

“MY CHILD WON’T BE ABLE TO GET “A” GRADES...”
CHALLENGES FOR IMPLEMENTING BILINGUAL
EDUCATION AT THE CLASSROOM LEVEL IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Bilingual Education (BE) was introduced to the education system in 2002 under the ‘National Amity Schools Project’. Since then, a few selected subjects have been taught in the English medium starting from grade six onwards. At present there are more than one thousand schools all over the island that implement BE. Studies conducted on the implementation of BE in Sri Lankan schools indicate that the performances of bilingual students is generally high in all subjects at the GCE (O/L) examination (World Bank, 2011; Nanayakkara, 2015). However, the programme faces several challenges (Wickremagama et al, 2009; World Bank, 2011) which have been identified at macro level, however, those faced by teachers, students, parents and principals at school level have not been sufficiently addressed. This study will therefore endeavor to focus in particular on the challenges faced by teachers and students in the bilingual classrooms of a selected urban Type 1C school. The following specific objectives have been identified for this purpose:

1. To explore the challenges faced by the teachers in the teaching learning process of bilingual classrooms in the particular school.
2. To understand the problems and issues faced by the students in learning in the BE classroom.
3. To make suggestions for the teachers, principals and educational administrators and policy makers to improve BE in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in this research. The study was conducted during a period of nine months in 2015. The data reported in this paper were generated during the process of collaborative action research study and during a series of related workshops as well as interviews with teachers and students. Eight out of nine teachers who teach in the junior secondary grades (Grades 6-11) in the English medium

in the selected school participated in the study. Percentages and graphs were used to analyze quantitative data and the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) and thematic analysis were used for qualitative analysis.

Results and discussion

Problems and challenges faced by the teachers:

Seven main challenges emerged in the analysis of teacher responses.

Relatively small number of students in BE classrooms:

Teachers reported that the parents are reluctant to admit their children to the bilingual classes due to several reasons.

Parents seem to be worried that their children would get less than 9As at the GCE (O/L) examination which would make it difficult for them to admit their child to a “more popular school” to study for the GCE (A/L). They also seem to be concerned about the possible resource constraints.

Student drop out rates from Grades 6-9

Teachers highlighted the fact that students drop out from grades 6 to 9 BE classes due parents being concerned about the low marks obtained by their children in grade 6.

Students’ poor knowledge of English

Identified as a major obstacle for teachers to meet the expected outcome of their lessons.

Additional administrative workload and other organizational barriers

Schools assign additional responsibilities to bilingual teachers and this consumed a lot of the teacher’s teaching time.

The lack of permanent classrooms for BE

During the interviews five teachers highlighted this as a serious practical issue.

The effects of conflicting guidelines and education circulars

Interviews with teachers revealed that *ad hoc* changes made through government circulars and conflicting guidelines on school level

implementation of BE provided by education authorities is a concern for the teachers.

The lack of support for students at home

Teachers also reported that most of the bilingual students in the school are from the lower middle class. The parents of these students do not have sufficient English language knowledge to help their children in their studies at home.

Problems and challenges faced by the students:

Almost all students in Grades 6 & Grade 8 reported that they had language problems. Their problems emerged both in classroom learning as well as in the assessments and at examinations. A comparison of the magnitude of the problems faced by bilingual students in grades 6 and 8 is set out in Figure 1 below.

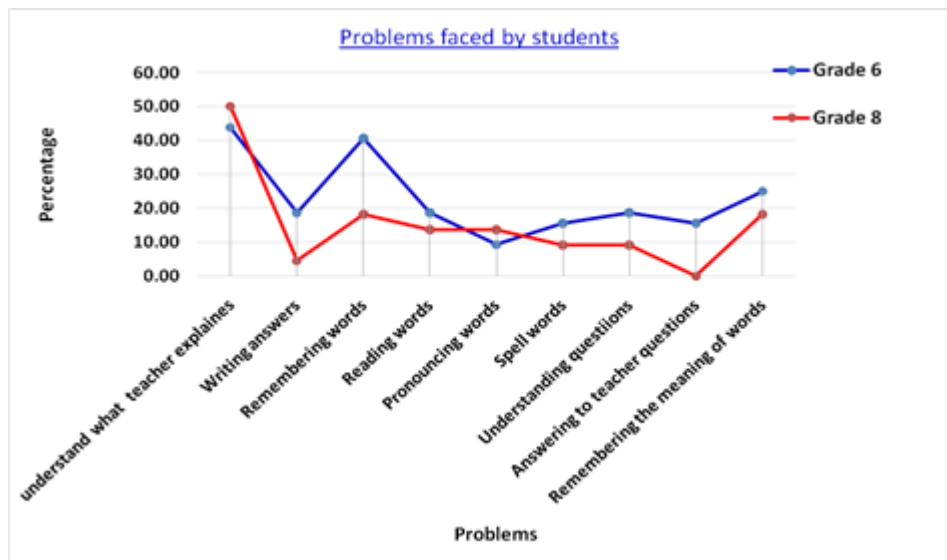


Figure 1: A comparison of the magnitude of problems faced by Grade 6 and Grade 8 students

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that teaching and learning in the bilingual classes is a great challenge for both teachers and students. Students' lack of adequate skills in English language is a major barrier for BE in this

particular school. The lack of classroom facilities and other resources, the lack of adequate support and guidance for teachers from school and zonal authorities to solve the context based problems aggravate the situation. Parental anxieties related to students' achievements in public examinations and their inability to provide appropriate support and guidance at home to their children also adds to the complexities of the situation. To improve the situation it is necessary to provide adequate training, guidance, resources and support for the BE teachers by the school and other relevant authorities. Developing professional learning communities of teachers in schools will also be useful to improve teaching learning and students' achievements.

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