

ON THE ROLE OF COMPULSORY ENGLISH IN THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA*

By

RATNA WIJETUNGE,

Department of Sinhala, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of English with special reference to compulsory English Education in universities of Sri Lanka and to point out some of its shortcomings. Further I suggest certain remedial procedures which can be considered as effective in making arrangements to improve English education specially in universities.

The curriculum of the university education in Sri Lanka today includes a compulsory English paper which is considered to be a requirement for undergraduate students and they should complete this requirement along with other subjects prescribed for the degree. Those who fail to fulfil this requirement will end up their university career without a degree. Even the passing of English paper may not prove that undergraduates have reached the level of proficiency in English which can be used for their future communication.

The state of English in Sri Lankan society—which is supposed to be multi-racial and multi-lingual—is very significant from the socio-linguistic point of view. It is claimed to be a link language, i.e. it links the people speaking Sinhala, Tamil or any other language of the country. This notion underlies the principle that anybody who is interested in interracial and inter-lingual communication should use English. Further a good knowledge of English is considered to be very important for higher education, administration, getting employments, business, going abroad and so on. Even the owners of private companies and other organizations prefer to hire English educated people for their jobs. English, as we know, is the lingua franca in the world of learning today. A knowledge of English is essential for higher studies anywhere in the world. Therefore, I feel that it is fitting and proper to consider the status of compulsory English in university education and its impact on young undergraduates of the country.

2. English education in the past:

English is inherited from the British and considered to be an alien language to Sri Lankans. The British arrived in Sri Lanka in 1796 and there after English was introduced into Sri Lankan society. Gradually English began to play a dominant role in our society and became a more prestigious language than either Sinhala or Tamil.

The recommendation of English as the medium of secondary school education by the British educational policy makers can be considered as the first step towards creating a new system of education in the country. Thus Sri Lankan students began to learn not only English but all school subjects in English medium. Even after independence from the British the status of English remained undiminished. "After independence, the native languages did begin to recover some of their previous significance, English has, however, continued to be the dominant language in several very important spheres of life, and, certainly, effective action at the higher level in these spheres is still impossible without English. In addition, not inconsiderable numbers of the westernized middle class who occupy the higher levels in these spheres of activity use English in their homes as well as their every-day social dealings among themselves".¹

The status of English remained unchanged even under the free education scheme although the mother tongue of the people became the medium of instruction. However this situation changed when the Government introduced Swabasha as the medium of instruction in education and administration in the country. A certain characteristic features connected with the introduction of English education in Sri Lanka should be pointed out at this juncture. One reason for the British rulers to import English into Sri Lanka was to train natives as translators, interpreters, clerks or preachers and thereby to fill the minor vacancies in the administration. The other reason was to destroy the traditional system of education and cultural heritage of natives. Some natives who studied English so highly have abandoned even their mother tongue.

"Missionary educational policy aimed at destroying the reverence in which the monks were held, and the exclusive employment of Christian teachers in Mission Schools meant that monks could not guide the English-Educated student of Sinhalese, Sanskrit and Pali".² Further a Sri Lankan scholar (1978) points out that 'numbers among the Sinhalese proficient in Greek, or Latin and English, are unable to read a common Sinhalese Ms. . . . , or read the Bible in their mother tongue, or take a deposition on the bench of Gansabawa (village tribunal),'³ Thus the English educated Sri Lankans who were considered to be members of the affluent society made themselves a special class while the poor village folks continued to learn in Swabasha medium schools.

Even today although the medium of education is Swabasha, the private sector is encouraged to open institutions known as international schools and tutories where students can learn all subjects in English medium. They have chance to sit for English medium examinations conducted by foreign educational institutions. They also can enrol in foreign universities to get their academic degrees or get chance to sit for G.C.E. Ordinary and Advanced Level Examinations in English medium in the near future in Sri Lanka. As we all know, the board of management of the North Colombo Medical School selected English as its medium of instruction in the recent past. Thus a limited number of students are studying English as their mother tongue whereas the

majority of children are directed to learn English as their second language. Under these circumstances, one might compel to consider the educational policy regarding the English education is rather vague, unclear and even hypocritical.

3. English as a second language in university education:

The role of English in university education has become a fascinating topic for many educationists. Seminars, conferences and workshops have been organized now and then with the collaboration of foreign organizations with a view to enhancing English knowledge among university undergraduates. Undergraduates coming from rural areas do not possess a sufficient knowledge of English. Since the medium of instruction in schools is being the mother-tongue, students are unable to acquire any English knowledge. They hardly speak any English at their homes. Even today, though we speak about the importance of English, the village school children are not given enough facilities to learn it. Yet the students coming from urban areas have access to learn English and hence some of them acquire a good knowledge of the language. Certain subjects such as medicine, science and technology are taught in English in universities and the students having a good English knowledge in schools may not find it difficult to follow these courses or to get through the compulsory English paper. Yet the youths who have very little English education will suffer due to their inferior knowledge of English. To overcome such difficulties English is taught in universities for a few hours per week without much success. Since the mother tongue is being the medium of instruction in universities, the allocation of a limited number of hours to learn English is not adequate.

The research in English language has been carried out by scholars attached to English departments in different universities in the island and abroad. Consequently, the ELT or English Language Teaching Programme was introduced for the benefit of undergraduates who are engaged in different fields of study. Thus the students are trained to develop listening comprehension and speaking, reading and writing abilities of English. The inventors of this approach have paid special attention to methodology and materials of the foreign language education. The approach to English language teaching in Colombo University is the following:

“Under the de Souza administration, the Colombo arts course included specific purposes for reading, grammar, speech and writing, with the main focus on the first two, . . . speech and writing had a general English base and were peripheral parts of the course. They were taught for general enrichment or diversion”.⁴

Teaching materials are mainly consisted of lessons prepared by the English teaching staff of the University. Methodology used in this approach is the following:

“Under the de Souza administration when the approach was subject-specific, structural and largely grammar translational, the use of L1 was an essential part of the teaching process. Accuracy was considered important, and the handling of error was traditional. In the second phase of arts teaching, where the teaching of reading was not translational, and reading skills and word study were emphasised, the use of L1 diminished”.⁵

A careful study of the procedure of the Colombo University reveals that its aim is to give a primary place for reading and writing abilities and a secondary place for listening and speaking skills.

A recent development of English language is known as ESP-English for Special Purpose—. This approach has been tested in Colombo, Katubedda and Peradeniya universities and considered to be useful. This approach aims at giving students the English language communication skills in relation to their field of study. Thus the teaching materials and methods vary depending upon the areas of study of the students. “The question ‘what kind of methods and materials should be used in ESP?’ has no direct answer. For one thing, there are a great many different kinds of ESP and the methods and materials in use for a particular kind of ESP must be appropriate to that kind. For another any given ESP course might suitably be taught with a wide range of methods and materials”.⁶

ESP procedure presupposes that every teacher should be familiar with course materials and language of the subject in addition to the general English knowledge. “Of course every teacher should be familiar with the materials to be used in class. But in this instance the familiarity must extend also to understanding exactly the ESP intention of each text and exercise. Remember that the course books will have been written, almost certainly, in a collaboration between a teacher of English and a subject specialist”.⁷

A number of scholars while evaluating the ESP approach point out certain problems and solutions that teachers might come across. “Normally the case study will be offered as part of the English course, with the technical instructor helping out as advisor. In classes with students from variety of disciplines, one could consider a variety of technical advisors. It is also possible to incorporate the case study into a technical course, but this requires very elaborate planning and unusually cooperative technical advisor”.⁸ As it is clear from the foregoing discussion, even the ESP approach is rather cumbersome and should be undertaken with utmost care.

4. The process of language learning:

I would like to consider the process of language learning at this juncture before making any suggestion regarding the improvement of English education in Sri Lanka. Language learning is a skill learning. It can be compared with a learning of motor car driving. A knowledge of motor car mechanism is not adequate for someone to be a driver. He should know how to operate the

motor car machinery. Similarly, in learning a language, one should be able to communicate effectively with other speakers. 'Did we learn or were we taught a language?' is an unanswerable question. "Just how extensive a person's skill has become—that is how well he speaks or reads or writes the language in particular situations is itself very difficult to discover precisely, since our methods of testing language ability are little more than rudimentary. As for being able to say whether any specific changes in the course of instruction would have been followed by any specific differences in this performance in the language, here we are still very largely in the dark".⁹

The language that we learn in our childhood is the first language or L1. This is known as parents' language or the mother tongue. Initially, the child acquires two basic skills of the language: listening comprehension and speech. Any normal child will develop these two skills without difficulty. Later, through formal education in schools he acquires other secondary skills of reading and writing. Children will learn two or more languages, simultaneously if they are exposed to them and become bilinguals or polyglots. However, this ability of language learning might decrease when they become adults. The majority of people have one language known as L1, but a few will acquire more than one language.

Any language which is learned after L1 is known as L2 or a foreign language. One should develop all four language skills, namely understanding-speech, speaking, reading and writing, even in learning a foreign language. The purpose of learning a foreign language is to gain a knowledge to communicate with others who speak the language in question. Thus it is important to consider the goal of foreign language education. "We define the goal in learning a foreign language as the ability to use it, understanding its meanings and connotations in terms of target language and culture, and the ability to understand the speech and writing of natives of the target culture in terms of their meanings as well as their great ideas and achievements. This definition excludes the necessity of learning to act like a native but includes the need to understand what a native means when he says he acted in a particular way, and it includes the needs to know what interpretation the native will make when he is told that someone acted in a particular way".¹⁰

In the light of this definition it is essential to consider whether the students following compulsory English courses in universities will achieve the above mentioned goals. We find a number of approaches which have been used for teaching English as a foreign language. The grammar translation method gives an important place to recitation of grammatical rules and vocabulary. The student is asked to use vocabulary of the language according to grammatical rules that he studied. Conversely the direct method introduces foreign language directly through that medium to the student. The association of words and sentences is taught through demonstration, dramatization and pointing etc. These two methods are widely used today in foreign language education. a newly invented method known as linguistic approach insists on the imitation

and memorization of basic conversational sentences as spoken by native speakers. Further, students will be provided with the description of the foreign language, including its phonology, morphology and syntax.

5. Problems and solutions/suggestions:

Foreign languages such as French, German, Japanese, Chinese, Russian and Hindi are taught today in Sri Lanka. English is just like any other foreign language. Then, why should we pay special attention to English? The reason is obvious. It is the demand for English coming from various circles of the society.

One of the major problems connected with English education is the lack of good teaching materials or language courses. We have been advised frequently by foreign experts, who are not familiar with the structure of indigenous languages, national culture or the difficulties of native speakers learning English, in preparing their English materials. These experts are assisted by natives specialized in English language and literature. Their knowledge of native languages is very superficial.

Although the native languages of the country, namely Sinhala and Tamil, are unrelated genealogically, they share common characteristic features with regard to the OV type word order, i.e. verb coming after the object. English on the other hand, includes the VO type word order, i.e. verb occurring before the object. These word order types will yield further dissimilarities between two groups, namely English and native languages. Further, the other structures of language such as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics differ in these two languages. All these differences should be taken into account in preparing teaching materials to teach English for Sri Lankan students. I doubt it very much whether we have good teaching materials to help students in learning English in order to overcome such difficulties. Therefore, I wish to suggest that the materials for English language teaching should be prepared by Sri Lankan teachers having native like command in English in collaboration with native linguists who understand the structure of English and native languages.

When we compare the teaching of English with the teaching of other foreign languages such as German, French or Japanese in Sri Lanka, we find that the standard of achieving language proficiency among students is not proportionate. Students will gain a working knowledge of French, German or Japanese within a period of 6 to 12 months. Not only they can converse in these languages, but can read and write with the help of basic vocabulary and syntactic patterns. Yet after a few years of learning, students of English may not be fortunate to achieve these goals.

The service of well qualified teachers is very important for English education. I am sure that the English teachers in universities are doing a tremendous work inspite of many difficulties and lack of modern teaching equipments

such as TVs, tape recorders, language laboratories and so on. I am aware that some teachers pay even special attention to difficulties that individual students have to face in learning English.

An important factor that should be taken into account is the attitude of natives towards the use of English. According to their opinion, English should be used in speaking and writing without committing any mistake. Consider the following Sinhala phrases: 'Kaduwa demima', 'to use the sword or the English language perfectly' and 'rajā Merima', 'to kill the king or the English language'. These phrases came into Sinhala as a result of the feeling of perfection and purity that we developed towards English.

It is more appropriate to encourage students to talk in English than to discourage or to laugh at them for their mistakes. We should put more emphasis on listening comprehension and speaking than on reading and writing. The self reliance and motivation can be created among students in helping them to talk English even with mistakes, and these mistakes can be corrected at a later stage.

I suppose that the time allotment for English in the university education is not sufficient. More time should be allotted to English learning. One of the devices for students to get familiar with English is to arrange few lectures in English medium as suggested by Mrs. S. Knight in her paper on ESP Learner Problem in Sri Lankan University.¹¹ This could be done initially through a series of mini lectures—approximately 15 minutes each—by members of the staff. These mini lectures could be taped and handed over to the English unit for further teaching purpose.

Most of the university students of English are unaware of the nature of foreign language education. They study English as they study any other prescribed subject for the degree. They take down class notes as usual and keep carefully without studying it until the announcement of the final examination. This notion is erroneous. They should realize that language learning is over learning and skill learning and not a content learning.

My opinion is that English should not be a compulsory subject. It is more appropriate to make students aware of the importance of learning English than making it compulsory. Need filling motive is the prerequisite for foreign language education. Will power is another important factor connected with foreign language education. In view of the deteriorating situation of English knowledge among university students, I suggest that the required period for a degree should be extended by six months and allocate this extra time for English education. If the new entrants to universities could be given intensive English training for extra six months, it will help them to gain a very comprehensive knowledge of English.

In conclusion, I must say that the English education in universities should be changed in order to fulfil the needs of the students and modern society. Further, the students should realize the necessity and importance of learning English, if they want to receive better positions in the competitive job market in Sri Lanka and abroad.

* This paper was read at the monthly seminar of the Faculty of Arts, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, November 07, 1990.

References

1. Kandaiah, Thiru, 1981 Lankan English Schizoglossia, English Worldwide, Julius Groos Verlag, -- Heidelberg, 2:1, 63-64 p.
2. Gooneratne, M., Y 1968, English Literature in Ceylon, 1845-1878, Dehiwala: Tissara Prakāsakayo, 10 p.
3. de Alwis, James, 1878, Memoirs and Desultory Writings, Colombo, 16 p.
4. Fernando, Siromi, 1989 Conference on English Language Teaching in universities, Taking stock and planning for the nineties, Arts Plenary Session, University of Colombo, 10 .
5. *ibid*, 13p.
6. Strevens, Peter, 1985, The Learner; and Teacher of ESP, International Conference on English for Specific Purposes, The Asia Foundation and the British Council, 11 p.
7. *ibid* , 13 p.
8. Huckin, Thomas N., 1985 Achieving Professional Communicative Relevance in a Generalised ESP Class Room, The Asia Foundation and the British Council, 6 p.
9. Halliday, M. A. K., 1964, et al, The linguistics Science and Language Teaching, Longmans: London, 177 p.
10. Lado, Robert, 1964, Language Teaching, A Scientific Approach, McGraw-Hill, Inc USA, 25 p.
11. Knight, S., 1985, ESP Learner Problems in Sri Lankan university Lectures" ,International Conference on English for Specific Purposes, The Asia Foundation and the British Council, 8 p.