LANGUAGE PLANNING AND POLICY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE SRI LANKAN STATE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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Abstract

As a multilingual country, Sri Lanka experiences numerous consequences in specifying a language for main functions such as education. Although a proper language management procedure is crucial in ensuring language rights in plurilinguistic learning environments, overt and covert language policies are in effect in the state university system in Sri Lanka with an influence on people's identity, lifestyle, and pedagogical processes. However, a discrepancy is apparent between the codified language policy and planning on higher education and the implementation of those policies in the actual context. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to investigate the implementation of the concepts of language planning and policy on higher education in the state university context, with an especial focus on the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Ruhuna, and the perspectives of the inhabitants regarding those enacted language policies within the institution. To achieve the research objectives, a qualitative approach was used in the present study. Hence, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 first-year students and two academic staff members to investigate their experiences and perspectives regarding the language policy and planning strategies enacted in the university context. According to the findings of the study, the students have many challenges in lecture comprehension when English becomes the only medium of instruction. Moreover, there are numerous practical obstacles and communication problems that Tamil language-speaking students face in their day-to-day activities within the university premises among the majority of Sinhala speakers. Additionally, there are discrepancies between the policy regarding national languages and its implementation in the university system. In conclusion, it is evident that the documented policies are not practiced authentically in the state university context in Sri Lanka and the perspectives of the inhabitants are both positive and negative on different occasions.

Keywords: *higher education, implementation, language planning, language policy, perspectives, state universities in Sri Lanka*

Introduction

Language policy is associated with the decisions and rules about the status, usage, domains, and territories of the languages within a country. Generally, these decisions are made formally by the legislation and informally by scholars or community leaders. Hence, these decisions prompt the right to use and maintain languages, affect the status of languages and demarcate which languages are nurtured. Moreover, the process of language planning commences with the detection of an issue, particularly to the demands of society. However, language planning and language policy are two diverse

notions in which language policy is about making decisions and setting goals while language planning is related to implementing policies to gain outcomes (Cooper, 1989; Schiffman, 1996; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). Therefore, language policy and planning signify all language beliefs, practices, and also management choices of society. According to Schiffman (1996), language policies appear in two forms: overt policies which are explicit, codified, or formalized as well as covert policies which are informal, implicit and unstated. Although a proper language management procedure is crucial in ensuring language rights in plurilinguistic learning environments, overt and covert language policies are in effect in the state university system in Sri Lanka with an influence on people's identity, lifestyle, and pedagogical processes. Besides, a discrepancy is apparent between the language policy and planning on higher education and the implementation of those policies in the actual context.

Therefore, the objective of the present study is to investigate the implementation of the concepts of language planning and policy on higher education in the state university context, with a special focus on the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Ruhuna, and the perspectives of the inhabitants regarding those enacted language policies within the institution. To achieve the above research objectives, two research questions are formed: How is the implementation of the concepts of language planning and policy on higher education in the context of Sri Lankan state university? and What are the perspectives of the inhabitants regarding the enacted language policies and planning strategies within the state university context in Sri Lanka?

The rationale for the study

The current study intends to discover the clashes and discrepancies between the implementation of community-controlled and state-controlled policies regarding language planning within the institutional context. This is a contemporary requirement because the government policy should be congruent with the societal needs to create a productive graduate who matches the demands and expectations of society. Additionally, the rationale behind choosing the state university context is that the interaction of multiple languages is most evident in government institutes where appropriate language management should be implemented. Hence, the issues of inhabitants such as students and lecturers should be examined properly in both academic and non-academic settings. Furthermore, the current study is significant to the field due to the absence of previous studies investigating language policy and planning strategies in the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Ruhuna.

Literature Review

As a multilingual country, Sri Lanka experiences numerous consequences in specifying a language for main functions such as education. According to Attanayake (2017), when British traders first arrived in Sri Lanka in the 1600s, Sri Lankans were exposed to the English language for the first time. Robert Knox first described the Sri Lankan way of life in English in 1681. The Dutch colony of Sri Lanka was

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taken over by the British in 1796, and the country became a British colony in 1815. Sri Lanka won its freedom from the British in 1948. Up until the introduction of the Swabhasha policy in 1956, English remained the sole official language used by the nation. English served as the medium of administrative purposes at higher levels of the administrative structure during colonial times as well as from 1948 to 1956.

However, using the 13th amendment to the constitution in Sri Lanka, adopted in 1987, English was designated as the link language while Sinhala and Tamil were given equal status as the nation's official and national languages. However, the English language has been taught in Sri Lankan schools as a main subject since 1956 (Attanayake, 2017). In 1956, the Sinhalese coalition, representing the majority Sinhala people, first agitated for a "Sinhala Only" policy (Eckstein, 2018). Bandaranaike's Official Language Act is viewed as a tactical move that was made to secure the open backing of the Sinhalese people during the period. Moreover, according to Eckstein (2018), the overall result of these activities meant that the Sinhalese language enjoys a higher standing and that Sinhala nationalism is advanced as equatable to Ceylon nationalism. Consequently, Orjuela (2008), suggests that the Official Language Act represented supremacy, allowing the government with a majority of Sinhalese citizens to completely control the educational and economical options available to the Tamil community as well as to ensure Sinhalese hegemony of the political system.

Nevertheless, the debate about whether Sinhala, Tamil, or both should serve as the nation's official language(s) quickly rose to prominence in politics and catalyzed the ethnic unrest that exploded in Sri Lanka throughout the late 1950s (De Silva, 2011), and later Tamil was given official status in 1987 (Mendis, 2021). Additionally, when viewed through the prism of language as a "hypercollective good" and right, the colonial history, rise of nationalism, and contemporary institutional system among the Sinhala and Tamil parties feed the ongoing tension among these ethnolinguistic communities nowadays (Eckstein, 2018 p.10). The Tamil-speaking minority in Sri Lanka considers that their L1 (First Language) has a lower status than Sinhala, despite both Sinhala and Tamil having equal status being Official as well as National Languages under the country's constitution, particularly in the area of education (Mendis, 2021). However, in terms of exposure to multilingualism, the nation's Tamil and Sinhala-speaking populations lack the necessary access and tools to develop their language proficiency to the point where they can converse with one another (Eckstein, 2018). This seems to be due to a lack of motivation, which is explicitly related to three aspects: the ineffectiveness of government policies requiring the career opportunities of bilingual civil servants; municipal sections that limit employee mobility; and the secondary and primary education systems that create these initial linguistic distinctions between pupils and the higher education system that reinforces these distinctions through its different linguistic trail of Tamil, Sinhala, and English (Eckstein, 2018). In addition, diverse state

universities in Sri Lanka autonomously employ language policies and planning strategies within the institution.

Thus, language planning is prominent in the higher education sector, as the functions of universities are basically facilitated by language (Liddicoat, 2016). According to the constitution of Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil have been demarcated as official languages while English is the linked language. When contemplating the Sri Lankan language policy in education, the constitution has entitled a person to be educated through the medium of either of the national languages (Sinhala or Tamil). Nevertheless, it specifies as 'provisions of this paragraph shall not apply to an institution of higher education where the medium of instruction is a language other than a National Language' (Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka - Chapter IV, 2015).

As an implementation of language policy and planning, all the degree programmes at the Faculty of Management and Finance, the University of Ruhuna which is selected as the context of the present study, are conducted in the English medium commencing from the first academic year with the aim to improve the English language proficiency of students as well as the achievement level towards the globally acceptable employment competencies (University of Ruhuna, 2021). Though theoretically English medium instruction was introduced in this university to enhance the students' English proficiency, the desired outcome has been questioned.

Students at the tertiary level face many challenges in developing English language proficiency while coping with their academic studies. Additionally, higher language proficiency is crucial for successful academic studies in the English medium including writing assignments, exams, and making presentations. The majority of students undertake their school studies in vernacular languages such as Sinhala and Tamil. As a result, the students entering the university are mostly monolingual. Even though English is taught as a subject at schools from grade 3 to G.C.E. Advanced Level, various reasons affect the successful learning of English at schools including inadequate resources and lack of motivation among the students towards the language (The World Bank, 2009). External factors such as not having proper guidance for learning and internal factors such as negative attitudes toward English can lead to poor language abilities. Therefore, this limited language proficiency affects their successful learning of content subjects, and developing language proficiency by following English instructions seems difficult for them. According to Flowerdew and Miller (1992), as more and more students have started studying in the medium of English, especially at tertiary levels, the ability to comprehend academic lectures has been a challenge for those students.

Additionally, according to Mendis (2021), language management is a significant facet in affirming language rights and harmony in society, especially in multilingual learning settings including Sri

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Lankan universities. Furthermore, universities and faculties do not usually appoint committees for the purpose of language planning and policy although language policy is considered a critical issue in the post-independence era in Sri Lanka (Coperahewa, 2009; Irshad, 2018; Medawattegedera, 2015; Perera, 2015; Raheem, 2006; Raheem & Ratwatte, 2004; Vamadevan, 1996).

Meanwhile, the government is directed by its own norms and philosophies in making language policies and planning, and it can generate as many complications as it proposes to solve, for instance, the language policy and planning have frequently been discriminating towards Tamil-speaking students in Sri Lankan universities. As Kennedy and Lee (2018) suggest, this phenomenon occurs because of the conception of developed and under-developed languages signifying the 'center-periphery' hypothesis, depending on the context of politico-economic development. However, the Sinhalese-controlled bureaucracy in Sri Lanka hinders the institutional sustenance required to completely execute the policy of bilingualism while the Tamil language is also documented in place of an official language since 1987 (De Silva Wijeyeratne, 2014). Thus, the current study aims to fill the knowledge void on the implementation of the concepts of language planning and policy on higher education in the state university context, with a special focus on the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Ruhuna, and the perspectives of the inhabitants regarding those language policies.

Methodology

Research design and sample

A qualitative approach was used in the present study to achieve the research objectives. A random sample consisting of 10 first-year students at the Faculty of Management and Finance of the University of Ruhuna was selected for the study to examine their experience and perspectives regarding the language policy and planning strategies enacted in the university. The students in the sample ranged from ages 21 to 23 while their First Language (L1) was Sinhala or Tamil. Additionally, two Assistant Lecturers who teach in the English Language Intensive Course (ELIC) for these particular students were chosen to obtain insights into the students' interaction in a plurilinguistic learning environment and the implementation of language policies in the university context.

Data collection methods and analysis

The data collection method includes semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 first-year students and two Assistant Lecturers to investigate their experience and perspectives regarding the language policy and planning strategies enacted in the university context. According to Bryman (2008), this data collection method offers a flexible way of obtaining information within relative boundaries. Moreover, this strategy allows the researcher to ask additional questions to gain clarification or further information from participants' answers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The interviews were conducted via telephone and limited interviews were preferred because individual

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standpoints on the issue are more beneficial than a larger set of responses to the same question (Van Esch, 2013). Additionally, informed written consent was obtained from all the participants to ensure ethical considerations in the research.

Furthermore, this study adopts the thematic analysis method to analyze the collected data. Furthermore, interviews are analyzed thematically to account for in-depth narrative description and identification of general themes along with supporting respondent quotes (Van Esch, 2013).

Results and Discussions
The data collected in the present study can be analyzed and discussed as follows.

Issues related to the medium of instruction
The participants admitted that they have lecture comprehension problems and limited English proficiency since they have English medium instruction starting from the first year to the first semester. According to Graddol (2010), most university students are struggling to learn because the double burden of mastering their subjects and thinking in a foreign language is far too great a strain on them. Mostly, undergraduates have low English language proficiency upon entry to the university this situation can lead to incompetent graduates due to their low aptitude in English language skills. Although the students have understood the importance of English medium instruction for their future careers and higher education, they reported that they have diverse challenges such as the speed of the lecture, new terminology, and concepts in understanding lectures that are conducted in only English.

> *"As a student, I know the value of the English language, but it is difficult to manage the language and the new subjects I learn at the university. I studied at my school through Sinhala medium instruction for 13 years. So, sometimes the new concepts and theories are not clear when the lecturer explains everything in English" (Participant C).*

Though the constitution of Sri Lanka states that a person can get higher education through any national language or English medium, it is not fair to force them to learn in a specific language. According to Flowedrew and (1992), students have many challenges in lecture comprehension when English becomes the only medium of instruction. Thus, as a recommendation, tertiary-level learners should be allowed to choose their medium of instruction at least for the first academic year. Then, there is a scope for policymakers, course planners, and educators to work together to find out a practical approach to solve the existing problem.

Challenges faced by minority-speaking communities
According to the participants, there are numerous practical obstacles and communication problems that Tamil language-speaking students face in their day-to-day activities within the university premises

among the majority of Sinhala speakers. For students who studied in Tamil medium during school time, the absence of satisfactory familiarity with Sinhala and English has instigated difficulties in comprehending their lecture sessions and has become an impediment, which severely affects the pedagogical processes. As participants explained, the usage of Sinhala by lecturers to give examples during English medium sessions has created obstacles that negatively affect their grades. In contrast, according to the participants, none of the Tamil-speaking students at the University of Ruhuna has chosen courses/ degree programmes conducted using Sinhala medium instruction since it is comfortable for them to complete them in English medium rather than in Sinhala medium. When teachers/ lecturers engage in code-mixing and code-switching during lectures between English and Sinhala, it is problematic for the Tamil-speaking undergraduates to track what is being imparted in the classroom. Hence, this obstructs higher education where a mismatch between the existing policies and the practices is manifested.

The discrepancy between the language policy and practice

The participants explicate that the discrepancies between the policy regarding national languages and its implementation in the university system are questionable because certain practices are beneficial only for the Sinhala-speaking community by neglecting the minority language speakers' requirements. For instance, at the library and the university premises, the majority of the post signs are confined only to Sinhala and English. Aggravating the previous fact, the main language of communication at hostels, canteens and laboratories is Sinhala, not Tamil or even English.

"I am a Muslim student and I couldn't speak English very well and didn't know Sinhala when I came to the university. So, I had problems introducing myself to the security staff near the gate on my very first day. And, it was a bit difficult to find buildings on the university premises and do activities in the hostel because I didn't know Sinhala" (Participant E).

Moreover, as mentioned by the interviewees, most of the printed application forms and students' grievances forms are in Sinhala and English. Furthermore, the notices and announcements given on the university Learning Management System (LMS) are mostly in Sinhala while English is rarely used, but Tamil is never used. The non-academic staff, student counsellors, mentors and career guidance instructors are mostly monolingual Sinhala speakers. Thus, they are unable to facilitate Tamil-speaking students who are reluctant to share their issues in Sinhala or English. Additionally, clubs and associations as well as concerts and festivals are mainly conducted in Sinhala within the university premises while limiting the opportunities for minority speakers. However, the orientation period during the first year stands as a positive phenomenon in the university to bridge the ethnolinguistic divisions among the students who speak different first languages (L1). Nevertheless, the activities were performed in Sinhala and English limiting students to communicate in a less-proficient language.

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Moreover, those programmes have been terminated with time and no efforts are taken to resume them in a positive way. Therefore, the Tamil-speaking student population experience marginalization and frustration because of the language policies and the deficiencies in their implementation.

Moreover, the lack of Translation Studies and language studies programmes appears as another deficiency in terms of ensuring language policy and planning within the university. Commencing from the academic year 2013/2014, the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, the University of Kelaniya and the University of Jaffna have posed degrees in Translation Studies (Eckstein, 2018). However, such opportunities are not available at the University of Ruhuna to improve the translation skills of undergraduates. In addition, no Tamil medium degrees are offered at the university. In contrast, at the University of Jaffna, students distinguished that since all of their lectures in the Faculty of Arts are taught in Tamil, they have no Sinhala-speaking students as L1 in their classes (Eckstein, 2018). In addition, according to the participants' perspectives, a positive influence in the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Ruhuna is the English Language Intensive Course (ELIC), which offers beneficial prospects to use languages and mingle with different language speakers.

> *"The clubs such as AIESEC and Gavel are dominated by our friends who are good at English and the students who are struggling to learn English get fewer chances to go to higher positions in those clubs" (Participant A).*

Moreover, as an unofficial policy, AIESEC and Gavel club in the university are mostly confined to the students who are fluent in English and the other students are not involved in them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it is evident that the documented policies are not practised authentically in the state university context in Sri Lanka and the participants' perspectives are both positive and negative on different occasions. Hence, the modern-day concept of bilingual education which is frequently understood as English medium instruction is regularly observed as being debatable due to the disparities in the language policies applicable to higher education in Sri Lanka. Rubin and Jernudd (1971) describe the choice as to what language to practice as a means of teaching as a "language problem" that "organizations …given a command to achieve" tenacities of language planning, a requirement to resolve by determining "which variety or language will be used by certain sectors of the polity" (p.4). Additionally, the system suppresses some Tamil-speaking students and low-proficient students in English and tend to leave the degree programme due to language barriers.

Therefore, trained people with trilingual capacities must be recruited to universities to effectively deliver facilities to the students. Moreover, the National Institute of Language Education and Training

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(NILET) has the potential to intervene in the language teaching and training of teachers, interpreters, public servants and translators (NLEAP, 2019). Besides, certain steps should be taken to diminish the sociocultural and linguistic distance between the Tamil speakers and the university to obtain positive outcomes. The relevant authorities should plan to overcome the lack of language teaching programmes in the university in order to make bilingual or trilingual speakers while providing sufficient teachers and resources. In addition, the official documents of the university should be released in national or English languages. Hence, according to Coperahewa (2009) and Groundviews (2013), in Sri Lanka, bilingualism in official languages is rare, since the government only boosts the teaching of Sinhala to Tamil students and Tamil to Sinhala students. Although the trilingual policy has been officially accepted, the operation of the language requirements through the Official Languages Commission is inadequate. In addition, as educators, certain measures can be taken in the classroom, such as mixing Sinhala, English and Tamil-speaking students in collaborative activities.

Concludingly, both the macro level and micro level solutions should be employed while including not only the policymakers but also academic staff, administrative staff and students in higher education institutes for the process of language planning to ensure a practical approach in the implementation of policies. Therefore, it is a requirement to question, examine and review language planning and policy practices not only in one specific setting but in the whole Sri Lankan state university system, to avoid dissatisfaction and discrepancies.

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