The role of multilingual education in enhancing ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka

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5th International Conference on Language and Education: Sustainable Development through Multilingual Education
19-21 October 2016 Bangkok, Thailand

Supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Context

- Ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils has a long history
- Fuelled by the ‘Sinhala Only’ Act in 1956 making Sinhala the sole official language of Sri Lanka
- Almost continuous civil war from 1983 to 2009, when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were defeated militarily
- Since the end of the civil war in 2009 communities remain polarised with Tamils feeling little is being done to redress their grievances
- Immediately post-war the Sri Lankan government was accused of being ‘triumphalist’ and ignoring legitimate Tamil grievances
- The Sri Lankan army retains a strong presence in the Jaffna peninsula, a former LTTE stronghold, which breeds distrust (Augustyniak, 2016)
Policies

• In 1987, Sri Lanka was proclaimed to be a multi-ethnic and multilingual society
• In 1988, the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution stated that “Tamil shall also be an official language”
• English was recognized as a “link language” at the same time
• The Education Policy of Sri Lanka is geared to meeting nine longstanding National Goals
• The first goal is: “The achievement of national cohesion, national integration and national unity”
  (National Education Commission, 1992, p.6)
• Projects continue to try to implement the 2008 National Policy on Education for Social Cohesion and Peace (e.g. GTZ, 2013-16)
Education

- Education in Sri Lanka is highly polarized; government schools are mostly either Sinhala-medium or Tamil-medium.
- Only a few schools have Tamil and Sinhala-medium streams.
- But research shows that “Combining Sinhala-, Tamil-, and English-medium students in the same schools is not enough to promote interethnic unity and integration” (Davis, 2011, p. 285).
- In all government schools, both official languages, Sinhala and Tamil, should be taught to all children as part of the core curriculum beginning formally in Grade 3 (2NL teaching).
- Peaceful coexistence fostered through second language education is both highly appropriate and long overdue.
Is 2NL teaching the answer?

• “In Sri Lanka, segregation of schools often causes students to grow up with a lack of awareness of other cultures and ethnicities. They begin to think in exclusive terms about their own race and religion. Segregated schools can thus cause children to endorse the stereotyping of characteristics of other ethnic and religious groups.” (World Bank, 2011, p. 15)

• Due to shortages of trained teachers, only approximately 45% of all schools offer learning in the second national language (World Bank, 2011)
Research questions

1. What attitudes do school children have toward members of the other community and its language when they begin instruction in either Tamil or Sinhala as a second national language?

2. Do these attitudes change as children receive instruction in these second national languages?
Research instrument

Attitude Measurement (Implicit): Trait Attribution Task

- Students are given 9 pairs of adjectives on cards that are opposite in meaning, for example, “good” and “bad”, “clean” and “dirty”, “friendly” and “unfriendly”
- The adjectives appear in the first language of the students in question
- Students are also provided with boxes (provided one at a time) denoting each of the following groups:
  - “Sinhala speakers”
  - “Tamil speakers”
  - “English speakers”
- “English speakers” are included as a neutral out-group for both Sinhalese and Tamils
- Students are asked to choose from the 18 adjectives the ones that they feel describe the ethnicity in question. Students can choose as many positive/negative adjectives as they wish since each ethnicity is provided one at a time
Results – attitudes to other ethnic groups/language speakers
Grade 3

• Children in the Sinhala-medium group developed a higher degree of in-group identification than Tamil-medium children over the course of the year
• Sinhala-medium students assigned more negative traits to out-groups (Tamils and English speakers) but this did not change over the year
• But Tamil in-group positivity and out-group negativity also increased
• Tamil-medium students assigned more negative traits to Sinhala speakers over the course of the year, but ...
• at the end of the year they also assigned increased positive traits to Sinhala speakers
Grade 5

- Both Sinhala-medium and Tamil-medium Grade 5 groups displayed much more in-group positivity than the Grade 3 students at the beginning of the one-year period.
- There was also an increase in Grade 5 students’ in-group positivity and out-group negativity over the one year period.
- Across all the students there seems to be an increase in hostility towards other ethnic groups by the end of Grade 5.
Sinhalese results by religion

• The results showed significant differences between the Buddhist and Christian Sinhalese groups.
• The Christian Sinhalese group was significantly more positive than the Buddhist Sinhalese group towards the Hindu group.
• The concept of a unitary Sinhalese-Buddhist identity, reinforced through the prevailing dominance of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist triumphalism, may have had a strong influence over children’s intergroup attitudes in this setting.
• See Jayawickreme, et al., 2010, on this influence
Change between Grades 3 and 5

• Caveat: the two age groups (categorized by grade) are comprised of different children so we are using cross-sectional data to make inferences about longitudinal change
• Children’s in-group positivity increases from Grade 3 to Grade 5
• Out-group negativity also increases from Grade 3 to Grade 5; in particular ...
• Sinhalese students assigned fewer positive traits to Tamil speakers over time
• Barrett (2005) concluded that “once a relative order of liking for different national out-groups has been established, this order tends to remain stable and consistent across the remaining childhood years” (p.271)
• In the case of Sri Lanka this does not augur well for reconciliation in the longer-term, as schoolchildren grow and take their places in society
Conclusions

• Attitudes between the two main ethnic groups, Sinhalese and Tamils, became more polarized over the course of the school year
  And between Grade 3 and Grade 5
• But within this ...
• Tamil medium students make fewer negative characterizations of Sinhalese medium students than vice-versa
• Sinhalese medium students make more negative characterizations of Tamils
• Attitudes need to be interpreted within the social contexts of Sri Lanka
  ➢ The defeated community in the civil war may feel that they have no choice but to accommodate themselves to majority wishes in order to survive in the country post-conflict
  ➢ Attitudes amongst Sinhalese children are likely to derive from their immediate families and communities
• More needs to be done in schools to make 2NL teaching effective
Policy goals not met

• At present the 2NL policy is not meeting goals at school level of increasing tolerance and respect amongst the diverse communities of Sri Lanka
• As children’s attitudes are strongly influenced by parental and other adult attitudes, success in transforming them may need to go beyond 2NL education in schools to encompass a programme of public education for the population at large
References