

Living in a Multilingual World: Socio-educational Experiences of a Cohort of Sri Lankan Children Living in Japan

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1. Aim

This paper examines 1) how integrative and instrumental orientations (Gardner 1985) towards learning a language can impact a group of students who learn two/three languages with different levels of social presence in the same society and 2) how students using one language at home (mother tongue), another at school (language of instruction) and another in their day-to-day social interactions (Japanese) cope with this multi-lingual scenario.

2. Data & Methods

For this purpose, collection of data is currently underway and the study sample is a group of Sri Lankan children living in Tokyo. The sample represents the ethnic groups of Sinhalese and Muslim and is between the ages of six and 14 years. Snowballing is used for accumulating sample cases. Some children studied so far were visited at home and the Muslim children were also studied at an International school which is mostly attended by Sri Lankan Muslims.

Data are gathered through in-depth interviews with children and parents, participant observation in school and at home, semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with parents.

3. Results

It has been observed that children learn and use Sinhala/Tamil, English and Japanese for different reasons. They use their mother tongue (either Sinhala/Tamil) in their most intimate interactions with family at home and in Sri Lanka. However, all Sinhalese children are reluctant to talk in Sinhala even with parents. This is not the case with Muslim children where parents are either not fluent in Japanese or are less fluent in English. Muslim families do not think Japanese is important as they do not have long-term plans to live in Japan. Likewise, they do not seem to feel Sinhala and/or Tamil to be significant languages in their life. Parents of both groups seem concerned about teaching English to their children. But it is a stronger concern for the Muslims as they do not seem convinced that Sinhala, Tamil or Japanese could do what English could do for their children's future.

4. Conclusion

The research is currently underway and it is early to come to a conclusion. But a conclusion will be drawn by November 2014.

However, the data gathered so far clearly show different orientations towards learning different languages while in Japan. The Sinhalese families seem to have a strong desire to integrate with Japanese society and are keen about learning and communicating in Japanese. The Muslims on the other hand have strong beliefs of the instrumental value of English. Their Islamic cultural beliefs also prevent them from developing any strong desires of integration with Japanese society.

Children also seem to have different coping strategies for managing this multilingual existence. Sinhalese children seem to prefer communicating in Japanese in all spheres of the socio-educational life in Japan while their Muslim counterparts prefer English for education and Tamil for intimate interactions.

References

Gardner, R.C. (1985), *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning*, London: Edward Arnold.