ trjpahtf ,Ue;jJ [*East and West Indian trade was operated from Sri Lanka*]

First reason ,flw; ghijapy; Sri Lanka ,Ue;jJ. Second reason, mth;fspd; West and East ghijapy; Sri Lanka ,Ue;jjhy; mth;fspd; tpahghu eltbf;ifia Nkw;nfs;sf;\$bajhf ,Ue;jJ [*There were two reasons which made the trade easy between Sri Lanka and East West india One is the sea route and the other is that Sri Lanka is in the Indian ocean.*] . ,J Second reason. We'll go to the third reason. During the North East monsoon season, the Trincomalee natural harbour would be a safe place to anchor a large number of ships. What do you mean by anchor?

Learners: eq;\$uk; [Anchor]

Teacher: eq;\$ukpl;L fg;gy;fis [*Ships anchored*]..... Monsoon?

Learners: gUtf;fhw;W (Monsoon season)

Teacher: gUtf;fhw;Wfspy; ,Ue;J fg;gy;fis ghJfhj;J eq;\$ukpl;Litg;gjw;F> which harbor was safe? [*Which harbor was considered to be safe for ships during the monsoon season?*]

Learners: Trincomalee harbor

Teacher: Trincomalee harbor mtw;wpw;F safe Mf ,Ue;jjhy; British had to focus for the safety [*Since the Trincomalee harbor was safe, the British focused on this harbor.*] For British, it was essential to acquire the Trincomalee harbor to compete with the French and to establish naval power in the Indian Ocean.

Learners: Nghll;bNahL [*To compete with French*] (See p. 234)

In the same English medium class, the science teacher taught a lesson-Scientific Method. Teacher was quite competent in English and used proper technical terms to explain the topics like phenomena, hypothesis, experiment, Micro organism, scientist, environment, etc. The interaction between the teacher and the learners was very operative and thought-provoking. The teacher made the learners to speak and got the learners busy with the lesson although there were a few break downs in the exchange of ideas.

T: Good morning Miss

S: Good morning

T: Today we are going to learn the first lesson. What is first one?

S: Scientific method

T: Are you aware of it? Do you know anything about it? Anybody! Volunteer!

You want to learn about scientific method. You know something. You know or

you don't know! Come on. I don't want to call your name. I don't know your name also. I am not familiar with your names First time I am meeting also. Please one of you volunteer and answer me. Come on Thusyanthi. Tell something.

Anything is ok.

Thusyanthi: it is method used by most of the scientists to arrive in their conclusion and aiming and they are having steps to be on the flow chart.

T: Very good. Thank you. Mostly this is mostly used by scientists. Why do you think this is put as the first lesson for you? Earlier it was not in the syllabus. Now it has been included. So why do you think this has been included in your syllabus

S: They want all of us to be Scientists.

T: They want all of you to be scientists. Yes, you know the aim of this. They want you to be thinkers. They want you to think about the things that you observe in your environment. First thing is what?

S: observation

Teacher did use mother tongue at times to explain certain things vividly, but learners responded to the questions raised by the teacher:

T: now you see for this one, how do you build a hypothesis? Now you have observed and identified the problem. We have to build a hypothesis. How do you build? Come on come on tell me. AnanthiyifNghjP]; vd;why; vd;dnrhy;Yq;Nfh?

[*What is hypothesis?*]

stand up. Quick

Ananthy: We will think about problem

▪ **Personality Development**

The data showed that English medium education has built up excellent behaviours of the learners in a big way. These behaviours include that the learners from English medium classes have been able to explain things well, and they understand things easily. They have confidence to talk to someone in public by overcoming the traditional and superstitious beliefs. A mother of an English medium child commented: "Now my daughter sometime explains the meaning of certain words to her father though he is a lecturer at the advanced Technical Institute, and she has developed a better personality after English medium education." Parents' views suggest one thing that English as medium of instruction is beneficial to the learners in many ways though they did not let their children to continue their studies in English medium because of various reasons. For example, a mother of two vernacular medium children commented on English medium education as follows:

"I haven't sent my children to English medium because of various difficulties, but as teacher I understand that English medium education is more advantageous than vernacular medium education"

Willett (1995) cited in Mickan (2006:344) states that “Speech events in classrooms are prime time for initiating learners into differentiated and appropriate language uses, which are functionally integrated into the routine and predictable events of class work”.

Findings of the study

The data analysis resulted in identifying some key things with regard to the operation of English medium education program in these two schools. From the data analysis the following findings were established

▪ Use of Two Languages

Although the literature suggests that the attitudes and language use of English medium learners affect their English proficiency, this study indicated that the attitudes toward English medium did not directly affect bilingual proficiency. This study made it obvious that English medium learners gave the importance of a balanced use of the two languages. Family, school, and community supported in order to maintain the balanced use of the two languages. The learners got more opportunities to use two languages, English and Tamil which led to higher bilingual proficiency. There should be more opportunities to use the languages for two reasons: 1) the learners will be looking for chances to use the languages, and 2) the school, community, and family will work harder to create bilingual environments. It is important to note that family, school, and community should cooperate with each other to create these environments, which will then lead to the bilingual proficiency of the learners.

Community Involvement

Community members understood the rationale and the critical components of bilingual and ESL programs and be strong advocates of the program. The community was well aware of the bilingual education programs and were strong advocates of the programs. Community members established strong linkages with the schools, shared staff, and built resources and expertise.

▪ Classroom Climate

The classrooms strongly reflected the school climate—different styles but common intrinsic characteristics, such as high expectations for all learners, recognition and honoring of socio-cultural, socio-economic and linguistic differences, learners as active participants in their own education, parents and community members were actively involved in the classrooms through tutoring, sharing experiences, reading, planning activities, etc. The classroom environment communicated high expectations for all learners, including Limited English Proficient learners. Teachers sought ways to value cultural and linguistic differences and fully integrated them into the curriculum.

Conclusion

The study clearly showed that a lot of advantages were gained by the students in the English medium classes in Jaffna Hindu college and J/ Vembadi Girls's High School. The English as medium of instruction gives a gate- way to the learners to aim tremendous goals in their life. The attitude of the children have changed a lot after they opted for English medium classes and this change would result in integrating the various communities of the country. However, we need to observe more to improve the English medium education and the entire stakeholders connected to English medium education need to provide their fullest cooperation to extend the English medium education to all the schools located throughout the island.

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