
Original Paper

Does Classroom Discourse in Sri Lankan Secondary Level Bilingual Classes Assist in Language Development?

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Abstract

Bilingual education in Sri Lanka has gained prominence as the country strives to improve students' English proficiency, which is essential for higher education and global employment. This study explores the role of classroom discourse, specifically teacher talk, in promoting English language development in secondary-level bilingual classrooms. Using Swain's Output Hypothesis and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as frameworks, the research examines how teacher talk either facilitates or impedes students' English language acquisition. The study was conducted in the Ampara District, focusing on bilingual instruction in subjects such as Geography and Science. Classroom observations, lesson transcriptions, and thematic analysis of teacher-student interactions revealed that key strategies such as scaffolding, questioning techniques, positive feedback, and vocabulary reinforcement support language development. However, issues such as excessive teacher talk and limited opportunities for student participation were identified as barriers. The findings highlight the critical role of teacher talk in fostering English proficiency and suggest that enhanced teacher training could improve bilingual education practices in Sri Lankan schools.

Keywords: Bilingual education, scaffolding, teacher questions, teacher talk, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Bilingual education has gained increasing importance in Sri Lanka, as the country aims to enhance students' proficiency in English, a crucial skill for success in higher education and global employment. English, alongside Sinhala and Tamil, holds a key position in Sri Lanka's education system, particularly at the secondary level, where subjects such as Science, Mathematics, and Geography are frequently taught in English. These bilingual education programs seek to develop students' language abilities while maintaining their native language proficiency (Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). However, disparities in the availability of resources and qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas, create challenges in ensuring equal access to high-quality bilingual education (Mahawattha, 2012).

The role of classroom discourse, especially teacher talk, is critical to the success of bilingual education. Teacher talk refers to the verbal interactions between teachers and students during instruction, including explanations, questions, feedback, and directions. In bilingual settings, where students are learning content through a second language, teacher talk serves the dual purpose of delivering content and supporting language development (Walsh, 2011). Teachers must strike a delicate balance between simplifying language for comprehension and maintaining the complexity of academic content, which is vital for fostering both language proficiency and content mastery (Gibbons, 2006).

Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis is central to understanding the role of language production in second language acquisition. Swain's research on French immersion students demonstrated that although students received ample comprehensible input, their language proficiency particularly in terms of grammar and oral skills did not reach native-like levels. This led Swain to propose that learners must not only receive input but also engage in active language production to move from understanding meaning to focusing on linguistic form. This process, as argued by Swain (1985), enables learners to refine their grammatical accuracy and fluency.

The sociocultural theory of learning, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on interaction, further supports the idea that language development occurs through meaningful social interactions. Vygotsky's theory suggests that learners construct knowledge through dialogue and interaction with others, highlighting the role of classroom discourse in cognitive and linguistic development. Mercer (1995) extends this idea by arguing that dialogue encourages collaborative knowledge-building, making it a powerful tool for both cognitive and language development in bilingual settings.

In Sri Lankan bilingual classrooms, however, preliminary observations indicate that students have limited opportunities to actively produce language, as teacher talk often dominates classroom interactions (Mahawattha, 2012). Excessive teacher talk can hinder students' ability to practice and develop their language skills, limiting opportunities for them to engage in meaningful discourse and language production (Walsh, 2011). Therefore, a closer investigation into the nature of classroom discourse in Sri Lankan bilingual classrooms is necessary to understand how teacher talk influences language development.

Research problem and purpose

While previous research has highlighted the importance of classroom discourse in language development, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding how teacher talk influences language acquisition in the context of bilingual education in Sri Lanka. Much of the existing research focuses on language teaching rather than on how content teachers can support language learning while teaching academic subjects. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of classroom discourse in secondary-level bilingual classes in Sri Lanka, specifically investigating how teacher talk facilitates or hinders students' English language development.

The purpose of this research is to provide insights into the dynamics of classroom discourse in bilingual education, focusing on the specific features of teacher talk that contribute to language learning. By understanding how teachers use language in content-based instruction, this study aims to offer practical recommendations for improving teaching practices in bilingual classrooms across Sri Lanka, particularly in underserved regions where English proficiency levels remain low.

Objectives of the study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the extent to which classroom discourse aids language development in Sri Lankan bilingual classrooms.
2. To identify the specific features of classroom discourse, such as teacher questioning, feedback, and interaction patterns, that contribute to language development.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on bilingual education in Sri Lanka, providing evidence-based insights that can inform teacher training and curriculum development, ultimately improving students' language learning outcomes.

Research questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does classroom discourse in Sri Lankan bilingual classes support or hinder language development?
2. What features of classroom discourse are most effective for enhancing language development?

2. Literature Review

Bilingual Education in Sri Lanka

Bilingual education in Sri Lanka has evolved significantly over the past few decades, largely in response to the growing demand for English language proficiency alongside the maintenance of native languages, Sinhala and Tamil. The Sri Lankan government officially introduced bilingual education reforms in 2003 as part of a broader initiative to equip students with the skills necessary to compete in a globalized world (Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). These reforms were implemented in response to the

decline in English language skills following the 1956 "Sinhala Only Act," which reduced English's role as the medium of instruction. Consequently, bilingual education aimed to bridge the gap, fostering both content learning and English proficiency.

The bilingual education program in Sri Lanka follows a sequential model where students typically begin learning subjects such as Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies in English starting from Grade 6. This model allows students to gradually acquire the English language while continuing to study other subjects in their native languages. However, implementation challenges persist, particularly in rural areas where the availability of qualified bilingual teachers and resources remains limited (Mahawatta, 2012).

Bilingual education not only serves academic purposes but also plays a role in fostering social cohesion. The inclusion of English as a medium of instruction helps students from diverse ethnic backgrounds to engage more positively with each other, using English as a neutral language for learning (Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). Despite these benefits, the uneven distribution of resources, particularly in rural schools, continues to create disparities in the effectiveness of bilingual education across the country.

Theories on classroom discourse and language development

Classroom discourse, particularly in bilingual settings, plays a central role in language development. Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) posits that language learners must have opportunities to produce language both spoken and written in order to develop proficiency. Swain's research in French immersion classrooms demonstrated that exposure to comprehensible input alone was insufficient for learners to achieve native-like proficiency. Instead, Swain argued that students need opportunities to use the language actively, as producing language requires them to move beyond mere comprehension to focus on language structure and form.

This theory aligns with sociocultural perspectives on learning, particularly those developed by Vygotsky (1978), who emphasized the importance of interaction and dialogue in cognitive development. From this perspective, language is both a social and cognitive tool that enables learners to build knowledge collaboratively. Mercer (2004) further expanded on this idea by introducing "exploratory talk," a type of classroom discourse that encourages students to engage in critical thinking and dialogue, promoting both language and cognitive development.

The role of dialogue in classroom discourse is especially important in bilingual settings, where students are simultaneously learning content and a second language. Effective classroom discourse in such contexts should provide students with opportunities to practice the target language, engage in meaningful interactions, and receive feedback that helps them refine their language use (Gass, 2003). This combination of input, output, and interaction is crucial for fostering language acquisition in bilingual learners.

Classroom discourse in bilingual settings

In bilingual classrooms, teacher talk and student interaction are essential components of effective classroom discourse. Teacher talk, in particular, plays a pivotal role in scaffolding students' understanding of both content and language. Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model provides a useful framework for understanding the typical patterns of interaction in classrooms, where the teacher initiates a question, the student responds, and the teacher provides feedback. This model is widely used to analyze classroom interactions and assess the quality of discourse in bilingual settings.

Prof. Navaz (2015) highlights that the IRF model in bilingual classrooms must go beyond simple question-and-answer sequences to promote meaningful engagement and deeper learning. He emphasizes that the feedback phase of the IRF cycle is critical for scaffolding students' language development and fostering active participation. By offering constructive feedback, including praise and corrections, teachers can encourage students to refine their language skills while simultaneously reinforcing content knowledge. However, he also points out that over-reliance on display questions within the IRF framework may limit opportunities for students to engage in authentic communication.

In bilingual classrooms, teacher talk must balance content delivery with language support. Teachers

must ensure that their language is comprehensible while still challenging enough to promote language development. This requires the strategic use of interactional scaffolding, where teachers adjust their language based on students' needs, providing explanations, rephrasing difficult concepts, and encouraging student participation (Walsh, 2011). Gibbons (2006) emphasizes that teachers must strike a balance between simplifying language for comprehension and maintaining academic rigor.

One of the key features of effective classroom discourse is the provision of opportunities for students to produce language. Long (1985) argues that interaction, particularly opportunities to negotiate meaning, is essential for second language acquisition. When students engage in dialogue, they are forced to clarify, elaborate, and refine their language use, which promotes both linguistic and cognitive development. In bilingual classrooms, where the language of instruction is not the students' first language, these interactions are crucial for building proficiency in the target language.

Challenges in classroom discourse

Despite the potential benefits of classroom discourse for language development, several challenges arise in bilingual classrooms. One of the primary issues is the balance between teacher talk time (TTT) and student talk time (STT). While teacher talk is necessary for providing explanations and modeling language use, excessive teacher talk can limit students' opportunities to produce language. Studies have shown that classrooms dominated by teacher talk often result in passive learning, where students have fewer opportunities to engage with the language actively (Cazden, 2001).

In bilingual settings, another challenge is the diverse range of language proficiency levels among students. Teachers must adapt their language to meet the needs of all students, ensuring that those with lower proficiency can follow the lesson while still challenging more advanced students (Mahawattha, 2012). This requires careful planning and flexibility in classroom discourse to ensure that all students benefit from the interaction.

Additionally, the use of teacher talk for correcting language errors can be problematic in bilingual classrooms. Content teachers, who are not always trained in language teaching, may hesitate to correct students' language errors for fear of disrupting the flow of the lesson (Stern, 1983). This can lead to missed opportunities for language development, particularly if students do not receive feedback on their language use.

Research gap

While extensive research has highlighted the importance of classroom discourse in fostering second language acquisition (Swain, 1985; Gibbons, 2006; Walsh, 2011), there remains a significant gap in understanding how classroom discourse, specifically teacher talk, influences language development within Sri Lankan bilingual classrooms. Most existing studies have focused on general language teaching strategies or explored the dynamics of bilingual education in broader contexts, overlooking the unique sociolinguistic and pedagogical challenges of bilingual education in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, studies on classroom discourse in bilingual settings often emphasize teacher-student interactions in language-focused classrooms rather than in content-based instruction, where the dual objectives of content mastery and language acquisition must be balanced. Despite the prominence of bilingual education in Sri Lanka's secondary education system, limited research has examined the specific features of teacher talk, such as questioning patterns, feedback mechanisms, and interactional scaffolding, in supporting English language development while teaching content subjects.

In addition, rural and under-resourced settings, which comprise a significant portion of Sri Lankan bilingual schools, present unique challenges such as teacher proficiency, resource limitations, and diverse student language levels. These factors are underexplored in the current literature. While studies like Mahawattha (2012) and Wijesekera and Alford (2019) acknowledge disparities in bilingual education, they do not sufficiently address how classroom discourse practices might mitigate or exacerbate these challenges.

This study aims to bridge these gaps by providing an in-depth analysis of the nature and effectiveness of classroom discourse, particularly teacher talk, in Sri Lankan secondary-level bilingual classrooms. It seeks to uncover how classroom discourse facilitates or hinders students' English language

development, offering context-specific insights into improving bilingual teaching practices.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the role of teacher talk in fostering English language development among bilingual students. A qualitative design was chosen to capture the intricacies of classroom interactions and to analyze how teacher talk directly impacts language acquisition. This approach allows for the detailed examination of real-time classroom discourse, focusing on specific features of teacher talk that promote language use, such as scaffolding, questioning, and feedback.

While quantitative data was gathered in other parts of the broader study, this section exclusively concentrates on qualitative findings related to language development. The study's qualitative component relies on classroom observations and lesson transcriptions to provide rich, contextualized data on how teacher talk facilitates students' English language growth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Study setting

The research was conducted at Addalaichenai Madhya Maha Vidyalayam, a secondary school in the linguistically diverse Ampara district of Sri Lanka. This school offers bilingual education from grades 6 to 11, where subjects like Science, Geography, and Mathematics are taught in English. The institution was chosen because of its representativeness of bilingual education programs in the district and its accessibility for efficient data collection. Six lessons from three teachers were selected for observation, recording, and transcription. These lessons provided the primary data for analyzing teacher talk's role in English language development.

Participants

Teachers

The study included three content teachers who delivered bilingual lessons in English. This group comprised one male Geography teacher and two female Science teachers. These participants were chosen to reflect diverse teaching styles and subject contexts within the bilingual program.

Students

Students from the observed classrooms, ranging from grades 6 to 11, were included indirectly. Their interactions with teachers served as a basis for analyzing how teacher talk influenced their language development. These students represented the typical linguistic diversity and academic profiles of bilingual classrooms in the region.

Sampling procedure

Purposive sampling was employed to select teachers and classrooms most relevant to the study's focus on language development. The chosen participants were those actively teaching in English-medium bilingual classrooms. This approach ensured that data collection centered on environments where teacher talk could be observed influencing students' language learning in real-time (Patton, 2002).

Research instruments

Classroom observations

Eighteen lessons were initially observed and audio-recorded. Two audio recorders were placed in the classroom one near the teacher and the other among students to ensure both teacher and student interactions were captured. To maintain natural classroom dynamics, the researcher functioned as a non-participant observer. Lessons significantly impacted by the observer effect or dominated by the use of Tamil were excluded, leaving six lessons for detailed analysis.

Transcriptions

The audio recordings of these six lessons were transcribed manually. Transcriptions captured linguistic details such as pauses, intonation, and emphasis, providing a nuanced understanding of teacher talk strategies. Annotations added contextual information about classroom interactions and non-verbal cues.

Data analysis

Qualitative analysis of classroom transcripts

The qualitative analysis focused exclusively on language development, examining how teacher talk supported students' English proficiency. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and strategies within the teacher talk. Key features of teacher talk that emerged from the analysis included:

1. Scaffolding language production

Teachers guided students in constructing responses through prompts, sentence starters, and modeling, enabling them to use English effectively.

2. Encouraging participation through feedback

Positive reinforcement, praise, and constructive feedback created a supportive environment that encouraged students to use English actively.

3. Questioning techniques

Open-ended and referential questions elicited extended student responses, fostering greater engagement with English.

4. Vocabulary development

Teachers consistently introduced and reinforced subject-specific and academic vocabulary to expand students' lexical repertoire.

5. Wait time

Allowing students additional time to process and respond facilitated greater fluency and accuracy in their use of English.

The methodology employed in this study provides a strong framework for exploring the role of teacher talk in fostering English language development among bilingual students. By adopting a qualitative research approach, the study captures the intricate dynamics of classroom interactions and focuses on how teacher talk strategies such as scaffolding, questioning, feedback, and vocabulary development contribute to students' language growth. Conducting the research in a representative bilingual educational setting and employing purposive sampling ensured the relevance and contextual depth of the findings. The use of classroom observations, detailed transcriptions, and thematic analysis facilitated a nuanced examination of teacher talk's impact on language acquisition. Together, these methodological choices align with the study's objectives, laying a strong foundation for understanding the pedagogical practices that support English language development in bilingual classrooms.

Findings

Positive feedback and praise and their impact on students' language development

Positive feedback and praise are important tools for improving students' language skills. These methods help students feel more confident and motivated, encouraging them to take part in language activities. Research shows that specific praise, which focuses on what students have done well, is more effective than general praise. For example, Blöte (1995) found that positive feedback boosts students' motivation, which is necessary for learning a language. Similarly, Hattie (1993) explained that praise works best when it includes clear advice on how students can improve.

Example

In this example, the lesson takes place in a grade nine Geography class, with a focus on the topic of Environmental Pollution. The teacher uses a series of referential questions to encourage students to think critically about the impacts of environmental issues like deforestation and military weapons.

T2 : OK sit down take your seats.

Right, You tell me, one of the impacts of deforestation.

ah , one of the impact of deforestation.

Yes, you tell me

one of the impact of deforestation.

S4 : Destruction of water resources.

T2 : Oh destruction of water resources no.

OK, Right, very good.

You tell me, others take your seats, one of the impact of examination of military weapons.

S5 : Global warming

T2 : Global warming no?

OK very good.

Sit down.

The teacher begins by asking, “You tell me, one of the impacts of deforestation.” A student responds with “Destruction of water resources,” and the teacher repeats the response for clarification, saying, “Oh destruction of water resources no,” and praised the student with “OK, Right, very good.” The teacher then moves on to another question, asking about the impact of military weapons, to which a student replies, “Global warming.” Again, the teacher repeats the answer and follows up with positive feedback, “OK very good.”

The teacher uses positive feedback and praise to reinforce student participation and correct content knowledge. By frequently using the phrase “very good,” the teacher acknowledges the students' efforts and encourages continued engagement. This use of praise helps build a supportive learning environment, where students feel confident in sharing their ideas and answering questions.

Extended wait time and its impact on students' language development

Extended wait time means giving students more time to think after asking a question. This practice helps students give better and more detailed answers. Rowe (1986) found that when teachers waited at least three seconds after asking a question, students' answers were clearer and more thoughtful.

Example

In this example from a grade eight Geography lesson on the South Asian Region, the teacher employs wait time as a strategy to enhance student engagement and language production. The lesson consists of two distinct interactions in which the teacher attempts to engage students with key content and vocabulary.

Excerpt 1

T1 : by all the South Asian countries for their mutual help ah.

How to spell mutual? (one second)

For their mutual helps ah.

I think you know what is mutual helps no? (two seconds)

Mutual help means, for an example, if I help you, ins and then again you will help me. When I have some help, you will help me. Okay?

Excerpt 2

T1 : Yes, tell me what can be the results? (six seconds)

S8 : increase in life expectancy

T1 : Oh, if the health sector is developed, there will an increasing the life expectancy

Then what will happen? (five seconds)

S8 : decrease in infant mortality

T1 : Oh, very good

The teacher asks the students how to spell "mutual" and, shortly after, checks their understanding of the term "mutual help." The first question, "How to spell mutual?" is followed by just one second of wait time, and the second question, "I think you know what is mutual helps no?" is followed by two seconds of wait time. Despite these prompts, the limited pause after each question does not allow students adequate time to reflect or respond. The rushed questioning prevents the students from fully engaging with the term, leaving them unable to produce any language in response.

In contrast, the second excerpt showcases a more deliberate use of wait time, yielding better results. After asking, "Yes, tell me what can be the results?" the teacher provides six seconds for the students to think and formulate their responses. This longer pause enables one student to contribute with "increase in life expectancy," demonstrating a clear connection to the topic. The teacher further extends the discussion by asking, "Then what will happen?" and allowing five seconds of wait time, which leads another student to answer "decrease in infant mortality." This shows that the students had sufficient time to process the question and respond with relevant content.

Scaffolding language production and its impact on students' language development

Scaffolding is when teachers provide step-by-step support to help students complete tasks they cannot do on their own. Over time, teachers reduce their help as students become more confident. This idea comes from Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Bruner (1976) also explained that scaffolding helps students learn new skills by breaking tasks into smaller, easier parts.

Example

In this example from a Grade 11 Commerce lesson on Marketing Objectives, the teacher employs scaffolding to support student language production and content comprehension. The teacher guides the students in constructing accurate and complete answers related to two important concepts: price definition and the objectives of preparing a profit or loss statement.

Excerpt 1

T3 - tell me what is called price? How to define price?

S12 - price is given to

T3 - very good, the value that is

S12 - the value that is expected to be charged from the consumers.

T3 - ah very good, now you see what is that price? the value of amount expected to be, amount of value expected to be charged from consumer to the, for a good or service. ok? Have you understood? So that is called price.

Excerpt 2

T3 - So once more can you tell me what are those two objectives?

S11 - to find out the business ah

T3 - oh, two find out or to calculate the

S11 - business earned gross profit or loss

T3 - gross profit or gross loss of business organisation at the end of the financial period. Ah second objective?

S11 - to calculate the

T - oh, very good, so to calculate the net profit or net loss of the business organisation at the end of the

financial period. There are the two important objectives of preparing the profit or loss statement.

The teacher begins by asking an open-ended question: "Tell me what is called price? How to define price?" The student initiates the response, saying, "price is given to..." but struggles to fully articulate the idea. The teacher immediately provides positive feedback, saying "very good," and steps in to expand on the student's partial response: "the value that is..." This prompts the student to complete the thought with "the value that is expected to be charged from the consumers." The teacher then repeats and refines the student's response, providing the correct terminology: "the amount of value expected to be charged from the consumer for a good or service." By co-constructing the answer with the student, the teacher helps reinforce the concept of price and strengthens the student's grasp of the correct language needed to express it.

In the second interaction, the teacher asks the student to recall the two objectives of preparing a profit or loss statement. When the student begins with "to find out the business ah," the teacher scaffolds the response by suggesting the correct phrase: "to find out or to calculate the..." The student then completes the thought with "business earned gross profit or loss," and the teacher affirms and models the full response: "gross profit or gross loss of the business organization at the end of the financial period." This step-by-step breakdown of the answer helps the student articulate the concept more clearly. The teacher then repeats the process with the second objective, providing prompts and feedback to guide the student toward the complete and correct response.

Elicitation and its impact on students' language development

Elicitation is when teachers encourage students to speak by asking questions or giving prompts instead of directly providing answers. This method helps students think for themselves and practice their language skills. According to Walsh (2013), elicitation creates a more interactive classroom, where students feel more involved in their learning.

Example

In this example from a grade nine Geography lesson on Environmental Pollution, the teacher employs elicitation techniques to encourage student engagement and language production. The teacher's strategic questioning not only reinforces content knowledge but also promotes language development, particularly in a bilingual classroom setting.

T2 : Now you tell me what is called bio community?

S5 : all the animals and the plants in the environment called community.

T2 : very good, all the animals and plants included in the environment is called bio community, right good,

Right, you tell me one of the uh impact of use of or emitting more smoke from the vehicles,

One of the impact of emitting more smoke from the vehicle.

SS : effect of green house

Oh, very good, what is that effect of green house, right okay, sit down very good.

Now you tell me which steps can be taken to minimize that problem, others boys

S13 : using hybrid vehicles.

T2 : very good, one of the suggestion or one of the alternative source is to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide.... what is that, smoke what is that use of

SS : hybrid vehicle.

T2 : hybrid vehicle no, right very good.

In this lesson, the teacher uses elicitation to encourage student engagement and reinforce both content and language skills. The teacher begins by asking students to define "bio community," prompting them to recall and articulate a scientific term, which helps with vocabulary and concept understanding.

Moving to environmental issues, the teacher asks about the impact of vehicle emissions, guiding students to discuss cause-and-effect relationships, as demonstrated when a student mentions the "greenhouse effect." Follow-up questions and affirmations help deepen student responses, such as when a student suggests "using hybrid vehicles" to reduce pollution, showing their grasp of environmental solutions.

The teacher's elicitation approach promotes active student participation, requiring them to use subject-specific vocabulary like "bio community" and "greenhouse effect" and prompting critical thinking about real-world applications. By affirming responses and encouraging further thought through follow-up questions, the teacher builds student confidence and fosters deeper understanding, helping students to practice language skills within a content-rich discussion.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight how teacher talk supports students' language learning in bilingual classrooms. Positive feedback and praise played an important role in helping students feel confident using English. Hattie (1993) explained that feedback combined with praise is especially effective because it motivates students while showing them how to improve. In bilingual classrooms, where students may be shy about speaking in English, praise becomes even more valuable.

Another important finding was the use of extended wait time. Teachers who waited longer after asking questions gave students the chance to think carefully and respond with more detailed answers. This supports Rowe's (1986) research, which found that longer wait times lead to better student responses. Cabell et al. (2015) also found that wait time is particularly helpful for bilingual learners, as it gives them the time they need to process and respond in a second language.

Scaffolding was another key strategy observed in this study. Teachers used prompts, partial answers, and modelling to help students complete their responses. Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD theory explains that this type of support helps students accomplish tasks they cannot yet do on their own. Over time, as students gain confidence, the teacher reduces their assistance, allowing the student to work independently. This gradual process is essential for developing both language and content understanding.

Elicitation techniques also showed how teachers can encourage active participation. By asking open-ended questions, teachers created opportunities for students to practice English while discussing meaningful content. Walsh (2013) explained that elicitation helps students take ownership of their learning, making them more confident and engaged in the classroom.

This study adds to the knowledge of existing research by showing how teacher talk supports language learning in bilingual classrooms. While many studies focus on how teachers provide language input, this research highlights the importance of output strategies like scaffolding and elicitation, which encourage students to use language actively. These findings provide practical suggestions for improving teaching methods in bilingual education.

The findings showed how teacher talk strategies, such as positive feedback, extended wait time, scaffolding, and elicitation, help students develop their English skills in bilingual classrooms. These strategies align with established theories, such as Vygotsky's ZPD and Rowe's wait-time research, and demonstrate the critical role of teacher talk in supporting bilingual learners. While challenges like time constraints and varying student proficiency levels exist, the findings suggest that teacher training and creative teaching methods can address these issues effectively.

Conclusion

This study highlights the essential role of teacher talk in supporting language development among bilingual secondary students in the Ampara District. By focusing on strategies like simplified language, scaffolding, questioning techniques, positive feedback, and vocabulary instruction, the findings underscore how teacher talk facilitates students' English proficiency while maintaining their engagement with subject content.

The analysis of teacher-student interactions revealed several features of teacher talk that effectively

promote language learning:

Teachers simplified complex concepts into manageable parts, enabling students with varying levels of English proficiency to understand and engage with the material. This finding aligns with Cummins' (2013) view that simplifying language helps students focus on both content and linguistic development.

Scaffolding emerged as a critical strategy for guiding students through language production. Teachers used prompts, sentence starters, and modelling to support students, gradually reducing assistance as students gained confidence and independence. This practice reflects Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners achieve higher levels of performance with guided support.

Strategic questioning techniques, particularly referential and open-ended questions, encouraged students to think critically and articulate their responses. For instance, teachers asked questions like, "What are the impacts of deforestation?" to promote active student engagement and language use. This aligns with Walsh's (2013) findings that questioning fosters deeper learning and linguistic growth.

The use of specific and encouraging feedback helped students build confidence in their language skills. Teachers validated student responses with phrases like "very good" and provided constructive reinforcement to encourage further participation. These findings are consistent with Mueller and Dweck's (1998) research on the importance of praise in fostering a positive attitude toward learning.

Subject-specific vocabulary was emphasized through repetition and contextual usage, allowing students to expand their academic lexicon. Teachers used targeted vocabulary instruction to ensure students understood key terms, supporting Coxhead's (2000) assertion that academic vocabulary is essential for mastering content and language.

Limitations of the Study

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the research focuses exclusively on secondary-level bilingual classrooms in Sri Lanka, limiting the generalizability of findings to other educational contexts, such as primary or tertiary levels, or bilingual education systems in other countries. The specific sociocultural and linguistic context of Sri Lanka, characterized by the coexistence of Sinhala, Tamil, and English, may yield findings that are not directly applicable to regions with different linguistic dynamics (Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). Additionally, the study's reliance on classroom observations and transcriptions of teacher talk may not fully capture the complexities of classroom interactions, particularly non-verbal cues and student-to-student discourse, which also play a vital role in language development (Mercer, 2004).

Another limitation pertains to the sample size and scope. The study includes a limited number of classrooms and teachers, which may not represent the full diversity of bilingual education practices across the country. Factors such as regional disparities, access to resources, and teacher training vary significantly between urban and rural schools, potentially influencing the findings (Mahawattha, 2012). Furthermore, the study primarily examines teacher talk in content-based instruction, which may overlook the broader dynamics of bilingual education, such as the influence of curriculum design, assessment practices, and students' home language use on language acquisition. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into classroom discourse in Sri Lankan bilingual education and highlights areas for further research.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to bilingual education in Sri Lanka by demonstrating the powerful impact of teacher talk on language learning in secondary classrooms. The findings provide practical insights into how content teachers can use language more effectively to support bilingual students.

The study emphasizes that teacher talk is more than a medium for delivering content it is a tool for fostering linguistic growth. By examining real classroom interactions, this research offers actionable strategies for improving teaching practices, particularly in resource-limited educational settings like the Ampara District.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The insights from this study have significant implications for educational policy and classroom practice. The findings advocate for professional development programs that train content teachers in effective teacher talk strategies, including scaffolding, questioning, and vocabulary instruction. Such programs would empower teachers to integrate language and content learning seamlessly, improving outcomes for bilingual students.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of recognizing teacher talk as a key element in bilingual education policy. Policymakers should consider supporting teachers through targeted training and resources to enhance their instructional practices. By prioritizing teacher talk in policy and practice, educational institutions can create more inclusive and effective learning environments for bilingual students.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, further research is needed to expand our understanding of teacher talk in bilingual education. Future studies could include:

- A broader sample of schools across various regions to capture the diverse contexts of bilingual classrooms in Sri Lanka.
- Long-term observations to examine how teacher talk influences students' language development over time.
- Additional methods, such as student performance assessments, to objectively measure the impact of teacher talk on language outcomes.

Such research would enrich our understanding of how teacher talk supports bilingual students and provide more comprehensive guidance for improving teaching practices.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that teacher talk is a vital component of bilingual education, playing a significant role in enhancing language development among bilingual secondary students. By focusing on strategies like scaffolding, questioning, and feedback, teachers can create supportive learning environments that nurture students' language skills and academic success.

The findings highlight the transformative potential of teacher talk in bilingual classrooms, offering practical insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers. With continued investment in teacher training, classroom resources, and evidence-based policies, bilingual education in Sri Lanka can be significantly improved, ensuring equitable and effective learning opportunities for all students.

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