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## DECLINE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE IN JAFFNA, SRI LANKA (SPECIAL REFERENCE TO UNDERGRADUATES OF UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA)

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### ABSTRACT

A predominantly monolingual situation in Jaffna in Sri Lanka today has led to the lesser extent of the use of English in this region. In Government Departments and State Corporations verbal communication among employees in official and unofficial dealings are carried out in Tamil. Government circulars and other official documents are released in Tamil. Cases of code switching and code mixing may be observed but to a very little extent. The 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka declared through its 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed in 1988 that Sinhala and Tamil be the languages of administration of all the provinces of Sri Lanka, other than the Northern and Eastern provinces where Tamil shall be so used etc. It resulted in the dramatic decline of English language use in Jaffna. Even though English is taught as a Second language in Government schools, students are not able to communicate in this language. This paper discusses the factors hindering learners from achieving communicative competence in English. Author's informal discussion with selected undergraduates of the University of Jaffna and an official report on the undergraduates' performance in the ESL test have been used as instruments for data collection.

### Key Words

Communicative Competence, Exposure, Instrumental Motivation, Monolingual Situation, ESL (English as a Second language)

### INTRODUCTION

#### An Outline of Status of English in Sri Lanka in the Past

Teaching ESL in government schools in Sri Lanka, irrespective of the socioeconomic and geographical background of students has been a vital concern of successive governments since the early 1950s. Since the 1990s, much emphasis has been laid on ESL teaching in view of solving the Sinhala – Tamil ethnic conflict adversely affecting the economic and social development of the country (De Mel, 2001 as cited in Karunaratne, 2003). In addition, it has been felt that providing students with necessary knowledge and technical skills which the modern employment market demands is crucial. To achieve this objective also, a good knowledge of English is felt essential. (De

Lanerolle, 1991, De Mel, 2001 as cited in Karunaratne, 2003) Despite the efforts taken by the governments with regard to the school ESL programmes, the overall unsatisfactory performance of students in English in the G.C.E (O/L) and (A.L) examinations and the poor performance of youths in job interviews are evidence of the inefficiency of the programme.

British colonial rule which lasted from 1796 to 1948 in Sri Lanka had a great influence on the status and function of English in this island. The British founded some schools namely the 'Superior Schools' that imparted education in the English medium (Jayasuriya, 1976). Only the economically privileged Sri Lankan natives could afford to receive education in these schools by paying a fee. The poor lower class Sri

Lankans were deprived of the facility of English medium education which lowered their standard of living.

Gunasekera(2005) remarked, " From 1796 to 1956, English was the official language of the country. In 1948, when we gained independence from the British, English remained the only official language of the new dominion. In July, 1987 as per Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, Sinhala, Tamil and English are declared official languages of Sri Lanka. In November, 1987, according to 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, English is the link language and Sinhala and Tamil are the official languages of Sri Lanka." (p.14)

The link between the English language and the economic status resulted in making English language proficiency an essential requirement for social progress in the country.

In post – independent Sri Lanka, the British education system was subject to many changes. The local politicians were very much concerned about providing equal opportunities to people of all strata of society. Free education in the vernacular for all in government schools has been prominent among these changes. English instead of being the medium of instruction became one of the subjects in the wider school curriculum; i.e. the second language.(Jayaweera,1984) Though English has been replaced by the student's mother tongue as the medium of instruction, the role of English in social life in Sri Lanka is unchallengeable.

Kandiah(1979, as cited in Raheem and Ratwatte,2004) stated about the different factors that contributed to the influence of English in Sri Lanka. Some members of the middle class used English as the means of establishing their distinct identity among the people with whom they lived. Another factor which he considered sociopolitical is associated with the presence of the separate ethnic groups, the Sinhalese speakers and the Tamil speakers. English became the effective lingua franca between these two communities. The third factor known as 'reactive' was determined by external realities. Here the participants have a keen inclination toward the language of power.

As Sri Lanka is considered, it's interesting to note that that the keenness to cultivate English by certain section of people emerged at a time when the language of power was Sinhala and not English.

Samarakkody(N.D:39) stated, " The position privilege and status occupied by English continued even during the period of post independence nationalism, since the elitism bilinguals of the national bourgeoisie had no desire to do away with the language that had brought them to these positions of power and privilege."

In Sri Lanka, the direct method and subsequently the grammar translation method had been in practice since English as a second language was included to the school curriculum. The direct method recommends the target language itself as the medium of instruction while the target language is taught in the student's mother tongue in the grammar translation method. These methods are found to have been unsuccessful in promoting the students' English language proficiency. Thus the Communicative Language Teaching has been adopted in schools since the late 1980s.

#### **Decline of English Language Use in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.**

During the British colonial rule in Sri Lanka (1976-1948), the Governor took the initiative in persuading the American Missionaries to function in Jaffna. The main objective of the Missionaries was to propagate their religious faith. Yet their contribution to the educational development of the Jaffna Tamils was tremendous. Vast employment opportunities and better prospects in life were available for the natives who had English language proficiency. The American Missionary realizing the need of the hour established several schools in various parts of Jaffna. Kailasapathy (1986:86 as cited in Sunthareswaran,2004:21) commented, " There was something unique in the educational facilities available in Jaffna during the middle of the last century(19<sup>th</sup> century) that have an important bearing on the relation between Tamil and Western scholarship----- . Due to a number of factors, some of which were fortuitous and others intrinsically historical, Jaffna was in the forefront of this

renaissance. The educational contribution of some of the Christian Missionaries in Jaffna, to this efflorescence cannot be exaggerated.”

A predominantly Tamil monolingual situation in Jaffna today leads to the lesser extent of the use of English in this region. In the government departments and state corporations, the verbal communication among the employees, pertaining to both official and unofficial dealings is entirely in Tamil. Cases of code – switching and code – mixing may be observed but only to a very limited extent. Most of the circulars and notices dispatched are found in Tamil, owing to the state language policy. The 1978 constitution of Sri Lanka declared through its 16<sup>th</sup> amendment passed in 1988 that “Sinhala and Tamil be the languages of administration of all the provinces in Sri Lanka, other than the Northern and Eastern provinces where Tamil shall be so used, etc. All laws and subordinate legislation shall be enacted or made and published in Sinhala and Tamil together with a translation thereof in English. Sinhala shall be used as the language of courts situated in all the areas of Sri Lanka except those in any areas where Tamil is the language of administration.” (Thirumalai,2002). Department meetings and discussions are held mostly in Tamil. In the case of the private sector, the employees of the Colombo based commercial organizations like Brown & Co.Ltd, Singer Co.Ltd, Commercial Bank of Ceylon Ltd, etc. and some insurance companies may use English to some extent since they have to communicate with their counterparts in the south in English.

No public forums or seminars are addressed in English. Even the periodical get – together and meetings of major clubs such as the YMCA, the Lions Club and the Rotary Club are held mostly in Tamil. Very few people read in English. No English Newspapers or magazines are published in Jaffna. Only a few members of Jaffna society subscribe to English newspapers like the Daily News brought from Colombo. People rarely show interest in viewing English T.V.programmes or listening to English programmes on the radio.

Sunthareswaran (2004:80- 82) observed, “English magazines, journals or periodicals are not published in Jaffna since the English reading population is very small now. People in Jaffna do not take much interest in English programmes broadcast by SLBC. On the whole, the use of English in the family domain in Jaffna is very much restricted.”

When commenting on the post-independence status of English, Suseendraraja (1997, as cited in Sunthareswaran, 2004:74) noted, “ English became socially restrictive and did not meet the need for popular participation. The day to day use of English in the Jaffna society was reduced.----- even among the older generation who had their education through English, the need for the use of English has declined considerably. They have given up using English in their conversations and writings as they did earlier because the younger generation is not in a position to respond in English. In fact, the percentage of people who read in English too has become very low. Among the Jaffna Tamil population the regional and national newspapers command the highest circulation as against the national English newspapers published in Jaffna at present.”

Even the teachers of English serving in government schools are not suitably qualified and although they complete courses in training Colleges and Colleges of Education, their competence in English is not satisfactory.

Professional courses like Accountancy, CIMA, etc. which are conducted in the English medium are not available in Jaffna presently for want of qualified resource persons in English. But a good number of avenues are open to follow courses in information technology and computer literacy in the English medium. Youngsters show much keenness in following these programmes with the hope of finding job opportunities. Such pursuits of youngsters have undoubtedly led to the progress of English knowledge of youngsters considerably.

Suntharesan(2009) observed that teachers serving in government schools should have a moral consciousness in performing their duties with perfection by covering the syllabus in time, strictly following the instructional guidelines to handle the text books, attending seminars to update their knowledge etc.

Sunthareswaran (2004:176) noted the decline of English language proficiency of the undergraduates of the University of Jaffna. "----the overall performance of the students has not been very encouraging in the recent years according to the Instructors and the Head of the ELTC of the University of Jaffna."

### **The Impact of Social Stratification on Students' Proficiency in English in Jaffna**

Proficiency in English among school students varies depending on the area or location in which the schools are situated. Classroom conditions and facilities, teaching methods and teachers' proficiency levels also vary considerably. Although one can assume that an average student after certain years of study, acquires knowledge of basic structures of English, however, it would be a misconception to assume that an average student across different villages, towns and cities knows equally the structures of the language. The following remarks by Thorat (2007, p.2) are worth mentioning in this context. "It is clear to all of us that the standard of English in rural areas in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal is very poor when compared with the skills students in the urban areas demonstrate. Generally the learners in rural areas are poor with not many facilities to improve their performance in studies"

Since the undergraduates of the University of Jaffna are students from schools situated in different locations and surroundings, their proficiency levels in English are found to vary by the time they enter the university. Their proficiency still varies even during their course of studies in the university due to certain factors which are dealt with later in this section.

People assume various statuses in the social strata and their social roles also vary. The markers of peoples'

identity include occupation, education, economic status, gender, age, colour, caste, social rank etc. Linguistic correlation of all these markers can be found at all levels.

The organization of people into hierarchically ordered social groups or classes becomes one of the sources of sociolinguistic identity. Classes made up of people with similar socioeconomic variables in social stratification can be stated in terms of urban versus rural, rich versus poor, male versus female etc. Proficiency levels in English found to vary across these variables in turn may lead to students' different attitudes, different levels of motivation and different levels of exposure to English. Besides, the teaching materials used and the teaching methods adopted in the university influence the English proficiency of the undergraduates of the University of Jaffna.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Urban versus Rural**

When compared with the students from rural areas, students from urban areas have better proficiency. Among the students of the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Management Studies & Commerce of the University of Jaffna, the students from the urban areas who have secured A grade in ESL are 18% whereas the students from rural areas who have secured the same grade in ESL are only 3%. (See Section- 3 in Appendix-A) Some urban students listen to and view English programmes on the radio and television. They also read English newspapers and magazines. Some of their parents subscribe to English newspapers. The researcher's discussion with students shows that 45% of the students from urban areas have a considerable exposure to English in the family surroundings. In short, the urban students have the opportunity to use English outside the classroom. In some urban families, students have their personal computers and they are able to learn and use English words and vocabulary items related to information technology. These facilities enable them to have higher proficiency levels in comparison with students from a rural background. It should be noted that in case of the undergraduates of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Jaffna, the

majority are from rural surroundings. According to the survey conducted by the researcher, 60% of the students are from rural areas. (See Section-1 in appendix-A)

#### **Rich versus Poor**

It's a usual feature that economically privileged students perform better than economically underprivileged ones across the towns and villages. However, inevitably there are a few exceptions in all areas. But as per observation, students from the upper class are more proficient in English than the middle and lower class students and the middle class students are more proficient than the lower class. McPortland (1991, p.2) supported this notion thus. "The different capacities of poor and wealthy homes to support students' learning activities continue through the elementary, middle and high school grades. Students from deprived backgrounds may not have a quiet place and home to study while well – to – do students will often have not only a quiet place but also home libraries and computers to support their learning activities. While parents who are not well educated can give strong emotional support in the education of their children, they will not have the academic strengths to help with homework as students progress through the grade levels to more challenging courses."

Another notable phenomenon of family lineage is education. Particularly students whose parents are educated, have more opportunity to use English in their family environment. This situation enables them to develop their English proficiency and they do better than the students whose parents are not educated. The researcher's informal discussion with the students revealed that 85% of the students whose parents are educated have passed in ESL in the University.

The above discussion by no means, implies that all poor students will perform worse than the rich students. The top – bottom polarization of students' merits and their English proficiency does not parallel the top – bottom polarization of people in terms of their socioeconomic status.

#### **Male Versus Female**

General perception is that women are better at language than men. Many female students are found to be more proficient in English than the male students. The survey indicates that among the students of the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Management Studies & Commerce of the University of Jaffna, while the female students who have secured A grade in ESL are 13%, the male students who have got the same grade are only 5%. (See Section-4 in Appendix –A) While 84% of the female students have passed in ESL, 77% of the male students have passed the same test. (See Section -5 in Appendix-A) It should be noted that the female students who are the most proficient in English do better than some male students in other subjects as well. The researcher's discussion with the students reveals that 85% of the female students who have secured either A grade or B grade in ESL have better performance in other subjects than males. That is gender as a social variable has very limited influence on English language proficiency in the University of Jaffna.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Most of the students in Government schools and university undergraduates lack exposure to English at home and outside. Furthermore what they experience within the ESL classroom is different from what they experience outside the classroom. Therefore real life situations should be simulated in the classroom to use English for communicative purposes. Special attention should be focused on students who are economically and

regionally backward and their needs should be identified and fulfilled. As far as the university students and school students are concerned, their motivation for learning English is purely instrumental. School students aim to pass English in the public examination like the G.C.E.(O.L) Examination for seeking job opportunities and the university undergraduates intend to fulfill the English language proficiency requirements of the university. Thus students should be made to realize the importance of the use of English for integrative purposes.

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## APPENDIX- A

## University of Jaffna

## Details of Students' Performance

## Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce -2nd Semester, 2010

## ESL Examination

## 1.Student Distribution Area wise:

## Faculty of Arts

Total Number of Students: 379

Students from Rural Areas: 60%

Students from Urban Areas: 40%

## 2.Student Distribution Area wise

## Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce

Total Number of Students: 137

Students from Rural Areas: 36%

Students from Urban Areas: 64%

## 3.Students' Performance Area wise

## Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce

Total Number of Students: 516

Students from Rural Areas: 276

Students from Urban Areas: 240

Students from Rural Areas who secured A-Grade in ESL: 3%

Students from Urban Areas who secured A-Grade in ESL:18%

## 4.Students' Performance Gender wise

## Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce

Total Number of Students: 516

Male Students: 188

Female Students: 328

Male students who secured A-Grade in ESL: 5%

Female students who secured A-Grade in ESL: 13%

## 5.Students' Performance Gender wise

## Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce

Total Number of Students: 516

Male Students: 188

Female Students: 328

Male students who passed ESL: 77%

Female students who passed ESL: 84%

Head/ELTC

University of Jaffna, Jaffna