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Teaching English as a second language in Sri Lankan primary schools: opportunity and pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Policy guidelines in Sri Lanka prescribe how and for how long English should be taught as a second language in primary education but practices on the ground may deviate. Opportunities for teaching and learning and pedagogy are key aspects of the process of learning. Using a large-scale survey this paper addresses (i) how much time is allocated to the teaching of English and how much time is lost, (ii) how English teachers use their time in primary education classrooms and (iii) the factors associated with student-centred learning and on academic learning in general. Around a quarter of the class time is lost through timetabling, teacher absenteeism, lesson start and finish times and teacher off task activity. Teachers who spend more time teaching in class are more likely to be in rural or estate schools and in schools with more facilities, and to have attended the Primary English Language Programme in the past. Teachers who spend more time on student-centred activities are more likely to be teaching Grade 3 than Grade 5, using remedial methods and holding an official ‘appointment’ as an English teacher. Policy implications for Sri Lanka are considered and points of comparison with policies and practices elsewhere raised.

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English; Sri Lanka; primary education; time on task; student-centred pedagogy; teaching methods

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the policy priority given to English, both as curriculum subject and as medium of instruction, has been subject to swings of democratic politics since the time of independence (Hayes, 2010; Nesiiah, 1945; Perera, 2000; Perera, Wijetunge, & Balasooriya, 2004; Punchi, 2001). As the language of the former colonial power, English was the medium of instruction in government, government-aided and private fee-levying schools for the elites and middle classes. Students in other government schools followed the curriculum through the vernacular languages of Sinhala (the language of the majority) or Tamil (the language of the minority). From 1956 onwards, Sinhala and Tamil gradually became the sole media of instruction in all schools. English was treated as a subject of instruction for all rather than a medium of instruction for a few. The general education reforms of 1997 gave fresh impetus to the teaching of English as a subject in primary schools through the Primary English Language Programme (Coleman & Edirisinghe, n.d.) within

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a set of guidelines that promoted student-centred learning. Activity-based oral English was introduced from Grade 1 and formal English from Grade 3.

In the current era of globalisation, the role of English is perceived by many sections of society less as a language of oppression and more as an international language of importance within an internationalised economy and society. Moreover, after 30 years of civil war, the teaching and learning of English play a vital role in the creation of common identities among young people divided by ethnicity and class. In 2009, the National Committee on Education asserted

With the expansion of the market economy and the private sector, it is recognized that those who do better in English have an edge over the majority of students who cannot effectively communicate in English with the inevitable result that the latter is debarred from social mobility, again leading to social polarization. With globalization, the increasing use of English as an international language, and the expanding role of Information and Communication Technology, the need for proficiency of English has come to the foreground. The concern for English has further escalated due to the expansion of ownership and available avenues of education such as private schools and foreign university courses ... while recognizing the equity in access to English, its role in a knowledge based society and changing social demands should be given due consideration. (National Committee on Education, 2009, 97)

English is now one ingredient in Sri Lanka's search for sustained peace, sustained economic growth and increased equity after the end of the civil war (Aturupane & Wikramanayake, 2011; Aturupane et al., 2011; Little & Green, 2009; Little & Hettige, 2013).

A recent study conducted for the National Education Commission recommended that the medium of instruction at the primary stage of education should continue to be the mother tongue with English introduced via Activity-Based Oral English from Grade 1 and as a subject from Grade 3 (Premarathna, Yogaraja, Medawattegedara, Senarathna, & Abdullah, 2016). Sri Lanka's current policy is in line with current British Council policy for low- and middle-income countries which advocates that fluency in English is best served by the strengthening of the teaching of English as a subject rather than as a medium of instruction (Simpson, 2017).

The pedagogic approach is also broadly in line with that found elsewhere. The stress on communication rather than grammar is consistent with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference and in several countries in East Asia, where the pedagogic approach has shifted from rote memorisation and grammar-focused to communication and task-based activities (Zhou & Ng, 2016). A stress on student-centred rather than teacher-centred activity is consistent with the discourses about teaching in general and the teaching of English as a second or foreign language that have prevailed in many countries in recent years (for a review see Moeller & Catalano, 2015).

We recognise that policy makers in all countries – as well as teachers and parents – are concerned with the correlates of student achievement in English as a second language. In a national assessment of English performance among Grade 4 students in Sri Lanka, NEREC (2016) identifies variations in performance by school type, gender (female > male), the medium of instruction (Sinhala > Tamil) and location (urban > rural).

In this paper, we do not examine achievement outcomes. Rather, we explore two sets of variables that may be of considerable importance in understanding the processes of

learning (i) opportunities for teaching and learning and (ii) pedagogy. These have been the subject of research elsewhere, for example in India (Sankar & Linden, 2014) and Latin America (Bruns & Luque, 2015) but have not been examined extensively in Sri Lanka hitherto. Moreover, while much of this earlier research has focused on the learning of mathematics and first language, less attention has been given to the teaching and learning of second or foreign languages.

Policy and curriculum guidelines

The official school timetable allocates 180 minutes (3 hours) a week for the teaching of English in Grades 3 and 4 and 210 minutes (3.5 hours) in Grade 5. Schools have discretion about how they distribute this time across the week. The English curriculum derives from the General Education Reforms of 1997 with a set of prescriptions for education in general, the syllabi for English, the Teachers' Guides the Pupil Book and pupil workbook. All students in government schools follow the same pupil and workbook and these are distributed to every student cost-free annually. All teachers have the teacher's guides.

The reforms clearly stated that education should be student-centred, not teacher-centred and activity-based.

The course is activity-based in line with research which demonstrates that learning is most efficient when the learner is actively involved (National Institute of Education, 2002, p. 2)

Emphasis was to be given to the development of the child's mind, skills, attitudes and abilities through guided play, activity and desk work. There is a grade wise transition in the proportion of time prescribed for these three elements. At Key Stage I (Grades 1 and 2), a greater part of the time is devoted to play and components of activities with less time devoted to desk work. At Key Stage II (Grade 3 and 4), the three approaches are given equal prominence while at Key Stage III (Grade 5) desk work dominates. Teacher Guides written for each subject stress the need to adhere to these approaches and follow them. The English course offered from Grades 3–5 is also expected to follow approaches recommended for Key Stages II and III (National Institute of Education, 2000). The course aims, as stated in the Grades 3–5 English syllabi, are to

- lay the foundation for the gradual development of the students' abilities to communicate effectively in English through speaking, reading, writing and listening;
- enrich students participation in primary school through positive enjoyable foreign language learning experience;
- develop positive attitudes in students that encourage them to learn English further in the secondary school;
- build students' confidence in their ability to succeed in learning the language;
- provide support to acquire the basic competencies related to the National Education Policy through an additional language teaching programme; and
- provide sufficient command of the language to enable the students to use English in real life situations as and when the need arises.

The student

- listens to simple commands/instructions in English and responds verbally and non-verbally;
- reads and understands simple words/expressions in English;
- gives expressions orally to basic language functions in English;
- distinguishes and identifies words, shapes and patterns of the letters of the English alphabet;
- forms the letters of the English alphabet on paper legibly using correct hand movements;
- writes simple sentences with accuracy; and
- acquires a sufficient vocabulary related to his/her immediate environment and communication needs.

The syllabus content is organised around the four pillars of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Neither the syllabus nor the Teacher's Guide prescribes how much time should be spent on each of the four pillar activities, nor the balance between them. However, the Teacher's Guide of 2002 accords greater emphasis to the skills of reading and writing.

Policy and practice

Educational policy and educational practices inhabit different domains. While guidelines may prescribe the time that should be devoted to the teaching of English (opportunities for teaching and learning), its style, content and practices on the ground (pedagogy) may deviate quite markedly. Our general question is 'how have Sri Lanka's guidelines on the teaching of English in primary education been translated in practice on the ground, inside schools and classrooms by school principals and teachers?'. More specifically, (i) How much time is allocated for the teaching of English in classrooms and how much time is lost? (ii) How do English teachers spend their time in classrooms? And (iii) What factors are associated with time spent on student-centred learning and on academic learning in general? These are the questions we explore in this research.

The key concepts for which we gather evidence fall into two categories: (i) opportunities for teaching and learning and (ii) the quality of time use, or pedagogy. For (i) we distinguish opportunities for teaching and learning in the school as a whole from opportunities for the teaching and learning of English. We examine the official expectations of both as set out in government documents. We recognise that actual opportunities for teaching are corroded gradually and for many reasons.

Losses of opportunity for teaching (in all subjects, including English) occur when a school closes for unofficial/unplanned reasons or school days are used for non-academic activities. Losses of opportunity for learning English as a second language occur when the school timetable allocates less time for English than the official guideline prescribes, teachers are absent from the timetabled English class, lessons start late or finish prematurely or teachers and students are 'off task' during the lesson. Each of these sources of loss of opportunity will be examined and time loss estimated.

For (ii) pedagogy, we employ a set of 18 student and teacher activities (e.g. questioning, reading aloud, copying) developed from the classroom 'snapshot' research of Stallings (1980). These 18 are classified into 'on task' and 'off task' activities, the former referring to activities intended by the teacher to contribute to the learning of English as a second language; and the latter to activity or non-activity unrelated to teaching 'On task' activities are classified further as 'academic' and 'non-academic' activity, the latter referring to classroom management and discipline. 'Off task' activity is assumed to be non-academic. 'On task' academic activities are classified further in 'teacher-centred', 'student-centred' and 'rote learning'. A similar tool has been used in a number of low- and middle-income countries (e.g. World Bank studies by Abadzi, 2007; Bruns & Luque, 2015; Sankar & Linden, 2014; Venäläinen, 2008) and others (e.g. Frost & Little, 2014).

Methodological approach

In order to address these questions, we combine evidence from documentary sources, interviews and classroom observations. Documents (timetables, log books) indicate the amount of academic time allocated officially in the school calendar for all activities in the school and the amount of academic time allocated to English activities in Grades 3, 4 and 5. Interviews were conducted with 60 school principals and 112 teachers to identify school and class characteristics, the amount of time available for formal teaching and learning and the education and training characteristics of teachers. The classroom 'snapshot observation' tool (see above) and a class information sheet were used to identify how teachers use the available time for teaching and learning.

The fieldwork

The study was undertaken between January and November 2014 in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. The empirical work in schools and classrooms was conducted over a nine-week period between mid-September and mid-November. The sample of classes for this study was selected from Grades 3, 4 and 5 (i.e. ages 7+ – 8, 8+ – 9 and 9+ – 10) in government primary schools and schools with primary grades. Among Sri Lanka's nine provinces the Central Province ranks fifth in mean achievement in the 2013 National Assessment in Grade 4 English, midway between the means of the highest and lowest-achieving provinces (NEREC, 2014). Its population reflects the demographic sectors of Sri Lanka: urban, rural and estate. Estate schools are located inside rural tea plantations and generally employ Tamil as the medium of instruction. Rural schools lie outside the estates and generally employ Sinhala as the medium of instruction. Urban schools offer education in either Tamil or Sinhala medium.

In advance of the study, the purpose of the research was discussed with provincial and zonal education officers and English specialist officers and took account of a number of their suggestions. Prior to the field work in schools, we obtained formal permission from the Provincial Department of Education of the Central Province. With a letter from the Provincial Department of Education, the research team visited schools, provided a brief description of the research, asked the school principals and teachers for consent and cooperation for this study and ensured anonymity and confidentiality. This was in line with the ethical guidelines for research in Sri Lankan schools. School visits were not

announced in advance as we wanted to observe normal practices, without undue preparation on the part of the teachers. This followed the normal visiting practices of in-service advisors and supervisory education officers. In every case, the consent of the principals and teachers for interviews and observation was established. The research team visited 60 schools. The initial intention was to observe teaching in 360 classes, 120 lessons from each of Grade 3, 4 and 5 and to observe each teacher teach the same grade twice.

Findings

Opportunities for teaching and learning

Official school days

According to the school activity calendar, the time allocated for all school activities in Sri Lankan Government schools for the year 2013 was 210 days. This compares favourably with countries elsewhere. On average, students in primary education in OECD countries receive 185 instruction days per year, with a low of 162 days in France and 223 in Israel (OECD, 2016). In Sri Lanka's nearest neighbour, India, the average number of days in an academic year varies across states between 220 and 225 days (Sankar & Linden, 2014). Within these official school days in Sri Lanka, a number were allocated to activities beyond formal teaching and learning. These are stipulated in a government circular and include, for example, days for the sports meeting, end of term/year examinations.

School closures

The number of days on which schools were closed during the period of our study ranged from 0 to 5 days (average 0.9 days). When the days lost due to school closures for various reasons during the same period was subtracted from the allocated days (210), the available time for all activities in the schools is an average of 209.1 days.

Non-academic school activity

Available time for all activities in the schools is sometimes curtailed due to special activities stated in the school activity calendar and unscheduled events specific to each school. This study found that an average of 18.9 days has been lost due to these activities and events. That means that after subtracting the days schools were closed and the days devoted to special activities and/or events, the available time for teaching and learning is an average of 190.2 days or 9.4% of time.

Time for learning English: opportunity for learning English and loss of opportunity

The official school timetable

The official school timetable allocates 180 minutes (3 hours) a week for the teaching of English in Grades 3 and 4 and 210 minutes (3.5 hours) in Grade 5. Schools have discretion about how they distribute this time across the week.

On the basis of an analysis of school profiles, English is timetabled by the schools for an average of 6.4 fewer minutes per week than that prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

This translates to a time loss of 3.4%. The average time loss in Grade 3 is 7.5% in Grade 4 2.5% and in Grade 5 just 0.6%.

Teacher presence/absence

The research team visited 60 schools. Their intention was to observe 360 English classes, 120 from each of Grade 3, 4 and 5. Of the 360 planned observations, only 307, or 85% were undertaken 15% of classes could not be observed because the class was not held, mainly because the teacher was on leave from the school. Sri Lankan teachers may be on leave from school for a number of reasons – training, attending an education office on official work, leave through illness, maternity leave or casual leave (e.g. allowed for attendance at funerals). In six cases, the teacher was in school but attending to other duties. In 21/53 classes, some form of ‘cover’ was provided by a substitute teacher who was teaching a subject other than English. These classes were not observed. So in total 307 classes were observed.

Lesson start and finish times

In the 307 classes, observed researchers recorded whether lessons started late or finished early. The average time loss was a modest 1.4 minutes per class period, which means that students lose on average 4.4% of the time in one class period. The average time loss was 6.5% in Grade 5, 3.6% in Grade 4 and 3.2% in Grade 3.

On task/off task

Once a lesson is in progress teachers and students engage in a wide range of activities, most of which are academic. Our snapshot tool employed 18 activities. Teachers were observed once in every three minutes and the main activity being undertaken at that time noted. In the later section on the quality of instruction, we present evidence on detailed activities and whether they are student- or teacher-centred. Here, we focus only on whether teachers and students are involved in some form of activity (on task) or no activity (off task). Our data suggest that 97.9% of time is spent ‘on task’ and 2.1% ‘off task’. This is high compared with Stallings’ international benchmark recommendation that 85% of class time be used for instruction (Bruns & Luque, 2015). If ‘on task’ activity that is devoted to classroom management and discipline rather than teaching is regarded as ‘on task but non-academic’ then the proportion of ‘off task’ time increases to 4.2%.

These four sources of time loss may now be combined. While a simple addition of time loss amounts to 24.9% or 27.0% (if classroom management and discipline is treated as off task, as above), this is an overestimate, since the percentages of time loss must be treated as compound not simple, i.e. each percentage applies to an amount of time that has reduced in line with the previous percentage of time loss. Calculated in this way the compounded time loss ranges from 23.2% to 24.8%, just under one quarter of all time allocated to primary schooling. (See supplemental online material information for a detailed estimate of time loss in the Central Province.)

Teaching activities observed in English classes

Having analysed the time available for the teaching of English, we turn now to the way in which the teachers were teaching (pedagogy). **Table 1** presents a hierarchy of activities.

Table 1. Hierarchy of on and off teaching and learning tasks and activities, percentages.

1	2	3	Activity	%	%	
On task	Academic tasks	Student-centred tasks	Kinaesthetic	6.6	40.7	
			Discussion/questioning	18.7		
			Focused listening	1.3		
		Teacher-centred tasks	Remedial work/corrective feed back	14.2		
			Reading aloud	12.0		
			Demonstration/modeling	4.8		
	Non-academic tasks	Tasks that are not purely academic	Assignment/desk work	17.7		
			Verbal instructions	9.5		
			Practice/drill	8.5		
			Copying	2.5		
		Student off task	Teacher off task	Classroom management	1.9	2.1
				Discipline	0.2	
				Student's personal social interactions	0.0	0.0
Off task	Non-academic tasks	Teacher off task	Student's uninvolvement	0.0		
			Teacher social interactions	0.0	2.1	
			Teacher management	0.0		
			Teacher uninvolvement	0.0		
			Teacher out of the classroom	2.1		
				100.0	100.0	

Our evidence suggests that broadly similar amounts of time are devoted to what we have classified as student-centred (40.7%) and teacher-centred (43.9%) activities. A further 11.1% of time is devoted to rote learning activities, 2.1% to classroom management and 2% teacher off task.

At 2%, the percentage of teacher off task time is small. However, if we include the time the teacher spends on classroom management and discipline (classified above as 'on task non-academic'), the total percentage of off task time rises to 4.2%. This compares rather favourably with an estimate of on task teaching time made by Perera (2001) in a series of case studies of English teaching in the post-primary grades of education. In her 'best performing' case study, she estimated that only 20 minutes out of a maximum of 40 minutes, or 50%, was spent 'on task'. Studies from Latin America suggest teacher off task percentages of 13% (Peru), 12% (Honduras) and Jamaica (11%) (Bruns & Luque, 2015).

However, the figures above are means – and disguise variation between teachers in the types of activities they employ in the teaching of English. We turn now to explore these variations and the school, teacher and class characteristics associated with them.

Correlates of teaching activities

The analysis focuses on two outcome variables. The first is the incidence of student-centred tasks observed in two lessons. The second is the incidence of all academic tasks. While the first is included in the second, we are interested in both outcomes and they are analysed independently. The first outcome indicates the time spent on student-centred pedagogy (student-centred) while the second indicates the time spent on all types of learning (all academic activities). (See supplemental online material for sample construction.)

In order to analyse factors that facilitate more student-centred tasks or academic tasks in general in the classroom, we employ a hierarchical linear model, wherein students are nested in classrooms which are further nested within schools.

A two-level modelling procedure was employed for analysing data. This modelling allows or the simultaneous investigation of the relationship within a given hierarchical level, as well as the relationship across levels (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

The 'explanatory variables' comprise school, class and teacher characteristics. These were generated from five instruments – a school profile, English language teacher profile, class teacher interview questionnaire classroom information sheet and the classroom snapshot observation (Supplemental online material). *School* variables consist of sector (urban/rural/estate), a facility index (toilets, classrooms, desks, chairs), and an estimate of the availability of English learning materials and play material. *Class* variables included large class size, grade and a teacher judgement of whether the majority of students attend private tuition for English. *Teacher* variables included whether teacher is appointed as English teacher, teacher's educational qualification, the teacher's professional qualification in English, years of experience as teacher, whether teacher has followed the Primary English Learning Programme (PELP) training some years ago, days of absence in 2013, whether the teacher discusses with parents about their child's performance and behaviours in learning English, whether teacher provides remedial teaching for English, the time spent by the teacher on lesson planning and the preparation of teaching and learning material, the amount of time spent in in-service training, whether teacher received training away from school, whether the In Service Advisor (ISA) for English visits the school, use of Teacher's Guide, use of pupil's book and workbook and whether the teacher use extra material for teaching (e.g. manipulatives, pictures, stories, news papers, computers, radio).

Analysis and results

First, a null model was tested to estimate the between-school effects and within-school effects. The second model includes all the school, class and teacher variables. The degree of resemblance between teachers to the same school can be expressed by the interclass correlation (ICC). The ICC is the proportion of between-school variance. The analysis suggests that the ICCs for student-centred tasks and academic tasks are 0.345 and 0.330, respectively. This indicates that 65.5% of the total variance in incidence of time on student-centred tasks is accounted for by class and teacher level differences. Similarly, 67% of the total variance in the proportion of time on academic tasks is due to class and teacher level variation. Both results suggest that characteristics specific to classroom and teacher rather than the school largely explained variation in student-centred tasks and academic activities. The results are shown in [Table 2](#).

Student-centred tasks

[Table 2](#) indicates that the proportion of time spent on student-centred tasks is positively related (at the 1%, 5% or 10% level) to the following variables (i) the teacher has been given an official appointment to teach English and (ii) the teacher reports using remedial activities frequently. These findings are consistent with the official guidelines.

Conversely, there was a negative relationship between grade level and student-centred activity. Teachers of students in Grade 5 spent less time on student-centred activity than they did in Grade 3. This is also consistent with the curriculum guideline on how time

Table 2. Covariates of student-centred and academic tasks.

	Mean incidence of student-centred tasks in two lessons	Mean incidence of academic tasks in two lessons
School characteristics		
rural	-0.033 (0.062)	0.079** (0.036)
estate	-0.107 (0.078)	0.097** (0.045)
facilityindex	-0.006 (0.057)	0.066* (0.038)
learnmaterial	-0.046 (0.039)	0.019 (0.021)
playmaterial	0.046 (0.035)	-0.002 (0.023)
Class characteristics		
largeclass	0.031 (0.026)	0.011 (0.011)
grade_4	-0.038 (0.024)	0.016 (0.012)
grade_5	-0.093*** (0.027)	-0.005 (0.015)
tuition	-0.021 (0.032)	0.016 (0.022)
Teacher characteristics		
engt_male	-0.020 (0.036)	-0.029 (0.031)
eng_appoint	0.085* (0.047)	-0.022 (0.036)
engtedu_2	-0.020 (0.056)	0.051 (0.033)
engtedu_3	-0.042 (0.095)	0.045 (0.043)
prof_2	-0.174** (0.070)	-0.077** (0.039)
prof_3	-0.178*** (0.062)	-0.015 (0.029)
prof_4	-0.072 (0.062)	-0.067* (0.037)
engt_yrs	-0.000 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
pelp	-0.020 (0.025)	0.033* (0.018)
not_attend_2013	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.000)
engt_discussparents	-0.077 (0.050)	-0.003 (0.019)
engt_remedial	0.087* (0.046)	0.034 (0.020)
engt_lessonplan_2	-0.006 (0.031)	0.029 (0.020)
engt_lessonplan_3	0.005 (0.044)	0.047 (0.035)
engt_training_2	-0.059 (0.060)	0.093 (0.089)
engt_training_3	-0.083 (0.070)	0.095 (0.093)
engt_training_4	-0.146* (0.088)	0.089 (0.088)
away_training	0.112 (0.073)	-0.065 (0.086)
days_ISA	0.002 (0.012)	-0.006 (0.006)
use_tg	-0.066* (0.036)	-0.029** (0.014)

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

	Mean incidence of student-centred tasks in two lessons	Mean incidence of academic tasks in two lessons
use_stubook	0.087 (0.053)	0.020 (0.034)
materialindex	0.056 (0.059)	-0.035 (0.045)
Constant	0.488*** (0.122)	0.781*** (0.067)
Observations	178	178
Number of groups	60	60

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Standard errors are clustered at school level. Sampling weights are used to obtain the coefficients and standard errors.

***, **, * indicate that the coefficients are statistically significant at 1%, 5%, 10% level.

should be spent in class as between play, guided activities and desk work, described earlier. As children move through the grades, they are expected to spend more time on desk work than on play or guided activities. Desk work is consistent with a more teacher-centred approach.

Three findings are inconsistent with expectations. Teachers who report using the teacher guides frequently in their teaching were observed to use student-centred activities less often, than those who reported their use less frequently. Compared with teachers with no professional qualifications in the teaching of English, teachers who have been trained to teach English through the teacher training colleges (where teachers undertake a two year residential course following a few years of service as teachers) or through the National Colleges of Education (a three year course following graduation from senior school), are less likely to employ student-centred teaching methods. Similarly, those who have received the most in-service training during the previous year (11–30 days) are less likely to employ student-centred methods than those who have received no in-service training. Training durations of 1–5 and 6–10 days made no difference. At this stage, we are unable to offer an explanation for any of these findings and suggest the need to review the contents and quality of the teacher guides, the training offered by the teacher training colleges and National Colleges of Education and the in-service training offered to teachers in relation to earlier stated expected and current policy expectations.

None of the other variables is significantly associated with the proportion of time spent on student-centred activity, when all other variables are controlled.

All academic tasks

Table 2 indicates that the proportion of time spent on all academic tasks combined (i.e. student-centred plus teacher-centred plus rote memorisation) is positively related (at the 1%, 5% or 10% level) to the following variables (i) the sector in which the school is located (rural or estate more than urban) (iii) the school facilities index (schools with more facilities more than schools with less facilities) and whether teachers attended a specialised course offered by the Primary English Language programme (PELP).

Negative relationships are observed between time spent on all academic tasks and two categories of professional qualification (i) 'trained' teachers and (ii) other. Compared with

those who have no professional qualification in the teaching of English, these teachers spent less time on all academic activities during lesson time. Teachers who reported using the teacher guides frequently spend less time on all types of academic activity than those who report using them less frequently.

None of the other variables is significantly associated with the proportion of time spent on all types of academic activity, when all other variables are controlled.

Conclusions

We draw two sets of conclusions. The first relates to the findings and policy recommendations for Sri Lanka. The second locates our Sri Lanka findings in relation to a broader literature on opportunities for teaching and learning, student-centred pedagogy and achievement.

In this study, we have explored opportunities, measured in terms of time, for primary schooling and for the teaching of English in primary education in the median performing Central Province of Sri Lanka, in relation to official expectations and school, teacher and class level practices. In brief, the main findings are as follows. Our estimates suggest that between 23.2% and 24.8% of time is lost between official prescriptions for time and classroom practices. As for the *use of time* the curriculum prescribes that teachers should place an emphasis on what are termed 'student-centred activities'. Our estimates suggest that broadly similar amounts of time are devoted to student-centred and teacher-centred activity. Since none of the official guidance indicates how much time should be devoted to different types of activity one cannot pass an evaluative judgement on these figures. Nonetheless, they will be instructive for curriculum developers as they undertake their ongoing reviews and revisions of the English curriculum.

Student-centred activities were more likely to be observed among teachers who reported using remedial teaching methods frequently, taught Grade 3 rather than Grade 5 primary and who had been appointed to schools as English teachers. Student-centred activities were less likely to be observed among trained teachers and those with a National College diploma than those with no professional qualification, those that reported using the teacher guide frequently and those that had attended between 11 and 30 days of in-service training during the previous year. Teachers in rural and estate schools, in schools with more facilities and those who had attended the Primary English Language Programme spent more time on all types of academic task than other teachers. Conversely, teachers who had been trained at teacher training colleges and who reported using the teacher guides frequently spent less time on teaching.

Some of these findings are expected and consistent with policy. However, a number are unexpected and suggest the need for a review of current policy, guidelines and practice. In Sri Lanka, the Ministry of Education and National Institute of Education might wish to review whether these findings from the Central Province have more general relevance for Sri Lanka, specifically whether the amount of time that should be spent on the teaching of English is aligned with the amount of time assumed by those who design the curriculum, and whether these take into account the 23–24% of time loss that arises across an academic year. The guidance on play, activities and desk work needs to be aligned with that on student-centred and teacher-centred activities, and there could be clearer guidance on the proportion of time devoted to different types of activity. Although our

research has not focused specifically on teacher education, our findings suggest the need for a review of the degree of alignment between curriculum intentions in the primary school, the content and process of professional and in-service training courses, the knowledge, experience and qualifications of trainers and teacher educators and the content of teacher guides. Conversely, the positive findings on the use by teachers of remedial approaches and having an English appointment need to be promoted actively in future Sri Lankan policy.

Researchers elsewhere may find the application of our methods to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language useful. Policymakers, curriculum developers and teacher educators may also find our suggestion about the need for a close alignment between curriculum expectations, curriculum materials, classroom realities and teacher education of value to their own systems.

We recognise that policy makers in all countries – as well as teachers and parents – will be concerned primarily with the impact of time and pedagogy on student achievement. While these are important relationships which have not been explored in this paper, we note that the evidence on the impact of time and student-centred pedagogy on student achievement remains equivocal (e.g. Bruns & Luque, 2015; Cattaneo, Oggenfus, & Wolter, 2017; Clifford, 2015; Schweisfurth, 2015). In part, this reflects variations in sampling, methods and measures employed in different contexts. And in part, it reflects the complexity of analysis required. At a minimum, such analysis requires a series of school and class observations over one academic year combined with reliable and valid measures of individual student achievement in specified subjects and Grades at the beginning and the end of the school years, such measures reflecting the content and process of the curriculum intentions. Variations in learning gains over an academic year may then be compared with school, class, teacher and student characteristics. Such an approach is worthy of research on the determinants of student achievement across a range of subject areas and stages of education in the future in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

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