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The Scope of Sri Lankan English in English Language Teaching among Teachers of Jaffna

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Abstract

This study attempts to examine the situation of Sri Lankan English among the English teachers of Jaffna in handling the text books for English Language from Grade 3 to Grade 13. Although both Sinhala and Tamil languages currently hold official status in Sri Lanka, English has often served as the lingua franca on the island and is typically the language of choice in contemporary governmental policies and practices (McArthur 329). As is the case for other former British colonial subjects, however, the use of English for Sri Lankans is far from uncomplicated. Thus develops a unique variety called Sri Lankan English. It reflects a lot in the text books for the primary and secondary classes. The paper will first discuss Sri Lankan English as a dialect of World Englishes. It will then discuss the necessity for registering the morphological features. Next, it will describe qualitative and quantitative methodology utilized in this study. Following the presentation of its findings and discussion, the paper will conclude with a consideration of the study's significance, its limitations, and suggest directions for further research.

Key words: Sri Lankan English, Jaffna English, Text Books, Dialect

Introduction

This study attempts to examine the situation of Sri Lankan English among the English teachers of Jaffna in handling the text books for English Language from Grade 3 to Grade 13. Over 19.4 million people call Sri Lanka home, but they do not all do so in the same language. A rich mixture of Moors/Muslims, Burghers/Eurasians, Veddahs, and Malays live on the island, in addition to its two main peoples—the Sinhalese majority, who speak Sinhala, and the Tamil minority, who speaks Tamil. Although both these languages currently hold official status in the country, English has often served as the lingua franca on the island and is typically the language of choice in contemporary governmental policies and practices (McArthur 329). As is the case for other former British colonial subjects, however, the use of English for Sri Lankans is far from uncomplicated.

At this juncture, it is of great importance that the status of English in Jaffna should be discussed. In this article Jaffna denotes the Jaffna Peninsula. English is brought to Jaffna in the 18th century in par with the rest of the country. Both English medium schools and indigenous central schools having Tamil medium education were established. The upper and upper middle class and even some ambitious lower class willingly attended the English medium private schools and sought government jobs. People of Jaffna had great incentive to use English. Prior to the colonial period, one's occupation was determined by his caste and changing social position was tremendously difficult. But the economy changed with the opening up of plantations, and non-traditional employment became more common with the “establishment of a modern bureaucracy together with the expansion of secular education” (Fernando, “English” 190). Along with these changes, English became the language of government administration, law, advanced secular education, and commerce. The use of Sinhala or Tamil in these domains was frowned upon, even if it occurred between native speakers of the language (Perera 57).

When Official Language Act of 1956 made Sinhala as the only official language and degraded English to a secondary position it is Tamils who suffered. Tamil Language was restricted to regional use. However, it proved difficult to dislodge English as the language of commerce, higher education, technology, science, and so on, and so it continued to hold social, cultural, and economic value throughout the period of these language policy enactments. “In this sense,” A. Suresh Canagarajah argues, “English was still the official working language in many institutional domains” (“Dilemmas” 423). In 1960 schools were acquired by government and a very few missionary schools opted to remain private.

Having all these in mind the view on Jaffna English has been divided into three main periods.

- The period between 1956 and 1990.
- The period between 1990 and 2006.
- The period after 2006.

The period between 1956 and 1990

The role of English in Jaffna is very complicated. Even though war started from 1983, the actual repercussions started after the arrival of Indian Peace Keeping Forces since until then those who were

involved in the war were only a small number and mostly children from rural schools. Even though there were shelling and bombing quite often, schools were conducted and children attended schools eagerly and thus the educational standard remained same though there was a slight decline. The senior generation of Jaffna always wanted that the younger generation should learn and speak English. Jaffna maintained a high standard of education until the beginning of 1990's. English knowledge was considered part of the education and the adults estimated the standard of a child by its English knowledge. Whether the child becomes a doctor or an engineer, the expectation of the parents and the society is that he/she should speak English. Thus the parents were very keen on teaching English at home, sending their children to English classes and so on. Consequently, those who have completed their education before 1990's were better competent in their English.

The period between 1990 and 2006

However in mid 1990's 'Language Purism' was claimed vehemently with lexical introduction such as [kuliṛ kaḷi] for ice cream, [veṭṭippi] for bread etc, and English Language education reached to a delicate position. There were many reasons for this position.

The importance given to the Mother Tongue made the learners to look at the English Language with some kind of step-motherly approach. Teachers of English were not much sought after.

The closure of the trunk road (A-9) was also the route course for the degradation of the English Language proficiency. The younger generation had less exposure to the outside world. They hardly had any English news papers, magazines and journals.

The interest of the learners was directed towards war and war related effects. The crisis took most of their time and thus learning of the second language was neglected.

The northern part was isolated from the rest of the country and the youngsters had less job opportunity in the private sectors and other parts of the country where the knowledge of English was greatly expected.

As a result of all these reasons those who completed their secondary education during mid 1990's and the beginning of 2000 were less proficient in English. This reflects in the graduates of Jaffna until today. Even though the concept of Standard Sri Lankan English was already formed during this period they neglected or didn't pay much attention to it.

The period after 2006

The situation of Jaffna after 2006 is considered as a separate period since after this year the trunk road (A9) was again closed and the population of Jaffna was restricted up to Mirusuvil. Even though severe war was going on in Vanni and still many sought refuge in the coastal areas, the educational process was going on mostly unaffected. With the opening of A-9 road in 2009, Jaffna started to change. The concern of this article falls on the English education. Most of the students feel that it's high time for them to learn English Language. They start to feel the inevitability of the language and both the attitude of the learners and the language policy of the government have changed. New projects are introduced.

The change in the attitude of the learners

With the opening of the A9 road in 2009, Jaffna encounters many changes in its socio-economic situation. Tourists from south and western countries started flocking in and there comes time to travel to and fro. The need of a Lingua-franca was felt.

Many multi-national companies have opened their branches in Jaffna. They seek English speaking youths. They provide jobs to those who are under 23, i.e. those who have only completed their secondary education with a sound knowledge of English while almost five batches of graduates wander about to seek jobs in vain. In addition the payment in the private sector also very attractive.

Access to mass-media, inter-net, avenue to T.V channels through cables, magazines, newspapers and journals is another cause.

Thus people want to make amends. Students show enthusiasm towards learning English. At this juncture they expect the changes in government policy will also support them.

The projects that are introduced by the government recently are

Re-introduction of English medium education – People of Jaffna welcome this project eagerly and thus many offer English medium education.

English as a Life Skill – meant for all – There’s an awareness and interest in using English. In addition Speech Test for the O/L Examination induces children to learn English.

Special Training programmes for language practitioners and govt. servants – it helps to improve the standard in Jaffna.

Introduction of new text books containing local experiences – it motivates the children since the situations are very familiar to them.

Concepts of Standard Sri Lankan English

It is of prime importance to know what Standard Sri Lankan English is. There is much disparity among the intellectuals of Sri Lanka about it.

Prof.Arjuna Parakrama talks about,

“De-hegemonizing language standards from post colonial Englishes”

“It seems almost universal that within linguistics there is no sense of hegemony at all”.

Prof Manique Gunasegara explains as

“What a Sri Lankan elite speaks is Standard Sri Lankan English”

“The English used by the Sri Lankan elite is standard Sri Lankan English, which is part and parcel of belonging to the ‘English speaking’ class”.

Sunimal Fernando the advisor to the Presidential Task Force reflects as

“All Sri Lankans should realize the need for learning English the Sri Lankan way”

Prof E. A. Gamini Fonseka comments

“The English used by the Sri Lankans is Inter-language.”

It’s the duty of the teachers that they should help students to reach the target language.

Michel Meyler

“The language spoken and understood by those Sri Lankans who speak English as their first language and/or who are bilingual in English and Sinhala/Tamil”

In addition he said that he had collected the data from conversations, newspaper cuttings which expose a variety

Shrome Fernando calls it as

“A transplanted language” which has its own sub-varieties.

Having all these comments about Standard Sri Lankan English Let’s now turn to the data that are collected from the text books from Gr. 5 to Gr.12.

Data from Present Text Books

Grade 5 – Unit 2 Lesson 8 – dagaba, bo tree

Unit 4 Lesson 1 – kevum, wattalapan

Lesson 5 Unit 7 – Nil manel, Na tree

Lesson 3 Unit 11- Andare

Grade 6 – Page 45 rabana

Page 48 Kewum, kokis, athiraha, asmee

Page 61 – Hummanaya

Grade 7 – Page 2 – Pragnasara Maha Vidyalaya, Gee

Page 10 – Brahmadata, Disapamok, Thaksila,

Page 53 – athtam, goyam kavi

Grade 8 – Page 41 – Araliya, Kohomba

Page 43 – Lakmini Vasana, Viduravi,
Suwasetha, Sethmaga

Page 77 – Perakum Vidyalaya

Page 126 - Pirikara

Grade 9 – Page 6 – Ehela, Hendirikka, Idda, Bovitiya

Page 7 – Kottambuwa Balika Vidyalaya

Page 16 – kos mama

Page 17 – wela, waraka, polos,

Page 68 – Malu Ambuthiyal,

Page 102 – dandumonara

Grade 10 – Page 26- Ruk Reka Ganno,

Page 43 Podi gamaya, Maha gamaya

Grade 11 – Page 43 – Bulatha, gal padi hel, wewa

Page 68 – helapa, thambili

Page 141 – Viridu singer, rabana

Grade 12 – Page 8 – konde,

Page 49 – amulet, thaachiya

Page 259 – Maharkshaya, Dhawala Bheeshana, and other names of dramas.

Interviews of different personalities who are involved in Language Teaching in Jaffna

Mrs. C. Ramakrishna, a senior teacher of English says, “It’s a burden to us. Teaching slows down because of the inclusion of Sinhala words”

Mr. K. Thayaharan, an in-service advisor says, “It happens to be a barrier in language teaching. When the syllabus couldn’t be completed the reason naturally falls on it”

Mr. K. Rajkumar, a resource person at STEPS Institute says “ Sometimes I left certain items to continue my teaching”

Miss. R. Mangaleswarasarma, a lecturer attached to Open University said, “I left some vocabulary like ‘kabarakoyya’ when I was teaching English medium science”.

Conclusion

English being used all over the globe bound to have many dialects. As American English, African English and Australian English are accepted with their distinct varieties, Sri Lankan English when displays certain local flavor should also be accepted. There is no objection among the teachers of English of Jaffna. However the teachers of English of Jaffna question the validity of the language they find now in the text books especially the use of vocabulary. Before teaching they have to get the meaning for the Sinhala vocabulary and for the Tamil children it is an extra burden since they have to learn not only English but also Sinhala. There is another question among the teachers that whether they could replace Tamil vocabulary in place of the Sinhala vocabulary. However it may create the following problems.

Pronunciation – Teachers of English in Jaffna do not know the actual pronunciation of the words since the transliteration will not give the actual pronunciation. In addition some words have more than one spelling. Eg. “Kavum”, “Kevum”, “Kewum”

Meaning – It’s difficult for both the teachers and students to find out the meaning of some words.

Uniformity – Teachers of Jaffna wonder if Tamil vocabulary is started being used how uniformity among the nation is going to be maintained.

Limitation/boundary line – In addition where is such inclusion going to stop? Which is the boundary line for including the vernacular language?

Extra burden - It’s going to be an extra burden for both the students and teachers. In reality, it is language learning that is going to suffer.

How to face the international exams & co-op up with international standards – If most of the nouns are used in domestic language how Sri Lankans are going to face the International Exams like IELTS, TOEFL etc. How they are going to face the challenging job market in the western countries.

In conclusion, the Sri Lankan English used in the text books is mostly Colombo centred and thus it should be decentralized. In addition Sri Lankan English should reflect the unique cultural differences only. The presenter expects to examine the structure of Sri Lankan English in the Text books in future.

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