

Age Dynamics in Community Language Learning as a Decolonizing Approach: Comparing Teens and Adults in Sri Lanka

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This study explores how Community Language Learning (CLL) as an approach can act as a decolonization method for learning English. We investigate differences in effectiveness among teenagers from 13 to 19 and adults from 25 to 45 in Sri Lanka, where multiple languages like Sinhala and Tamil coexist. Unlike traditional colonial language instruction that honours dominant epistemologies, CLL emphasizes learners' native cultural structures and also highlights the use of local knowledge. We fill a key gap by examining how the specificity of age is important in the implementation of CLL to achieve linguistic decolonization in postcolonial settings like Sri Lanka, where English is still infused with elements of colonial power, even though Sinhala and Tamil are official languages. The study's specific objectives were to: (1) identify motivational differences between teenage and adult learners within CLL contexts; (2) analyze age-specific learning strategy preferences; (3) examine cognitive processing variations across age groups; and (4) evaluate sociocultural adaptation differences when approaching English through a decolonizing framework. For data collection, a strong mixed methods approach was used over five months with 180 participants—90 teens and 90 adults from eight community centres spanning four provinces. Quantitative data collection involved language proficiency assessments, progress tests, and standardized examinations to judge linguistic competence. Qualitative data provided insights through focus groups, direct classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews; analysis was conducted thematically to explore learners' experiences of CLL as a decolonizing methodology. Results revealed clear differences depending on age level. When it came to motivation, teenagers showed greater intrinsic motivation related to the preservation of their cultural identity compared to adults (63 percent higher), while adults showed instrumental motivation related to career advancement (with 52 percent citing career advancement). Regarding learning approaches, teenagers showed a strong preference for collaborative meaning-making and learning mediated through technology that incorporated local cultural references. In contrast, adults demonstrated higher performance with structured analysis that addressed the power dynamics of language.

Keywords: Community language learning, Motivation, Decolonization, Power dynamics

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