

The Role of Classroom Discourse in Enhancing Content Learning in Sri Lankan Secondary Bilingual Classrooms

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of classroom discourse, particularly teacher talk, in enhancing content learning in Sri Lankan secondary bilingual classrooms. It was conducted at a secondary school in the eastern part of Sri Lanka. It focuses on five discourse features identified as critical for content development: scaffolding complex content, referential questions, subject-specific vocabulary, content feedback, and recontextualization. This study used a qualitative approach where six bilingual secondary-grade classes in Science, Geography, and Commerce, taught in English, were observed, audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. Findings reveal that scaffolding enables gradual comprehension of complex concepts while other discourse strategies promoted critical thinking, conceptual clarity, connects abstract knowledge to familiar contexts, etc. Collectively, these strategies support deeper cognitive engagement and facilitate subject mastery despite linguistic challenges. The study underscores the need for targeted teacher training in discourse strategies to strengthen bilingual education in resource-constrained, linguistically diverse contexts.

Keywords: Bilingual education; classroom discourse; teacher talk; scaffolding; recontextualization; content learning; Sri Lanka.

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving educational landscape of Sri Lanka, English has emerged as a vital language for both academic achievement and professional growth. Since English is accepted globally, English proficiency opens doors to higher education, international communication, and employment opportunities (Perera, 2014). Consequently, the Sri Lankan government has introduced bilingual education

policies, particularly at the secondary level, to meet this demand. These policies aim to improve students' English language skills while simultaneously fostering their academic content knowledge in subjects such as Science, Mathematics, and Geography (Kularatne, 2022). However, classroom discourse, especially teacher talk, plays a major role in determining the success of these bilingual education programmes.

The National Education Commission (NEC) officially introduced bilingual education reforms in 2003 to address the longstanding effects of the "Sinhala Only Act" of 1956, which diminished the role of English in public education. Although the Act was initially designed to promote national identity by prioritizing indigenous languages, it inadvertently weakened the population's English proficiency and created linguistic divides, especially among the Tamil-speaking minority (Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). The new bilingual education initiatives attempt to rectify this by promoting English as a medium of instruction (EMI) alongside Sinhala and Tamil, thereby aiming for a more inclusive and globally relevant education system (Kularatne, 2022).

In bilingual classrooms, content teachers are tasked with a dual responsibility: delivering subject matter while simultaneously facilitating second language acquisition. This is where classroom discourse, particularly teacher talk, becomes critically important. Teacher talk refers to the structured use of language by teachers to instruct, explain, question, and interact with students (Walsh, 2011). In bilingual contexts, effective teacher talk plays a pivotal role in scaffolding students' understanding of complex academic content while supporting their language development. Drawing from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, teacher talk can act as a form of scaffolding that assists learners bridge the gap between what they currently know and what they are capable of knowing with appropriate support.

Teachers in bilingual classrooms often employ various discourse strategies such as simplifying vocabulary, adjusting the speed of speech, repeating key information, and recontextualizing abstract concepts to promote student comprehension (Chaudron, 1988). Furthermore, classroom discourse that includes referential questions, dialogic interactions, and contextualized feedback has been shown to foster deeper cognitive engagement and improve both content mastery and language proficiency (Nunan, 1991). Harmer (2000) notes that praise and positive reinforcement, when delivered through teacher talk, can significantly boost learner motivation, especially in second language contexts where students may lack confidence.

Nevertheless, content teachers in Sri Lankan bilingual classrooms face multiple challenges. One major issue is balancing teacher talk time (TTT) and student talk time (STT). Excessive TTT may hinder student participation and limit opportunities for learners to practice English and engage with the content actively (Harmer, 2000). Moreover, classrooms are often characterized by varying levels of English proficiency, requiring teachers to constantly adjust their speech to suit diverse learner needs while still maintaining the academic rigor of the subject (Mahawattha, 2012).

Another key challenge lies in the lack of formal training in language pedagogy among many content teachers. While these educators are well-versed in their respective subject areas, they often lack the methodological tools necessary to support second language acquisition effectively (Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). This shortcoming can result in missed opportunities for language development and may widen the gap in educational equity, particularly in rural schools where resources and English exposure are limited.

In this context, classroom discourse serves as a critical pedagogical tool. It functions not only as a conduit for content delivery but also as a scaffold for academic language development. Effective discourse can aid students internalize both linguistic structures and disciplinary knowledge, thereby promoting dual learning outcomes. However, for this potential to be realized, teacher talk must be intentional, inclusive, and adaptive to learners' linguistic and cognitive needs.

This study is situated in the Ampara District in eastern Sri Lanka, a region notable for its linguistic diversity and socio-economic disparities. The research focuses on Addalaichenai Madhya Maha Vidyalayam, a government school that offers bilingual education from Grade 6 to Grade 11. This school represents a typical bilingual educational setting in the region, where students from Tamil-speaking backgrounds engage with academic content in English. By examining classroom discourse in this school, the study seeks to explore how teacher talk contributes to students' content learning and language development.

In summary, the role of classroom discourse in bilingual education cannot be overstated. It is central to the educational experience of students learning academic subjects in a second language. This research aims to investigate how classroom discourse, especially teacher talk, can be optimized to support content understanding in secondary bilingual classrooms in Sri Lanka. In doing so, it aspires to contribute valuable insights into enhancing teaching practices and policy implementation in bilingual education.

Research Problem and Purpose

In Sri Lanka, the implementation of bilingual education has emerged as a strategic response to the rising demand for English proficiency and global academic competitiveness. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of bilingual education remains uneven due to challenges such as limited teacher training, disparities in resource distribution, and varying levels of student language proficiency (Mahawattha, 2012; Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). A central but underexplored aspect of bilingual education is classroom discourse—particularly teacher talk—and its dual role in facilitating both content and language learning.

Content teachers in bilingual classrooms are expected not only to convey subject matter but also to support students' acquisition of academic English. However, many teachers are not formally trained in second language pedagogy and may struggle to adjust their discourse to meet the diverse needs of their students. As a result, students may face difficulties in comprehending complex

content taught in a second language, limiting both their academic success and language development. This issue is particularly pressing in regions such as Ampara, where linguistic diversity and rural education contexts present additional challenges.

The present study seeks to investigate the extent to which teacher talk shapes content learning in secondary-level bilingual classrooms. Specifically, it examines the nature of classroom discourse between teachers and students to determine its impact on students' acquisition of subject knowledge. Furthermore, the study aims to identify the particular features of classroom discourse that are most effective in facilitating learners' comprehension of academic content.

The study will have the following research questions:

1. In what ways does classroom discourse, with particular emphasis on teacher talk, influence content learning in secondary-level bilingual classrooms in Sri Lanka?
2. Which specific features of classroom discourse most effectively facilitate students' comprehension of subject matter?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classroom discourse plays a critical role in mediating content learning, particularly in bilingual classrooms where the medium of instruction is not the learners' first language. In Sri Lanka's bilingual education context, content subjects such as Science, Mathematics, and Geography are often taught in English to Tamil- or Sinhala-speaking students. This presents a dual challenge: teachers must deliver complex academic content while ensuring students comprehend it through a second language.

While much of the existing literature has emphasized language acquisition in bilingual contexts, this review specifically examines the role of classroom discourse, with a particular focus on teacher talk, in influencing students' content learning within Sri Lankan secondary-level bilingual classrooms. The scarcity of empirical evidence on how teacher talk can most effectively facilitate content learning in South Asian contexts—where English, as a second language, serves as the medium of instruction for selected subjects—highlights a significant research gap. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the ways in which teacher talk in bilingual secondary classrooms supports and enhances students' content development.

Bilingual Education and Clil in Sri Lanka

Bilingual education in Sri Lanka was formally introduced in 2003 to address the decline in English proficiency following the Sinhala Only Act of 1956. The

policy allows secondary students to study subjects like Science and Mathematics in English while continuing to learn other subjects in their first language, either Sinhala or Tamil (Kularatne, 2022). The aim is to improve students' English proficiency while ensuring effective content learning. However, uneven implementation, especially between urban and rural schools have affected the programme's success. Many rural schools face shortages of trained bilingual teachers and adequate resources, limiting students' access to quality content instruction in English (Mahawattha, 2012).

A major challenge in bilingual education is that most content teachers lack formal training in bilingual pedagogy, which affects their ability to use classroom discourse strategies that support students' content understanding. Excessive lecturing or oversimplified explanations can restrict student participation and deeper mental engagement. Additionally, the exam-oriented education system places little emphasis on discourse-based teaching practices, further limiting opportunities for content-focused classroom interaction (Wijesekera & Alford, 2019). Despite these issues, research suggests that when teachers effectively use discourse strategies such as scaffolding, questioning, and feedback students perform better in content subjects taught in English (Perera, 2014). This highlights the crucial role of classroom discourse in enhancing content learning within Sri Lanka's bilingual education framework.

Classroom Discourse as a Tool for Content Development

Classroom discourse refers to the language used by teachers and students during classroom interactions. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) introduced the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) structure, which remains foundational for understanding how classroom communication occurs. Cazden (2001) emphasized that classroom discourse shapes not only participation but also access to learning. In bilingual contexts, it is not just a medium of language instruction but a tool for making content accessible.

Teacher talk which is a subset of classroom discourse, is crucial for content transmission. Effective teacher talk assists students understand abstract or unfamiliar academic concepts. In bilingual classrooms, teacher talk can be used to rephrase complex ideas, emphasize key terms, or connect new content to students' prior knowledge (Walsh, 2011). However, when teacher talk is unstructured or linguistically complex, it can hinder comprehension, especially for students in rural or low-resource settings (Mahawattha, 2012).

Features of teacher talk that promote content learning

Scaffolding, rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, involves temporary support from teachers that enables students to perform tasks they would otherwise find too difficult. In bilingual classrooms, scaffolding is crucial for content learning, as students struggle with both unfamiliar concepts and

unfamiliar language. Teachers scaffold by breaking down complex material, using visuals or analogies, and gradually increasing the complexity of discourse (Gibbons, 2015). In Sri Lanka's CLIL classrooms, scaffolding makes sure that students are not cognitively overwhelmed, particularly in subjects like Science and Mathematics (Cummins & Early, 2015).

Referential questions, those without predetermined answers encourage higher-order thinking and promote deeper engagement with subject content. Unlike display questions, which seek factual recall, referential questions push students to analyse, interpret, and connect ideas (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987). In content subjects, such as Geography or History, referential questioning assists students internalize and reflect on information, leading to better comprehension (Long & Sato, 1983). Teachers in Sri Lankan bilingual classrooms can improve students' cognitive engagement by including such questions into their discourse.

Effective classroom discourse includes deliberate use and teaching of subject-specific vocabulary. This assists students connect language with concepts, especially in subjects that have more technical terminology. For instance, understanding terms like "photosynthesis" or "equilibrium" is essential in science. Coxhead (2000) emphasized that subject vocabulary instruction enhances retention and comprehension. In bilingual classrooms, teachers who explicitly introduce and revisit academic vocabulary assist students develop a conceptual understanding, bridging linguistic and cognitive gaps (Pulido & Hambrick, 2008).

Content feedback refers to comments and corrections made by the teacher about students' understanding of subject matter, rather than language errors. Timely and specific content feedback assists clarify misconceptions and reinforce accurate understanding. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), effective feedback should not only evaluate student performance but guide them on how to improve. In bilingual contexts, this feedback can include elaborations, additional examples, or reformulations that fix abstract concepts in relatable contexts (Butler & Winne, 1995).

Recontextualization involves adapting complex academic knowledge to students' learning contexts (Bernstein, 2000). Teachers often recontextualize content by using examples from students' everyday experiences or by simplifying the language of textbooks. This is particularly effective in Sri Lankan rural settings, where students may lack prior exposure to formal academic discourse. Teachers act as agents of recontextualization, making difficult subject content meaningful and accessible (Kitson, 2021).

Patterns of interaction and content learning

Interaction patterns in classroom discourse can either promote or inhibit student understanding. According to Mercer (2000), dialogic teaching, which encourages student talk and collaborative inquiry supports deeper learning.

Alexander (2008) echoed this in his framework of dialogic teaching, highlighting how open dialogue fosters both cognitive and metacognitive development.

In bilingual classrooms in Sri Lanka, the usual IRF model can be adapted to promote exploratory talk, collaborative discussions, and problem-solving activities. Such approaches aid students share their reasoning and strengthen their grasp of the subject. (Mercer, 2004).

Classroom Discourse in Sri Lankan Secondary Bilingual Classrooms

In Ampara and similar districts, classroom discourse varies significantly based on school infrastructure and teacher expertise. Schools that effectively integrate classroom discourse strategies such as extended wait time, referential questioning, and scaffolding often show better student performance in content subjects taught in English (Perera, 2014). This suggests that enhancing teacher talk, even within existing resource constraints, can positively impact content mastery.

Implications for Teaching Practice and Policy

To improve content learning outcomes in bilingual classrooms, it is essential to provide professional development for content teachers focused on effective discourse strategies. Teachers need specific training on how to scaffold subject content and use referential questions to stimulate higher-order thinking and student engagement. Moreover, promoting dialogic teaching approaches that emphasize student-centred learning can create more interactive and meaningful classroom environments. Addressing these needs would enable teachers to use classroom discourse more strategically, enhancing students' comprehension of academic content regardless of their proficiency in English.

Classroom discourse, especially teacher talk is a powerful pedagogical tool in Sri Lanka's bilingual secondary classrooms. When structured effectively, it facilitates not only language acquisition but also content comprehension. Features like scaffolding, subject-specific vocabulary, referential questioning, and content feedback allow teachers to bridge cognitive and linguistic gaps, enabling students to access complex subject matter. However, realizing this potential requires focused teacher training, systemic curriculum reforms, and equitable resource distribution. For bilingual education to be effective, classroom discourse must be intentional, strategic, and inclusive, particularly in linguistically diverse and resource-constrained environments like Sri Lanka.

Research Gap

While a growing body of research highlights the importance of teacher talk in second language acquisition, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of how classroom discourse, particularly teacher talk, supports content learning in bilingual classrooms. Most studies to date have focused on how language teachers use discourse to improve English language proficiency (Walsh, 2011; Nunan, 1991), often overlooking the pedagogical practices of

content teachers who deliver academic subjects like Science, Mathematics, and Geography in a second language. In the Sri Lankan context, where bilingual education programmes have been introduced to strengthen both content mastery and English skills, there is limited empirical research examining how teacher talk contributes specifically to students' comprehension of subject matter. This lack of attention to content-related discourse leaves an important aspect of bilingual education underexplored.

Furthermore, although Sri Lanka has implemented bilingual education policies across secondary schools, few studies have examined the effectiveness of discourse strategies employed by content teachers in these settings. Most existing studies either generalize findings from monolingual classrooms or emphasize language acquisition outcomes without deeply investigating how classroom discourse facilitates conceptual understanding and cognitive engagement in subject-specific learning (Mahawattha, 2012; Kularatne, 2022). As a result, only limited evidence exists on how teacher talk can best support content learning, especially when learners are dealing with difficult subjects in a second language.

This research seeks to fill this gap by focusing exclusively on how teacher talk in bilingual secondary level classrooms supports students' content development. By examining classroom discourse practices used by content teachers in Sri Lanka, the study aims to identify specific features that improve students' understanding of subject matter. Addressing this research gap will not only enrich existing research on bilingual education but also offer practical implications for improving teacher training and instructional practices. It will provide much-needed insights for policymakers and educators striving to improve subject comprehension in bilingual learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate how teacher talk influence content learning in secondary bilingual classrooms in Sri Lanka. A qualitative design was selected to explore the complexities of classroom discourse in real-time and understand how specific teacher talk features influence students' comprehension of subject content. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how teachers communicate academic concepts and facilitate student understanding through spoken interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This research centres solely on content-related outcomes. Classroom observations and detailed lesson transcriptions were used to capture authentic instances of teacher talk that impacted on the learning of academic subjects. The analysis focused on five key discourse features identified as essential for content development in bilingual settings: scaffolding complex content,

referential questions, subject-specific vocabulary, content feedback, and recontextualization (Gibbons, 2015; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Mercer, 2000).

Study Setting

The research was conducted at a government secondary school in the Ampara District of eastern Sri Lanka. This school was selected for its active bilingual education programme, which includes instruction in subjects such as Science, Mathematics, Geography, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Health and Physical Education, Civic Education, and Commerce in English from Grades 6 to 11. The site was chosen purposively due to its representative bilingual education practices and accessibility for observation. The school primarily serves a Tamil-speaking student population, making it a relevant context for studying how classroom discourse supports content learning in a bilingual setting."

Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select classrooms and teachers most relevant to the study's focus on content development through discourse. The criteria for selection included active involvement in teaching important subjects in English language and willingness to participate in recorded classroom observations. This sampling approach ensured that data collection was centred on rich, authentic examples of teacher talk in bilingual education contexts (Patton, 2002).

Participants

Teachers

For this study, three content teachers were purposively selected as participants. The group consisted of one male Geography teacher and two female Science teachers, all of whom were engaged in teaching English-medium bilingual classes. Participants were drawn from a pool of five teachers who provided informed consent, with the selection guided by the need to capture variation in subject discipline and pedagogical approach within the bilingual programme. Each participant possessed over ten years of teaching experience, including extensive involvement in bilingual instruction, and all held a university degree.

- Teacher 1
Male teacher specializing in Social Studies and Commerce. He holds a National Diploma in Teaching (NDT) and a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. He has 16 years of teaching experience.
- Teacher 2
Female teacher with a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree. She has 15 years of teaching experience.
- Teacher 3
Female teacher holding a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree. She has 10 years of teaching experience.

Students

The student participants ranged from Grades 6 to 11 and represented a typical group of Tamil-speaking students found in Sri Lankan bilingual classrooms. Their verbal responses provided insight into how effectively they were engaging with and understanding the content being delivered through teacher talk.

Research Instruments

Classroom Observations

Eighteen classroom lessons were initially observed and audio-recorded using two devices, one near the teacher and one among the students to make sure full coverage of teacher-student interactions. The students' interactions with teachers were recorded and analysed as part of the classroom discourse. The researcher maintained a non-participant role to protect natural classroom dynamics. From these, six lessons that prominently featured instruction in English language and minimal interference from the first language (Tamil) were selected for in-depth transcription and analysis.

Transcriptions

The six selected lessons were manually transcribed based solely on the classroom audio recordings. The transcriptions focused on identifying and analysing instances of teacher talk related to five key features: scaffolding complex content, referential questions, subject-specific vocabulary, content feedback, and recontextualization.

These five features were selected based on their predominant presence across the lecturers as well as their established importance in supporting cognitive engagement and content mastery in bilingual classrooms. Scaffolding, rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, enables teachers to bridge gaps between students' current understanding and curricular demands by providing structured support. Referential questions encourage deeper cognitive processing and promote students' ability to engage with content meaningfully, rather than simply recalling facts (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987). The inclusion of subject-specific vocabulary is critical, as understanding subject-specific terminology is essential for comprehending and understanding academic concepts (Coxhead, 2000). Content feedback, particularly when it is clear and specific, aids students refine their understanding by addressing misconceptions and reinforcing accurate knowledge (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Finally, recontextualization allows teachers to adapt abstract academic language into more familiar terms, making complex subject matter accessible to learners with limited proficiency in the language of instruction (Bernstein, 2000). These features were thus selected for their direct contribution to content learning in

bilingual classrooms, particularly in contexts like Sri Lanka where students navigate both linguistic and academic challenges simultaneously.

These transcripts were used to examine how these specific discourse strategies contributed to students' understanding of subject content. Non-verbal elements such as gestures or student reactions were not included, as the analysis was limited to verbal interactions captured in the recordings.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to examine the transcripts, guided by the five predetermined features of teacher talk relevant to content development. These features were drawn from existing literature on effective pedagogical discourse in bilingual settings (Gibbons, 2015; Walsh, 2011). The analysis process involved coding instances of teacher talk that corresponded to these five features:

1. **Scaffolding complex content:** Examining how teachers simplified abstract or complex ideas using analogies, step-by-step explanations, or visuals to make them accessible to students (Vygotsky, 1978; Gibbons, 2015).
2. **Referential questions:** Identifying questions that prompted critical thinking, reasoning, or elaboration helps move beyond factual recall to deepen students' conceptual understanding (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1991).
3. **Subject-specific vocabulary:** Analysing how teachers introduced and reinforced key academic terminology necessary for understanding subject content (Coxhead, 2000).
4. **Content feedback:** Investigating how teachers responded to students' content-related answers, including clarification, elaboration, or correction to guide learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
5. **Recontextualization:** Observing how teachers adapted textbook knowledge or formal curriculum content into locally meaningful examples or simpler discourse suited to students' backgrounds (Bernstein, 2000).

Through this framework, the study aimed to identify discourse patterns that consistently supported student understanding of academic subjects. The methodology adopted in this study provides a robust foundation for understanding how classroom discourse, particularly teacher talk supports content learning in Sri Lankan secondary bilingual classrooms. By narrowing the attention to five specific discourse features and employing detailed qualitative methods, the research offers insights into the pedagogical strategies that effectively bridge the gap between academic content and student comprehension in English language instruction. These methodological choices align with the study's aim of improving teaching practices and informing bilingual education policy in multilingual settings.

FINDINGS

Scaffolding and its Effect on Content Development in Students

Scaffolding, based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, is a teaching approach where teachers provide temporary support to aid students achieve tasks beyond their current abilities, gradually fostering independence (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). This method is particularly beneficial in bilingual education, where language barriers can complicate learning. By breaking down complex content, teachers bridge students' existing knowledge with new information, encouraging higher-order thinking and deeper cognitive engagement (Cummins & Early, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2013).

In this research, "scaffolding" has been chosen as a key framework for analysing teacher talk in bilingual classrooms. This decision is informed by a comprehensive review of numerous articles and studies that emphasize scaffolding's significant role in content development, especially for bilingual learners. This aligns with insights from scholars like Gibbons (2015) and Echevarría, Vogt, and Short (2017), who emphasize the importance of using scaffolding to improve bilingual students' content development.

Example

This lesson takes place in a grade eight Geography class, focusing on the topic of South Asian countries. The teacher introduces the concept of "absolute location" and engages the students in a discussion about the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of South Asia.

T1 - Now shall we discuss about the absolute location of the south Asian region?
huhh? Who can say the absolute location? absolute location is what?

S8-3 - specific location

T1 - ohh.... specific location another term we can use specific location, then what is called absolute or specific location?

SS - latitude and longitude

T1 - right, what is that?

SS - latitudinal

T1 - latitudinal location as well as longitudinal location, it means, ahh... specify the location of a country based on the latitude as well as the longitude. That is called what?

S8-5 - Absolute location

T1 - Can you tell me the longitudinal location of south Asia no, latitudinal location of south Asia?

S8-5 - zero to thirty-eight degree

T1 - latitudinal location, what is that? Zero to?

SS - Thirty-eight

T1 - Zero degree to thirty-eight

In this example, scaffolding occurs as the teacher helps students gradually understand the concept of "absolute location." First, the teacher starts by asking

what students already know, using a familiar term like "specific location." Then, the teacher builds on this knowledge by guiding students to the more technical term, "absolute location," through questions and explanations. As the students try to answer, the teacher provides gentle prompts and feedback to aid them think critically and arrive at the correct understanding. By breaking down the concept step-by-step and providing support at each stage, the teacher ensures that students grasp the content fully. This process of gradually assisting students while encouraging them to think is what scaffolding is all about.

Asking referential questions and its effect on content development in students

Asking referential questions, which are open-ended and require students to provide responses based on their own understanding, plays a crucial role in content development. Unlike display questions, which seek simple factual answers, referential questions encourage higher-order thinking, prompting students to connect ideas, analyse information, and apply knowledge (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987). Research shows that referential questions lead to more complex language output, helping students justify, explain, and critically evaluate content, thus enhancing comprehension of subject-specific concepts (Brock, 1986). These questions also foster active participation in discussions, supporting content mastery (Nunan, 1987).

"Asking Referential Questions" has been chosen as a key feature to analyse how teacher talk influences student content development, based on strong evidence from multiple studies. Unlike display questions, referential questions require students to think critically and express their own understanding, which enhances content mastery (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987). Studies show that these questions lead to more complex student responses and deeper engagement with the material, aligning with Swain's (1995) "output hypothesis," which emphasizes the role of language production in reinforcing learning.

Example

In this example, the lesson occurs in a grade nine Geography class, focusing on the topic of environmental pollution. Here teacher asks referential questions, which encourage students to think critically and provide their own responses rather than simply recalling memorized facts.

T1 : Yes, you tell me

one of the impacts of deforestation.
S9-4 : Destruction of water resources.
T1 : Oh destruction of water resources no.
OK, Right, very good.
You tell me, others take your seats, one of the impacts of examination of military weapons.
S9-1 : Global warming
T2 : Global warming no?
OK very good.
Sit down.
You tell me, one of the results of improper disposal of garbage.
S9-11 : Air pollution will occur.

The teacher asks referential questions, which encourage students to think critically and provide their own responses rather than simply recalling memorized facts. The questions focus on real-world impacts, such as "destruction of water resources" from deforestation, "global warming" from military weapons, and "air pollution" from improper garbage disposal. These questions guide students to apply their knowledge of environmental concepts while encouraging the use of subject-specific vocabulary. By doing so, the teacher fosters a deeper understanding of the content and engages students in meaningful interaction, helping them develop their content knowledge.

Using subject-specific vocabulary and its effect on content development in students

Using subject-specific vocabulary is a crucial strategy for enhancing students' content development, particularly by helping them understand and retain academic concepts. Subject-specific vocabulary, unique to each discipline, connects students to the core ideas of the content (Coxhead, 2000), and explicitly teaching these terms aids in comprehension and navigation of complex texts (Baumann, 2009). Research shows that integrating specialized vocabulary into instruction facilitates deeper cognitive processing, promoting higher-order thinking and improving academic performance (Pulido & Hambrick, 2008).

The focus on "using subject-specific vocabulary" in analysing bilingual lesson transcripts highlights its key role in enhancing content development. Research by Coxhead (2000) and Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) shows that teaching academic vocabulary helps students navigate texts and express their understanding. Studies by Carlo et al. (2004) and Vadasy and Nelson (2012) further suggest that targeted vocabulary instruction aids English Language Learners (ELLs) in overcoming comprehension challenges, while fostering higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. The analysis of how teachers incorporate this vocabulary aims to assess its impact on students' comprehension and engagement with the subject matter.

Example

In this example, the lesson takes place in a grade 8 Geography class, focusing on the topic of South Asian countries. Here the teacher reinforces the use of key geographical terms, prompting students to think critically and respond with accurate information.

T1 - now tell me what is the largest continent in the world?

SS - Asia

T1 - Asia no, right, very good, one of you, ok you tell me altogether how many continents are there in the world?

S8-7 - seven

T1 - huhh? How many continents?

SS - seven continents

T1 - seven continents no, what is the smallest continent in the world?

SS - Australia

T1 - now you tell me how many oceans are there in the world?

S8-21 - five

T1 - huhh?

S8-21 - five oceans

T - what is the largest ocean in the world?

S8-23 - Indian ocean

S8-9 - Pacific Ocean

T1 - Pacific Ocean, no? right sit down

Now shall we discuss about the absolute location of the south Asian region?

huhh? who can say the absolute location? absolute location is what?

S8-19 - specific location

T1 - specific location another term we can use specific location, then what is called absolute or specific location?

S8-19 - latitude and longitude

T1 - right, what is that?

SS - latitudinal

T1 - latitudinal location as well as longitudinal location, it means, specify the location of a country based on the latitude as well as the longitude. That is called what?

SS - Absolute location

T1 - Can you tell me the longitudinal location of south Asia no, latitudinal location of south Asia?

S8-15 - zero to thirty-eight degree

T1 - latitudinal location, what is that? Zero to?

In this example, the teacher uses subject-specific vocabulary such as "continent," "ocean," "latitude," "longitude," "absolute location," and "Pacific Ocean" to engage students with key geographical concepts. The teacher begins by asking simple questions like "What is the largest continent?" and "How many continents are there?" to elicit responses using basic terms such as "Asia" and "seven continents." As the lesson progresses, the teacher introduces more

complex terms like "absolute location," and guides the students to connect this concept with "latitude" and "longitude," helping them to develop a deeper understanding of how to describe the geographical positioning of regions. By consistently incorporating these terms into questions and explanations, the teacher makes sure that students are not only recalling facts but also familiarizing themselves with the academic language required to understand and describe geographical phenomena.

Content feedback and its impact on content development in students

Content feedback is essential for fostering deeper learning and comprehension, as it provides specific information about students' understanding of the subject matter. Research shows that effective content feedback not only identifies errors but also clarifies misconceptions, encourages critical thinking, and enhances content mastery, particularly in bilingual educational contexts (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Kulhavy (1977) highlights that feedback addressing content accuracy promotes cognitive restructuring, assisting students deepen their comprehension. Butler and Winne (1995) argue that it also reinforces self-regulation, enabling students to monitor and adapt their learning strategies.

The analysis of "giving content feedback" in teacher talk is crucial for enhancing students' understanding and comprehension of subject matter. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) highlight that feedback focused on task-related content leads to better learning outcomes, while Bangert-Drowns et al. (1991) show that elaborated feedback aids connect new information with existing knowledge. This analysis focuses on exploring how teacher feedback can impact bilingual students' content development and provide insights into effective teaching practices that develop learning experiences in secondary bilingual classrooms.

Example

In this example, the lesson takes place in a grade seven Geography class, focusing on the topic of social development in South Asian countries. The teacher's use of clarification, correction, and affirmation serves as a form of content feedback.

T1 : You tell me which country has the second place in the literacy in level
South Asia

T1 : Which country?

S7-10 : Bangladesh

T1 : Ah

S7-10: Bangladesh

T1 : yes which country

Sri Lanka no very good

So, Sri Lanka has the second place in the literacy level among the South Asian country

Right okay

The teacher asks a question about the country with the second-highest literacy level in South Asia. A student answers with "Bangladesh," but the teacher gently corrects the answer, confirming that the correct country is "Sri Lanka." The teacher then reinforces the correct information by stating, "Sri Lanka has the second place in the literacy level among the South Asian countries." This method helps the student refine their knowledge by providing accurate information in a supportive manner. Through repetition of the correct answer, the teacher makes sure that the student retains and understands the content more clearly. This method not only corrects errors but also deepens the student's understanding of literacy levels in South Asia, advancing to their content development.

Recontextualization and its impact on content development in students

Recontextualization denotes to the process of adapting knowledge from one context, such as an academic discipline, to another, like a classroom or curriculum, making it accessible and relevant to learners, particularly in bilingual classrooms (Bernstein, 2000). This transformation helps students engage with complex material by tailoring content to their cognitive levels and incorporating scaffolding strategies that facilitate understanding (Kitson, 2021). Bernstein (2000) highlights that recontextualization also involves filtering ideological and pedagogical influences to break down complex ideas into manageable units that students can connect to their prior knowledge.

Recontextualization is chosen as the key framework for analysing teacher talk due to its vital role in adapting complex content for students, particularly in bilingual settings. In bilingual education, where language and content development are intertwined, effective teacher talk helps students grasp subject-specific concepts while improving their language skills (Gibbons, 2015; Cummins & Early, 2015). This approach is essential as students develop both content knowledge and language proficiency (Hordern, 2021; Walqui, 2006). The analysis focuses on how teachers adapt their language to develop students' understanding and academic growth.

Example

In this example, the lesson takes place in a grade eleven Commerce class, focusing on the topic of marketing objectives. The teacher introduces the concept of how a product helps a business achieve its marketing objectives, highlighting the importance of using the four marketing variables (product, price, place, and promotion) correctly.

T1 - So, tell me how a product helps to a business to achieve their marketing objectives? how? Now you know these are the four variables used by a business ah to achieve their marketing objectives. They must use these four variables in a proper way then only they can achieve their marketing objectives.

I ask how these variables help? First of all, you explain how the product helps to achieve the marketing objectives by a business.

S11-1 - fulfilling wants

T1 - ah very good, very good, it means when we manufacture when we manufacture any product mention about the needs and wants about the consumer. It means product must be able to satisfy their needs and goals. When you prepare any product, even now you see at your home, when mother prepare food in a special day, mother will ask, no? what you prefer? you prefer 'dham' biryani or fried rice or 'kothu'. Like that mother will ask, no? why does mother ask these questions?

S11-2 - needs and wants

T1 - ah because mother wants to produce a product or manufacture to satisfy our needs and wants. Do you understand? So that's why, that's the way how a product helps to a business to sell that, to achieve their marketing objectives. Because now you see ah when the product is differ from the wants of the consumer, tell me whether the business can achieve their marketing objectives?

SS - No

T1 - No, did you understood? so likewise you must be able to think and understand all these four variables how help to the business to achieve the marketing objectives ok.

The teacher asks the students to explain how a product contributes to this process. When a student answers by telling "fulfilling wants," the teacher acknowledges the answer and expands on it by linking the product's role in satisfying consumer needs and wants. To make the concept more relatable, the teacher recontextualizes the abstract idea by comparing it to a real-life example of a mother cooking food at home. The teacher explains how a mother asks family members about their food preferences (e.g., "dham biryani," "fried rice," or "kothu") to make sure that she meets their needs and wants, just like a business must alter its products to meet consumer demands.

Through this everyday example, the teacher helps students understand that, just as a mother considers preferences when cooking food, a business must design products that satisfy consumers' needs to meet its marketing objectives. This connection between familiar experiences and academic content helps students in grasping how marketing principles apply to real-world situations, thus improving their content development in the subject of Commerce.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study point out that particular features of teacher talk significantly enhance content development in bilingual classrooms. One of the most important features observed was scaffolding, where teachers broke down

complex subject matter into manageable parts. This approach supports students' content understanding by connecting prior knowledge to new concepts, consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and supported by scholars such as Cummins and Early (2015), and Gibbons (2015). Teachers effectively used this strategy to support learners through structured, gradual guidance, which boosted conceptual clarity.

Another crucial strategy was the use of referential questions, which encouraged students to think critically and engage more deeply with subject content. Unlike display questions, referential questions required learners to apply knowledge and offer personal interpretations, fostering higher-order thinking and better content retention. These findings align with earlier studies by Nunan (1987), Long and Sato (1983), and Brock (1986), who emphasized the value of such questions in enhancing meaningful classroom interaction and deeper learning.

The study also highlighted the importance of subject-specific vocabulary in improving students' academic understanding. Teachers who explicitly introduced and reinforced disciplinary terms assisted students grasp complex ideas more effectively. This aligns with Coxhead (2000) and Pulido and Hambrick (2008), who argue that mastery of academic vocabulary is key to content comprehension and overall academic achievement.

Content feedback emerged as another critical element in improving students' learning. Teachers provided accurate, targeted feedback that clarified misconceptions and led learners toward correct understandings. This mirrors Hattie and Timperley's (2007) and Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) research, which emphasizes the cognitive advantages of detailed, content-focused feedback in enhancing student performance.

Lastly, recontextualization, the practice of relating abstract academic content to familiar, everyday experiences was found to be effective in improving comprehension. Teachers connected theoretical ideas to students' real-life contexts, making lessons more accessible and relatable. This is consistent with Bernstein (2000), Gibbons (2015), and Cummins and Early (2015), who emphasize recontextualization as a key strategy for making complex content meaningful in bilingual classrooms.

Limitations of the Study

This study, while offering helpful insights into the use of teacher talk in bilingual classrooms, has a few limitations. Firstly, it was restricted to a small number of secondary classrooms in a single school in the Ampara District. As such, the findings may not fully represent the broader spectrum of bilingual education practices across Sri Lanka. Regional variations, especially between urban and rural schools in terms of teacher training, student demographics, and resource

availability, may influence the extent to which teacher talk supports content learning (Mahawattha, 2012).

Secondly, the study relied solely on audio recordings and transcriptions of classroom lessons. While these data provided a rich source of teacher-student verbal interactions, they did not capture non-verbal communication, visual aids, or student-to-student discourse, all of which contribute to content learning. As Mercer (2004) notes, classroom interaction is a multimodal process, and relying only on audio may overlook critical elements of instructional dynamics.

Finally, this study aimed to focus exclusively on content development. Curriculum design, assessment methods, and home language use were not examined, though they may also significantly impact students' academic success. Future research should consider these broader variables to give a more holistic understanding of bilingual education.

Significance of the study

This study contributes meaningfully to the field of bilingual education in Sri Lanka. By analysing authentic classroom discourse, the research offers concrete examples of how teachers can use their language not only to deliver instruction, but also to scaffold thinking, reinforce subject knowledge, and improve students' academic engagement. The insights obtained are especially relevant for educators in resource-constrained, linguistically diverse settings such as the Ampara District.

The findings emphasize that teacher talk is a central mechanism for enhancing students' cognitive development in bilingual classrooms. Rather than viewing language as a barrier, this study portrays how intentional and strategic use of teacher discourse can make content accessible and meaningful. These outcomes have practical implications for teacher training and professional development, suggesting that educators should be stocked with discourse strategies that support both the delivery and comprehension of subject matter. By emphasizing the pedagogical value of teacher talk in bilingual settings, this study puts the groundwork for improving teaching practices and shaping educational policy focused on content mastery, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

Implications

The findings of this study carry crucial implications for educational policy, teacher training, and classroom practice, particularly in bilingual education contexts where students must learn complex subject content in a second language. This research shows that teacher talk, when used strategically through scaffolding, referential questions, subject-specific vocabulary, content feedback, and recontextualization, plays a central role in facilitating students'

content mastery. Therefore, teacher talk should be acknowledged not merely as a communication tool but as a key pedagogical resource for supporting students' academic achievement.

The study suggests the urgent demand for professional development programmes tailored specifically for content teachers in bilingual settings. These programmes should focus on equipping teachers with practical strategies to break down complex academic concepts, lead students through cognitive challenges, and make subject content more accessible through effective classroom discourse (Gibbons, 2015; Cummins & Early, 2015). Training in these areas would enable teachers to improve content learning without oversimplifying academic rigor.

At the policy level, educational authorities should formally recognize the role of classroom discourse in content-based instruction. Investments in teacher training, curriculum guidelines that emphasize discourse strategies, and the inclusion of classroom interaction quality as a standard in teacher evaluations would contribute to more equitable learning outcomes. Prioritizing the role of teacher talk in content learning, especially in linguistically diverse regions such as the Ampara District, can lead to more inclusive and effective bilingual education systems (Mahawattha, 2012; Bernstein, 2000).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the vital role of classroom discourse, particularly teacher talk in enhancing content learning among bilingual secondary students in Sri Lanka. The analysis focused on five key features of teacher talk: scaffolding, referential questions, subject-specific vocabulary, content feedback, and recontextualization. The findings show that these discourse strategies are instrumental in helping students grasp complex subject matter, especially when instruction is delivered in a second language. Teachers effectively aided students' cognitive engagement by breaking down abstract concepts, encouraging critical thinking through open-ended questioning, introducing academic vocabulary, clarifying misconceptions, and connecting new content to familiar contexts.

Scaffolding emerged as a foundational strategy, permitting teachers to gradually lead students toward understanding subject content that might otherwise be inaccessible. Similarly, referential questions fostered deeper student engagement and content mastery by promoting analytical thinking. The emphasis on subject-specific vocabulary equipped students with the linguistic tools necessary to access and articulate key disciplinary concepts. Teachers' use of targeted content feedback enabled learners to refine their understanding and correct inaccuracies. Finally, recontextualization helped bridge the gap between academic content and students' everyday experiences, making learning more meaningful and relevant. Collectively, these strategies show that teacher talk is

not only a medium for communication but a powerful pedagogical tool that directly shapes students' content comprehension in bilingual classrooms.

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