

***Learning and Teaching Experiences of Second Language in Sri-Lankan Schools***

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**Abstract**

This paper studies the methodology applied to upskill non-language specialist teachers to learn and deliver second language lessons in Sri Lankan schools. The implementation approach of this project provides insight into the benefits of incorporating second language specific learning theories and also paves way to a different delivery method to overcome the teacher's fluency in second language.

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## **Introduction**

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic country and understanding the second language is considered as a critical success factor for improving social cohesion (Jayaweera, 1999). Tamil is the second language for Sinhalese and likewise Sinhala is the second language for Tamils (Jayaweera, 1999). Education for Social Cohesion (ESC)<sup>1</sup> is a programme implemented by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education in collaboration with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) to promote teacher competencies in Sinhala and Tamil as second languages.

A pilot programme was implemented among 200 secondary schools across five provinces in Sri Lanka. The implementation involved 60 “train the trainers” and 300 teachers who have been educated in second language content and teaching methodologies, since 2010.

Difficulty in finding qualified teachers to implement second language curriculum underpins the framework used in this pilot programme to develop second language teacher competencies to non-specialist language teachers.

The implementation framework incorporated concepts of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), meaningful learning (Ausubel, 1963, 1978), different learning styles (Gardner, 2006) and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) along with previous experiences in teaching and learning second languages within GIZ.

The first section of this paper examines the purpose of the Education for the Social Cohesion (ESC) program to understand the second language teaching requirements in Sri Lanka. The implementation approach deployed to meet the teaching requirements is reviewed next with special consideration to teaching second language to non-language specialist teachers with exclusive fluency in the first language. This is followed by a closer examination of how the learning and teaching principles were customised to address the needs of the learners. Finally, the feedback from the ESC pilot is reviewed to evaluate the impact on the learning process.

## **Background to the Education for the Social Cohesion (ESC) Program**

Second language has been taught at schools from grade one (age 5) to GCE ordinary level (age 16). In the primary schools, students are expected to learn limited number of words in the form of transliteration. At the secondary level, from grade six to nine, it is a core subject and two lessons (40 mins each) are allocated per week, which is equivalent to 5% of the total learning time for this subject. Second language is taken as an elective among grade ten and eleven<sup>2</sup>.

A study carried out on the exit level competencies in second language education after the completion of primary education (NIE, 2014) showed learners were not competent in listening and speaking in the target language at the basic level (NIE, 2014).

The ESC project initiation work identified lack of second language teachers, mismatch in curriculum and text book, lack of second language teacher education program, deficit of second language trainers and less focus on oral communication as opportunities for improvement (ESC, 2010). The supply shortfall of second language

teachers in the school system was recognised as a key challenge to the delivery of this programme.

For example, first language lessons in class rooms start with script writing to reading letters and words, because the learners have language fluency (Birch, 1992) before they begin school. Deploying the same approach to second language lessons in the absence of language fluency is unlikely to result in meaningful learning (Oxford et al, 1991) yet the use of methods such as grammar translation is still prevalent in the second language teaching (Karshen, 1985).

Similarly, learning aids such as text books need to cater to the student's maturity level, previous learning experience and learning styles to achieve the required competency levels (Griggs and Dunn, 1984, Oxford et al, 1991). During the project initiation work, the difficulty levels of the second language text books were identified to be in par with the first language text books.

Whilst the ESC project has taken several initiatives to address these shortcomings, this paper will focus on the approach taken to upskill the non- language specialist teachers.

### **ESC Implementation Approach**

To address the shortfall of teachers during the pilot project phase, 300 hundred teachers were selected who had no skills or aptitude in teaching the second language in the school system. These teachers were upskilled with exposure to basic language competencies and teaching and learning methodologies in second language. The methods used in this program have goals to ensure that learners:

- Enjoy learning the second language (Sinhala and Tamil)
- Appreciate the benefits of communicating in Sinhala and Tamil (as a second language)
- Able to communicate in a simple way

The key aim of promoting second language was to develop language skills among the selected teachers but majority of these teachers did not have knowledge of the target languages. Therefore the ESC focused not only in educating the competencies and methodologies of the second language education but also adopted an approach to teaching the target language to this cohort in a simple way to assist delivery in the class room. The teaching methodology uses minimal first language (Atkinson, 1987) and leverages on the benefits of the teachers understanding the learning anxieties (Oxford, 1999) of the students as they themselves have gone through the second language learning process (Birch, 1992).

### **Learning and Teaching principles**

During the implementation process, the same second language learning principles were provided to the teachers. Therefore they were recipients as well as delivery agents of the methodology to the class room. The implementation process leverages on concepts of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), meaningful learning (Ausubel,

1963, 1978), different learning styles (Gardner, 2006) and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) to deliver the learning process.

In this program the “experience learning theory” (Kolb, 1984) is used to introduce the basic concepts of language learning. In essence, experience means that the learner will learn the concepts in an authentic situation. For example, you bring an umbrella and show it to the learner, and say this is an “umbrella”. The learner will visualize the umbrella and pronounce the sound as “umbrella”. At this point, the learner observes and sees the physical product and brands it as an umbrella. In this way, several characteristics of an “umbrella” are introduced to the learner.

When the teacher pronounces a characteristic of an umbrella, the learner identifies the respective word with the characteristic of an umbrella. In this way, the learner can retain the sound in the long term memory. By using this method, at the primary level, it is possible for us retain the sound in the long term memory. At this stage, the phonological sound is used as stimuli and the corresponding object characteristic or component becomes the response.

Similarly experience is used as the vehicle to introduce abstract and concrete concepts. For example, if you want to learn to say the taste of a candy in the second language, you get the learner to taste a candy and say, it is sweet. In this example, candy is concrete and the taste is abstract. In the same way several concrete and abstract concepts are introduced.

In our facilitation, the activities are not limited to the classroom situation (Karshen, 1985). The learners play, dance and sing to learn the language because learning is gaining experiences (Ingram, 1989). In our model, the learners gain a lot of experience in the target language. At the beginning, the learners are given the opportunity to gain experiences in real world situations (Ingram, 1989). For example, it is possible to introduce an action verb with the action in the target language. This type of monolingual approach (Brown, 1994) encourages target language development and is considered very useful in practice to upskill the non-language specialist teachers in the second language. This approach is very practical given the cohort are limited in target language knowledge.

Bilingual approach (Atkinson, 1987) was also used to complement the learning process by adopting the below approach. When learning a second language, if the learners see the objects, they place the second language sound with first language sound. However, the learners are not expected to pronounce the first language but pronounce the second language. The ESC adopted this philosophy when training the train the trainers as well as the teachers.

Meaning and context is pivotal for second language acquisition (Ausubel, 1963; 1968). Meaningful learning has two basic concepts, one is retention and the other is application. During our intervention in the second language context, anything the learner learns need to have meaning (Ausubel, 1963; 1968).

In the human learning process it is very difficult to apply a linear and standardised process (i.e. Input + Process = Output). Humans are varied and their ways of learning is different (Oxford et al, 1990). Therefore, the facilitator should be aware of the

different type of learning styles to meet the learners' needs. The ESC applied different learning styles when conducting second language workshops.

Developing the second language competencies among learners play a major role in the teaching and learning process. ESC applied the scaffolding principles (Vygotsky, 1978) for developing activities. These principles were applied horizontally and vertically to pave way for step by step acquisition of second language skills.

Below is an example Scaffolding methodology (Vygotsky, 1978) application. You use a bottle to introduce this activity for listening and speaking

- Show bottle
- And say this is a bottle

At the beginning, learners have zero knowledge in the target language. The facilitator step by step introduces listening and speaking. After the introduction, learners are expected to practice in pairs or in groups to develop listening and speaking competencies. The sequence of the introduction is important because without developing the listening competency, it is not possible to ask, what is this? But if the learner knows that it is a bottle, then if you ask the learner what is this? Then the learner is able to say that it is a bottle.

The formulation of tasks is very crucial in the human learning process. The tasks should be challenging to the learners. In a classroom situation, it is not easy to develop a task to match all the individual learning styles. The tasks for this pilot were developed to match learners' skill levels by assessing their entry level competencies. In addition to this, all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are taken into account in developing activities.

## **ESC Pilot Feedback**

This section provides a summary of feedback received from Train the trainers, Trainers and Teacher Learners.

### **Feedback from Train the Trainers**

Train the trainer candidates were selected from a resource pool identified by the relevant provincial ministry of education. These candidates already had a good standard of knowledge in the target language. With the help of these train the trainers, the training materials were developed and teachers trained in the target language. Target language was the first language for some of the train the trainers, whilst for others it was the second language. Having trainers with target language being their second language provided additional insight to second language learning experience (Birch, 1992).

Second language competencies could not be achieved in a day or two, learning a language is a lifelong process. These trainers have been working on the ESC programme for more than five years.

Every three months, they meet and reflect previous workshop experiences and create strategies for improving the learner experience.

## **Feedback from the Trainer**

Second language trainers served as teachers and advisors in the system. Their experience has helped them differentiate the first and second languages, the need to accommodate different learning styles, how learning takes place, adult and student learning (pedagogy and Andragogy) styles, different type of games to apply in the teaching learning process and understand different types of learners and evaluation methods.

- Innovative methods are applied in the training programs.
- Listening and speaking are given importance in the training.
- Know what the teachers need
- Real-time feedback is used to tailor learning methodology and learning materials
- Use activity based learning principle
- Use different types of indoor and outdoor games

## **Feedback from Teacher Learners**

ESC has trained nearly 300 teachers, who are continuously taking part in the second language teacher training workshops. They have the content knowledge as well as pedagogical knowledge of the second language with the expectation to implement the activities at the classroom.

- Children show a keen interest in speaking the target language.
- Activity oriented teaching make us and children to be creative
- Updated our knowledge and experience through trainings
- Realise how language skills could be developed in children
- Cross application of methods in other subject areas
- Listening and speaking should be used as a method for other non-language teaching
- Conducting training with Sinhala and Tamil language teachers help us to learn other languages informally

An exit test was carried out on candidates completing ESC pilot. The pre and post test score comparison showed a statistically significant improvement as a result of the training programme.

## **Conclusion**

The ESC pilot used the theoretical learning concepts to develop a customised framework to upskill non-language specialist teachers where majority of them do not know the second language. This demanded an innovative approach where target language had to be delivered with heavy reliance on meaningful experience. Whilst the feedback received from the pilot is encouraging, more in-depth research is required to understand if this approach is applicable in other second language training programs.

## **Foot Notes**

**1** The Education for the Social Cohesion program (ESC) is a collaborative program of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education,(MOE) and the German International Cooperation( GIZ) to achieve the long term program objective of education and psycho social care to enable school and society to live together in a multilingual and multicultural society. To achieve this program objectives, the ESC facilitate technically and financially with the stake holders who are directly and indirectly involved in developing social cohesion of the school system. Under this program, there are four projects initiated to achieve the long term goal of the social cohesion. The four projects are Peace and value education, second language education, psycho social care and school safety education.

**2** There is no text book at the primary level but in the levels above there are text books for each grade.

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