Second Language: bridge or barrier?
EXPLORING the Linguistic Identities of Novice International School English Teachers
in sri lanka

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Introduction

Following the implementation of trade liberalization in 1977, English became a vital tool for participation in the globalized and neoliberal economic sphere. In response to the increasing demand for English education, a new category of fee-levying English medium private schools known as international schools that teach foreign curriculums emerged in Sri Lanka. The popularity of international schools in Sri Lanka has been heightened by the unequal distribution of facilities and opportunities offered by the government schools and their failure to produce generations of youth with a competitive spirit for excellence (Uyangoda, 1995) while international schools are perceived to have an element of quality embedded in them as private fee levying schools accountable to its ‘customers’ (Fertig, 2007).

As international schools have become a significant part of the Sri Lankan education system, the number of graduates from the local education system seeking career opportunities as English teachers in these schools is increasing. This study expects to shed light on the linguistic identities of the novice international school English teachers and how they are being reconstructed and negotiated in response to the conditions and expectations of the international school they work in.

As Barkhuizen’s (2017) states, language teacher identities (LTIs) are “cognitive, social, emotional, ideological and historical.” According to her,

“LTIs are being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying. They are struggle and harmony: they are contested and resisted, by self and others, and they are also accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others. They are core and peripheral, personal and professional, they are dynamic, multiple, and hybrid, and they are foregrounded and backgrounded.” (p.4)

In this light, this study examines the novice teacher perceptions associated with the use of the first language (L1:Sinhala) and the second language (L2:English) in order to explore their anxieties springing from the clashes between their existing (linguistic) identities and the newly assumed role or identity of an international school English teacher. Similarly, their attempt to negotiate an identity accepted by others (teachers and students) is examined by this study.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach in its attempt to explore the experiences of novice English Language teachers and their perceptions. A qualitative approach sheds light on how novice teachers interpret their experiences (Merriam 2009) in the international school context by collecting highly subjective data leading to a deep analysis of novice teacher identity. Similarly, the case study approach of this study enables the capturing of the contextual and ungeneralizable data of this research.

Four teacher participants were selected from three international schools and they are products of the local education system. All of them have entered their teaching career in an international school after obtaining their educational qualification, yet without any teacher training. At the time of data collection, they had served as English teachers for approximately 2 years.

The data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews which are sufficiently structured to address specific topics related to the study, while leaving space for participants to offer new meanings to the study focus. The data analysis involved the thematic approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the data of this study revolves around two main thematic strands associated with the linguistic identity of teacher participants. It raises the question whether the English language acts as a barrier that obstructs student-teacher relationship or whether it acts as a bridge of trust that leads to the students’ acceptance of the novice English teacher.

**English: a barrier for relationship building?**

The perceptions of the novice English teachers show how L1 facilitates them better to build closer relationships. All the novice English teachers of this research feel more comfortable using their L1 which is Sinhala. They believe that their L1 facilitates expression of emotions and feelings more eloquently, creates bonds, brings out humour and even to feel more at ease with people they interact with.

**Sula** : *When you are making a bond with someone, there’s something about Sinhala… English for me sounds very formal and I find it hard to reach out the other person in that language*.

**Jay** : *I feel more at home talking in Sinhala…the essence of a joke would not come if you talk in English*

**Madhu** : *I feel more comfortable if I can switch to Sinhala during intimate conversations.*

**Tilani** : *Sinhala is the best language for gossiping and talking nonsense.*

It is implied that English language stands for formality and they feel more natural and at ease when switching to L1. Their preference of L1 in building rapport reflects their linguistic identity as native speakers of Sinhala who have acquired English through formal education. It is interesting to note how their linguistic identity rooted in their mother-tongue, Sinhala has an impact on their perceptions of language choice in the international school. The role of L1 in relationship building with students even in the international school context where English only instruction is promoted is brought to light here. The perception that the English teacher has to be a bilingual helper, a sympathetic advisor and a friend at least on a para-pedagogical level is brought to light (Makulolluwa, 2013).

**Jay**: *If there is a huge restriction on the kids like you have to speak with me entirely in English they wouldn’t open up to you certain cases that they really want to. So, I think allowing them to speak in Sinhala is acceptable because they would come up with their ideas more freely as Sri Lankans.*

**Sula**: *A teacher should be approachable to the students.* *I think the use of L1 as a tool to bring the students a little closer towards the teacher.*

According to Dewaele (2010), the direction of code switching in situations where strong emotions are expressed is from the L2 to L1. As Davies (2003) notes, the individuals who have learned English as their L2 in various institutions may lack communicative competence in terms of the language of the childhood and there could be an absence of a wider and essentially intimate language. The novice English teachers of this study are bilinguals who have learned and use English in educational and work environments. As a result, they may find that English only communication has fewer emotional connotations (Altarriba and Canary, 2004).

**English: A bridge that connects and builds trust?**

Despite the novice English teacher perception that L1 builds better student-teacher rapport, there is tension that arises as L2 simultaneously plays the role of a tool that builds students’ trust in the novice English teacher. As a result, the novice English teachers attempt to negotiate their existing linguistic identity and adapt a role that is more fitting to that of an English teacher.

**Sula**: *I never use Sinhala. It kind of creates that persona as the English teacher. Appearing all knowledgeable in front of students, I think matters. It helps to create a good image of the teacher and the fact that the students can rely on whatever is being told. I think it creates that sort of environment when you stick to one language.*

Similarly, the idea that a novice teacher needs to use English consistently in order to be accepted as an English teacher is emphasized. According to Sula, for instance, a teacher who has established her identity as an English teacher may switch to L1 occasionally without losing the student trust in her English competency. She says, “*I’ve not reached that comfort level with students yet. I’m not even one year old as a teacher*”.

Another aspect brought to light by this study is the perception that flawed L2 or lack of fluency could easily affect the ‘image’ of a good English teacher. ‘Speaking without failing’ is seen as a necessary tool as well as a challenge for novice international school English teachers.

**Jay**: *The children spot your errors quite easily and quite often. So, if we make errors they tend to mock our language and also that leads to losing their trust in us.*

The participants claim that as non-native English speakers, learning English language is a never-ending process and no matter what level of L2 proficiency they have achieved so far, they still consider themselves to be language learners. Hence, appearing incompetent and less eligible to be English teachers is yet another feeling associated with anxiety.

**Madhu**: *At first, I thought these children study English from the nursery and it would be really hard to manage.*

Moreover, being a part of a work-environment that operates in English and having to maintain standards of English higher than those of the other stakeholders (i.e. teachers, administrative staff and parents) result in foreign language anxiety in the novice English teachers (Horwitz, 1996). As the novice teachers perceive, an English teacher is heavily criticized for making English language errors.

**Sula**: *“I’m always concerned about speaking correct grammar… I don’t want to speak bad English in front of people.”*

**Tilani**: *Most of the time I notice others’ mistakes, but sometimes I keep my mouth shut because they would laugh at me when I make mistakes. There are people who wait until we make mistakes. If an English teacher doesn’t know something they tend to question how did she/he become an English teacher even without knowing that?*

Hence, as perceived by the novice English teacher, her reputation depends much on the fluency and accuracy demonstrated by her while that directly impacts how far she is accepted as a competent English teacher by the students.

conclusions/RECOMMENDATIONS

Novice English teacher anxieties emerge as their existing linguistic identities (as non-native English speakers, speakers of Sinhala as the mother tongue) clash with the new role as an English teacher of an international school. Simultaneously, the novice teachers have set standards for themselves such as the necessity to appear ‘all knowledgeable in front of the students’, speak error-free language and safe-guard the reputation associated with L2 competency. The attempts made to confront their anxieties and maintain these standards involve a constant process of identity negotiation where their existing identities are reconstructed and adapted to fit their professional English teacher identity. This knowledge about the novice teacher struggles with their anxieties provide insights to the teacher educators and trainers to initiate ways to help the novice teachers overcome them easily while the principals of the international schools could create a more conducive atmosphere for the novice teacher to grow.

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