

The Influence of Sociolinguistic Knowledge on English Language Teaching Practice

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English to multilingual students whose first language is Sinhala or Tamil has reshaped the understanding of English language learning as a socially situated and multilingual process in the Sri Lankan context. Employing a qualitative reflective approach, this study examined the influence of five sociolinguistic principles: 1) code-switching, 2) language and identity, 3) gender and social class, 4) attitudes toward linguistic prestige and 5) community and cultural context, on the classroom practices of English language learning of forty undergraduates at a faculty of technology in a Sri Lankan university. The findings show that allowing the students to switch between their first language and English aids comprehension, supports learning, and values multilingualism. Translanguaging tasks such as brainstorming in the students' native language before expressing ideas in English supported recognition of the students' identities, build confidence, and highlighted the need for teacher sensitivity to language and identity. Group activities with shared leadership and mixed-gender participation encouraged equal involvement, boosted the female students' confidence, and challenged the gendered communication patterns. Recognizing Sri Lankan English and prioritizing intelligibility over native-like accents helped the students view English as a shared resource, enhancing participation. Incorporating local cultural practices, such as community-relevant speech topics, made learning meaningful and connected to the students' experiences. The study implies that English language teachers should foster inclusive and socially responsive classrooms by encouraging controlled code-switching and translanguaging, ensuring equal participation, and valuing local English varieties. They should also emphasize communicative clarity over accent and use culturally relevant materials to support students' identities and linguistic strengths.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Code switching, English language learning, Multilingual, Identity

INTRODUCTION

English language instructors in Sri Lanka mostly teach students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. A large proportion of students are bilingual or multilingual with Sinhala or Tamil as their first language and English as an additional language (Wijesekera, 2014). In such a context, English language learning cannot be viewed merely as an acquisition of grammatical knowledge but must be understood as a social practice shaped by community, identity, and cultural experience (Canagarajah, 2005). Therefore, English language classrooms in Sri Lanka become spaces where multiple linguistic repertoires interact, overlap, and often blend.

Drawing from this understanding, English language instruction at the university level places greater emphasis on developing communicative competence, academic literacy, and spoken fluency in both academic and professional contexts. Sociolinguistics can provide a good understanding of the role of language in society where issues like power, prestige, identity, class, and social environment play a crucial role in language use (Parakrama, 1995; Gunesequera, 2005). Having studied sociolinguistics, the two authors of this study

understood that multilingual students carry linguistic resources that should be recognized and utilized rather than suppressed.

The sociolinguistic approach to teaching English promotes translanguaging, code-switching, and the legitimization of local language varieties, shifting the focus from native-speaker accents to intelligible and contextually meaningful communication (Coperahewa, 2011; Kachru, 1992). While previous research has highlighted the role of sociolinguistic principles in language teaching and the importance of recognizing multilingual students' linguistic resources (i.e., (Parakrama, 1995; Gunesequera, 2005), there is limited empirical evidence on how these principles are applied in Sri Lankan university classrooms. Therefore, this study examined the influence of sociolinguistic principles on the practice of teaching English to a group of undergraduates at a faculty of technology in Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section presents the literature review of this study that consists of six themes.

Sociolinguistics and Language as a Social Practice

Sociolinguistics emphasizes the fact that language is not just a set of grammar and vocabulary, but a social practice that is conditioned by cultural, inter-personal, and situational contexts of communication. According to Hymes (1972), language use can only be explained by looking at how people use language to undertake social activities, build relationships, and enhance identity. This approach transcends the understanding of language as a neutral and rule-bound system and emphasizes the dynamic and socially constructed character of language. Holmes (2013) also elaborates on how the linguistic choices of speakers depend on their social status, setting, and group membership, which depicts how language has a social connotation and reflects cultural values.

In English language learning situations, especially in a multilingual society, language acquisition is not only based on learning linguistic forms, but on the ability to negotiate social identities and cultural norms via communication. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) observe that learners of language have to acquire the way language works in real interactions that construct and are constructed by relationships, communities, and social expectations. Consequently, understanding language as a social practice is essential for developing English language instruction methods that are contextually relevant, meaning-making, and attentive to the learners' lived linguistic experiences.

English in the Sri Lankan Sociolinguistic Landscape

In Sri Lanka, the English language has a unique and historically entrenched status, which is conditioned by the colonial history of the country due to its persistence in relation to education, employment, and social mobility. It has a strong association with administrative power, elite identity, and access to socio-economic opportunities, and became firmly established after British colonial rule (Parakrama, 1995). Consequently, English competence has been regarded as an indicator of prestige, and this has added to the social rift between individuals who have access to English education and those who do not. This has positioned English not only as a language of communication but as a symbol of cultural capital in the Sri Lankan society.

English usage in Sri Lanka has however, changed over time. The English language has been localized, with the phonological, lexical, and syntax patterns of the Sinhalese and Tamil languages contributing to the development of what is now known as the Sri Lankan English (SLE) (Gunesequera, 2005). This localized variety indicates the identity and cultural experience of Sri Lankan speakers and challenges the notion that that English must conform to native-speaker norms to be considered "correct." Canagarajah (2005) emphasizes that the Sri Lankan English language reveals how it can be localized to address the communicative needs of the local people instead of imitating other languages.

English is a connecting language used between Sinhala and Tamil groups in modern Sri Lanka, and it is an important aspect of higher education, tourism, and the professional world (Coperahewa, 2011). Accepting the

Sri Lankan English as a valid variety, rather than a deviation, can support more inclusive teaching that affirms students' local identities and linguistic resources. Such an outlook promotes a shift away of prescriptive, colonial views of English to a contextual, functional and culturally grounded application of the English language.

Multilingualism in the Sri Lankan Classroom

Classrooms in the Sri Lankan universities are naturally multilingual environments, where students bring Sinhala,

Tamil and English linguistic resources into their learning. Multilingualism affects not only the linguistic resources that students bring to the classroom but also their patterns of interaction and participation structures (Canagarajah, 2013). In meaning negotiation, clarification requests, and peer collaboration, students utilize their entire linguistic repertoires. According to Wijesekera (2014), a monolingual approach is not effective for teaching English in Sri Lanka, whereas a bilingual medium of instruction can support students by connecting English to familiar languages and cultural contexts. Consequently, the recognition of multilingual habits would trigger a more considerate, context-sensitive pedagogical approach, in which linguistic diversity is viewed as an asset, instead of an obstacle to language acquisition.

Code-Switching and Translanguaging in ELT

Bilingual speakers employ common communicative strategies, including code-switching and translanguaging, and studies generally highlight the benefits of these practices in the teaching and learning process. According to Garcia and Wei (2014), translanguaging enables learners to strategically switch between languages to gain a better understanding of the language, identity, and confidence building. Code-switching has been found to facilitate the process of clarification, alleviate anxiety and enhance conceptual learning in the Sri Lankan classrooms (Coperahewa, 2011). Canagarajah (2011) emphasizes that rather than stifling local language use, a teacher is supposed to promote fluid language practices which is a characteristic of real communication patterns. Classrooms become more inclusive, interactive, and meaningful when teachers allow students to draw on all their linguistic resources.

Language, Identity, and Classroom Participation

Learning of language is closely related to identity strategies, self-esteem, and sense of belonging in the learning context. According to Norton (2013), students invest in language learning when they perceive that their identities are respected. In Sri Lanka, students can be reluctant to use English because of the fear of being judged when it comes to pronunciation, grammar, etc., and where native-like English is treasured (Parakrama, 1995). Further, the identification of the Sri Lankan English as legitimate assists students to contribute more easily since their linguistic identity gets legitimized rather than marginalized (Gunsekera, 2005). When students' identities are recognized, they become more willing to take communicative risks, participate actively, and perceive English as accessible rather than distant or elitist.

Native-Speaker Norms vs Communicative Intelligibility

Traditional English language teaching has tended to advance the norms of native speakers as the desired goal of learners. Sociolinguistic studies however dispel this assumption by focusing on communicative intelligibility and not native-like accuracy. According to Kachru (1992) and Jenkins (2009), English has become a lingua franca in the world; therefore, the major purpose should not be imitation but good communication. In addition, local varieties and locally significant communication practices should be used in the Sri Lankan context since they enable the learners to experience greater authenticity (Canagarajah, 2005). When teaching focuses on understandable English rather than just "correct" English, learners can use English language in real-life situations without fear of making mistakes. This change establishes a more accommodative and realistic pedagogical model to English language learning.

Though the relationship between language and identity and learner confidence is emphasized in research (Norton, 2013; Coperahewa, 2011), there is a scarcity of focus on how Sri Lankan undergraduates perceive

their multilingual identities in English classrooms. Alternatively, little focus has been directed towards how they deal with matters of linguistic insecurity, confidence, and communicative choice in institutions of learning. Thus, this study highlights the need to adapt English language teaching approaches to align with Sri Lanka's unique sociolinguistic realities to make instruction more contextually relevant and effective.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative reflective research approach to examine how the five sociolinguistic principles influence English language teaching practices of a group of Sri Lankan undergraduates at a faculty of technology of a Sri Lankan university. This approach was suitable as it enabled an in-depth exploration of teaching experiences, multilingual classroom interaction, and identity negotiation in natural learning settings. 40 first-year undergraduates (30 female students and 10 male students) were selected based on voluntary participation from a larger group enrolled in the programme, ensuring a manageable sample for in-depth qualitative analysis. The students communicated in Tamil and Sinhala, with limited proficiency in English.

As an English instructor, the first author communicated in English, Tamil, and Sinhala, shifting between the three languages when needed to support understanding and participation. The classes were held twice a week, with each session lasting two hours, over a period of six months. Data was collected using a reflective journal of the first author. Reflections were maintained weekly, focusing on the student engagement, the impact of multilingual instruction, participation patterns, and the development of confidence in using English within the classroom. In addition to the reflective journal of the first author, field notes were maintained to systematically document student interactions and classroom dynamics.

Data was analyzed using the Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes for recurring patterns, organizing these codes into overarching themes, and interpreting the themes in relation to sociolinguistic theory and classroom practices. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, the observations and reflections that would be recorded, and that their participation was entirely voluntary. These methodological approaches allowed for a systematic and reflective examination of how the sociolinguistic knowledge informs English language teaching in a multilingual classroom context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sociolinguistics has significantly influenced English language teaching by highlighting that language learning is shaped by learners' identity, culture, and social context. By recognizing the value of the undergraduates' first languages, strategies such as code-switching and translanguaging are employed to enhance comprehension and foster learner confidence. This study emphasizes equal participation of students and prioritizes intelligibility over native-like accents, contributing to a shift in English language teaching towards a learner-centered, inclusive, and contextually relevant approach. The following section presents the themes derived from the thematic analysis and discusses them in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and empirical studies.

Code-Switching as a Pedagogical Tool in Teaching

In the past, code-switching was often perceived as a weakness or deficiency in language proficiency. However, sociolinguistic theories have shifted this perception, challenging the negative view of code-switching. An effective pedagogical use of code-switching lies in its ability to help learners overcome linguistic impasses and achieve better understanding through strategic communication (Cook, 2001).

In classroom practice, allowing students to switch between their first language and English during discussions or when explaining complex concepts can facilitate easier comprehension. The first author reflected on teaching experiences and observed that when introducing tenses, particularly distinguishing between the simple past and the present perfect, the students often struggled to grasp the differences in usage. To facilitate comprehension, the students were requested to speak in their native language (Tamil or Sinhala), then translate and use the sentence in English. Similarly, the first author observed that many students often drew comparisons

between similar meanings in their L1 when describing sentences such as 'I ate breakfast at 8 a.m.' and 'I have eaten breakfast already,' which helped them recognize the differences in time and aspect. Making a few resorts to their native language, the students associated the English grammatical form with other familiar linguistic patterns and became aware of the appropriate application of the language in speech and writing. This method facilitates language acquisition and collaborative learning while recognizing that multilingualism is not a limitation but an asset, aligning with the sociolinguistic perspective that language use is contextually and socially constructed (Canagarajah, 1999 & Norton, 2013).

The bilingual negotiation of meaning fostered conceptual clarity and cross-linguistic awareness, illustrating that comprehension improves when learners mobilize their full linguistic resources. These practices reflect key sociolinguistic ideas: language learning connects to identity (Norton, 2013), multilingualism is a strength (Canagarajah, 1999), and communication requires ongoing negotiation of meaning (Cook, 2001). They manifested in the classroom through practices like translation, comparison, and peer discussion, all of which contributed to improved learner confidence, comprehension, and collaboration.

The findings also include significant pedagogical implications for both classroom practice and teacher education. Teachers can adopt integrative language use by incorporating activities that permit students to alternate between L1 and English (i.e., translation-based discussions, bilingual glossaries, and comparative grammar exercises). Also, collaborative learning activities that encourage peer explanations in both L1 and L2 can scaffold weaker learners' understanding while keeping English as the primary communicative medium. For a sustainable impact, teacher training programs should include modules on sociolinguistically informed pedagogy, enabling educators to make principled decisions about when and how to apply code-switching and translanguaging effectively. By embedding these strategies within teacher development and classroom design, English language teaching can become more inclusive, learner-centered and contextually relevant.

Identity and Language in the Classroom

There is a correlation between the English language and identity as the English language is not only a communication tool, but also a symbol of one's cultural and social belongings (Holmes, 2013). According to the results of this study, the sample of undergraduates mostly experienced anxiety and a lack of confidence in using English, which may be linked to the issues related to identity. The first author encouraged students to present their linguistic backgrounds and provided Tamil and Sinhala examples to demonstrate that all languages are equally valuable. This strategy is in line with the principle of translanguaging that enables learners to use their entire linguistic repertoire for meaning making and idea expression (Garcia and Wei, 2014). An inclusive classroom incorporated translanguaging tasks such as group discussions where students first brainstormed in their native language before expressing their ideas in English; in this way, students' identities were valued, and their confidence in learning English was strengthened. Therefore, English language teachers need to be more sensitive to issues of identity when teaching language.

The classroom data revealed that students' confidence and participation improved when their linguistic identities were acknowledged and integrated into the learning process. Translanguaging practices such as allowing discussions to begin in Tamil or Sinhala before transitioning to English helped many of the students to express ideas more freely and build conceptual understanding. These observations reflect key sociolinguistic principles: language functions as a marker of identity and belonging (Holmes, 2013); translanguaging affirms learners' linguistic identities (García & Wei, 2014); and inclusive pedagogy values linguistic diversity (Norton, 2013). By incorporating examples from the students' mother tongues and positioning them as legitimate contributors to classroom discourse, the teacher reduced learners' anxiety and fostered a sense of empowerment, transforming the classroom into a space where linguistic diversity was seen as a resource rather than a barrier.

The findings further underscore the pedagogical need for identity-sensitive teaching approaches in English language classrooms. Teachers should design tasks that integrate translanguaging strategies such as bilingual brainstorming sessions, comparative discussions, and reflective language autobiographies, to bridge students' linguistic worlds. In teacher training, incorporating modules on sociolinguistic awareness can help educators recognize how identity influences participation, motivation, and classroom interaction. Such preparation

enables teachers to strike a balance between promoting English proficiency and affirming students' cultural and linguistic identities, thereby creating more inclusive and empowering learning environments.

Language, Gender, and Class Sociolinguistics

The awareness of classroom power building has also been enhanced by the comprehension of language, gender, and social class. Linguistic behavior, such as interruptions, style of speaking or the degree of participation, may indicate greater social inequalities at large (Cameron, 1998). In this study, group activities were designed to rotate leadership and encourage undergraduates of all genders and diverse social backgrounds to participate equally, thereby promoting inclusivity.

Promoting balanced participation through mixed-gender group activities can challenge gendered communication patterns and foster greater equality in classroom interactions. For example, during a classroom discussion on social media communication, male students were more likely to speak in English, while female students tended to remain mostly silent. To strike a balance in their participation, mixed-gender groups were formed, and the female students were appointed as discussion leaders. This practice not only boosted confidence of the female students but also altered the patterns of interaction of the male students, who started to listen and to respond more respectfully. These practices help challenge gendered hierarchies in classroom communication and promote equal participation.

The findings highlight the importance of designing gender-responsive and socially inclusive language pedagogy. Teachers can incorporate mixed-group tasks, rotating leadership systems, and structured turn-taking to ensure equitable participation across genders and social backgrounds. Classroom discussions on topics like gender and communication can also help students critically reflect on how social norms influence speech patterns and confidence in using English.

From a teacher education perspective, training programmes should raise awareness of how power relations manifest through language in classroom settings. Modules on critical sociolinguistics can help educators identify subtle forms of exclusion such as dominance in talk time or limited opportunities for certain groups to speak and equip them with strategies to counteract these imbalances. By consciously addressing gendered and class-based communication patterns, teachers can create classroom environments that promote equity, mutual respect, and empowerment through language learning.

Attitudes towards Language and Linguistic Prestige in the Classroom

Learning about and particularly understanding attitudes towards both standard and non-standard varieties of English influences English language teaching. Students often consider that native-like English is the only correct and valuable form, which often makes them feel ashamed, hesitant, or afraid to speak the language. Nonetheless, sociolinguistic studies show that language varieties reflect cultural identity, social affiliation, and historical development, and that effective communication does not need to conform to native-speaker standards (Kachru, 1992). The focus is also placed on intelligibility and contextually appropriate communication rather than on imitating a native-like accent.

Sri Lankan English has standardized features and deserves recognition as a legitimate variety. Accordingly, authentic listening texts featuring a variety of global Englishes, including native accents from professionals in India, Singapore, Kenya, and Malaysia, were used in teaching. When the focus on accent perfection was replaced with communicative clarity, the undergraduates began to see English not as a foreign property but as a shared global resource, which helped reduce feelings of linguistic inadequacy and encouraged greater participation in classroom activities.

The findings emphasize the importance of fostering positive language attitudes and promoting linguistic inclusivity in English classrooms. Teachers should integrate exposure to multiple English varieties through listening materials, peer interactions, and comparative language analysis. Classroom discussions can also be used to challenge stereotypes about "correct" English and highlight the legitimacy of localized forms such as

Sri Lankan English. Such practices help students appreciate linguistic diversity while prioritizing communicative competence over native-like pronunciation.

For teacher education, training programs should include modules on World Englishes and language ideology awareness to help educators critically examine their own attitudes toward language variety and prestige. Teachers who understand the sociolinguistic realities of English as a global language can more effectively model inclusive practices, create confidence-building classroom environments, and help learners develop realistic, identity-affirming goals for language use. Ultimately, this pedagogical shift promotes a more equitable and empowering understanding of English in multilingual contexts.

Community, Culture, and the Local Context of Language Use

Language is not a vacuum and is deeply embedded in communal practices and cultural norms. Accordingly, local cultural backgrounds are included in classroom discussions, learning materials, and assessment design. It was noticed that English is abstract and far removed from the lives of many undergraduates, which led to disengagement from classroom learning and participation. To dispel this, activities were organized in a manner as the students were requested to refer to community practices, including greetings, honorifics, narratives, the media and religious manifestations to illustrate that English can be used to convey culturally specific meanings.

In this study, undergraduates were asked to choose topics relevant to their community (e.g., environmental issues, cultural festivals, or family expectations) and organize a speech for a persuasive speaking assignment. This approach made learning more engaging and positioned English as a tool for meaningful, real-life expression. Practical experience and academic language enable students to internalize English not as a forced requirement but as a meaningful and valuable skill (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Cummins, 2001). This approach demonstrates that culturally responsive teaching can bridge the gap between students' lived experiences and language learning, fostering both engagement and deeper comprehension.

The findings highlight the value of culturally responsive teaching as a strategy to enhance learner engagement and linguistic development. Teachers can incorporate community-based topics, local narratives, and culturally familiar examples into lessons to bridge the gap between academic English and students' lived experiences. Classroom assessments can also include tasks (i.e., reflective writing, storytelling, or community project presentations) that encourage students to express cultural identity through English.

From a professional development perspective, teacher training programs should help educators build cultural competence and understand how sociocultural factors shape language learning. Workshops and training modules can focus on developing teachers' ability to design materials that reflect local culture while maintaining academic rigor. By embracing a culturally responsive approach, English teachers can transform classrooms into inclusive, meaningful spaces where language learning is both personally relevant and socially empowering.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the influence sociolinguistics knowledge has profoundly shaped the researchers' approach to English language teaching. Understanding concepts such as language variation, language and identity, and code-switching has helped them to become more reflective, inclusive, and responsive to students' linguistic realities. It has encouraged to move away from a monolithic view of English and embrace the multilingual realities of our learners. Ultimately, this shift not only enhances students' linguistic competence, but also empowers them to see English as a flexible and accessible means of global communication.

This study suggest that English language teachers encourage controlled code-switching by allowing students to use their first language strategically to clarify concepts and connect to English, especially during complex discussions. To integrate translanguaging activities, tasks that allow student to think, plan, and collaborate in their own languages before presenting in English can be used to foster confidence and deeper understanding of language use. To promote inclusivity, teachers can monitor students' participation to ensure providing equal

speaking opportunities to both male and female students and students of different social backgrounds. Leadership roles can be assigned to empower quieter students. Further, to value Sri Lankan English, students can be encouraged to achieve communicative clarity over accent imitation. They should be encouraged to consider that Sri Lankan English as a valid and meaningful language variety. On the other hand, teachers can use culturally relevant materials when selecting examples, topics, and activities. Those are connected to learners' communities and make English learning meaningful and relatable. Thus, English language learning has to be considered as socially constructed, and teachers should support students' identities, experiences, and linguistic strengths.

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