

# Language Challenges Faced by Minority Undergraduates: An Exploration of the Sri Lankan Language Policies on Higher Education

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**Abstract**— Language is a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols and used by people of a particular country or region in order to talk or write. Thus, it should be a tool for communication, not a barrier. However, in a multilingual country like Sri Lanka, the minority language speakers face a lot of problems in several domains. In the Sri Lankan state universities, the situation is the same. Sinhala being the language of the majority, they encounter many challenges in academic and non-academic settings. The present study focused on the challenges faced by the undergraduates who speak Tamil as their “mother tongue”. In most cases, the medium of instruction is not the same in the tertiary as it was in the secondary levels. Therefore; this situation has negatively affected their academic performance and also caused communication problems when they interact within the university community on daily basis. This research attempted to investigate whether the authorities have implemented necessary policies and taken steps to enact those in order to prevent any psychological burden the undergraduates would face. The participants of the study were 100 undergraduates from state universities of Sri Lanka who speak minority languages. The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain data. The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS whereas qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed thematically. The findings indicated that the undergraduates face problems in both the academic and non-academic settings. Although the constitution demonstrates some policies which are supposed to provide assistance to prevent such circumstances, a mismatch between the policies and practice exists. The data obtained from this study are of relevance to policymakers, researchers, and instructors.

**Keywords**—Language challenges, language policy and planning, language policies in education, language policies for Sri Lankan universities, minority undergraduates.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The terms ‘language policy’ and ‘language planning’ have different dimensions. Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) [5] argue that language policy is about decision-making and goal-setting whereas language planning is about implementing policies to obtain results. On the contrary, Rubin (1971) [7] argues that language policy is a part of language

planning which is comprised of four phases: fact-finding, policy determination, implementation, and evaluation. According to Cooper (1989) [4], language policy and planning refers to “deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure of the functional allocation, of their language codes” (P.45). Planning is frequently undertaken for the expressed purposes of solving communication problems. However, many linguists prefer the term language planning to language policy or language planning and language policy because they take ‘planning’ to be inclusive of policy (Zaidi, 2013).[9] Accordingly, Language policies and planning occur in most countries by their relevant government wherein they have more than one language within the community. Thus, language planning is important to be implemented in a country with every aspects including education.

The language in education policy is identified as one of the major problems faced especially by most of the bilingual and multilingual countries. In a pluralistic society, there are two dimensions of different status in between the language of the “majority” and “minority”. According to Capotorti (1979), minority refers to a group of numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members being different from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, tradition, religion or language (as cited in Petricusic, 2005) [6].

Sri Lanka too being a multilingual country, faces the same issues due to this dimension, especially, when it comes to higher education. According to the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka,

21(1) A person shall be entitled to be educated through the medium of either of the National Languages: Provided that the provisions of this paragraph shall not apply to an institute of Higher education where the medium of instruction is a language other than a National Language.

(2) Where one National Language is a medium of instruction for or in any course, department or faculty of

any university directly or indirectly financed by the State, the other National Languages shall also be made a medium of instruction for or in such course, such University were educated through the medium of such other National Language. (Constitution, revised version, chapter 4) [3].

Assuming that the undergraduates who speak minority languages in Sri Lanka face various problems in both academic and non-academic settings, this research was designed to explore those language issues and to provide solutions to them. Specifically, this study focuses on Tamil speaking (Tamil and Muslim) undergraduates in state universities. The rationale behind choosing Tamil speaking undergraduates is that it is an official language in the country despite these issues in higher education. The rationale for selecting "state" university undergraduates is that the collision of multiple languages is most evident in government institutions. Therefore, the issues of the undergraduates have been investigated in terms of medium of instruction and community interaction.

Thus, the objectives of this study were to investigate the communication problems that the undergraduates face in the university, investigate the issues due to the change of medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary levels and to investigate the ways in which the policies could be best operated to solve these issues.

In order to achieve these objectives, the following research questions guided this study.

RQ 1: What are the language challenges faced by minority undergraduates in state universities?

RQ 2: How can the policies could be best operated to solve these language challenges?

## II. OBJECTIVES

With the objectives of investigating the communication problems that the minority undergraduates face in the university, investigating the issues due to the change of medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary levels and investigating the ways in which the policies could be best operated to solve these issues, this research was conducted. The data obtained from this study are of relevance to policymakers, researchers, and instructors.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed- method research design that involved 100 minority language speaking undergraduates from three state universities in Sri Lanka; University of Kelaniya, University of Colombo, and University of Peradeniya. According to Tashakkori and Creswell (2007)[8], mixed-method which is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative measures offers

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multiple perspectives to examine a research problem, expands the understanding of a complex issue, and leads to better interpretation of the findings. The participants were selected through convenient sampling. Out of the 100 participants, 66 were males and 34 were females and their age limit was 20-26.

The research instruments which were utilized to collect data were a survey questionnaire consisted of 15 items and semi-structured interviews. The items in the questionnaire were ranged using five-point Likert scale which participants had to tick based on what their responses were towards each item. The items in the questionnaire were also thoroughly explained orally through translation by the researcher for the participants who found it very hard to understand. Then, the data gathered from the questionnaire were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The researcher has conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 students. The participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to take part. The semi-structured interviews were audio taped, transcribed and coded. After coding the data, the prominent themes and recurring ideas were identified which were later interpreted to draw meaning from it. Thus, the study applied thematic analysis whereby data gathered were categorized into themes and sub-themes so as to be comparable.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.

The descriptive statistics and analysis of the survey can be summarized as follows. 88% of the participants were reported as first language users of Tamil while 12% stated that their first language is Sinhala and 3% stated that it is English. 68% said that their second language is English while 26% stated that it is Sinhala. 80% of the participants have learnt in Tamil medium at school while 12% learnt in Sinhala and 8% in English.

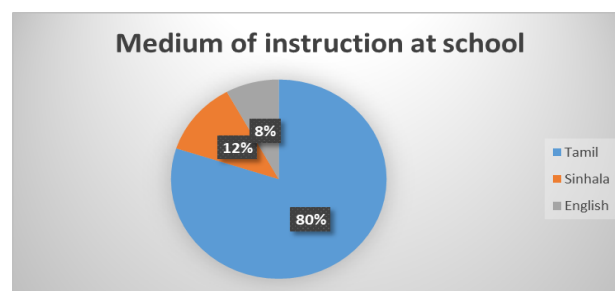


Figure 01

Medium of instruction at school

Moreover, 88% learn in English medium at university while 10% learn in Tamil and 2% in Sinhala. 50% reported that their competence in speaking Sinhala is fair. 64% of the participants think that most of the time they face communication problems in the university while 20% said that they sometimes face communication problems. 52% of them strongly agreed with the statement that code switching and code mixing between Sinhala and English in lectures is a barrier to them while 21% disagreed with it.

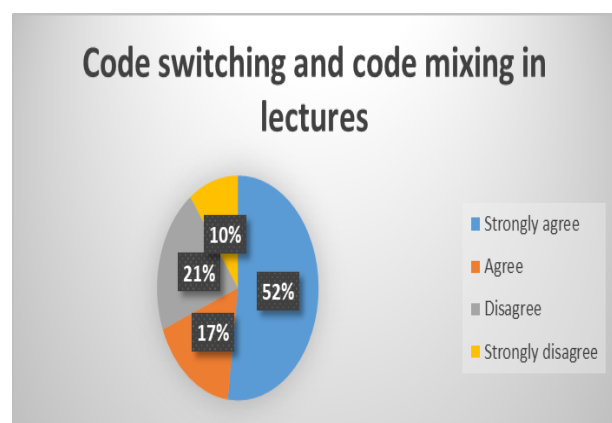


Figure 02

Code switching and code mixing between Sinhala and English is a barrier

Through the data gathered from semi-structured interviews, two major issues associated with minority language users were identified: challenges faced in academic setting and challenges faced in non-academic setting. Table I presents a summary of the themes emerged from semi structured interviews with few example excerpts.

TABLE I  
THEMES AND EXAMPLE EXCERPTS

No.	Themes	Example Excerpts
01	Challenges faced in academic setting	<p>"My subject was taught using Sinhala in the first year. They used a little bit of English too. But, I couldn't understand most of the times".</p> <p>"This has negatively affected my academic performance".</p> <p>"I got very low grades".</p> <p>"I was scared to ask questions in the class".</p> <p>"Some staff don't know English. There is no way to communicate".</p> <p>"When preparing for group work or group presentations, my peers talk in</p>

		Sinhala. I can't understand it. So, I can't give my opinions".
02	Challenges faced in non-academic setting	<p>"I had difficulties when making friends here at the hostel"</p> <p>"I had difficulties in reading and understanding notices at the administration".</p> <p>"I had to become so dependent on someone who knows Sinhala"</p> <p>"I always wanted someone to explain what is going on".</p> <p>"I can't join some clubs here because of this issue"</p>

Further, they were asked to state their opinions on how to solve the above language issues. Some of them responded as follows.

TABLE II  
SOLUTIONS FOR THE LANGUAGE ISSUES

No.	Solutions
01	"Schools should teach both Sinhala and Tamil languages simultaneously"
02	"Communicating with people whose mother tongue is different from yours"
03	"Non- verbal communication is the best solution"
04	"There should be a common language that everyone is fluent in"
05	"Students must learn three languages"
06	"Conduct all lectures in English medium"
07	"Tamil speaking lecturers are needed"
08	"Universities should offer courses in all three medium. So that the undergraduates have a choice"
09	"The lecturers must encourage English within lectures"
10	"In the first year, all the lectures are conducted mostly in Sinhala. So, it is difficult for the Tamil medium students. Therefore, I think the lectures should be conducted only in English"
11	"Making all the official announcements, classroom lectures and discussions in English"

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed that all of the participants (N=12) believed that they encounter language issues in both academic and non-academic settings. Previous research has been done addressing this issue worldwide. As cited by Cernakova Website: [www.ijmre.com](http://www.ijmre.com) Volume No.1, Issue. 3 13

2014[2], assuming that minority languages are vital for the preservation of their identity and culture, it is important that their language is recognized in the education system (Cummins, 2000). Sri Lankan constitution also recognizes the vitality of the minority languages in secondary education although the practice contradicts the policy in tertiary education.

Moreover, not having an option to choose Tamil as the medium of instruction is a problem for them. On the other hand, none has selected courses where Sinhala is the medium of instruction because it is easy for them to do it in English rather than in Sinhala. In some situations where lecturers code-switch and code-mix during lectures between Sinhala and English, it is difficult for them to follow what is being taught. They view this as a barrier when it comes to education therefore in such instances the mismatch between policy and the practice is evident. Administrative work, notices and forms are often in Sinhala. Since the undergraduates who speak minority languages are not very fluent in Sinhala, they face several intelligible issues due to this. However, administrative work, notices and forms should be intelligible to everyone.

Bi-lingual education is also yet another solution for this. For example, Physical science is taught using Sinhala and English in first year. Though it is an advantage for the undergraduates who studied in Sinhala medium, it is a disadvantage for undergraduates who studied in Tamil. Necessary steps should be taken by the authority to provide lectures in Tamil along with English. According to a research conducted by Ha et al (2013), in the past 10 years, Malaysia has introduced two major policies regarding the medium of instruction. This reversal has resulted in the introduction of a new language policy. That is “to uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to strengthen the English language” (as cited in Abdullah, Medawattegedara, Premarathna, Senarathna & Yogaraja, 2014)[1]

They further cite that, China changed their policy in September 2010 to “Fine-tuning Medium of instruction Policy” permitting schools to have flexibility to offer English medium classes, partial English medium classes and/or Chinese medium classes. The reason for this is that they found that the undergraduates who studied only in their mother tongue at school had lower grades in universities since the medium of instruction in universities is English. It is necessary to implement such policies in Sri Lanka too in order to find solutions for these language issues.

Further, English skills for academic purposes should also be developed. This is a better solution to the language problems faced by the undergraduates who speak minority languages. Finally, adequate library facilities should be

provided to everyone. There are Sinhala and English books in university libraries. It is a disadvantage to these undergraduates. This should be changed by providing adequate library facilities to everyone.

## V.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the undergraduates who speak minority languages face several language difficulties in University premises. The authority should take necessary steps to make everyone aware of the language inside and outside the classroom. As many of them mentioned, English can be used as the lingua franca. Finally, the above problems should be solved through necessary policies.

There are several limitations in this study. It only consisted of 100 participants. There are a lot of minority undergraduates who face the same language problem in Sri Lanka. But, this research focused on a limited number. Also, the participants were limited to 3 state universities only; University of Kelaniya, University of Colombo and University of Peradeniya. But there are 15 universities in Sri Lanka and in each and every university, minority language speaking undergraduates study. They were not taken into consideration. The method of data collection was also a limitation here since it was collected only through a questionnaire and semi structured interviews. There are several other research tools to collect data such as interviews. This research only focused on Tamil and Muslim undergraduates. But there are some other minority language speaking undergraduates such as Malay in Sri Lanka. Finally, only the student's perspective regarding language issues has been investigated while neglecting the lecturers' perspective regarding this.

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