RESEARCH ARTICLE

TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH IN SRI LANKAN RURAL SCHOOL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the current teaching trends and practices in teaching oral English in rural and semi-urban Sinhala medium schools in Sri Lanka and their relevance to the current theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical perspectives of second language acquisition (SLA). The present study which was conducted in two Sri Lankan Sinhala-medium schools is a case study in which the classroom observation, interviewing of the participants, videotaping of students' interaction, and evaluating of the English textbooks were included as data collection tools. The data were analyzed using the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) scheme designed by Fröhlich, Spada and Allen (1985).The findings of the study indicate that the instructional method and materials used by teachers do not to help improve students' oral communication skills in rural and semi-urban school contexts. As a result, a majority of students from rural and semi-urban schools in Sri Lanka demonstrates a limited or a low proficiency level in oral communication. Therefore, possible reasons for the lack of greater awareness towards more communicative teaching are discussed and suggestions for promoting changes in teaching EFL in rural and semi-urban school contexts are offered.

Key words: Oral proficiency, language input, group activities, interaction, authentic materials

1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi lingual country where different ethnic groups such as Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and other minorities live together. In the act of promoting mutual understanding and trustworthiness among different ethnic groups, a link language such as English can play an important role because it is a powerful communication tool both in local and global contexts (McKay, 2002).Given the importance of English, Sri Lankan government has been spending a large amount of money to promote English education throughout the island for the last two decades. However, the effectiveness of school English programs has been minimally successful compared to the large investments made on it (Karunaratne, 2003). Some studies that investigated the students' oral proficiency in rural and semi-urban schools, report that those students show relatively a lower or limited proficiency in oral English (Karunaratne, 2003; Perea, 2001).

Given the importance of teaching oral English to rural and semi-urban students, the present study aims to investigate why a majority of students fails to achieve oral proficiency in the target language and how this problem is addressed in the domain of teaching English as a second language in Sri Lankan context.

1.1. Research problem

In most of the Sinhala medium, government schools in Sri Lanka, English is taught as compulsory foreign language commencing from grade one to twelve. For classroom instruction, teachers are supposed to use government textbooks which are freely distributed to students. For English language education, the Educational Publications Department produces teaching and learning materials for all school grades. The materials consist of a pupil's book, work book and a teacher's instructional manual. However, the teacher's instructional manuals are prepared by the National Institute of Education (NIE). Sri Lankan students generally study English during their school period and also, receive opportunities to study various English courses at university or other higher education institutions provided they gain entry into one of them. Despite all the opportunities and facilities which Sri Lankan students have for learning English, a majority of them, especially rural and semi-urban students do not gain mastery in oral proficiency (Karunaratne, 2003).

The researcher's observations and the analysis of the data gathered from classroom teacher-learner interaction and reviewing the literature related to the current study have revealed that English textbooks used in teaching and the teaching practices in the context of Sri Lankan rural and semi-urban school do not necessarily cater for the learners' communicative needs. Therefore, students who study English in such a background as described above find it difficult to engage fluently and accurately in conversations in real-world situations. Since a majority of students from rural and semi-urban areas fail to achieve oral proficiency in the target language in school context, the present study was undertaken to investigate the factors which negatively affect learners achieve oral proficiency in English. Based on the findings, the present study suggests possible ways and means to improve teaching materials and the instruction practices that can help low-achievers develop their oral communication skills. In order to engage with the research problem as stated above, three research questions were formulated as below.

1.2. Research questions

1. Why do a majority of students in rural and semi-urban schools show a low or limited oral proficiency in the target language?
2. Do teachers of English in rural and semi-urban schools use Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)approach in their classroom teaching?
3. To what extents are the oral activities included in the current English textbook series (from grade 6 to 10) are communicative? And do they meet the linguistic needs of the students studying English in rural and semi-urban school contexts?

1.3. Objectives of the study

By conducting this study, the researcher hoped to achieve the following objectives:

1. To find out why a majority of students in rural and semi-urban schools fail to achieve oral proficiency in the target language and suggest practicable measures.
2. To examine the extent to which the instructional practices help learners to develop their oral proficiency in the target language in such contexts as stated above.
3. To enlighten the English teachers, ELT material produces, authorities, and policy makers who are responsible for English education in Sri Lanka the extent to which the current ELT teaching and learning materials used in government schools are deviant from the pedagogical views of SLA and how this gap is bridged.

2. Literature review

This section will focus on relevant empirical and pedagogical aspects of teaching English to ESL/EFL learners in general and teaching oral English in particular. Moreover, the studies that have investigated the instructional practices used in L2 classroom teaching in Sri Lankan context are explored with reference to published literature and their relevance to the current study.

2.1. Teaching oral English

The main objective of teaching oral communication skills to learners is to make them competent users of a given language. It is evident that most rural students in Sri Lanka can read and write in English, but they do not know how to speak (Karunaratne, 2003; Perera, 2001). They need to learn how to communicate in sociolinguistic situations such as work place, school, and other life-related events. Given the present status of oral communication skills of the linguistically disadvantaged rural students of Sri Lanka, it seems necessary for English teachers to endeavor to use communicative activities such as role-plays, simulations, language games, and picture stories which may reflect situations similar to the real world. One way of making the learners feel that they use the samples of real language spoken by real people outside the class is to use a variety of useful and relevant authentic materials which can range from print to electronic media. The idea of exposure to authentic materials is important in Sri Lankan rural context since most students have limited opportunities for practicing the target language outside the classroom. To use authentic materials as described above, students should have activities to perform in the class. As authors such as Ments (1989) and Crookall and Oxford (1990) have observed that role-playing activities can provide learners with opportunities for them to engage in modified interaction with their peers and the teacher. Therefore, given the merits of role-plays in a language classroom, their potential benefits are briefly discussed below.

2.2. Role-play activities

Role-play activities provide students with opportunities to practice communicating in different social contexts and varied social roles. In a study, the researcher conducted with a group of university students in Thailand, (Samaranayake, 2012)found authentic materials and roe-plays very effective in enhancing oral proficiency of the study group. Moreover, Crookall and Oxford, (1990) and Littlewood, (1992) have asserted that role-plays not only help learners develop their oral proficiency in the target language but they also provide opportunities for students to appropriate the kinds of linguistic behavior-patterns which they will need to produce outside the classroom.

2.3. Empirical evidence of L2 instructional practice in Sri Lanka

The studies cited below are similar to the current study in some aspects. In a school based study conducted by Karunaratne (2003) has reported that the teaching styles adapted by teachers were not in line with Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) and that the teachers heavily dependent on the English textbook. Therefore, in classroom teaching, no authentic, teacher prepared material or communicative activities were used. The researcher concluded that the teacher-student interaction was completely in their native language. Therefore, learners received no opportunity to improve their communication skills in the target language. A similar study which was conducted by Perera (2001) to find out the role of classroom interaction in L2 acquisition in Sri Lankan secondary school context, has found similar results as that of Karunaratne's study. However, Perera (2001) used COLT scheme same as the researcher of the current study did in classroom observation and found that some teachers were not proficient enough to deliver lesson effectively in that they resorted to use the native language to explain the lesson. One of the weaknesses in both studies cited above is that both studies were conducted in urban contexts where more facilities and opportunities to learn English are readily available than in rural and semi-urban contexts. However, the present study was conducted in semi-urban and rural school contexts.

3. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research framework was used to investigate the type of teaching practices used by English teachers in rural and semi-urban schools. The design of the research entailed a case study in which classroom observation, interviewing of the participants (students), videotaping of students' interaction, and evaluating the English textbooks were included as research instruments to gather data. The data gathered from the four research instruments were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

The study was conducted in two Sinhala-medium state schools in Sri Lanka (one rural and the other semi-urban) in two consecutive days in March of 2014. The two schools were selected based on the common assumption that students in rural and semi-urban schools fail to achieve oral proficiency in the target language even though they can achieve proficiency in reading and writing.

3.1. Participants of the study

The participants in this study were school children studying in grades ten and seven from two Sri Lankan state schools; as noted above, one school is from a rural area while the other is from semi-urban area. The grade ten students from the rural school consisted of 8 boys and 12 girls making a total of 20 students aged 15 years while the grade seven students from the semi-urban school consisted of 18 boys and 16 girls making a total of 34 students aged 12 years old. All students from both schools belong to Sinhala ethnic group. Moreover, from the structured interview conducted with the students, it was realized that most of the students in grade ten in rural school come from low-income generating families. These students have less or no opportunities to hear or use English except in the classroom. In contrast, most of the students from semi-urban school come from middle class families.

3.2. Data collection tools

In this study, in order to gather data, 4 research tools were used as follows:

Classroom observation: As noted above, classroom observations were conducted in two schools (rural-grade 10 and semi-urban-grade 7) in two different classes and each observation lasted for 45 minutes.

Video-taping of the students' interactions: Two classes were video recorded from the beginning to the end and later the classroom data were transcribed and analyzed using the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) scheme designed by Fröhlich, Spada and Allen (1985) to identify the communicative features of the classroom.

Structured interview (students): In order to test the basic communication abilities of the learners, the speaking test of the *Cambridge Key English for Schools Test* was used because Cambridge *English: Key (KET)* is an elementary level qualification set at Level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, in part 2 of the test, some adaptations were made to suit the learners' social context.

Evaluating the English textbook series: One aspect of COLT scheme is material evaluation. Therefore, two English textbooks (grade 8 and 9) were selected and evaluated using a criterion adapted from Mukundan, Nimehchisalem and Hajimohammadi, (2011) to see how much the activities suggested in the textbooks are communicative and the extent to which they meet the linguistic needs of students. The evaluation criterion included 5 questions (See below).

3.3. Procedure of the data collection

After obtaining permission from the principal and the teacher, the researcher first observed a lesson conducted at the rural school by a male English teacher for grade 10 students. It was a conversational activity in which the teacher taught the class how to conduct a conversation in English with a shop keeper if they want to buy something. The lesson was video recorded from the beginning to the end. After the lesson, the researcher, with the teacher's permission, selected ten students (five boys and five girls) randomly from the same class and they were interviewed during their lunch interval in their classroom. The same procedure was followed with the semi-urban school to gather research data.

3.4. Ethical consideration

The researcher obtained the permission from the principals of the two schools after explaining the purpose of the study and then met the two teachers and explained to them the purpose of the research. The two teachers voluntarily agreed to conduct lessons for the researcher to observe and video record the classroom activities. For ethical reasons, the teachers and the students were informed that the data collected from them would be used for study purposes only. Furthermore, the researcher got the participants' permission to publish the date (samples of spoken data) anonymously in any referred local or international journal.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Analysis of the data collected through class observation from students in the rural and semi-urban school: Analysis of the spoken data of the classroom interactions of both schools were done by using the COLT scheme designed by Fröhlich, Spada and Allen (1985).The COLT scheme was selected to analyze the classroom data because the COLT analysis can quantify the teacher-pupil interactions in relation to the type of activities

(group work or individual). In addition, it includes the modalities in which the students were engaged in each lesson as well as the type of learning materials and the way L1 and the target language were used in the class. Moreover, the COLT scheme can address the research questions posed at the beginning of this study. Finally, the analysis of the two lessons and interview data were synthesized and interaction patterns in each class in relation to the realization of what is proposed in the English textbook series were identified and evaluated. Table 1 shows the summary of the lesson conducted in the rural school, the time taken for each stage of the lesson and the teacher and student behavior.

Table 1: Summary of the lesson conducted in the rural school

Type of the task-(Speaking)	Time taken (Minutes)	Teacher behavior	Student behavior
Buying something from a shop (a dialogue between a customer and a shopkeeper)	3	Greets the class and introduces task using L2 (Dialogue between a shopkeeper and a customer). Gets students elicit language used in offering service (Can I help you?).	Listen to the teacher and answer teacher's question in L1 from time to time.
	10	Speaks out the utterance which is supposed to be used by the shopkeeper and writes it on the blackboard one by one until the whole dialogue completes.	Students repeat the utterance and look for the next to come. Students mostly answer to teacher's questions in L1.
	5	Reads the lines of the dialogue and asks the class to repeat after him loudly.	Students read the dialogue line by line after the teacher
	4	Divides the class into two portions and asks the class to practice the dialogue.	Students practice several times exchanging their roles
	5	Gets the class to practice the dialogue pair by pair. Teacher monitors and corrects mistakes	Students practice the dialogue pair by pair. Some words and phrases are mispronounced
	5	Forms groups (4) and each group is assigned a different shopping situation. First, the group should write a dialogue similar to the one which the teacher has already written on the black board.	Each group writes a dialogue according the shopping situation it has been assigned (e.g. buying vegetables)
	3	Monitors and helps students in language issues.	Each group asks teacher to check their dialogues.
	5	Asks each group to practice their dialogue.	Each group does the practice.
	2 group 1	Names a group from girls and asks the group to stand up read out their dialogue. At the end, teacher praises the group and asks to sit down	The nominated group stands and reads out the dialogue while the class listens
	2 group 2	Same as above	Same as above
	2 group 3	Same as above	Same as above.
The school bell rings	Group 4 did not present	Greets the class and ends the task.	The class greets the teacher.

4.1.1. Analysis of the lesson using COLT

As table 1 indicates, the lesson was based on a dialogue between a customer and a shopkeeper. The COLT analysis category "Participant organization" provides opportunities to analyze the ways in which the students were organized within the task. Table 2 shows the participant organization of the lesson as a percentage of class time. The total duration of the lesson was 45 minutes.

As indicated in table 2 below, the students were involved in whole class, group, pair and individual work in this lesson. Most of the class time (59.99%) was spent on student involved activities while the teacher played the role of a facilitator. Group and pair work occupied the 22.22% of the class time. However, a few students did not involve in the activity and one group could not present their dialogue due to time constraints.

Table 2: Participant organization by class time

Participant organization		Time (Mints)	Percentage (%)
Patterns	**Categories**		
Whole class	T-C[1]	8	17.77
	S-S[2]	15	33.33
	T-S[3]	10	22.22
Pair	Practice the dialogue	5	11.11
Group	Compose the dialogue	5	11.11
Individual	Present the dialogue	2	4.44
Total		45	100

T-C[1]=Teacher addresses the whole class
S-S[2]=Students-students interaction
T-S[3]=Teacher-student interaction

Next category of COLT is Student Modality, which is listening, speaking, reading and writing provides the opportunity to indicate which modality or modalities are involved for the majority of students in different skills of the lesson. Table 3 indicates the main modality for the majority of students as a percentage of class time. According to table 3, most students spent a good amount of class time (42.22%) for speaking while this lesson also involved the students in listening (22.22%), reading (11.11%), writing (11.11%) and presentation (4.44%) of the class time.

Table 3: Student modality as a percentage of class time

Skills	Time (Mints)	Percentage
Listening	10	22.22
Speaking	19	42.22
Reading	5	11.11
Writing	5	11.11
Presentation	2	4.44
Other	4	8.88
Total	45	100

The Content category in COLT scheme refers to the subject matter of the activities. It includes what the teacher and the students were talking, reading, writing about or listening. The content of the lesson was a dialogue between a customer and a shopkeeper. The teacher used the language for several functions such as requesting help, offering help (Can I help you?), asking for price of items (How much is this one?), expressing likes and dislikes (I think it is too small). The topic for the dialogue was selected by the teacher.

The last category of COLT is material. Concerning materials, it can be said that the teacher in the above lesson did not use any prepared materials or a textbook. Therefore, with regard to materials, no comments are made here. However, a detailed discussion of materials is given below.

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Table 4: Summary of the lesson conducted in the semi-urban school (grade 7)

Type of the task-(Speaking)	Time taken (Minutes)	Teacher behavior	Student behavior
Greeting and responding appropriately	5	Greets the class and sticks a large sheet of paper on which a song was written and tells the class that we are going to sing a song today. Asks students to sing it with the teacher	Listen to the teacher and sings with her. Students repeat after the teacher.
	5	Draws attention to a specific line of the song (How are you today Sir? And the response "Very well, thank you" Asks the class when they say, "How are you?" and what response is given for "How are you?" Teacher explains the meaning of the greeting to the class and asks the class to respond when she asks it.	Most students are silent and one girl stands up and answers in L1. The whole class answers to teacher with "I'm fine. Thank you"
	5	Teaches a few greeting (Happy new year, happy birthday) to the class along with responses	Students respond to the greetings said by the teacher.
	5	Puts the students into 8 groups (boys and girls separately)	Students form groups by turning their chairs to face each other around the desks.
		Sticks some sentence strips with these headings (situation, greeting and response) on the blackboard. Under these heading some situations, greeting and responses are also pasted.	Two students help teachers to stick them on the blackboard while others remain seated in their groups.
	8	Asks each group to match the right greetings with the right responses. Teacher goes to each group and explains to them the task again and again.	Each group works while the teacher monitors. Some groups still ask the teacher what they are supposed to do.
	3	Monitors. Goes to a group that asks for her help. Uses L1 to explain the task.	One member from each group writes the answers while others help him/her
	5	Checks the answers of the groups that have finished matching and provides feedback.	Students correct their answers.
	4	Asks the class to stop the activity and discusses the right answer to the first situation. Asks volunteer to come to the blackboard and do one matching.	Students reply to teachers questions with right responses. A girl comes and matches the greetings and responses with the right situation.
	2	Praises the first volunteer and asks for another.	A boy comes and does the matching
	2	Same as above	The class looks at how he matches.
The school bell rings	2	Recaps what the students have studied during the session and asks the students to complete the task at home.	The class stands up and greets the teacher.
	6 groups did not present	Tells students to stop the task and stands up. Greets the students and leaves the classroom.	

4.1.2. Analysis of the lesson using COLT

As table 4 indicates, the lesson was based on how to greet people in some social situations or events. Table 5 shows the participant organization (COLT) of the lesson as a percentage of class time. The total duration of the lesson was 46 minutes. As indicated in table 5 below, the students were involved in whole class, group and individual work in this lesson. Most of the class time (36.95%) was spent for teacher-student interactions because these students are from grade 7 and the majority could not understand the teacher's instruction so they kept on asking the teacher for clarification several times. Group work occupied 10.85% of the class time which is relatively lower than the rural school's group work time. Some groups were not actively involved in the task and 6 groups were not called for the greeting-matching task on the blackboard due to time constraints.

Table 5: Participant organization by class time

Participant organization		Time (Mints)	Percentage (%)
Patterns	**Categories**		
Whole class	T-C[1]	12	26.08
	S-S[2]	10	21.73
	T-S[3]	17	36.95
Group	Matching task	5	10.85
Individual	Matching task	2	4.34
Total		46	100

T-C[1]=Teacher addresses the whole class

S-S[2]=Students-students interaction

T-S[3=]Teacher-student interaction

Table 6: Student modality as a percentage of class time

Skills	Time (Mints)	Percentage
Listening	10	21.73
Speaking	12	26.06
Reading	5	10.86
Writing	13	28.26
Other	6	13.04
Total	46	100

As per the Content category in COLT scheme, the content of the lesson was to teach how to greet people in day-to-day life. The teacher began her lesson with a song and incorporated it to the lesson effectively. The teacher used several social situations such as meeting a friend on the way to school, meeting someone on the New Year's Day, and what to say when going to bed at night. The topic for the lesson was selected by the teacher. However, the students made use of 28.26% of the class time for writing where the objective of this lesson really was speaking.

As noted above, the next category of the COLT scheme is material which will be discussed in detail below.

4.1.3. Analysis of the data collected through structured interview from students in the rural and semi-urban school: As described in data collection tools in 3.2, in order to test the basic communication skills of the students of both rural and semi-urban school students, Cambridge Key English for Schools Speaking Test was used. The test consisted of two parts. In the first part, each candidate interacted with the researcher, using the language normally associated with giving factual information of a personal kind.Part 2 was based on prompt cards and the interaction was between two candidates. The researcher read out the instruction and gave a question card to candidate A and answer card to candidate B. After the candidates had asked and answered the questions, they changed the cards and did the same. Each part of the test was scored out of 10. Table 7 shows the marks the students in both schools obtained for the Key English Speaking Test.

Table 7: Marks obtained by the rural and semi-urban school students for the Cambridge Key English for Schools Speaking Test.

St: Serial No	Rural school participants (n-10)			Semi-urban school participants (n-10)		
	Part 1 10 Marks	Part 2 10 Marks	Total 20 marks	Part 1 10 Marks	Part 2 10 Marks	Total 20 Marks
1	8	2	10	9	2	11
2	8	2	10	7	4	11
3	6	0	6	8	4	12
4	6	0	6	5	2	7
5	6	5	11	3	4	7
6	5	4	9	9	6	15
7	5	4	9	8	2	10
8	6	2	8	5	6	11
9	4	4	8	6	4	10
10	9	6	15	8	6	14
Mean			9.2			10.8
SD			2.61			2.57
Std Error			0.82			0.81
P value			P=0.18			

According to the descriptive statistics shown in the table 7, the students in both (rural and semi-urban) schools performed equally well in the first part of the test. However, the results in the second part indicated that the majority of students in both schools did not perform well because the second part included an information gap activity in which two candidates were expected to ask each other questions to which they didn't know the answer. According to Underhill (1987), these kinds of tasks have the advantage that they produce concrete evidence of oral proficiency, or the lack of it. Moreover, the test results show that there is no significant difference at $\alpha = 0.05$ between the mean and the standard deviation scores of the two groups of students (rural and semi-urban schools).

4.1.4. Analysis of the data collected through evaluation of English textbook series.

As described in the data collection tools in 3.4 above, two English textbooks (grade 8 and 9) were selected and evaluated using a criterion adapted from Mukundan et al. (2011) to see how many activities suggested in the textbooks are communicative and the extent to which they meet the linguistic needs of students.

4.2. Findings

4.2.1. Findings related to the rural school classroom observation

The spoken data gathered from two video-recordings were transcribed separately. The researcher first analyzed the spoken data gathered from the rural school using COLT. After analyzing the data, it was found that the teacher used the Audio Lingual Teaching method to teach an oral task instead of using Communicative Language Teaching approach. Even though, the teacher in the rural school was quite successful in using the target language in classroom instruction, the teacher displayed some problems relating to pronunciation in particular and language fluency in general. Moreover, the students performed the oral activity as a writing one where they wrote the dialogue and read out to the class rather than speaking it out. Therefore, the teacher did not realize the objective of oral activities due to the fact that he has not been trained to use CLT.

4.2.2. Findings related to the semi-urban school classroom observation

The instructional procedure which the teacher carried out with a group of young children in the semi-urban school was successful in terms of content, focus, and organization of the activity. Focus of the activity was on the meaning rather than on the form. The teacher used the target language in classroom proficiently. The teacher planned to teach learners how to greet and respond appropriately to various kinds of greetings

learners receive in real-world situations such as meeting someone in the morning, afternoon, wishing someone on the New Year's Day. The teacher started with a good warmer in which she recited a poem with the students. The students were very interested in the activity and they wanted to communicate. However, the teacher suddenly changed the speaking activity into a writing one in which the students were made to work in group to complete a matching task. Furthermore, the instruction the teacher gave to the class was not understood by a majority of students even though the teacher used L1 on several occasions. Only a few students (about 5 out of 34) were given a chance to speak in the class while the majority was just left to engage in writing. In the following section, the findings related to the materials (English Textbook series) used in Sri Lankan state schools will be evaluated.

4.2.3. Findings and discussion related to the current English textbook series

In an attempt to answer the third research question, the researcher selected two English textbooks (grade 8 and 9) and evaluated using a criterion adapted from Mukundan et al. (2011) to see how many activities suggested in the textbooks are communicative and the extent to which they meet the linguistic needs of students studying them in the classroom context.

1. Do the textbooks cover the language functions which the learners are likely to use in their day to day life related situations?

English textbook series (grade 6 and 10) written in line with the curriculum reforms which have been effective since 2009,highly focus on developing reading and writing skills because reading and writing skills are the only two skills evaluated at the public examinations, whereas speaking and listening skills remain unevaluated either at school or at the national level examinations (Karunaratne, 2003). Even though the textbooks have some speaking activities, their main purpose is to improve writing skills rather than oral and aural skills. Example from grade 8 pupil's English textbook can be provided as follows:

Activity (a) suggests that students in groups should introduce themselves to each other and then write a self-introduction in their writing book while activity (b) asks the students to write an introduction about their friend using the self-introduction written by their friends.

Activity 3.3 (Group Work)

Speaking / Writing

a) In groups introduce yourself to each other. Then write a self – introduction in your writing book.

b) Write an introduction about your friend using the self - introduction written by him/her.

(*English Pupils book*-grade 8, p. 18)

With regards to the activity above, it can be asserted that in activity (a) students can practice how to introduce themselves but in activity (b) they are asked to write about their friends. This sounds quite awkward. An activity such as (b) implies that students should talk about themselves but not about their friends instead they should write about their friends. This seems to be a crucial matter which requires serious and insightful thought from the syllabus writers and the materials producers who have failed to include communicative activities in the English textbook series currently used in state schools.

2.   Do the English textbooks cover the topics/situations learners are likely to meet in their real world?

In general, it can be stated that the textbooks cover the topics learners are likely to encounter in their real world. However, when examining the layout of a unit, it becomes evident that speaking occupies a small portion when compared to the reading and writing. In other words, the ratio of speaking activities against the reading and writing activities is 2: 10 which can be considered as very low in terms of the spread of activities across the unit that deal with the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Moreover, some of the activities listed under speaking are not purely speaking but they are writing.

For example;

Activity 3.22 **(Group Work)**

Speaking / Writing

In groups take two sayings about friendship in your own language, Sinhala or Tamil

   Write their meanings in English in your writing book. Then read them aloud.

The teacher will help you to correct them.

Activity 3.23 **(Group Work)**

Speaking / Writing

…………………………………………(Removed)

(*English Pupils book*-grade 8, p. 60)

Speaking activities should help students improve their oral proficiency. Therefore, speaking activities should not be made as writing because one may find that more than 80% of the subject matter included in the English textbooks is of writing and reading. In the global context, almost every country especially in the Asian region has recognized that development of oral communication skills is paramount. Therefore, the development of oral communication skills should start at the beginning of language learning (Ministry of Education. (2010). *English Language Syllabus: Primary and secondary*. Singapore).

    Given the condition of the English textbook series produced by the Educational Publications Department (EPD) in line with the syllabi prepared by the National Institute of Education in Sri Lanka (NIE), it is interesting to note that the *Teacher's Instructional Manual-English grade 9* (2009) issued by the NIE states;

> The main purpose of learning a language is to use the language practically in day-to-day situations. Therefore, in preparing the new syllabus, the practical aspect was considered to more important than the theoretical aspect (p. 1).

One may clearly see that there is a mismatch between the objectives stipulated in the *Teacher's Instructional Manual* and the type of contents included in the English textbook series with which the students in the country study English. By inclusion of materials which focuses on developing students' reading and writing skills and neglecting listening and speaking skills which play an important role in oral communication, achieving the objectives stated in the *Teacher's Manual* seems impossible. As discussed earlier, the contents of the English textbook series (Grade 6 to 10) have not been appropriated to cater for the students' oral communicative needs. Therefore, teachers also tend to pay less or no attention to oral skills in the class and a condition of this nature directly or indirectly affects a majority of student population to achieve oral proficiency in the target language.

    Teacher's Instructional Manual-English grade 9 (2009), moreover, asks teachers to use eclectic approach in language teaching in which they should "pick and choose from among methods to create their own blend" (Larsen Freeman, 2000, p. 183). A closer scrutiny of the instructional manual and the analysis of the classroom data in the current study reveal that teachers do not adhere to the pluralistic view of methods rather they still practice either the Grammar Translation Method or the Audio-Lingual Method which have not left the language classroom in Asian context yet. Grammar lessons included in grade 8 pupil's book shows that the book follows the Grammar Translation Method in which grammar is taught deductively.

3.   Do the English textbooks emphasize the linguistic skills most needed for learners to achieve Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) as hypothesized by Cummins (1979)?

    Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) refers to the language proficiency needed to perform other kind of tasks which are not directly related to learning academic content such as interpersonal communication (Richards & Platt, 1992). A close analysis of the English textbook series indicates that they fail to emphasize linguistic skills most needed for learners to achieve BICS so that learners do not receive adequate input on listening and speaking in the classroom instead most activities are centered round Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) which demands a special kind of proficiency for students to perform classroom tasks. Following are some of the examples that are cognitively demanding.

Eg:2. Change the following sentences to the Passive - Future. First practice orally

Then write in your writing book.

1. The children will clean the garden tomorrow. 2. The parents will paint the classroom.

(*English Pupils book*-grade 8, p. 64)

Activity 1.29(Group Work)

Speaking / Writing

In groups prepare a speech on the advantages of gardening as a hobby.

SARATH WITHANARACHCHI SAMARANAYAKE

Present it to the class. Write it down in your writing book. The above reading text may help you.

(*English Pupils book*-grade 8, p. 19)

Another feature observed in the textbooks is the structured dialogues which make difficult for students to speak them out because of their length and complexity. The examples drawn from the textbooks will testify that they contain book language rather than spoken language and moreover, it is difficult to imagine if learners get opportunities to speak language as they have been presented in the text in real-world situations unless the learners act them out in a play.

E.g. Mother Nature: People use things just once and throw them away. You human beings have no feeling for me and you produce a lot of waste that makes me sick.

Old newspapers: We overheard you talking about us. Yes, Mother Nature we were once trees. We are very sad now. We were dumped here. We could have been recycled and used again. That saves energy and trees!

(*English Pupils Book* -grade 8, P. 12)

4. Do the contents of English textbooks adequately reflect local and target language cultures?

The English textbook series published by EPD in Sri Lanka well reflect both local and target language cultural aspects. Therefore, given the aspect of local context, it can be stated that the textbook series do not pose any problem for the learners. However, as described above, the material writers have considered in writing the English textbook series (grade 6-10) that learners should first master the written discourse and then move on to the spoken discourse which is against the natural order of language acquisition or primacy of speech where the speech is considered basic and writing is only secondary.

5. Do the English textbooks take into account local teaching/learning styles?

Analysis of textbooks indicated that they have readily taken into account local teaching/learning styles with lot of emphasis on reading and writing skills. Therefore, the contents and tasks of textbooks have been written in ways that help learners improve their reading and writing skills of the target language.

4.3. DISCUSSION

4.3.1. Discussion related to the first and second research questions

The first research question the researcher formed at the beginning of the study was "Why do a majority of students in rural and semi-urban schools show a low or limited oral proficiency in the target language?" This study has shown that the students in rural and semi-urban area schools do not receive adequate language input (Krashen& Terrell, 1983) that leads to oral proficiency of the learners. The researcher's classroom observation and the analysis of the classroom interactions clearly indicate that students of the two schools have potential and willingness to communicate in the target language but the pedagogical constraints imposed by the teachers were a barrier for them to interact in the class. Another crucial factor that emerged from the study can be ascribed to the teachers' failure to provide learners with communicative activities in the classroom context in which learners can practice and use the target language with ease.

The approaches of two teachers to their class activities were not communicative in that the students in the rural school merely read out the script they had already composed while the students in the semi-urban school tended to write greetings and responses instead of speaking them out. The teacher who chose to teach greetings and responses should have made the activity more interactive and engaging by assigning different social situations to each group. This activity demands learners' physical involvement too and this is where the teacher's sense of plausibility should come into play. Similarly, the teacher (from the rural school) who chose to teach a dialogue should have avoided giving any model but simply explained the activity and allowed learners to work together and construct their own dialogue even if they could produce a few exchanges because spoken language is unpredictable and cannot follow any structured pattern.

As the researcher has argued earlier, neither of the two teachers the researcher observed used authentic materials or class realia in their classroom instruction. The teacher from the rural school should have easily used some authentic materials from the class to make the activity more realistic while the semi-urban school teacher should have created social situations in the class to allow her students to engage in greeting more purposefully. Given the factors described above concerning the status of rural and semi-urban students'

oral proficiency, the two research questions the researcher posed at the beginning of the study; 1. Why do a majority of students in rural and semi-urban schools in Sri Lanka show a low proficiency in the target language? 2. Do teachers of English in rural and semi-urban schools apply communicative language teaching approach in their teaching? can now be answered. Concerning the first research question, it can be stated that students in rural and semi-urban schools are not adequately exposed to communicative activities in class so that they do not receive language input which is thought to lead to language acquisition. In respect of the second research question which shares a direct link with the first is now answerable with concrete evidence to prove that teachers of English in rural and semi-urban schools are deviant from application of CLT approach in classroom teaching.

4.3.2. Discussion related to the third research question

In terms of third research question, "To what extents are the oral activities included in the current English textbook series (from grade 6 to 10) are communicative? And do they meet the linguistic needs of the students in rural and semi-urban school contexts?" it has become evident that the current English textbook series have placed much emphasis on reading and writing skills thus neglecting listening and speaking skills in that these series of English text books have not been written in line with the communicative approach. As a result, they do not cater to linguistics needs (oral English proficiency) of rural and semi-urban students. Therefore, given the status of teachers' instructional practices and the current teaching and learning materials, it can be assumed that these two factors can have a negative impact on rural and semi-urban students' achieving oral proficiency in the target language. Furthermore, it is suggested that the current textbook series need a drastic revision to address the communicative needs of the students both in academic and social contexts.

4.4. Limitations of the study

Even though the results of the present study indicated that the oral proficiency of the study groups were low or limited due to the fact that the teachers did not effectively use communicative activities in classroom situation, there are limitations which must be acknowledged. The first limitation is the sample selection. Even though the two student samples selected from two different schools from a student population, the sample size was limited to 54 participants, therefore, the results in this study, cannot be generalized to a bigger population of school students who study English in rural and semi-urban contexts in or out of Sri Lanka. The second limitation is that the outcomes of this study cannot be generalized to learners studying in schools with more opportunities to use English for communicative purposes. Further research is needed to make a more informed decision as to why a majority of students in rural and semi-urban schools fail to achieve oral proficiency in the target language.

4.5. Implications and recommendations

In answering the research questions, the researcher investigated the classroom practices carried out in L2 classroom in Sri Lankan rural and semi-urban contexts and found that the current instructional practices in rural and semi-urban schools are deviant from the CLT. The study, furthermore, found that the English teachers were in need of proper training which should coincide with the current theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical views of second language acquisition. During the investigation, it, moreover, became evident that the English Pupils Textbook series introduced by the DEP under the directives of the NIEin Sri Lanka highly focus on reading, writing, and grammar while listening and speaking skills are slightly tackled and some speaking activities are intended for writing rather than speaking. The instructional manuals produced by the NIE show instances of mismatch with the textbook series where either the material producers or the manual producers have failed to come into a common agreement concerning the objectives of teaching and learning the target language.

Concerning the application, the researcher concludes that the classroom practices currently used in rural and semi-urban schools are not effective in promoting oral proficiency in L2 learners. Therefore, the researcher believes that by providing learners with adequate opportunities to interact in the target language in the class and delivering instruction through unorthodox teaching approaches will promote students' oral

proficiency. Moreover, using learner authentic materials in classroom teaching will help learners produce authentic language spoken by real people outside the classroom.

5. Conclusion

This study has focused on the instructional practices of local L2 teachers teaching in rural and semi-urban state schools in Sri Lanka and its relevance to current theoretical, empirical and pedagogical perspectives of second language acquisition. The study which was conducted in two Sri Lankan state schools revealed that instructional practices and teaching materials are not effective enough to help students improve their oral communication since the teaching practices and materials are rather deviant form the principles of communicative language teaching. Therefore, based on the findings of the current study, it is suggested that using unorthodox teaching approaches and classroom techniques along with the appropriate materials can help students, who study English in rural and semi-urban contexts, improve oral proficiency.

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