

# STATUS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SRI LANKA: STRUCTURAL APPROACH

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## Introduction

Sri Lanka is a South Asian country, an Island lying off the coast of Southern India. It is a small country, about 65,000 square kilometers in area with a population of 20 million people. The Island contains a mixture of communities, religions, and languages. The major communities, the Sinhalese, who comprise 70% of the population are mainly Buddhist by religion and use Sinhala as their language. The next largest community is the Tamils, predominantly Hinduism by religion and who use Tamil as their mother tongue. Tamil is also considered the mother tongue of the Moors, Muslims, a community which forms 7% of the population and who are adherents of Islam. Other communities include the Burghers, who are descendants of the European nations that colonized the island from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However the Burghers tend to use English as their mother tongue. English entered the country with the advent of the British who took over the administration of the Island from the Dutch, in turn, had wrested control of the Island from the Portuguese in 1656.

In investigating the history of English in Sri Lanka, writers have noted the similarity between India and Sri Lanka, and commented on the fact that as in India, in Sri Lanka too, English was established as a language of education because of a need for native employees who could mediate between colonial masters and the local masses. Though these accounts are substantially accurate, they tend to downplay an important historic fact that English was not the first western language, to be used as a language of education in Sri Lanka. By the time British rule over the island was established in the nineteenth century, education in Sri Lanka had already been influenced, for a long period of time, first by Portuguese and then by Dutch, and then the British were to follow.

Of course, the British were not concerned on spreading their religion at the beginning, but gradually focused attention in religion (Christianity) and thereafter various religious societies were encouraged and permitted to visit and establish themselves in Sri Lanka in order to re-establish the existing educational and proselytization programmes. Thereafter, the responses of the public were favorable to them. After obtaining the adequate psychological support of the public, the British invited the Missionaries to raise the moral and educational standards of the natives in Sri Lanka. The central idea for this invitation was reducing the government's educational expenditure in this country. However, Missionaries (The Church Missionary Society, The Wesleyan Methodist Society and The American Missionary Society) made use of this opportunity, quickly triggered their basic mission and proselytized the natives very rapidly through English education. They coveted their primary objectives with the great idea of providing social amenities to the local people of Sri Lanka. The vast majority of the people in Sri Lanka favorably accepted this trend since they wanted to improve their financial status and life styles via English education.

## Establishment of English Education

During the Dutch period, (1658 – 1796) Parish schools played an important role in providing rudimentary instruction in reading and writing to the masses. Teaching in the Parish schools was carried out in the vernacular. Besides teaching, the head master of the Parish schools was entrusted with the maintenance of various records relating to the residents of each Parish. He registered births and solemnized marriages, and he wrote and attested deeds for transfer of property. Attendance at school was compulsory until the age of fifteen years, and this was enforced by means of fines. These Parish schools functioned more or less like a reporting station. Anyhow, the establishment of a network of Parish schools by the Dutch provided employment as teachers for a number of local persons who thereby acquired a financial interest in the entries of education.

On the other hand, unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch languages, the history of English language in Sri Lanka took a different turn. It took roots into the society from the time the British established political power in Sri Lanka. British rule in Sri Lanka began in 1796 and ended in 1947. The long period of stable and powerful rule enabled the English language to become a politically and economically superimposed language. Even after the independence, indigenous governments that were in power from time to time could not get rid of English totally. It functions as a link language (*Lingua Franca*) among the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka and serves as a unifying force. It serves as the medium of communication at the national and international levels. It is also the language of international trade. Though the education is imparted in the mother tongue of the students at the tertiary level in Sri Lanka, the use of English appears to be still indispensable in fields of study like advanced science, technology, medicine, engineering, etc. All these factors continue to generate a great demand for the use and learning of English in Sri Lanka.

The British government handed over the educational power to the representatives of the Sri Lankan people (The Donoughmore Commission) in 1931. A little later with a view to make education available to all the divisions of the people, The Education Ordinance Act No.31 of 1939 was passed in the Parliament of Sri Lanka and education was made free in all the government schools. Currently the major languages in use on the island are Sinhala and Tamil which are both national and official languages while English is officially termed a 'link language'. Although Sri Lanka is a developing country, its social indices are fairly high for it has a literacy rate of 90%, the rate for males being 92% and for females 88%. This favorable rate is attributed to the fact that education on the Island is mainly state sponsored, and provided free to all citizens. Of the 10,475 schools in the Island, 9790 are state schools. University education too is the responsibility of the state, and all 16 universities of the Island are administrated by the University Grants Commission.

## Colonial to Independence

When the British began to establish their administration of the Island, a system of schools based on European practices where instruction was imparted in a western language had already been in existence for over two centuries. The contribution of the School in this respect was very great, not particularly for what was taught in the classroom, but it provided the conditions and developed the outlook in them to adopt English as the first language of the larger part of their lives. In the English schools that these children attended the whole

atmosphere was English. Thus the medium of instruction and of administration, as well as of all activities, in these schools was English. In some of these schools a fine was imposed on the children if they were heard speaking in the native languages. So completely did English and the outlook, associated with it dominate the atmosphere a typically British "Publish School" variety. The teachers singled out for particular harassment rather unpleasant and belittling jokes generally issued those who taught the native languages. For children nurtured in this kind of atmosphere at school and at home, English was indisputably the first language of action, interaction and transaction in most, if not all, significant aspects of their lives.

### **Protest against English Education**

By the beginning of the twentieth century, serious agitation begun against this iniquitous system which not only condemned the greater majority or Sri Lankans to poor education and a lower strata in society, but also denied them social mobility upwards through education. In 1910, the Ceylon social reform society sent a deputation to the government urging that Sinhala and Tamil should be made compulsory in English schools. They recommended that the mother tongue of the student be used as the medium of instruction instead of English under this scheme there was also a gradual introduction at the primary level of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in place of English. The rationale for this scheme lay in the fact that quality education was available only to those who could pay for it, and the fact that English had become 'a badge of superiority' which divided the population (Rupasinghe;1982).

English however was not totally abandoned, on the contrary the authorities concerned decided that the system should be made more equitable by the provision of better facilities for English in the vernacular schools. The teachers recruited to teach English in these schools had neither the experience nor expertise to do so. They were in fact "people with no other prospects" for all that was required to become an English Assistant, as these teachers were called, was a pass in the senior school certificate examination. Once appointed, these teachers were supposed to carry out their task with no syllabus, teaching materials or training.

It is also relevant to comment on teacher education an important aspect of these educational reforms. In the pre-independence era, a new training school was established for English teachers. Then a government teacher training college had been established, with two departments - one for the teaching of English, and the other for the vernacular languages. They recognize that teacher education was important and drew up plans to enhance teacher training.

By the time gained independence, English education had begun to be eroded. English was no longer the single most important medium of instruction but was being gradually replaced by the national languages, Sinhalese and Tamil, throughout the schools of the Island. The private schools in urban centers too, English medium instruction was dismantled at the primary and junior levels, and new student intake into English medium instruction at these levels was not provided for. English which had been the main language of instruction was now reduced to being a mere subject on the time table.

## **Bilingual Instruction**

As Sri Lankans gained political voice in the 1930s, a policy of bilingualism in education became official. The policy is somewhat deceptive; however, as bilingualism in this context differs from bilingual education systems in which language equally participate in a shared curriculum. Instead, this system tended to work in one of two ways:

1. Full instruction would take place in a vernaculars with English treated as a single subject taught throughout that vernacular.

OR

2. More frequently vernaculars continued to be used as singular medium of instruction in primary school and the teaching of English often remained reserved for upper grades typically eight and higher.

The local languages and cultures began to receive far greater prominence than ever before and there was a conscious effort to minimize the role played by English in the national life of the country. However Kandiah (1984) also notes that in spite of these changes, English, paradoxically, continued to be a dominant language. He attributes this to the fact that knowledge of English gained in the past permitted the elitist, dominant power groups in Sri Lanka to maintain their control of national interests.

In education, it had no visible status or prestige as all school teaching had shifted to mother tongue instruction. English continued to be maintained covertly or not so covertly in the working of the economy and the social fabric of the country. The position of English continued to be as entrenched as ever despite official efforts to marginalize and suppress it in the social and economic life of the country.

The school system where English was taught as a second language was affected not so much by socio-political upheavals, as by the change in the medium of instruction in the later period. Problems had been identified as the dearth of properly qualified English teachers. The lack of qualified teachers for English throughout the country, and the change in the medium of instruction had impacted seriously on the language proficiency of those who entered the training colleges to become English teachers. This, in turn, naturally affected the teaching of English in Sri Lankan schools. Attitudes to English, the teaching of this language and receptivity by the young were certainly at their lowest ebb.

## **Re- establishment of English Teaching**

At the international level, Sri Lanka as a member of the global community needed an international language for communication. It is in this context that the status of English changed once again. Recognizing the importance of English, the state took significant steps to establish initiatives to improve English teaching in the country. The low proficiency levels of teachers entering the English language teaching profession had by now become a serious cause for concern, and therefore many of the major state efforts were focused on the improvement of English language teaching teacher education. These efforts were meant to develop English teachers in three areas: a) Pre-service training, b) In-service training, c) continuing teacher education.

a) Establishment of National Colleges of Education (NCOE)

In terms of Pre-service training, the intention was to create a cadre of teachers who have received effective training before they enter the profession. The training courses provided were based on trends in communicative language teaching.

- i) basis for textbooks already introduced into the school system
  - ii) updated in content
  - iii) new developments in the field of Applied linguistics - such as second language acquisition and socio linguistics
  - iv) enhance the proficiency levels of teachers
  - v) intensive English language instruction
- b) In terms of In-service training was designed to train teachers who had not received adequate training prior to joining schools. The program was the attempt "to combine language development, teaching methodology and literature through the exploitation of a piece of text".
- c) Continuing education for teachers was given new directions with the establishment of the Higher Institute of English education. The institute was set up to cater to the ever increasing need for teacher educators.

In addition to these initiatives a significant change was the establishment of the National Institute of Education (NIE). It has been responsible for all major aspects of ELT in the Sri Lankan school system including curriculum development, production of text books and continuing teacher education in the country.

### **Post Colonial Situation**

The scenario surrounding ELT in Sri Lanka is in fact a complex one. These complexities arise not only from the shifts in attitude to and status of English, but also from developments in the field of education in this country. English teaching seems to be based on a solid and equitable island-wide network of schools, universities and teacher colleges and a comparatively high rate of national literacy. Yet at forums of university English teaching personnel, the comment was made that nothing has been achieved in English teaching in Sri Lanka since 1970s.

More disturbing socio-political events of the late 1980's were also a key factor in the change of the status of English vis-a-vis the national life of the country. The in-digested situation involved youth uprisings, the complete paralysis of the school system and of the universities led to a rethinking and re-evaluation of the goals and objectives of education in the country. This gave rise to a sweeping set of reforms that took serious note of the role of English in the nation's education and employment sectors and advocated changes in the teaching of English.

ELT has been adopted various methods in time to time. The present day communicative language teaching method super ceded from all others. Noam Chomsky's concepts of "innovative property of language and Hymes ideas of use rather than the usage" paved the way for the communicative method of ELT in schools.

## Changing Attitudes towards Teaching English

One of the major thrusts of the new reforms was the strengthening of English within the education system of the country. Under these reforms, English was strengthened at all levels of the school system. It was decided that English should be introduced at the very earliest stages of education i.e. the primary level where until that time; instruction had been carried out exclusively in the mother tongue.

In primary classes, students were exposed to the formal teaching of English was introduced as a subject, mainly emphasized as developing spoken language skills. English was also considered a core subject in the national school system.

English was given high priority, and the university grants commission decided that all higher education institutes should offer a mandatory co-module and this should include General English language teaching. The university grants commission had been distributed more than 96 million among the English language teaching units and departments to enhance capacity and improve facilities for teaching English in the universities.

Currently there are number of initiatives spread over the school system of as well as the university system of Sri Lanka which indicate the growing importance attached to this language on a national scale.

## Conclusion

As the all above discussions show, the status of English in Sri Lanka has been subject to significant changes which have been linked to socio-political events within the country as well as to the global context. The period of British rule saw English firmly entrenched in the education system of the country- becoming an instrument of domination and one that worked towards the marginalization of indigenous languages. The period immediately following the granting of independence saw the phasing out of English system, these efforts coming to a culmination with the installation of Sinhala as the sole official language of the country. In the next decade, the role and function of English as an international *lingua franca* has been subjected too much analysis and debate. The significant changes in economic policy and embattled socio- political events signaled new changes in the official attitude towards English.

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