**IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY AND INVESTMENT: UNDERSTANDING ABSENTEEISM OF A MEDICAL UNDERGRADUATE IN AN ELT CLASS AT A SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

English Language Teaching (ELT) and learning in Sri Lanka, which dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, is a critical process due to the historic, social, economic and political background of the country. Also, the complex behaviours of English Language Learners (ELLs) in Sri Lanka, for instance, their absenteeism in ELT classrooms in universities, remain unaddressed. However, absenteeism in English classes can have a negative impact on the university administration, lecturers, instructors and the students who regularly attend lectures. Therefore, the objective of the current study was to understand the absenteeism of medical undergraduates in ELT classes in universities. Absenteeism in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes seems to have been extensively researched and discussed in the international context, whereas it has only been limited to a few studies in the local context. Furthermore, most of the studies conducted were based on motivational theories, pedagogical factors and institutional policies. However, there are several international studies which have explored student absenteeism in the light of Norton’s sociological theories related to language learning, i.e., identity, ideology and investment. Unlike in the international context, none of the studies on student absenteeism carried out in Sri Lanka has analyzed absenteeism using theories of learner identity. Therefore, the current study employs the sociological theories: identity, ideology and investment to examine absenteeism of a medical undergraduate in an ELT class at the university.

According to Norton (2013), identity is defined as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 4). She demonstrates the “contingent, shifting and context-dependent nature of identities” (p. 4) and emphasizes that identities are not merely given by social structures or ascribed by others, but are also negotiated by agents who wish to position themselves in social structures. The use of a target language by learners in speaking, writing and reading, according to Norton , not only helps learners exchange information with members of the target language community but also serves to “organize and reorganize a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (p. 6). As a result, the learners engage in identity construction and negotiation. However, the medical undergraduate of the current study, seems to have not negotiated his identity when transferred from school in a remote residence area to the university in an urban commercial city.

Norton (2013) argues that the concept of ‘investment’ complements the psychological construct of ‘motivation’ in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and it signals the complex relationship between language learner identity and commitment to language learning. Furthermore, Darvin and Norton (2015), claim that “investment holds a significant place in language learning theory for demonstrating the socially and historically constructed relationship between language learner identity and language learning commitment” (p. 37). They state that the way power manifests itself materially in the practices of a classroom, workplace or community can be examined through an interrogation of ideology. Further,

they argue that the way learners gain or lose power can be understood through the fluid nature of capital because its value shifts across time and space. The experiences of the participant in the current study affirm the above arguments because he finds his linguistic capital (Sinhala) loses its value in the new educational context. Also, he does not have the linguistic capital required in the new context (English), therefore; he finds himself powerless among others who have that linguistic capital. As a result, he makes ideological choices to not to invest in the English language.

**Research Questions**

1. How does the identity of a first year Medical undergraduate in a Sri Lankan university affect his absenteeism in ELT classes?
2. How does the student’s ideological beliefs about English impact on his investment in ELT classes at the university?

**METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted in an English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) of a faculty of medicine at a state university in the Western Province. The identity and ideology of the participant was successfully analyzed by employing a case study research design. The participant, Madushan, was selected upon availability from a purposive sample of absent students gathered through attendance reports. He is a first year medical undergraduate from Bibile, Monaragala, Sri Lanka. Data was collected using an in depth interview which lasted for 38 minutes. A pseudonym has been used to address the participant due to ethical considerations. The transcribed data was analyzed using thematic analysis method.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Identity: constituted in and through the mother tongue and the target language**

Norton (2013) remarks that the “identity is constituted in and through language” (p. 5). Madushan indicated that his identity is constituted through his mother tongue. For instance, he identifies himself as a Sinhala speaker, and uses other details about himself to show that his identity is determined through his mother tongue. For example, he mentions that his mother is a Sinhala teacher and that his siblings had studied Sinhala for their Advanced Level Examination. Further, he mentions that the schools in his area teach in Sinhala; therefore, no one encourages the students to study English. Moreover, he explains that English has not been given any value in his hometown, Bibile, in Monaragala district, which is a remote, rural and underdeveloped area in Sri Lanka. He also mentions that it is not necessary to forcefully add English into his community because everything is done in Sinhala and the majority uses Sinhala. Madushan’s experiences suggest that even though English is considered to be a second language in Sri Lanka, it has not been established as a second language in some areas of the country, where it remains a foreign language. Therefore, the linguistic identity of the learners who come from such areas is constituted through their mother tongue, Sinhala and they do not see the need to study the target language, English, unless they are required to use it in areas other than their residence area. Furthermore, their mother tongue, which is their linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in their residence areas, loses its value when these students move from rural areas to urban universities, because material and symbolic capital lose their power when they shift across space.

The findings revealed clashes between different identities of medical students based on the use of English. For instance, Madushan identifies students who regularly utilize English for communication as “*the ones who are speaking and eating in English*”.

He also points out that the use of English for day to day communication in the Medical Faculty affects other undergraduates who use only their mother tongue, Sinhala, for communication, and makes them uncomfortable in certain situations. For example, he states that when undergraduates of both categories mingle during tutorials, the latter may feel uncomfortable since they cannot communicate adequately in English. Madushan’s views on the use of English in the university by proficient speakers reveal resistance towards English language hegemony. “To be fluent in English means to have capital, as it signifies that one belongs to the socio-economically privileged with the power to exclude those without such capital.” (Nagahawatte, 2016, p.82). Consequently, Madushan feels excluded from the community and disadvantaged in terms of education since the medium of instruction at his Faculty is English (linguistic capital which he does not enjoy). Therefore, he makes ideological choices to not to invest in learning English at the university.

**Ideological views about English and learning English at the University**

Madushan interprets English as a form of “worry”, “discomfort” and “burden”. He uses the words “a bullet” (“*anayak*”) and “a fart” (“*wathayak*”) to refer to the English language. Madushan’s reference to the English language as “*kadda*”, a term which has been used by the university community since the 1950’s in Sri Lanka reveals his ideology of English as an obstacle for mobility for ELLs like himself who are from non-English speaking backgrounds. According to Madushan, undergraduates in the Faculty of Medicine consist of two communities: “the ones who are good in English (“*puluwan un*”)” and “us” (“*api*”)”. He always refers to the former community as “them” and to the latter as “us”. In his imagination, he neither belongs to the former community nor does he want to learn English in order to belong to that community in the future, and he draws a clear line between the two communities. Madushan’s ideology related to the two classes of learners (less proficient learners and proficient learners) provides insights into the fact that “English is inseparable from social class. People from disadvantaged rural and urban settings who composed the non-English speaking masses have a much more fraught relationship with English” (Nagahawatte, 2016, p. 11). On the other hand, Madushan’s views on English language learning can also be understood as an ideologically defined social practice as stated by Darvin and Norton (2015). They state that “the learners navigate through the spaces where they are not only granted or refused the right to speak but also the right to entry” (p. 43).

The ideological views of Madushan on homogenous English class (in proficiency levels) have an immense impact on his investment in learning English at the university. For instance, even though class formation methods practiced in different language teaching programmes are based on facts such as the availability of resources, and various pedagogic theories, learners may have different views on such methods depending on their own ideologies. Although homogeneous classes in language teaching are considered to be advantageous for both teachers and learners, Madushan criticizes homogenous classes as a form of discrimination. Moreover, tailoring lessons to different levels of proficiency is also seen by him as a form of discrimination and as being problematic when the undergraduates follow classes together. According to him, Medical undergraduates start grouping themselves based on their level of English proficiency. He accuses the ELTU of splitting the undergraduate body further and creating confusion by accommodating them in classes based on their English proficiency: “It is really problematic. They stay in one group. The ones who are not good at English stay in another group. It is really problematic. It starts with the English Unit”. Walcott (1999) argues that students are making complex ideological and social choices in opting to learn and use the English language. Similarly, Nagahawatte (2016) remarks that learning English as a

second language is “always already an ideological and political act” (p. 14). Moreover, Darvin and Norton (2015) state that the way power manifests materially in the practice of a classroom, work place or community can be examined through an interrogation of ideology. For instance, Madushan’s interpretation of the homogenous class as discrimination is a strong ideological, social and political comment. Therefore, this illustrates the fact that making an investment to learn English or not is contingent on an individual’s ideology concerning the language, as well as on all pedagogic practices related to language teaching.

**CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

According to Han-Carlson (2014), many studies on absenteeism in ESL classes have failed to reveal the correlations between learner identities and absenteeism because they have focused on larger groups rather than analyzing the experiences of individuals in-depth. Therefore, the current study of Madushan’s absenteeism in the ELT class fills the gap in literature by providing insights on the connections between identity and absenteeism through an in-depth analysis of a case study. The present study indicates that Madushan does not attend the ELT class due to his identity which has not been negotiated in different social, geographical and linguistic circumstances. Also he finds it difficult to attend the English classes as he makes ideological choices towards learning English. Therefore, understanding the identities of the undergraduates in the ESL classroom and supporting them to negotiate their linguistic identities are of utmost importance for administrators and academics. It is because all pedagogic aspects such as designing curricula and teaching material, deciding on appropriate methods of grouping, planning teaching methods, classroom activities and evaluation methods, as well as institutional policies such as implementation of attendance policies and allocation of teachers, need to be informed by second language learner identities of the undergraduates.

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