

# Essential English knowledge every Tamil speaking bilingual teacher in Sri Lanka should know

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**Abstract:** *Bilingual Education (BE) in Sri Lanka has already taken its phase to be rewarded as the best education system for it enables learners to acquire subject knowledge in English and parallel to it, gain fluency in English language. BE further enables learners to continue their higher education from a ranking university and be better employed. Undoubtedly, teacher of BE should be capable of English for they have to communicate explicitly in both verbal and written. In this research, having given an introduction to the topic started exploring the important areas like pronunciation, contraction in speech, word order and sentences, vocabulary, meaning of the word, word class, verb forms, word trees, other information related learning vocabulary and teaching collocation in the way best elaborate to the teachers. Conclusion of this research is drawn from literature produced particularly in the subject area and based on observations. I gave importance to a number of topics that worth paying urgent attention for BE teacher at the present time have an urgent need to cram for it.*

**Keywords:** Bilingual education, Bilingual teachers, English knowledge

## Introduction:

Bilingualism has so far been varying from early definition to subsequent definition. We could learn from the literature that Bloomfield, (1933:56) marked - someone who has “native-like control of two languages” is a bilingual. However, Brice & Brice, (2009) defined that someone who has the ability to speak, listen, read, and / or write in more than one language with varying degrees of proficiency” is a bilingual – this explicitly illustrates the way the definition evolved over the ages.

According to Nanayakkara (2017), “Bilingual education can be defined in the Sri Lankan context using English as the medium of instruction in a few selected subjects in the secondary level through a methodology of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach without jeopardizing the position of the first language (L1) as some subjects in the curriculum will continue to be taught either in Sinhala or Tamil. History and Religion are taught in the first language considering the cultural value and the national identity embedded to those subjects. As mentioned above, the medium of instruction in primary grades (Grades 1 – 5) is either Sinhala or Tamil. Lakshmi K (2020), referring bilingual education said that “It is a potentially useful educational resource if we can get it right. Therefore, having a policy with regard to Bilingual Education and, planning and resourcing it is critical”.

K. Pradeepa (2021) introduces that, “Bilingual Education can be identified as three common types such as Transitional, Developmental and Immersion, depending on the instructional models used in many countries. In terms of Bilingual Education in Sri Lanka, it was introduced initially through National Amity School Projects and labeled as “English Medium Program” in 2002. In this Program, few selected subjects were taught in English medium from grade

six onwards. Although in 2007, it has been streamlining within a conceptual framework of bilingual education in developmental program. The objectives of Bilingual Education may differ depends on its cultural, social, economic and educational needs”.

This study intends to provide bilingual teachers with essential English knowledge pertinent to bilingual teaching. Bilingual teachers should be aware of multiple factors that influence the English of students learn in Bilingual Education (BE). Clegg, John (2004) being an education consultant of multilingual schools in the UK, South East Asia, Africa and Europe has concluded that “education through a second language works if the context is right. Shulman (1986) took an important step in his study to mark a perspective on teacher knowledge. “The need for a more coherent theoretical framework has become rapidly apparent”. He further suggests that we distinguish among three categories of content knowledge: (a) subject matter content knowledge, (b) pedagogical content knowledge, and (c) curricular knowledge.

Teacher Development Manual (2007), reads as “Bilingualism should be promoted by using English as the medium of instruction in selected subjects such as Mathematics, Science and Technology including Computer Literacy, Social Sciences in secondary grades, year by year, from Grade 6, depending on the availability of teachers. It is expected that students will reach acceptable level of proficiency in English at the end of junior secondary education without jettisoning Sinhala and Tamil which will continue to be the medium of instruction in selected subjects”

Above all these factors that play an important role in the teaching, it’s further important that teachers should be in possession of adequate English knowledge. When it comes to the matter of Tamil speaking bilingual teachers’ English proficiency – it is vital that they are well-aware of;

**Pronunciation:**

Sripabha (2015) stated that “the importance of pronunciation in communication cannot be denied. In fact it is as important as grammar and vocabulary. Yet, the evidence of mother tongue influence on English is very obvious”. Further he added that “Also, be aware that words have different connections in different languages, or words that have multiple meanings in English might not have the same (or any) alternate meanings for other languages. This means that you should take extra care when presenting new vocabulary, as sometimes there are ambiguities that you wouldn't have thought of”. Many Tamil speaking populations have problem in pronouncing both vowel and consonant sounds. Short vowels are partially taught correctly while long vowels are either taught incorrectly or not taught.

Short vowels “a –æ” is almost always pronounced as “e – e” – Cat /kæt/ is pronounced by almost all as /ket/ so are ‘at’/æt/ as /et/, ‘bat’ as /bæt/ as /bet/, ‘cat’/kæt/ as /ket/, ‘fan’ as /fæn/as /fen/, ‘gap’/gæp/ as /gep/, ‘hat’/hæt/ as /het/ and so on and so forth, so, short ‘a’ is pronounced as short ‘e’. Though these variations in pronunciation can be insignificant as it might be considered Sri Lankan accent, the pronunciation of consonant sounds worth paying a crucial attention and are important that we gave importance and teach learners the right way to pronounce them.

Letter “G” in words like Great, Goal are pronounced as Kreat and Koal. “P” in words like Simple and Example are pronounced as ‘Symbol’ and ‘Examble’.“H” in words like Hallo and Halo and House are pronounced as ‘kallo’ and ‘kouse’. And there are numerous examples like these which we can discuss in a separate paper.

Moreover, there are hundreds of common mispronounced words; in other words, they are words learners find difficult to pronounce. Ismail MBM, Ilmudeen A (2011) stated that “Mother tongue interference was primary reason for difficulty for students. Next, inexperience of phonology was the second highest reason for difficulty. Third reason for difficulty was inappropriate teacher as model to student. Last reason for difficulty was lack of practices of students”. Following is a list of words that Tamil speaking people mispronounce in general.

- Won - /wʌn/ is pronounced as /wɒn/
- Plumber - /'plʌmə/ as /'plʌmbə/
- Honest - /'ɒnɪst/ as /'hɒnest/
- /ɪ'levən/ as /'levən/
- Eleven
- Almond - /ɑ:mənd/ as /ɑlmɒnd/
- Cupboard - /kʌbəd/ as /kʌ'bo:(r)d/
- Vocabulary - /və'kæb-jə-ləri/ as /və'ka:-bju:-leri/
- Preposition - /,prep-ə'zɪʃ-ən/ as /'pri:pɒsɪsən/

Bilingual teachers should also know that Ruzkina T.F. et al. (2016) marked “There are several factors influencing the pronunciation of the second language learners. Through this particular study we could find out some of the major influencing factors namely influence of the native language, learner’s age, Linguistic variations, attitude and psychological factors, motivation and concern for good pronunciation, classroom atmosphere and amount and type of prior instruction”.

**Contraction in Speech**

Kenneth Beare (2019) says “English learners should become familiar with contractions in order to understand the grammar of what is said quickly. Native English speakers tend to speak quickly and glide over function words such as helping verbs. Most English contractions are contractions of helping verbs, so an understanding of the role these contracted helping verbs play in grammar can help you better understand spoken English”. Not only Tamil speaking teachers but also other professionals don’t naturally use contractions when speaking English. Which actually is a sad ending for students leave school without being able to understand native English speaker.

L2 speaker: I am reading an English novel.

Native speaker: I’m reading an English novel.

L2 speaker: I would like to talk to you.

Native speaker: I’d like to talk to you.

L2 speaker: You are joking!

Native speaker: You’re joking!

L2 speaker: You need not worry

Native speaker: You needn’t worry.

L2 speaker: Everything is dark! What would you do?

Native speaker: Everything is dark! What’d you do?

**Word order and sentences**

Abdul RahumanMM (2017) observed in his research that “The English language they use in the classes is influenced by their mother tongue. The errors in using grammar and constructing sentences in English language are common and they symbolize the influence of L1. Mostly they avoid “be” with adjective, do or does or did in interrogative sentences. Direct translations are seen everywhere in their use where their errors are bounded to mother tongue, Tamil.” Moreover, Benzigar. M, Vinothini M (2021) noted that “A lapse in the choice of words, inappropriate grammar and wrong word order disables the user from establishing intended meaning”. Bilingual teacher should have a thorough knowledge of the differences between word order of Tamil and English sentences.

Abdul RahumanMM (2017) noted that “Creating a sentence in a language follow the rules associated with the particular language. Especially in a sentence of English, subject + verb + object (SVO) order and the agreement between the subject and verb must be satisfied to form a meaningful sentence. Basically, to create a sentence in L2, the learner must have a knowledge how L2 differs from L1. When we consider Tamil it prefers subject + object + verb (SOV) form in a sentence.

Following table illustrates how the word of simple sentences differ from English to Tamil

Pattern	English	Tamil*
S+V+O	I read book.	I book read.
S+V+C	He is a teacher.	He a teacher is.
S+V+Manner	She reads quickly.	She quickly reads.
S+V+Place	She reads here.	She here reads.
S+V+Time	She reads in the morning.	She in the morning reads.
S+V+O+Manner	She reads English well.	She English well reads.
S+V+O+Place	She reads English here.	She here English reads.
S+V+O+Time	She reads novels in the evening.	She in the evening novel reads

\* Tamil expression is based on contemporary accent of Sri Lankan Tamils.

The very same error in word order is seen in compound, Complex and Compound complex sentences as well.

Compound Sentences:

English: Ravi knows English but he cannot speak well.

Tamil: Ravi English well know but He well speak cannot.

English: Ravi came in the morning and he studied English.

Tamil: Ravi in the morning came and he English studied.

Complex sentences:

English: While Ravi was reading a book, Ram called him.

Tamil: Ravi book while was reading, Ram him called.

English: Because I was late, I couldn't participate in the meeting.

Tamil: I late came because, I in the meeting couldn't participate.

Sriprabha M (2015) rest-assured that “This (error of mother tongue influence) is usually easy to rectify, you just need to remind students of the correct word order, and practice, practice, practice. In fact, most errors are fixed by just practicing more”.

### Vocabulary

MOFAREH ALQAHTANI (2015). Lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second/foreign language and a lack of vocabulary knowledge is an obstacle to learning. Subhashinie Wijesundera. et. al. (2021) states that “Insufficient L2 skills such as reading, comprehension, writing and speech and lack of an adequate vocabulary, spelling and the unavailability to use language learning resources such as dictionaries and modern technological tools seem to have affected students' learning”. She further added that “Memorizing content and subject-specific terms appear to have been difficult for some students”. And “Problems of spelling and pronunciation”. Kenner and her colleagues (2008) suggested providing help with these and other activities by presenting key vocabulary and language structures bilingually through explicit modelling and collaboration of L1 and L2 teachers. Macaro (2009) even conveys that “some items of vocabulary might be better learnt through a teacher providing first-language equivalents because this triggers deeper semantic processing than might occur by providing second-language definitions or paraphrases” (p. 49).

Important factors should be considered when teaching vocabulary in BE classes

**Meaning of the word:** It's always better to teach the meaning of a word by showing a picture, acting, or giving simple example relative to learners' context. Knowing different meanings of particular verb in learners practical context is of vital importance in the language learning and vocabulary increase.

**Pronunciation:** Should be either standard Sri Lankan English or Modern RP accent. It'd even be more effective if the teacher can use an authentic sound clip of standard dictionaries like Oxford, Cambridge, Lexico or Longman. Teachers' knowledge of speech stress, rhythm, variable stress, stress and pronunciation as well as, intonation in conversation and attitude will certainly add value to the pronunciation of learners.

**Word class:** A word can belong to different classes like the word fast is an *adjective*, *adverb*, *verb* and *noun* when a teacher explains this word should give enough information about the word class with example sentences like;

- a. She bought a fast car. (Here the word fast describes the noun car)
- b. Don't drive fast. (Here fast elaborates the verb drive)

- c. Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan (Verb)
- d. Muslims break their fast in the evening (noun)

**Verb forms:** When a teacher tend to teach a verb, it's important that the students are imparted all different forms of the verb (Begin, begins, Beginning, Began, Begun). And, it would be appreciated if the teacher takes a step to explain learners, the nature of regular and irregular verb of its time. Some third person singular verbs get 's/es' as well as 'y' ending verbs get either 's or +ies' removed ending 'y'. The same method should be practiced in present participle verbs (add '+ing' / double last consonant '+ ing') and irregularity of past verbs. It hardly takes more than five minutes to repeat these things with examples.

**Word trees** are a visual illustration of a group of words, with a branching structure elaborating the words' interrelationships. If a student asks what 'tree' is? The teacher takes a step to depict words like tree, branch, leaf, log, root, flower, fruit and so on, depending on the level and nature of the student the teacher can even further teach photosynthesis and etc.

**Other information:** look at following sentences

1.
    - Here are many people suffering from poverty. (*Here in this sentence is a noun used as a subject*)
    - Here many people are suffering from poverty. (*Here in this sentence is an adverbial of place*)
  2.
    - I met a Britisher at the library. He is an English teacher. (*Simple two sentences*)
    - I met a Britisher at the library last night who is an English teacher. (*\*at the library is an adverbial of the verb met*)
    - I met a Britisher who is an English teacher at the library. (*\*at the library is an adverbial of the verb is*)
- Teachers should be able to explain these patterns to the students therefore pupils can understand the question well and comprehend study notes pertinent to their subjects.

**Collocation** refers to how words go together or fixed formula relationship. In order to write and speak natural and correct English, you need to know considerable factors of collocations like what, how, types and the way to use the dictionary to learn collocations. Following are some example of common collocation errors Tamil speaking Sri Lankans make.

- ~~She did this mistake~~ for She made this mistake.
- ~~We discussed about the programme~~ for We discussed the programme.

- ~~I will explain you the situation~~ for I will explain the situation to you.
- ~~Allen is good in maths~~ for Allen is good at maths.

Interesting enough Dr Silbert P' Rayan (2016) explained The term 'bull shit' can't be changed to 'bull dung' and 'cow dung' can't be changed to 'cow shit' because 'bull dung' and 'cow shit' are miscollocations." He continued, "When one of our classmates asked you why 'cow dung' is called 'cow dung', you replied to him saying, "This is how the language is spoken and this is how we are expected to speak."

The teacher input in bilingual class is one of the important factors enhance learners' ability. T. Karunakaran (2011) Tamil speaking bilingual teachers in Jaffna, teachers in many schools use mother tongue most of the time, and the students don't have any other situation to get input for learning.

## Conclusion and recommendations

M. Aloysius (2015), stated that, while teaching they (*bilingual teachers*) are provided with regular continuous professional development programmes by the Department of Education. However, a lack of qualified bilingual teachers is a continuous problem in Sri Lanka for more students to access bilingual education. Neranjani (2013) concluded that opportunities should be provided for bilingual teachers to develop their English language proficiency. It is obvious that bilingual teachers not only Tamil speaking Sri Lankan but also around the world have this very same lack of L2 proficiency. Sri Lanka unlike the other third world countries have enough training programmes for teachers to build their capacity to be a better bilingual teacher and their proficiency in English.

Despite being busy, teacher should allocate some time on a regular basis to read subject related books in English and English language learning books. Post Covid-19 world of education has evolved into more digital or electronic education. E-books, Learners Management Systems, Web sites, Virtual learning platforms and so many other resources made the learning easier and accessible to almost all around the world. Every teacher should seek opportunities to learn more of these resources and explain student of the way they also can benefit of this evolution for present teachers are yet on route to progress.

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