

English Language Proficiency of Sri Lankan Tamil / Sinhala Speaking Students after 13 Years of Studying the Language at School.

SMBM Arshad - MA TESL(R), BA ELT

English Aasan Academy, e-mail - arshad.smbm@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper conducts a surface scrutiny in the teaching of ESL in Sri Lankan schools. Having given an introduction and background of the nature of ESL learning and teaching in Sri Lanka, explained types of tests that are conducted to evaluate learners' level of language competency and how it takes place. The Government of Sri Lanka has actually provided students and teachers, teacher educators with enough facilities and resources. There're issues with examination and the way it is conducted which affects the development of English language. Reasons for poor performance have been taken into study and follows the consequence of expected qualities and qualifications of effective teachers, that lead the study towards the conclusion and recommendation.

Keywords: L2 learners, ESL in Sri Lanka, L2 teachers,

Introduction

Kumara (2019) stated that "The English language reached Sri Lanka with the arrival of the British East India Company in 1796. Since then, it has been in contact with the two prominent local languages of the country- Sinhala and Tamil. As the language of the former colonial power, English was the medium of instruction in government, government-aided and private paid schools for the elites and middle classes". Moreover, Angela et. al. (2019) marked that, "students in other government schools followed the curriculum through the vernacular languages of Sinhala (the language of the majority) or Tamil (the language of the minority)".

Parasangani (2019) Sri Lankan formal English education begins from primary school. There are three key stages in primary English learning. Key stage I (Grade 1 and 2) allows students to learn English in a stress-free environment by playing without doing any desk work. In Key stage II (Grade 3 and 4) students are allowed to do desk work and play. National Institute of Education (2000) outlined that Key stage III is mostly allocated for the desk work. While, Junior secondary students start learning English as a second language from Grade 6 and they expect to sit General Certificate Examination of Ordinary Level (G.C.E. O/L) in Grade 11. National Institute of Education (2007) outlined that, students have to sit for General English paper in General Certificate Examination of Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) in Grade 13. Abeywickrama, (2008) marked by introducing the General English syllabus and a text book in 1998 for GCE (General Certification of Examination) Advanced Level. He further says that it was expected that the students should be able to obtain a reasonable command of the target language in the areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing, thus to acquire language and communicative competency in English that facilitate employment in contexts in which the language is actively used.

In addition to these, Prasangani(2019) stated that A new program of English as a Life Skill was initiated in 2009. Moreover, Prasangani(2019) further emphasized the importance of English and IT for the education of Sri Lanka. Hence, the main objective of the program was to teach English in an understandable way to use it without fear and reluctance.

L2 Tests in Sri Lanka:

I am well-aware of how L2 tests take place in Sri Lanka for I have studied my entire school level curriculum in Sri Lanka itself. National Education Commission (2014) explains, in general, kids in school are tested in different ways by providing students with homework, assignments, School-Based Assessment, term tests and annual tests. Besides, Sri Lankan kids are tested their proficiency level in L2 by Reading and Writing tests in conjunction with grammar and vocabulary only. There are three Public Examinations conducted by the Department of Examinations.

Grade Five scholarship examination: Despite several arguments over the suitability of this test to the kids at the age of eleven, National Education Commission (2014) witnessed that the Department of Examination (DoE) conducts the Grade Five Scholarship Examination annually in August with the twin objectives, to provide bursaries to the economically handicapped bright students to have access to continue education in better schools and, to accommodate bright students in popular schools. According to the Department of Examination (2022), 340,508 kids have sat for this exam in Jan 2021. Kids are tested their learning abilities, First Language, Mathematics and Environmental Studies

GCE Ordinary Level and GCE Advanced Level (A/L): These are two more major tests that are conducted by the department of Education in Sri Lanka namely General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (O level) and General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A level). O level test is the entry qualification to the A level and it is not competitive exam though; on the other hand, A level is a competitive exam

by which only selected, qualified students shall be enrolled into graduation studies in state universities. Though syllabuses, pupil's book, workbook, past question paper and model question papers as well as activities and theories books published by teachers are available performance of student yet remain low. Performance of Candidates (2019) 305,162 school candidates sat for English in GCE O/L whereas 37.64% of the students failed the test while 25.24% of the students scored Simple pass, in other words less than 37.12% of the students have scored from 'C' pass to 'A'.

Dave (2019), Sri Lanka has a longstanding language teaching tradition which has largely avoided the teaching and testing of speaking and listening skills that are equally required for effective interaction.

Sources available for students to learn L2 in the Sri Lankan context and their significance and issues or both.

Raja (2015) remarked that, importance of English today is something that can't be emphasized enough. It turned to be as important as a graduation degree and knowledge of English can be something that links you and your dream. National Institute of Education. (2001) reports, since 2001, Sri Lankan government has adopted the Communicative approach to teaching English in the government schools. Richards, (2001), The communicative approach involves three types of instructional material: text-based, task-based and realia. Text-based teaching refers to the use of textbooks in the classroom for teaching and for various classroom activities. Task-based teaching involves a variety of tasks, such as games, role-plays, simulations and any other form of classroom activity that reinforces target language communication in the classroom. The final category of material, realia refers to the use of authentic teaching material such as newspapers, signs and posters in the target language. Widdowson, H. G. (1996), According to the proponents of communicative teaching, realia is a vital classroom tool in the attempt to teach language 'in use'.

Abeywickrama, (2008), concludes that; "It is notable that the textbook for General English at the GCE Advanced Level does not easily lend itself to individualization of instruction that is not catering to the varying levels of language competence". According to UNICEF (2013); English has been given a significant place in the Sri Lankan education system. However, in rural schools, students suffer due to the lack of physical and human resources. This leads to the problematic condition for mastery of English in rural areas.

Samaranayake (2016) marked that, the English Pupils Textbook series introduced by the Department of Educational Publications (DEP) under the directives of the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Sri Lanka highly focus on

reading, writing, and grammar while listening and speaking skills are slightly tackled and some speaking activities are intended for writing rather than speaking.

Besides all afore-mentioned resources, there are institutions run by government, private or both helping the learning and teaching of English. Especially, when the outbreak of Covid-19 hit Sri Lanka – TV and Radio channels like Nenas TV, Kalvi TV, Guru TV, Channel One, A-Plus, Supreme TV, Vidasa, and so on and so forth were opened by government and private institutions together and individually. Yet the question on the contribution of these TV channels in the teaching of English has been in a need of answer.

Reasons for not demonstrating English language skills as required: this may include theoretical, social, personal and cultural and supporting details.

Students, teachers, parents, school administration and teacher educators as well as researchers have varied opinions about the reasons for the weak performance in English related with theoretical, social, cultural, personality, parents background, learners' environment and so on and so forth. Halik (2020); There are number of factors like theory or teaching strategy, social influence, personal exposure to the language, culture, and so on and so forth that can stand a reason for people study second language easily or don't. He further listed factors such as poor parental support, lack of students' and parents' support, lack of learning/teaching materials at schools, both students' and parents' negative attitude towards learning English, lack of motivation, improper guidance, inadequate interest in learning English, poor learning environment, poor family background and lower-level knowledge of basics in English that contribute to the challenges encountered by English teachers in rural schools.

Prasangani K.S.N (2019), concludes that ESL teaching needs proper training. In Sri Lankan context particularly in rural areas there are few ESL teachers due to the lack of adequate facilities in these areas. Truth be told, other subject teachers have been recruited as ESL teachers without considering their appropriacy and qualifications. This has become a serious issue in learners' progress and motivation, because they may not achieve the required proficiency and they will be demotivated. UNICEF. (2013), Learners do expect friendly, motivating and flexible teachers, hence, in the actual classroom they experience the opposite. Teachers' negative attitudes and harassments towards students demotivate the learners.

Dave (2019), Good teachers with high levels of proficiency are likely to inspire students to become teachers through their positive practices. Gajadeera, S.R. (2002), Dearth of competent teachers is a major reason for ELT failure. NIE (1999), Theoretically, Sri Lankan Government has attempted to adopt communicative teaching practices in the school English classrooms since the late 1980s.

Devapriya (2018), Whatever said, English education is not a problem prefixed by social class and background. At a basic level, there are “poor” children, coming from rural backgrounds, who can speak the language better than their more privileged counterparts from the city.

According to Anoma&Buddhima (2017), Teachers have undergone several training programmes offered by institutes such as the Regional Educational Service Centre (RESC), Zonal Educational Office (ZDO), and Ministry of Education (MoE), where they were not exposed to any research as means of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning English in Sri Lankan school context. Through all of the programmes, the knowledge of ‘outside experts’ has disseminated. L2 learners in Sri Lanka find learning English difficult for they aren’t taught how to use learning materials independently, especially they don’t have at least basic knowledge to refer a monolingual dictionary.

Expected Qualities of an L2 teacher

We all are well aware that teachers are the ones, parents do completely rely on. There’s a saying here in my village that – teachers don’t catch and give the fish but show learners how to do. This ornaments what teacher does and what a learner should expect from a teacher. For the reason that learning is not easy to every learner vary in multiple dimensions, it’s unjust to load all the blame on teachers alone hence the teachers should be in possession of expected qualities and qualifications. Teachers in general hasten students to speak, whereas give enough time when a student tries to think, locate appropriate word and speak his view. Teachers should speak English in a way that attracts learners. Thus, teachers should not compel learners to speak exactly the way teacher does for it becomes parroting but, on the other hand, explain learners how the teacher improved learning speaking, writing, reading, listening, grammar and so on and so forth, in way that could encourage learner to build students own style of speaking writing and using other skills of the language.

Bowman, R. (2011), The classroom teachers should facilitate the three human needs of autonomy (freedom for choices and determine the future), mastery (ability to learn and expertise), and purpose (search for the use of learning to the life). Abeywickrama, (2008), Sri Lankan teachers of English face the daunting task of doing their jobs in an under-resourced system where the ELT infrastructure is very basic. Wijeratne (2015), A teacher or the course work can also have an impact on the desire of the student to learn a L2. Prasangani (2019), Sri Lankan ESL learners expect high quality professional teachers with good skill in reading, writing, speaking and considerable knowledge about grammar. Anoma&Buddhima (2017), Teachers of English being the most important stakeholders in English language teaching, their contribution to these failures are significant. Out of several reasons it is apparent that teachers’ skills, professional knowledge, perceptions and pedagogic practice

all contribute to the failure in ELT. Harsha & Angela (2021), Teachers are absent from the timetabled English class; lessons start late or finish prematurely or teachers and students are ‘off task’ during the lesson. Each of these sources of loss of opportunity will be examined and time loss estimated. For language development letting the learners to learn on their own through trial and error is vital. Rauman & Seefa (2017), In a classroom where learner autonomy is to be maintained the role played by the teacher should be reduced, that is, learners should be given more chance to do the classroom talking than the teacher.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

Comparatively students manage reading and writing but not speaking, listening, appropriate use of grammar nor adequate vocabulary. These are areas where major fall in the learning of Sri Lankan L2 learners. Teachers don’t speak in English while teaching nor do they motivate learners enough to speak English with a standard Sri Lankan or RP accent. It’s a bitter truth that our teachers cannot comprehend a news broadcast in TV or livestreamed on any social media platform in English. Most of the teachers aren’t yet sure of accurate use of tenses in English so are other grammatical components of the language. I personally have heard English teachers from famous schools in Colombo say “*today, we’re going to discuss about preposition; Today we’re going to look at a interesting topic*” in Nenas TV channel dedicated for students’ programmes. Besides, I have seen English teachers post flyers inviting students to “*join with our new class*” I won’t quite blame the government for there are enough facilities and resources with periodic training to English teachers. It is generally believed by the majority of learners, teachers, researchers and scholars that, Sri Lankan discourse like “*discuss about*” and kind of mistakes are accepted to a certain level if the user is a learner or other professionals than English language teachers.

Recommendation

Teachers should turn their attention back to improve one’s personal English proficiency and teachers should further understand that not every learner is same but unique. Students must be motivated to eradicate fear, inhibition, and negative attitude towards learning English.

Government authorities have already introduced activity based, communicative teacher method, yet the authorities concerned, should impart teachers teaching methods, approaches and techniques to choose the best for particular learners.

Classroom should be learner-centred. Teachers should understand that not all students can afford tuition fees, therefore arrange additional classes to teach English and motivate students to learn well. Undoubtedly the curriculum

needs an urgent revision to consider teaching listening, speaking, vocabulary and other essential components.

Parents also play a major role that they support learners and motivate them by providing essential learning materials as well as space to practice English. The most important thing that every parent should understand; motivation that students get from parents is far better than from teachers, counsellors or others. Parents should spend time with their children listening to them and respond to them in the way practical and natural.

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