



Exploring the Effectiveness of Sri Lanka's Language Proficiency Support for Bilingual Education Teachers

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Abstract

This research investigates the effectiveness of Language Proficiency Support Systems (LPSS) in Bilingual Education (BE) in Sri Lanka. The Bilingual Education Program, initiated in 2001, aims to improve teachers' cognitive skills and academic language proficiency in English. However, BE faces challenges due to varying levels of language proficiency among teachers. The study aims to identify linguistic challenges for teachers, explore existing support mechanisms, and propose strategies to enhance language proficiency and pedagogical skills. The research targets teachers of BE and teacher educators, with a sample size of thirty across the country. The research design is survey-based, and the instruments are questionnaires and interviews. The study reveals gaps in current LPSS and suggests the need for targeted interventions to improve bilingual education and teacher training. Effective bilingual teachers require fluency in their first language (L1) and English (L2), with robust pedagogical skills to navigate bilingual classrooms effectively. The proposed plan includes revising teacher education curricula, providing specialized language proficiency training, organizing workshops on bilingual pedagogy, and integrating technology into teaching practices. Enhanced community engagement and professional development opportunities are crucial for continuous improvement. The proposed interventions aim to foster improved student outcomes and contribute to the broader discourse on bilingual education.

Keywords: Language Proficiency Support Systems (LPSS); Bilingual Education (BE); Teacher Education Program (TEP); CLIL; BICS; CALP

Introduction

This research aims to explore the challenges for BE teachers in the Sri Lankan context and propose effective strategies to address these issues. The study focuses on the need for teacher education programs that support language proficiency and pedagogical skills, and the specific needs and challenges faced by BE teachers.

The problem is rooted in the lack of teachers capable of teaching subject content in English (CLIL classroom), often due to the use of Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI) and poor teaching methods. The lack of training for teachers specifically designed for BE is another issue. Thus, the principals and the zonal departments should pay attention to improving bilingual education and teacher education programs in Sri Lanka. The research aims to improve the effectiveness of bilingual teachers by addressing language proficiency gaps and student learning outcomes. The findings will help prepare policy and practice, leading to targeted interventions and improvements in bilingual education in Sri Lanka. The research also aims to strengthen teacher education programs by integrating language proficiency support, equipping future teachers with the necessary skills to meet the diverse needs of students.

Many graduates are directly recruited without professional qualifications until they complete a postgraduate diploma in education. The Western Province advertisement for 'English Medium' teachers mandates a degree, written examination, general interview, and practical test. However, English language proficiency is not evaluated, and candidates should acquire proficiency in Sinhala Language. Orientation programs are inadequate for understanding BE pedagogy and scaffolding strategies, and postgraduate diplomas do not include specialized components on BE or CLIL (NEC, 2024). Therefore, teacher education programs play a crucial role in BE teacher professional development. LPSS for BE teachers in Sri Lanka is vital for promoting linguistic equity, enhancing instructional quality, fostering cultural sensitivity, improving student outcomes, strengthening community partnerships, and supporting professional development. Effective communication is essential for BE teachers to effectively communicate with students, parents, and colleagues in both languages. Therefore, LPSS provides training in cultural competence, helping teachers understand the cultural backgrounds and identities of their students, and fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

Objectives

General objectives

Explore and propose effective language proficiency support systems for bilingual teachers enrolled in teacher education programs in Sri Lanka.

Specific objectives

- To identify the specific linguistic challenges faced by BE teachers in delivering instruction effectively and examine the current support mechanisms and interventions available for BE teachers to enhance language proficiency among them.
- To provide recommendations for the implementation and refinement of language proficiency support systems within teacher education programs for BE teachers in Sri Lanka.

- To contribute to the broader discourse on language support systems for bilingual educators and inform policy and practice in bilingual education, nationally and internationally.

Materials and Methods

This research employed quantitative and qualitative approaches, utilizing graphs and pie charts for quantitative data and content analysis for qualitative data, with narrative stories explaining interview results. The research followed a survey design using questionnaires with both open and close-ended questions followed by online interviews. The survey sample included thirty bilingual teachers randomly selected from across the country and the interviews were held with five teacher educators from various institutions such as universities including the National Institute of Education (NIE), the Ministry of Education (MoE), and provincial zonal education offices. Research tools were developed based on the objectives. The interviews were open-ended. Thematic Content Analysis was utilized for data analysis and the interpretation involved graphs and pie charts.

Results and Discussion Teachers (Ts)

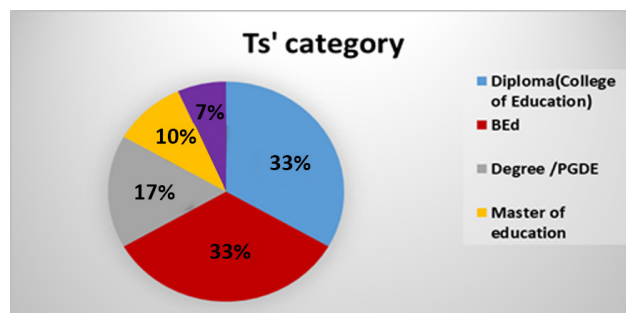


Figure 1. According to BE Teachers' views based on the teacher's higher studies

As Figure 1 depicts, most of the teachers in the sample are trained at NCoEs (33%) and another 33% of teachers have a Bachelor of Education. Only 7% of teachers have completed a master's degree as an academic qualification.

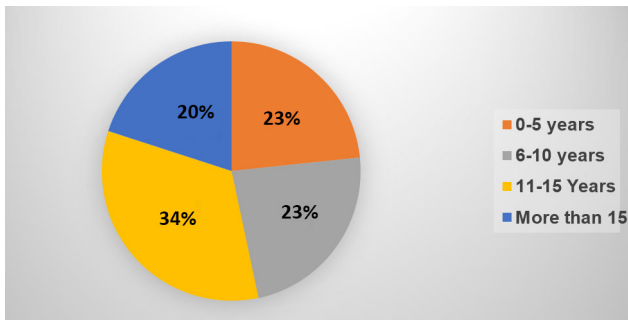


Figure 2. Bilingual Teachers' experiences in their services

Figure 2 depicts that 34% of the teachers have 11-15 years of experience in bilingual education while other teachers are equally distributed among different service experiences in bilingual education.

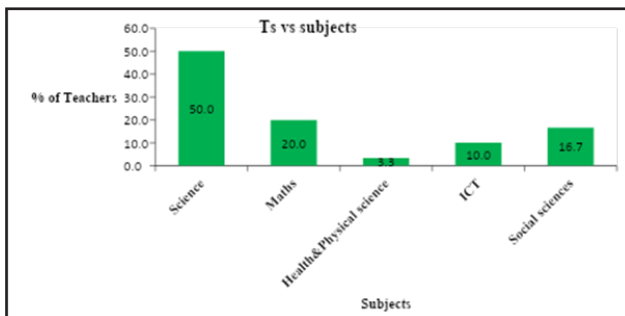


Figure 3. Percentage of teachers based on subjects taught

As illustrated in Figure 3, a maximum of 50% of teachers teach science subjects, while 70% of teachers teach both Science and Mathematics. A minimum of 3.3% of teachers teach Health and Physical Education in English medium.

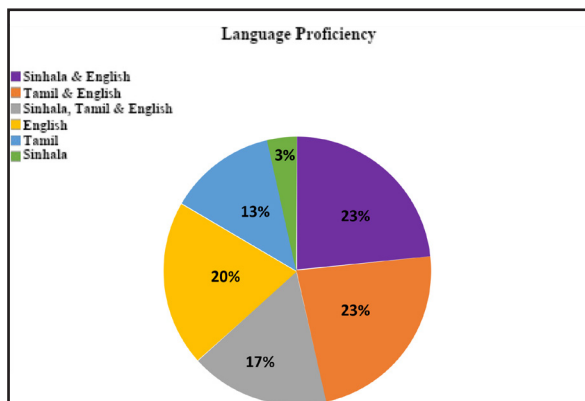


Figure 4. Language proficiencies

As per Figure 4, a maximum of 23% of teachers mention that they are proficient in both Sinhala and English/Tamil and English whereas 20% of teachers are proficient in English. The latter may be because they are English teachers who usually teach humanities subjects such as Civics, and Geography in English medium. in English Medium. Though teaching in English medium or bilingual education classes, 3% of teachers mention that they are proficient only in their mother tongue -Sinhala language. Similarly, 14% of teachers declare that they are proficient only in Tamil language. This shows the importance of LPSS to the teachers who are in the bilingual education system and teaching in English.

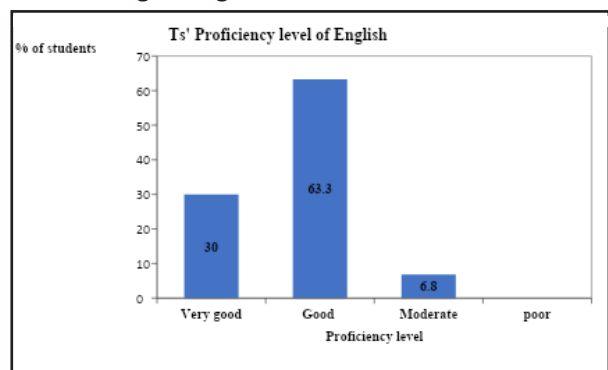


Figure 5. Proficiency Level of English

Figure 5 shows that a maximum of 63.3% of Ts are good in English language proficiency, while 30% are very good in the English language. However, only 6.8% of people mentioned that they are moderately competent in English language teaching.

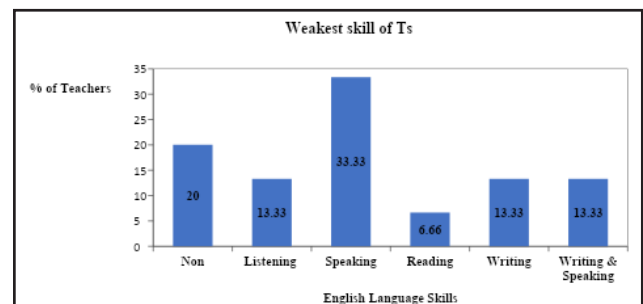


Figure 6. Weakest English language kills

As per Figure 6, 33.33% of teachers have poor speaking skills. However, 20% did not mention that they are weak in English language proficiency, because they may be English teachers but teaching subjects in English in BE classes. 6.66% of teachers also self-assess that they are weak in reading skills.

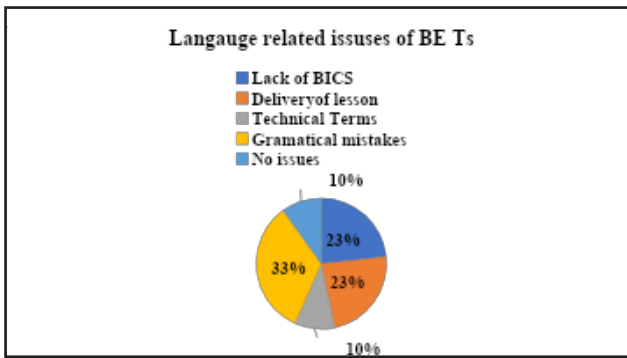


Figure 7. Language-related issues of BE teachers

Figure 7 depicts that a maximum of 34% of teachers accept that they are making grammatical mistakes while delivering the lesson and that they are aware of that. However, 10% of teachers do not have any issues related to the teaching content in the English language, and the same percentage of teachers recognize that they have problems with technical jargon. Around 23% of teachers report problems in delivering the lessons due to poor speaking skills or lack of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS).

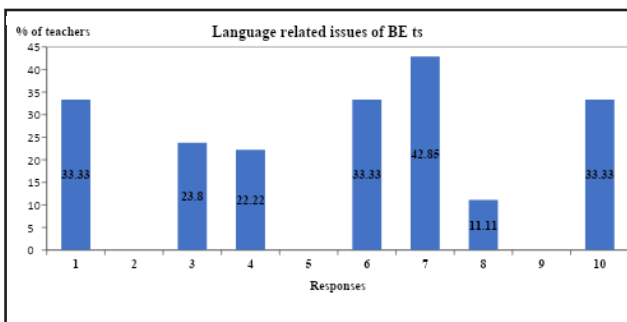


Figure 8. Language-related issues of BE teachers based on the teacher's subject

Figure 8 shows that a maximum of 42.85% of science teachers are weak in English language grammar. Social science teachers have not mentioned having problems in BICS because most of them may be English language teachers. At the same time, science teachers declare no issue with technical terms. 33.33% of science teachers recognize having problems in BICS while social science teachers mentioned that they do not have issues regarding teaching/learning.

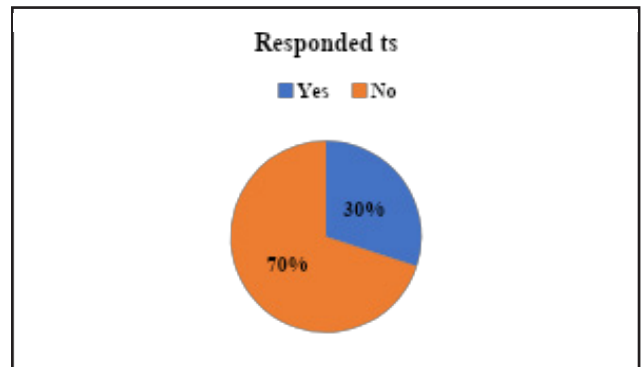


Figure 9. Participation in language-related Teacher education/training programs

As the pie chart depicts, 70% of teachers have not received any teacher education related to language either soft CLIL or hard CLIL. Only 30% of teachers have received language-related training and short courses. Among them, most are language teachers, and they have done soft CLIL courses and training programs. They have not followed any training program related to Cognitive Academic Language proficiency (CALP). Some teachers have mentioned participation in language-related training at the NCoEs and during the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program but not CALP.

BE teachers have highlighted the necessity of Language Proficiency Support Systems (LPSS) to cater to their language needs. They propose several LPSS-related initiatives, including language courses like soft CLIL and language workshops in their localities.

Teacher views: Open-ended questions in the questionnaire

A teacher mentioned translation and simplicity of content output are necessary. That is true, if teachers have a clear idea about CLIL, soft CLIL, and hard CLIL, they can use scaffolding strategies and techniques and simplify the content by using some translanguaging techniques like code-switching, mixing, and translation, and deliver the lesson well.

According to the teachers, teacher education programs must include better support for BE teachers. They suggest, for instance, seminars, and awareness programs and especially subjects such as civics,

health & physical education. Another important suggestion is providing modules for English medium subjects. Motivation to take TOEFL IELTS examinations by giving incentives such as fee reimbursements, providing additional language-related teaching learning material other than Teacher Guides, and training to develop their English-speaking ability are among the other suggestions.

The NCoE-trained teachers have mentioned that BE teachers should be trained to improve their subject knowledge, specifically improving vocabulary. More suggestions include organizing more CLIL model lessons to learn various techniques to teach the subject in English, providing technical support to learn the English language, teaching about STEM, and providing an in-depth understanding of language and subject concepts. Continuing professional training programs, CLIL concepts and methodology, and subject-based methodology have also been suggested by the participant teachers.

Some teachers mentioned that they do not have any issues, and they have proper training from NIE about CLIL, and that as a result, they have learned a lot of strategies and techniques in pedagogy. It leads to minimizing the language-related issues in the teaching–learning process.

Teachers' views about Teacher educators

Teachers believe that teacher educators should also know CALP because most of the BE teacher educators are from English Language backgrounds and not content-related educators. As per the respondents, educators must have an in-depth understanding of content knowledge and English including BICS and CALP. The teacher educators, as per the responses, should be content teachers who are proficient in English language knowledge so that they have an easy understanding and handle their real pedagogical issues related to subjects BE. Teacher educators should be sent to foreign training programs in CLIL. The respondents also suggest that foreigners or native speakers should be recruited as resource persons to improve

our language skills. According to the Teachers' view teacher educators should get the help of the British Council. Teacher educators should also participate in language training programs. This, as respondents mentioned, can be done by organizing a conference for teacher educators/teachers to discuss updates on BE and CLIL.

4.0 BE-related Teacher Educator Views Based on Interview

The interviews with five teacher-educator participants revealed the following.

- Language proficiency (LP) is crucial for the effectiveness of BE teachers.
- Integrate LP within BE theories and concepts, particularly in CLIL classrooms.
- Teachers should be proficient in both the native language and target language, to address different pedagogic needs and cognitive targets.
- Language-related challenges impact teacher performance and student outcomes in multilingual classrooms, where language is the vehicle to achieve content-related outcomes.
- BE teachers play dual roles as language and content teachers, with their pedagogical effectiveness underpinned by their linguistic capacity.
- Current teacher education programs in Sri Lanka adopt a monoglossic view, treating language as a separate component and not adequately addressing it in pre-service and in-service programs, except for the Postgraduate Diploma by PGIE of the Open University.
- There are teacher education programs offered by the British Council, Ministry of Education, universities, and the NIE, but they often do not focus on CALP and mostly practice soft CLIL.
- Courses for BE teachers should integrate translanguaging theories and concepts, focusing on the necessary linguistic input for teaching in BE.

- Language development programs for BE teachers should be based on BE-related theories and concepts, including CLIL and translanguaging, to improve their L2 proficiency.
- Successful initiatives from other contexts, like translanguaging research and the 4Cs curriculum-based theory, can inform local models.
- Teacher education programs should address the specific needs of bilingual educators, focusing on additive bilingualism and developing both language proficiency and the ability to handle linguistic components in BE classrooms.
- Programs like the scholarship offered by the Ministry of Education through PGIE and the CLIL program by the SLIIT campus are sufficient to fulfil the needs but need further refinement.
- BE teacher educators possess some proficiency in soft CLIL and hard CLIL methodologies but need to improve their knowledge and skills in CALP and BICS.
- Important to improve proficiency standards by pursuing related courses, gaining practical perspectives, and organizing teacher empowerment programs.
- Prospective BE teachers need training in CLIL, and in-service teachers need more support with linguistic skills.

5.0 Discussion and Recommendations

In Sri Lanka, bilingual education began in 2001, reflecting the country's common reality of bilingualism. Contemporary bilingual teachers come from colleges of education and universities with varying proficiency in Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). English teachers often teach humanities subjects like Civics and Geography but may lack CALP, while Science and Maths teachers may be rich in CALP but lack BICS. Both are essential for delivering the content effectively in BE. Teachers must be proficient in English as a link language (L2) to empower them with the necessary skills and confidence. Effective BE

teachers must be fluent in their first language (L1) and L2 (English), possess pedagogical skills to transfer knowledge, and manage BICS and CALP, with CALP dominant in BE classrooms. Self-directed studies, and professional development through institutions like the National Institute of Education (NIE), universities, the Ministry of Education, and provincial and zonal authorities may be utilized to improve L2. These organizations offer pre-service and in-service training through workshops, seminars, and courses such as PGD, MEd, and B.Ed. The Ministry of Education offers a scholarship program through the Postgraduate Institute of English for a limited number of teachers to pursue a PGDip in Bilingual Education, while the NIE, provincial, and zonal authorities conduct continuous teacher development short programs. Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology offers an accelerated CLIL program as a Professional Certificate course, and the British Council conducts workshops for those with an English language background.

For effective teaching in BE, language proficiency standards (LPSS) are essential. A comprehensive curriculum should be designed. This program must include second language acquisition theories, bilingual teaching methodologies, language assessment techniques, and cultural competence. These components should be integrated into existing courses, providing pre-service teachers with practical experience in BE classrooms through field experiences and practicum placements supervised by experienced BE educators. Professional development workshops and seminars led by experienced educators, linguists, and cultural experts should be offered.

Language immersion programs or cultural exchanges can enhance language skills and cultural awareness. Technology-based resources and tools should be incorporated to support language learning and proficiency development, with training on integrating technology into bilingual teaching practices.

Integrating CLIL principles into teacher education programs helps BE teachers teach academic content while developing language proficiency. Field experi-

ences and internships in diverse BE classrooms allow pre-service teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. Teacher educators in Sri Lanka must be proficient in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, possess advanced education degrees, and demonstrate expertise in educational theory, pedagogy, and research methods. They should have specialized knowledge in bilingual education theory and practice, extensive teaching experience in bilingual settings, and engage in continuous professional development. Cultural competence and sensitivity, strong pedagogical skills, and active participation in research related to bilingual education are crucial. These qualifications enable teacher educators to effectively support and empower bilingual teachers, ensuring high-quality teacher education in Sri Lanka.

Conclusions

Language Proficiency Support Systems (LPSS) for bilingual teachers in Sri Lanka play a vital role in education. Around 66% of bilingual teachers come from National Colleges of Education (NCoE), and many BE teachers also hold a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree, while few have master's degrees. In terms of experience, the sample consisted of teachers with approximately 34% with 11-15 years of teaching experience, 70% of them teaching subjects like science and mathematics in English. English proficiency among teachers varies, with 30% reporting high proficiency, while others face challenges in speaking and reading. Common difficulties include grammatical mistakes, content-based language issues, and understanding of technical jargon. In the participant teacher cohort, only 30% of teachers have received proper training in programs like Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This highlights the need for more support. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that many findings of the present study corroborate the findings of the NEC report on "Situational Analysis of Bilingual Education Approach (English Medium Instruction) in Sri Lankan Government and Government-Assisted Schools: Towards Informed Policy Recommendations" (Wijesekera & Nanayakkara, 2024).

BE teachers advocate for enhanced LPSS through language courses, workshops, and tailored training, especially within the first three years of service. They also suggest offering free TOEFL and IELTS preparation, more teaching materials, and awareness programs. Teacher educators play a key role in overcoming these challenges. Teacher education needs a shift towards a heteroglossic approach that also includes CALP and BICS framework. Authorities must ensure all BE teachers participate in continuing education programs. The zonal and provincial authorities should organize CLIL training with national-level resource persons due to the scarcity of such resources.

Suggestions/ Recommendations

Based on the findings the proposed plan aims to enhance the teacher education program for bilingual teachers in the Sri Lankan education system by conducting a comprehensive needs assessment, revising the curriculum, offering language proficiency training programs, organizing bilingual pedagogy workshops, and integrating technology tools. The needs assessment should involve input from educators, students, parents, and community stakeholders to understand bilingual learners' linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical needs. The curriculum should reflect the linguistic diversity of Sri Lanka, with equal emphasis on Sinhala/ Tamil and English language proficiency. It should also integrate content and language learning across all subject areas to promote holistic development for bilingual learners. Language proficiency training programs should be offered for pre-service and in-service teachers to enhance their proficiency in Sinhala/ Tamil and English. Bilingual pedagogy workshops should focus on practical techniques for scaffolding language and content learning, promoting language development across the curriculum, and fostering cultural inclusivity in the classroom.

Technology integration should be integrated into the teacher education program, training teachers to use digital platforms, educational apps, and multimedia resources to enhance language acquisition,

provide differentiated instruction, and facilitate communication with bilingual students and families. Community engagement and partnerships should be fostered with bilingual communities, local schools, and educational organizations to create collaborative learning opportunities. Community-based learning centres or resource hubs can be established to enhance teachers' language proficiency and teaching effectiveness in bilingual settings.

A multifaceted approach is needed to enhance the capacity of teacher educators working with bilingual teachers, including specialized workshops and seminars on language proficiency and bilingual education, courses, language immersion experiences, training programs on bilingual pedagogy and instructional strategies, peer learning and collaboration, research and scholarship, and technology integration into professional development programs. The quality of the teacher education program determines the quality of teacher educators in bilingual contexts. Some teachers suggest programs to enhance listening and communication skills, and language development, including free IELTS courses. It is suggested that bilingual teachers undertake an English course like IELTS within the initial 3 years of service to either progress in their teaching careers or confirm their service. Moreover, efforts should be made to bolster writing and speaking abilities through continuous teacher training programs focused on language skills improvement. This training should encompass both language proficiency and subject matter knowledge. The ideal approach should encompass the renewal of knowledge across all four language skills in an academic manner, ensuring comprehensive language proficiency enhancement.

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