

Abstract

Teachers' language use to create affordances for target language use in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom has been a contentious issue in the rural contexts of Sri Lanka. Drawing on theoretical assumptions from the participatory framework, Leo Van Lier's concept of affordances and the mediation concept of Vygotskian socio-cultural theory, this study, investigated the extent to which teachers' language use contributes to target language affordances in ESL classes in the Sammanthurai Education Zone in the Eastern Province. It also explored perceptions of language use. The study adopted a case study qualitative research methodology and the participants were forty English teachers and their students from the junior secondary classes of the zone. Data sources include classroom observation along with field notes, transcripts of audio-recorded lessons and in-depth interviews with teachers and students. Data analysis focused on the language used, whether it was the first language or second language and the scaffolding patterns emerging from the data obtained from transcripts, relating to how students participated in ESL classes. Findings reveal that English is mainly taught as a content subject rather than a subject to develop learners' ability to use the skills of the target language. Although the teachers overuse mother tongue in the form of code mixing, this affords opportunities for learner participation. However, teacher centred classrooms with fixed roles for turn taking and the lack of English language proficiency of both teachers as well as students hinder opportunities for target language affordances. The requirement for communicative language teaching to fulfil policy goals is to have interactive classrooms with more student opportunities to initiate discourse but given the sociolinguistic realities, affordances for student initiation, characterized as strong affordances are limited, leading to one-way transmission of content. Most learners at different proficiency levels, all have positive perceptions of the use of mother tongue rather than English in the ESL classroom, largely due to psychological and socio-political factors as well as their over reliance on comprehension rather than language production. A minority, influenced by education in the family and experiences gained by means of life chances, despite their differences in socio economic background, share a positive perception of English. The study concludes that there is a requirement for acknowledgement of the sociolinguistic and cultural realities of the Sammanthurai education zone and the need for intensive teacher training in urban contexts to veer away from the teaching ethos constructed by the hierarchical system of this geographical and cultural space.