

Stories of Teaching and Learning Practices

学習・教育実践の成功談・失敗談

From second language educator to second language education researcher: Learning to research during volatile times



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INTRODUCTION

When Covid-19 and the pandemic-led economic slump caused a major upheaval in Sri Lanka, it obstructed the execution of my research study, posing unprecedented challenges to access resources and data collection. Following a reflective narrative, this article recounts the challenges I encountered, choices I made, and the lessons I learnt as an education researcher when implementing my research project in Sri Lanka. While these were indeed problems to overcome, they have afforded me more opportunities to develop my knowledge, adaptability and skills as a researcher and a teacher.

When I started lecturing at a Sri Lankan university as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, I soon became more interested in the English language learning that occurred in the school system. Around the same time, I got a scholarship to pursue my graduate studies at a Japanese university. It allowed me to make a systematic inquiry into the field that I am passionate about, English language education. Being one of the first enrollees in the Bilingual Education Project (BEP) of Sri Lanka, I always have had the urge to see how this system was functioning today. I decided to make this the focus of my graduate work.

MY RESEARCH FOCUS: THE BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROJECT

Bilingual Education was introduced into the Sri Lankan education system initially in 2001, via BEP, and was promoted across selected government schools by teaching a few selected subjects in English, while the rest were taught in the official mother tongues, Sinhala and Tamil. The expected outcome was that irrespective of socio-economic and/or regional disparities, students would have the opportunity to acquire a level of English proficiency adequate for higher education and career advancement. Nonetheless, the project is still only available in 732 (7%) government schools, which remain largely ethno-linguistically segregated. Although there is some useful research on the BEP, it is limited. Through my research, I sought to understand the within-school education experience of bilingual learners in Sri Lanka under the auspices of the BEP, with its dual objectives of raising English proficiency and facilitating social integration.

CHOOSING THE RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

I believe that to accommodate the individual needs of students and create a setting conducive to learning, educators should acknowledge the embodied diversity and respect the individuality of each student. Sri Lanka is an ethnically and linguistically diverse nation, hence the largely ethno-linguistically segregated government school system, as a result of the mother-tongue instruction policy (Wijesekara et al., 2019). Therefore, to adhere to my wishes as an ESL teacher, and also to validate my methodical choices, I needed to examine how the BEP is experienced

by these ethnically segregated bilingual learners in each different context. Besides, BEP was implemented to provide equal opportunities for all children and thereby “develop social harmony and social cohesion in a pluralistic society using English as a link” (MOE, 2016, p. 7). To ensure that the experience and views of all ethnicities are well comprehended, I chose three schools to allow insight into the different school contexts: Sinhala and Tamil, and a mixed ethnic context.

As a researcher and a teacher, another thing I deem crucial is the contribution of language teachers in delivering the curriculum. Teachers hold firsthand knowledge of what happens in a classroom. They are the middleman who continuously deals with the administration, education policy and curriculum designers, parents, and most importantly, the learners. Therefore, to gain a reliable, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, I decided to choose both teachers and students as participants, those who are involved in the BEP.

VOLATILE TIMES: COVID-19 AND SRI LANKAN UPHEAVAL

The detrimental effects of the Covid-19 pandemic remain a challenge for public health, the global economy, and the workforce in Sri Lanka, with education being strongly affected (Yang et al., 2022). Implementation of online learning added unexpected stress and confusion for students, teachers, and parents due to a lack of resources and technological knowledge leaving them exhausted (Lucas, G. N, 2020). It was only worsened when school teachers and principals started protesting and launched an extensive strike on 26th February 2020, over the lack of facilities and resources to conduct virtual classes and long-standing salary anomalies. After a year-long closure, the schools gradually resumed in October, 2021. That is when I decided to proceed with data collection, and I soon started preparing for the field visits and the interviews.

The scheduled school visits and interviews were scheduled from June to August in 2022. However, shortly after my visit to Sri Lanka, the government declared a fuel shortage and banned the sale of petrol and diesel for non-essential vehicles for two weeks. This led petrol and diesel prices to rise dramatically, restricting commuting. For months, Sri Lankans were struggling with prolonged power cuts and shortages of fuel, food, and medicine. Anger over the government’s handling of the crisis led to violent protests all around the country and a curfew was imposed periodically during the months of May and June. As a result, schools were again closed for weeks, derailing my plans. I had to cancel and reschedule the school visits and interviews repeatedly, due to the unpredictability. With no means of transportation and schools being closed for weeks, I struggled to execute the study.

PIVOTING

As a funded scholar, deferring my research was impossible. Time management was crucial at this stage. The only resort was to accommodate the situational changes happening in prospective schools. As we moved into 2022, international travel was open, and schools were opening. Staying true to the original objectives, after a thorough examination, I decided to adopt an exploratory phenomenological qualitative research design via a case study, employing semi-structured interviews.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS AMIDST THE CHAOS

There is a wide range of benefits and skills an individual can acquire through any research. When executing my study, foresight was impossible given the unpredictable nature of events happening in Sri Lanka. Instead, I had to constantly assess and evaluate the methodical choices I made. This nurtured my resilience, having to critically analyse challenges and devise timely solutions. One such decision made was the choice of participants. The initial idea for understanding the learning experience in the BEP was to interview randomly selected bilingual students who are currently in school. However, considering the impact of the pandemic, the prolonged teachers’ strike, and the socio-economic crisis on current BEP students’ overall experience, the choice of ‘learner’

participants was shifted to recently graduated alumnae, as they could still clearly recall their experience of the BEP during a time of less disruption.

However, the scheduled visits had to be cancelled repeatedly and at short notice due to the upsurging socio-economic crisis. At this stage, it was necessary that I again consider alternative ways of data collection that would still fit the objectives of the study considering the time constraints weighing on me.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR DATA COLLECTION

Although I was able to undertake teacher-participant interviews face-to-face (though many delays were experienced), the worsening situation facing all meant that schools became a little reticent with their involvement and potential participants being harder to access (particularly student participants). When travelling to field sites and meeting participants were hindered by restricted commuting and inaccessibility to fuel, I decided to conduct interviews online, via Zoom. Zoom allowed me to communicate with geographically dispersed individuals via computers or mobile devices when meeting in person was a non-viable option, during my stay in Sri Lanka and after returning to Japan. With regard to participant selection, teacher participants were chosen via voluntary self-selection sampling. Alumni students, however, had to be chosen via snowball sampling, as the schools failed to provide contact details of alumni students. While these are viable alternatives, they may come with advantages and disadvantages, depending on each context. Thus, I believe it is important that researchers rigorously gauge the methodological fit of these alternative approaches and tools to their research questions, technical requirements, resource implications and ethics (Barclay & Garcia, 2020).

As I write this paper, I am currently analysing the interview data with bilingual learners and teachers. The research called for 26 long-form semi-structured interviews. The data set is providing me with in-depth insight into the bilingual education project. Both students and teachers sense a disharmony and separation among students which they believe occurred when students were separated according to medium of education (as bilingual and monolingual). Another cause for this separation is the perceived superiority and inferiority complex associated with English, which reflects the ideology that prevails in the Sri Lankan society, that English is a denominator of social hierarchy. It seems that although BEP was expected to mediate the ethnolinguistic 'difference' and create collective linguistic habitus for students, student separation as 'bilingual' and 'monolingual' seems to have created a division among learners, regardless of their ethnicity. Apparently, even after two decades of implementing the programme, elitism associated with the English language still prevails, although the BEP was intended to instigate serious attitudinal change towards social integration. Similarly, another recurrent concern that was shared by most participants is the lack of English-speaking practice and reluctance/and or difficulty to speak in English. It seems, although the BEP was implemented to improve English proficiency of students for career advancement and higher education, the programme has fundamentally failed to improve speaking and in consequence, past-pupils are now struggling with spoken language competence at work and higher educational contexts.

The learner/teacher concerns expressed above are crucial to improve language teaching/learning in Sri Lanka. The insight gained from bilingual learners' and teachers' experience of BEP allowed me to recognize gaps in BEP objectives and practice, unfulfilled language needs of ESL learners, and many more issues. I am now aware of what is expected of me as an ESL teacher, the language skills and attitudes that need nurturing, the BEP classroom structural changes that are required, to improve the educational experience of all students. The findings will also/or may benefit future research and iterations of the BEP.

RESEARCH LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR

Education research paves the path to the systematic pursuit of knowledge and facilitates the discovery of reliable practical solutions to improve or solve issues observed in the classroom or any learning-teaching environment. Not only does it add value to professional accreditation, but the constant use of creative analytical skills in tackling issues avail practitioners to become more reflective and effective as educators. When looking back at my research journey so far, it is safe to say that despite posing unprecedented challenges, the pandemic and socio-economic crisis in Sri Lanka have provided me with an invaluable research learning experience. Practising resilience and adaptability in negotiating with education directors, heads of schools, and teachers honed my problem solving skills and increased my self confidence. From working solely to meet institutional criteria, now I feel empowered to act, take on responsibility, and influence professional and institutional political decisions that I previously was reluctant to do while chairing an academic department. By contextualising the research project, I now have a wider knowledge of the BEP policy and practice occurring in the Sri Lankan context. New knowledge acquired through this PhD research promotes my professional growth and hopefully, will allow me to be proactive and take the initiative to make or influence change in language-related teaching theory and practice in the ESL classroom, or the BEP itself.

Teachers feel tremendous pressure every day, and educational institutes, administration, and curriculum designers must work in collaboration to provide constant support and guidance to educators. Specially designed programmes like the BEP may require assistance. Amidst all the chaos in Sri Lanka, I sustained a regular, open, and constructive relationship with my supervisor. I could, thus, make the required adjustments and work effectively despite the obstacles I faced. Not only is this rewarding for my professional growth, but the new knowledge will contribute greatly to bettering myself as an educator, fostering positive learning and teaching practices and improving future iterations of English education.

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