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An Understanding Reticence and Ambivalence towards Speaking English through the 'Problem' of Limited Capital Yielded by English in a Sri Lankan State University: A Case Study

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Abstract

The use of English for communicative purposes among Sri Lankan state university students has been a topic of concern for many decades as they are typically noted as being either reticent or ambivalent in using the target language (TL) for oral communication irrespective of their proficiency in the TL or the fact that they are enrolled in English Medium Degree Programmes (EMDPs). This paper therefore offers a sociological response to the issue through an exploration of the notion of 'capital' yielded by English. Required information was obtained from a larger narrative case study conducted with five first-year undergraduates studying for two profession-oriented EMDPs offered by one academic department in a state university in Sri Lanka. Portraying the positioning of English in the context under study, this paper depicts how English use is discouraged by the hegemonic sociocultural environment in the context whereby opportunities for the respondents to use English that would ultimately enable them yield 'capital' are constrained. This 'problem' of 'capital' associated with English in the context under study has direct impacts on the learners' investment in using the TL. The study confirms that 'capital' has direct implications to investment in using English within the social realities of the respondents in the university context and recommends institutional-level support to foster a supportive academic environment that creates legitimate opportunities for the learners to yield 'capital' in using English.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Capital, English language use, Reticence, Sri Lankan state university undergraduates.

Introduction

The use of English for oral communication or the lack thereof among Sri Lankan state university undergraduates has been a topic of concern for many decades. Despite the general acknowledgement of TL use as part of the language learning process, English language learning and English language use in Sri Lanka can be referred to as two reasonably inconsistent phenomena. This is because the expanse of English language and learning does not necessarily mean the use of English for oral communication in the post-colonial setting of the country where English is surrounded by numerous socio-political and socio-cultural tensions, including the co-existence of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) and English learners with socially deprived access and opportunities to learn and use English (Nagahawatte, 2016). While it seems that, in Sri Lanka, learners use English in the development of listening, reading, and writing skills, they are often identified as being reticent and ambivalent in terms of the speaking skills, irrespective of their proficiency in the TL (Rathnasiri, 2020). Further, notwithstanding the fact that there has been a rising shift from mother-tongue-based undergraduate education to EMDPs, especially in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM); the limited use of English among undergraduates still becomes apparent and the ELT field is often blamed for producing graduates who are unemployable in the corporate sector where English is typically the language of communication (Attanayake, 2017; Gunsekera, 2005). In such a backdrop, the status-quo regarding prospective graduates' English-speaking abilities becomes

problematic and worthy of exploration through an approach that considers the socio-political and socio-cultural factors associated with English language use among the Sri Lankan learners. A sociological approach to explore English language use is thereby chosen for the study based on an understanding of language as a complex social process founded on the approach that perceives language as "a set of ideologically-defined resources and practices constructs language as a fundamentally social phenomenon" (Heller, 2006, cited in De Costa, 2016, p.19).

In the backdrop associated with the sociolinguistics of English in Sri Lanka, English has been characterized as the "language of the westernized elite", and a resistance to English could be identified in the linguistic landscape of Sri Lanka (Gunsekera, 2005, p.33). Theorising the term '*kaduwa*' ('sword' in Sinhala) used by the non-English speakers in Sri Lanka to refer to the frustration and oppression they have felt by English that excludes them, Kandiah (2010) notes how the non-English speakers have been denied of the opportunities to learn English, yet have acutely been made aware of the need for English for social mobility. While English has been identified as a major instrument of dominant power groups and a marker of oppression, it has also been identified as a language of power and upward mobility (Gunsekera, 2005) and a language of privilege associated with class (Rambukwella, 2018).

Furthermore, the use of English in Sri Lankan universities is highlighted by a class distinction between the haves and the have

nots (i.e., the users of English and those who are not), or 'us' versus 'them', creating a distinction with unequal power between the two parties, marked by English (Gunasekera, 2005). This difference holds currency within the so-called state university subculture which is a crucial aspect inhibiting the English use in the Sri Lankan universities (Nagahawatte, 2016; Wijesinghe, 2020). Driven by the fear of sustaining an upper elite social class inside the university, a prohibition to use English ('*kadda*', as it is colloquially referred) can be identified a key characteristic of the 'batch fit' which is colloquially normalised as what supposedly reduces the "feelings of isolation and homesickness of the students" (Wijesinghe, 2020, p.5). Inequal power relations between the junior students and the senior students that discourage the learning and use of English, viewing English as a subject and not as continual skill development, and involving in student politics are cited as key causes of the issue (Wijesinghe, 2020). Overall, this succinctly portrays the linguistic landscape surrounding English in Sri Lankan universities that forms part of the background of the present study, without an exploration of which a precise understanding of the many socio-political/socio-cultural complexities around English use in Sri Lankan state universities would not be possible. The present study aims at exploring the problem of reticence (i.e., the state of being reserved and silent when having to use English) and ambivalence (i.e., the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about English and its use) towards English use through an exploration of the notion of 'capital' yielded by English in a state university context in Sri Lanka. 'Capital' (Bourdieu, 1977) as a construct views language as 'symbolic capital'

which can be defined as resources available to an individual through accumulated prestige, honour, and recognition. It resembles the value accorded to a language within a particular society or culture and can be converted into economic and social capital. Capital also scrutinises how language learners gain or lose power as its value alters across time and space (Darvin & Norton, 2016). Norton (1995), developing Bourdieu's notion of 'capital', presents the construct of investment where she argues that "if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will, in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital" (p.10). Thus, investment explains how learners may be motivated to learn a language, but it is unlikely that the learners invest in the language learning process if the social and educational contexts of language learning do not provide them with equal positionings and improvement of capital (Darvin & Norton, 2016; Norton, 1995). Given the circumstances, exploring how capital is yielded by English in the university context under study would pave the way to understand the learners' limited investment in using English exhibited through reticence and ambivalence towards the TL. This paper argues that, although the macro language ideologies of English as symbolic capital are still present in the societies, the capital associated with English in the context under study is extensively limited, which impacts the participants' use of English in the present context including the ELT classrooms.

Materials and Methods

This paper reports from a narrative case study conducted with five (05) first-year undergraduates of the two profession-oriented

degree programmes offered by the ABC Department in a leading state university in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The first-year students of the ABC Department were chosen as the study population since they were participants of a common first-year academic and professional English language programme, in which the issues of reticence and ambivalence towards the use of English were noticed. Rathnasiri (2020) has described the method of selection of the five students.

This study employed the case study design to gain an in-depth understanding into the relationship between the capital associated with English in the context and the participants' English language use in the research setting, in order to explore their reticence and ambivalence towards using English generally observed in the university. The context of this case study was the state university while the case was the student community and the sub-culture found around the ABC Department. For the units of analysis (Yin, 2003) of the case, five (5) participants were selected using purposeful sampling, combined with the two strategies of intensity sampling and maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2001). Recruitment to the study was carried out via a two-step screening process that consisted of a background profile questionnaire with a set of inclusion criteria and identity portraits (Rathnasiri, 2020).

The data in the form of narratives were collected using identity portraits and (predominantly) narrative interviews. According to Yin (2003), interviews used in case studies are likely to be fluid rather than rigid and appear to be guided conversations rather than structured queries. In line with this idea, a consistent line

of inquiry—"a conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984, cited in Herath, 2015), was pursued throughout the interviews. Identity portrait is a form of multimodal approaches to the study of identity-associated research such as language profiles, linguistic practices and attitudes, and sociocultural identities (Busch, 2010) which investigates into "processes that influence language use [which] tend to operate unconsciously and cannot be easily verbalized" (Busch, 2010, p. 286). Data generated from both these tools were analysed using the thematic method of narrative exploration (Reissman, 2008).

This paper reports the findings gathered from five (05) students: Melani, Anuja, Daham, Dilini and Abā. All five students are 21 years old and three are females and two are males.

Results and Discussion

The results of the present study are discussed under three main themes below, all centralized around the positioning of English in the context to elaborate how 'capital' as a key construct enables us to understand reticence and ambivalence towards using English in the context under study.

English use being equivalent to risking the 'social capital' by facing ostracisation and not having friends in the context under study

The narratives of the participants principally highlight how using English in this university context has direct and overt implications to 'showing off superiority'. This socio-cultural environment in the context seems to be largely discouraging learners who are proficient in

English to diminish their English speaker identities. Melani, who is a self-claimed low-proficient English learner from suburban Western Province, sums this up:

The other thing is, within our batch, there's like this idea – this was there during the school times too – even we were sometimes like that – that when people use English, it is to show off, like, superiority. So even a student who can speak English doesn't use it here. Even if such a student says a few words in English, others think that the particular student is trying to be a snob. But that may be the usual habit of that student. But others don't think like that. So, the chances to use English in the university are very low.

Melani's point is also confirmed by Anuja, a comfortable speaker of English also from the suburban Western Province, who claims that 'people look at you differently' if you use English in this context. This does not seem to be the social capital anyone would need, and his narrative also highlights how using English for oral communication in the university could attract 'unwanted attention' from people around them, that could even lead to facing 'certain problems', supposedly from senior students:

I'm generally comfortable in using English but, I'm comfortable only if the other person speaks English. Here, on campus, there's no push to speak English and people sort of look at you differently [if you use English]. I don't want people to think I'm showing off, so I try not to use English here. I have seen people surrounding us look at us strangely when we use English

here. There are students who are not bothered by it, but I am. If people notice you're speaking English, you experience some problems. A good example for this is Abā (. Unlike me, she doesn't care what others think of her. So, because she speaks English freely, she doesn't have many friends in the batch. Nobody really approaches her and she's usually on her own.

Both Melani's and Anuja's remarks clearly highlight the positioning of English in the context and how 'limited' social capital it truly yields in the forms of allowing English speakers to be targets of ostracising and marginalising. The examples of Anuja and Abā clearly manifest how students who are proficient and comfortable in using English are indirectly presented with two options: either to conceal their English speaker identities like Anuja does or to continue using English despite the contextual challenges and be ostracised and marginalised.

More interestingly, when posed the question "Would you use English if you could speak 'perfect'¹ English?", almost all the participants responded negatively, for which the explanation is summed up in Daham²'s answer below:

What I don't like is largely speaking English, then the others (friends) won't talk to me.

1. 'Perfect English' was a popular quote from the participants.
2. Daham is a self-claimed average-proficient learner of English from the suburban Central Province.

Daham's response clearly implies a strong link to English use and losing social capital in this social context, which essentially sums up the first sub theme of this paper's findings.

English use being challenging for the entry into and membership of the community of practice termed 'the batch' in the present context

The narratives of the present study shed light on how speaking in English could be to gain entry into and ensure the membership of the 'community of practice' (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) called 'the batch'. In this state university context, the participants were reading for profession-oriented degrees which stressed the alleged need to always maintain 'the batch fit', which colloquially refers to the fraternity among the members of a batch of students who enrol in the same degree programme or academic department. In this context, the 'batch fit' had strong emphasis and the students typically make a stronger investment in state university student identities which generally conform to the hegemonic subculture that prioritises the 'batch fit'. These strong desires of 'inclusion' into the CoP of the batch, with a strong 'batch fit', stood up as a major reason for such distancing from English use.

Anuja, Dilmi and Melani mentioned the high value placed on 'batch fit', for example, when they talk about how everyone of the batch is almost pressurised to be there for common social purposes such as events, student meetings, acting as 'one'. The use of English, which is generally perceived as a class marker, indicates a sense of division among the batchmates, as it categorises English-

speaking and Sinhala-speaking students into two groups: the privileged and the disadvantaged. Thus, in a subculture where 'unity and oneness' are valued, this 'division' caused by English use becomes problematic. Abā sums up her experience:

All through the first semester, I was frustrated by the people, even my own batchmates, who asked me not to speak in English or even to use any English words when I speak in Sinhala.

Abā's quote clearly highlights how even a student's own peers (i.e., batchmates) can apply pressure to discourage English use. In this context, such efforts can be identified as attempts to ensure there are no 'divisions' in the batch caused by English use and everyone in the batch is 'equal' and act as 'one'. Thus, Abā exemplifies how, although English is positioned in her heart and mind, it is not used owing to issues related to losing social capital in the context.

Furthermore, Dilmi, a self-claimed average-proficient learner of English from the rural Southern Province, implies how gaining access into and maintaining the membership of the CoP of the ABC Department student community (of all years/levels) is portrayed paramount for newcomers:

Here, everyone listens to the seniors; they have told us that we cannot get into a good job without their help. If you're from a well-to-do socio-economic background like Abā in our batch is, then you don't have to listen to the seniors. But the majority aren't from that kind of backgrounds, so they listen to and follow the seniors forgetting what's more important.

Dilmi's remark reflects the ubiquitous power the subculture has over the university students and highlights how it fosters a 'herd mentality' or a culture of dependence. It seems that the seniors have established their power over the first-years by making the latter believe that better employment opportunities will be secured with the 'help' of the seniors, and this ultimately might lead the first-years to interweave a substantial portion of subculture into their state university student identities. This depicts how their investment lies in the current social identities within their CoP which includes group solidarity but excludes English use.

English use being 'mechanical' within the mandatory academic practices in the context under study

In the present context, the students are sometimes required to use English for explicit utilitarian purposes centred around academic needs such as making presentations and facing viva voce. The narratives highlight that the students use English only when the context necessitates its use, for example, in academic presentations. Most of the respondents claim that they 'manage' their English in these occasions as the required amount of English use is specific and restrained, for example, memorising a few points in the presentation slide and reading the rest from the slides. Such linguistic behaviour within the academic scope manifests how spontaneous communication in English is hardly called for even within the academic scope, depicting how limited capital it yields in the reality of the context under study.

More importantly, the narratives depict that the students use English 'if and when' everyone else uses it, for example, in activities that are called out in front of the classes. Melani notes how they still hesitate to use English, fearing if the lecturer may ask further questions and what their peers might think of them. She recalls how they would go to a lecturer with a question, and try to speak English 'collectively', until the lecturer most probably switches to Sinhala. These examples depict how 'mechanical' English use within the academic scope can be, and how the students strategically 'manage' those. Such 'mechanical use' and managing' of English clearly yields limited capital in reality, and thereby, disallowing the students to invest in using English in the context.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the socio-political and socio-cultural tensions surrounding English in the context under study; such as noticing the English-speaking students differently, ostracizing and marginalizing them, considering them a threat to the 'batch fit';, would not evade the language or content classroom where the students are required to speak English. Therefore, it can be argued that the limited capital English seems to offer to the students in the realities of the present context must still be present even within the mandatory academic scope and the students would still have fears of the socio-political tensions surrounding English and its use, even within the classrooms. This could also mean that such fears may even create conflicts with student identities and investment practices in using English.

Conclusions and Limitations

Conclusions

This paper aimed at exploring the problem of reticence and ambivalence towards English use through an exploration of the notion of 'capital' yielded by English in a state university context in Sri Lanka. The paper argued that, although the macro language ideologies of English as symbolic capital are still present in the outer societies, the capital associated with English in the context under study is extensively limited, which impacts the participants' use of English. English-speaking does not seem to be truly necessitated by the existing academic practices and thereby receive limited capital both inside and outside classrooms in the context. The fact that the students who confidently use English are ostracised and marginalised also mean they risk acquiring social capital as not everyone wishes to be friends with the students speaking English. Thus, in this context, English use is subdued through the labelling and ostracising practices existing in the context which seem to be delegitimising, devaluing, and ultimately discouraging the use of English.

This finally leads to projecting identities non-inclusive of English and concealing students' English-speaking-selves or identities, for one's sense of self is constructed by language and discourse (Norton & Toohey, 2001). This paper recommends institutional-level support for a positive and a much engaging academic culture, in place of its current subculture. This may result in English use being authenticated and legitimised for the participants to yield positive capital and investing in the practices of using English freely. Due to various

limitations, the study was limited to a sample of five students. Thus, it is recommended to carry out such studies using proper sampling techniques.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the dual-role I played as a lecturer and a researcher, despite the many precautions I took to evade its influences on the study; the recruitment of first-year undergraduates whose mother tongue is Sinhala since Sinhala is the shared mother tongue of the researcher and participants; and the use of narrative interviews as the primary data source while the use of identity portraits both for screening and triangulation purposes. Finally, it stands to reason that, other departmental/university contexts, which have different sub-cultures, would undoubtedly provide diverse insights into the research area.

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