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LANGUAGE SHIFT IN SINHALA-SPEAKING FAMILIES: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS ON CHILDREN

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Abstract

This paper explores the psychological and social impacts of language shift within Sinhala-speaking families in Sri Lanka, particularly focusing on children raised with English as their first language whose family background remains Sinhala for generations. As English is increasingly linked with upward mobility, elite education, and global opportunity, more and more Sinhala-speaking urban families are investing in early exposure to English. But this development comes with the price of decreasing intergenerational communication with grandparents and other extended family members who speak Sinhala only. Using literature-based thematic analysis, this study investigates the influence of early language selection on emotional development, cultural identity, and family unity. Interference with communally shared linguistic schemata always results in sub-optimal emotional bonding, restricted access to ancestral narratives, and shortened participation in Sinhala-dominant social engagements. Early childhood between the ages of 0 and 5 years is the age of language development, emotion regulation, and socialization; disruption at this age based on language conflict may lead to cognitive dissonance and identity confusion. Cross-sectional research implies that English-first children may display cognitive skills and world view but also social alienation and affective distance with their native culture. Consequently, Sinhala-first children are to show closer family connections and cultural origins, albeit with English lagging. Systemic problems in early childhood education, including the absence of standardized preparation for Sri Lankan pre-school English-medium teachers, are also brought to light by the study as being likely to work against bilingual benefits in development. The article finishes by recommending bilingual education policy, intergenerational use of the language, and national institutions to ensure both linguistic expertise and cultural continuity. In balancing global fluency and cultural embeddedness, Sri Lanka can produce a generation that is not only competitive internationally but also well entrenched in family and national identity.

Key words: Cognitive dissonance, Communication, Early childhood education, Language

Introduction

Language especially influences early life development, family dynamics, and cultural identity in multilingual settings like Sri Lanka. Sinhala-speaking families have long raised children's emotional intelligence and empathy using age-old narrative devices. Many times, these tales personify natural elements, such as "Handa mama," (Uncle Moon) and have animals and plants as characters capable of moral teachings and human emotions. Such stories developed not only great relational empathy for the surroundings but also values of kindness, reciprocity, and

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community solidarity. This great cultural activity suffers, though, in homes where children speak English mostly and grandparents, who are traditional storytellers, are not fluent in English. This language barrier could prevent the passing on of family values and culturally relevant tales.

Thanks mostly to British colonialism; separate language communities have emerged from Sri Lanka's sociolinguistic scene. While English-speaking families usually emerged in elite urban circles, Sinhala-speaking families were more common in rural and less wealthy urban areas (Perera, 2019). By ethnic groups including Tamils, Moors, Burghers, and Malays, regular mix of English as a secondary or co-language alongside their native tongues improves the linguistic variety of Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021).

Though Sinhala is the most often used language among over 74% of the population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021), recent years have seen a growing trend towards English due to its link with economic prospects, higher education, and social mobility. Particularly urban Sinhalese families show this shift; despite family challenges including limited parental fluency, roughly 43% actively inspire their children to become English proficient from a young age (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020; Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022). Usually, this language change results from parents' goals to raise their children's future employment and academic possibilities.

Children from homes where Sinhala is spoken find major social and psychological problems from this shift to English. Apart from more general issues with social integration and identity inside the mostly Sinhala-speaking community, problems include compromised empathetic relationships and less significant interactions with extended family members resulting from language barriers.

Psychological and social consequences of early language change

During the fundamental developmental period of years 0–5, language functions not only as a cognitive tool but also as a means of emotional regulation, social bonding, and cultural identification creation (Shin, 2013). Children learn to negotiate the social world by means of both verbal and nonverbal communication; disturbances in the shared family language can thus have a major influence on these early interactions.

Research on bilingual development show how crucial the home language is for fostering emotional connection and stability even if young children can pick several languages from early age (Espinosa, 2015; Ranaweera, 2021). In Sinhala-speaking homes where children are raised mostly in English, a difference in emotional attunement between the child and non-English-speaking carers, such grandparents, can follow. Children who lack exposure to or memory of the family's heritage language have reportedly have less access to cultural narratives and less opportunities for emotional scaffolding inside the family (Guardado, 2002).

Children raised in English in a Sinhala-speaking environment may also struggle to relate to peers and community members most of the time. In early life settings such as preschools, language becomes a mark of social belonging; a mismatch can lead to feelings of alienation or identity uncertainty (Kenner et al., 2007). Early language changes can also affect the absorption of values unique to a society. Often expressed in Sinhala, proverbs, moral tales, and ceremonial expressions—all of which are part of Sri Lankan Sinhala culture—help to teach empathy, respect, and social responsibility. Children who do not become competent in Sinhala suffer in their access and interpretation of these cultural tools, so perhaps leading to a thinner sense of cultural self and less social grounding (Cummins, 2000). Having balanced contact to both languages helps one to minimise these consequences. Early bilingual education for Sinhala and English has shown to produce in young learners stronger cognitive flexibility, social

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adaptability, and bicultural identity (Bialystok, 2001).

Context: English vs. Mother-Tongue Upbringing in Sri Lanka

Usually connected in Sri Lanka with education, status, and economic possibilities is English. For some small but increasing number of Sinhala-speaking urban elite families who decide to raise their children speaking English from birth, English is first language (Canagarajah, 2005). Usually in both social and educational settings, these children speak English; they may only come across Sinhala very seldom, usually as a second language. Parents mostly base their family language policy on their conviction that fluency in English guarantees improved access to elite education, global employment opportunities, and social mobility (Gunesekera, 2005).

Although most Sinhala-speaking families in Sri Lanka use Sinhala as the main language at home, most of them later, generally in formal education, introduce English. Studies of early childhood education in a child's first tongue reveal improved comprehension, learning outcomes, and long-term academic success (UNESCO, 2008). Children raised in Sinhala often develop a grounded cultural identity and get closer both practically and emotionally inside the family. Still, many parents choose early English exposure more and more since society sees English competency as related with intelligence, class level, and success (Perera, 2015). Early on switching to English and maintaining the mother tongue exposes a more intense national debate on globalisation, opportunity, and identity.

Implications for Families and Policy Makers

The psychological and social effects of language change early in life demand thought from families as well as legislators. Families—especially those in Sinhala-speaking surroundings—have to realise how crucial the home language is for the development of emotional and personal identity. Simple events like telling folk stories, encouraging grandparents to speak Sinhala with young children, and going to cultural events help to strengthen relationships between generations and support language retention (Kenner et al., 2007).

On the other hand, legislators should support early childhood initiatives including projects involving bilingual education combining English with Sinhala meaningfully. This addresses supporting inclusive language environments honouring their native tongue and teaching preschoolers in bilingual ways. From the very beginning of life, language policy shapes identity, access, and belonging not only regarding communication as Shin (2013) points out.

Furthermore, public campaigns and parenting courses can help households understand the need of keeping the mother tongue in addition to English. These projects should underline that, under suitable support, bilingualism is a dynamic process with cognitive, social, and emotional advantages rather than an either-or choice (Espinosa, 2015; Cummins, 2000). By valuing and addressing these effects, Sri Lankan society can generate a generation of children who not only linguistically competent in English but also strongly anchored in their cultural identity and family relationships.

Family communication and personal relationships

Among the first and most important changes a language change in young children causes on family communication. Language is the main tool used in the family for values, cultural narratives, and emotional expression as well as for transmission of knowledge. Children whose first language is different from that of other family members—especially grandparents and extended relatives—may feel emotionally and socially apart (Fillmore, 1991). In homes where English takes front stage for children between the ages of 0 and five, interactions with monolingual Sinhala-speaking relatives may become limited or strained. Important family events including bedtime stories, emotional support, or traditional moral lessons can be

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undermined in a child lacking Sinhala proficiency for understanding or response. Research on immigrant families suffering loss of heritage language reveals similar findings: children often suffer to maintain emotional intimacy and cultural continuity when a shared language is absent (Wong Fillmore, 1991).

A language shift can also bring asymmetries even in the nuclear family. The child might show preference or dominance in English, for example, so limiting chances for culturally rich interactions in Sinhala even if bilingual parents would have little trouble switching between Sinhala and English. This dynamic could lead to what scholars call "shared language erosion," a phenomena whereby incompatible language repertoires weaken intergenerational ties (Guardado, 2002). Conversely, when children start speaking their parents' and grandparents' mother tongue from the beginning, communication often seems to be fluid, emotionally rich, and culturally rooted. They are more likely to engage with traditional idioms, expressions, and narrative devices endorsing family cohesiveness and cultural continuity.

Understanding and Emotional Development

Particularly in the early years, developing children's emotional intelligence and empathy depends on language absolutely. Young children use language to express their own as well as to grasp the emotions of others. Common language facilitates the development of emotional attunement and ease of communication for the child and carers. Growing up speaking another language than their parents or even grandparents can throw off this emotional mirroring (De Houwer, 2007).

Because of the mental flexibility required to move between languages, early childhood bilingualism has been linked to higher cognitive empathy—the capacity to take another person's perspective (Dewaele & Wei, 2012). But emotional empathy—that capacity to feel with others—often finds its roots in shared cultural-linguistic expressions. If children cannot understand or imitate emotionally charged Sinhala expressions, their ability to emotionally connect to Sinhala-speaking relatives may be limited.

Furthermore, Sinhala conveys emotional experiences, including love, fear, or shame differently using specific words, intonations, and cultural references. Children raised in English without access to these may find it difficult to understand or respond to the subdued emotional signals of members of the Sinhala family. This separation may lead to a thinner emotional bond especially with grandparents who use metaphorical language, folklore, or spiritual idioms unique to Sinhala culture.

Children who grew up in Sinhala, on the other hand, would be more sensitively able to negotiate relationships since they would more easily grasp the whole emotional terrain of their family and community. Though their exposure to other cultural points of view comes later, their early emotional sensitivity could be stronger in their immediate surroundings.

Social Invitation and Cultural Identity

Much about a child's sense of identity and belonging comes from the language they speak. In Sinhala-majority Sri Lanka, language offers not only a means of communication but also a symbolic mark of cultural affiliation. Sometimes growing up Sinhala as their first tongue helps children to more naturally fit their environment. Inside their language group, they can choose cultural references, participate in local activities, and create close friendships (UNESCO, 2008).

Children from Sinhala-speaking homes who grow up speaking English as their first tongue could, on the other hand, experience social anxiety. Even if they might thrive in English-speaking classrooms, these kids sometimes struggle to connect to Sinhala-speaking peers or

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when attending Sinhala-medium cultural events. This language gap especially in non-urban areas where Sinhala is still the primary language of social interaction can cause alienation or the sense of difference (Canagarajah, 2005).

Moreover, regular cultural activities and customs—many of which are firmly anchored in Sinhala language—helps to foster social integration. Mostly used in Buddhist teachings, folk stories, and national holidays like Vesak or Independence Day is Sinhala. Children who lack fluency in Sinhala could not fully appreciate the significance of these events, so compromising their cultural identity and sense of national belonging (Perera, 2015). Young English-speaking individuals may also fit cosmopolitan or globalised identities moulded at the same times by Western media, international education, and peer groups. Although this might widen their viewpoint, it can also complicate their cultural self-perception, so generating what sociolinguists term as "hybrid identities"—where people negotiate between global and local affiliations (Gunesekera, 2005).

Encouragement of early life bilingualism has shown potential to overcome these challenges. Children driven to become fluent in Sinhala and English will be more suited to negotiate both cultural spheres, so promoting more seamless social integration without compromising cultural authenticity (Bialystok, 2001).

English-first against Sinhala-first: results in development

A comparative approach helps to understand how early language choice affects more general developmental outcomes. Children grown in Sinhala-first homes against English-first homes often show different strengths and challenges in four main areas: language proficiency, family communication, empathy development, and social identity.

Table 1: Observed results in development

Developmental Aspect	English-First Upbringing (Sinhala Family)	Sinhala-First Upbringing (English as Second Language)
Language Proficiency	Early fluency in English; possible delayed or weaker Sinhala skills	Strong Sinhala fluency; gradual English development; bilingualism supported by school/play groups.
Family Communication	Communication with bilingual parents may be smooth; gaps with Sinhala-only relatives	High fluency with all family members; ease in sharing stories, advice, and emotional content
Empathy Development	Gains in cognitive empathy from bilingual exposure; risks emotional disconnect with relatives	Strong emotional empathy due to shared language and cultural context
Social & Cultural Identity	May form hybrid or elite identity; risk of disconnection from Sinhala traditions	Strong Sinhala cultural identity; ease of integration in local community

This comparison study implies that every strategy involves some concessions. English-first children may need intentional help to maintain family ties and cultural sensitivity even though

they may have early global fluency and multicultural experience. English acquisition is occurring more slowly, thus sinhala-first children are more likely to be anchored in local customs and emotionally tuned to their family environment. By means of supportive family practices and bilingual educational strategies, one can help to minimise these variations so that children gain cognitively, socially, and emotionally from both linguistic environments.

Qualifications of playgroup teachers: differences in language policy

While early childhood education in English-medium appeals to Sri Lankan parents, playgroup teachers' qualifications are still rather arbitrary and unmonitored. Especially targeted should be on the three to five years' crucial period in a child's cognitive, emotional, and language development. While many parents are ready to give English top priority in the classroom and at home, the quality of preschool education they come across does not always conform international standards. Most preschoolers in Sri Lanka seem to just need an AMI (Montessori) certificate or an early childhood education diploma (Best Chance Pre-School, 2024; XpressJobs, 2024), after two to three years of experience. Though some job seekers, lk, 2024 postings give fluency in English and basic computer skills top importance, there is no nationally enforced qualification framework or regulating body that standardises training across institutions.

Countries like Australia and the United Kingdom, on the other hand, keep strong standards. Early childhood teachers must prove they grasp the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework typically having a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (Milton Keynes Council, 2024; Get Into Teaching UK, 2024). Requirements in Australia include also registration with the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, 2024) and a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.

The discrepancy draws attention to a paradox in Sri Lanka's language education policies: although English is seen as a means of attaining upward mobility, there is dearth of infrastructure to support preschool education English. This discrepancy may hinder children's development, particularly in cases when underqualified teachers are assigned to build the basis for future language and social skills. Sri Lanka has to fast solve the lack of control and teacher preparation in the early childhood sector if it is to assist children from bilingual or English-medium education without compromising quality. Apart from matching national preschool teacher qualifications with international criteria, a national framework would help to protect the developmental well-being of young children.

Table 2 : Comparative Analysis

Criteria	Sri Lanka	United Kingdom	Australia
Minimum Qualification	Diploma in Early Childhood Education or AMI	Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Studies	Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education
Certification	Not standardized nationally	Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS)	ACECQA registration
Experience Required	2–3 years	Varies; experience often preferred	Varies; experience often preferred
Language Proficiency	English fluency emphasized	Proficiency in English	Proficiency in English
Curriculum Knowledge	Montessori or local curricula	EYFS	EYLF

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Summary

English over Sinhala used in early childhood education reflects more general objectives in Sri Lankan society for global competency and economic mobility. But one cannot ignore the psychological, social, and developmental consequences of this shift. Not only a tool for communication, language is the basis of family bonding, cultural sharing, emotional development, and identity building. Though early bilingualism and global exposure can help children raised in English-dominant homes, this article has shown that these children also run the danger of emotional distance from their families and less integration into Sinhala-speaking communities. Though they often grow in stronger emotional empathy, clearer cultural identity, and simpler local integration, Sinhala-first children may suffer delays in English acquisition without systematic bilingual support.

Moreover complicating the benefits of early English-medium education is the lack of standardizing in preschool teacher credentials. English education has advantages that could be compromised by unequal quality and developmental damage without qualified teachers and a suitable policy framework. Sri Lanka has to balance ambition with infrastructure so that it may fully benefit from the bilingual abilities of its future generations: this will help families to keep mother tongue communication and guarantee that qualified, competent teachers staff classrooms. Language policy should give whole development—linguistic, emotional, social, and cultural—first importance. Then only will we be able to ensure that a child's first words—in Sinhala or English—are stepping stones toward confident, linked, and culturally grounded futures.

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