



Return to Reading: An appeal to reconsider the pedagogy of Teaching English as a Second Language in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This paper calls for a rethinking about the pedagogy of teaching English in Sri Lanka and suggests an alternate and effectively possible way through getting students to read for pleasure. In answering the question as to how we can bring in an impactful, low-cost solution – as other ways seem difficult in this country at the moment - to improving the teaching/learning of English in Sri Lanka, this paper hopes to show, through research done in this area by Second Language Acquisition theorists, that reading for pleasure especially at young ages, but also among adult learners, is a practically possible and suitable solution to this country, which has a strong public library system in place. Therefore, the focus is mainly on the necessity and the worth of such a programme to university students - the tertiary education sector being where the researcher is mainly involved in - and will bring in the ideas of SLA theorists, mainly Stephen D. Krashen, to advocate a particular pedagogy. Therefore, the paper will limit itself to showing why such a programme is necessary and how it can be put in place, using the work that has been done so far in this field through the English for Fun project, centered at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and taken across the country through the National Library and the public libraries under its purview. The idea is to demonstrate the actual possibilities that arise when educational systems and the national library system work together, to put parallel and even alternate ways of teaching in place in this field that is crying out for innovation.

KEYWORDS: TESL, Reading, Poverty, Pleasure, Libraries

1. Introduction

The 2023 results of first years sitting the final English proficiency written paper¹ at a state university, after two semesters of study with ten hours of English given per week², shows that, of those who were not very proficient in English when they came in (calculated by the fact that they got below 50% in the placement test administered at the beginning of the course) only 1% got marks within the 90 – 100 range for a reading and writing test, 4% got in the 80s, 13% got in the 70s, 22% got in the 60s, 32% got in the 50s and 28% got in the 40s, with 27% failing the written exam. These statistics were not correlated with attendance at the time of gathering this data, so no definite conclusions can be made yet – but one would expect better results to be shown especially when there are 300 hours of class time given to students, the majority of whom did attend classes till maybe the last weeks of the year.³

These statistics are not particularly surprising; that Departments of English language teaching in universities have been struggling to make significant differences in the language ability of students is something that I have both experienced and seen personally. Trying new pedagogies of teaching is not just important but crucial in this field, and the aim of this paper is

to suggest one method that seems possible in Sri Lanka: reading for pleasure. This is an effective way of getting learners exposed to the language, which is necessary if they are to acquire it, as opposed to being taught it in formal situations. This method is particularly suitable for Sri Lanka which has a good library system in place to get books across to any village, and also internet (and a profuse use of smart phones⁴) which makes access to simple reading material possible with no great cost involved. The very specific aim of this paper is to show why an alternative or parallel method for the teaching/learning of English in Sri Lanka should be put in place, and also suggest, in the conclusion, how this can be done, based on the experience of the English for Fun project that the University of Sri Jayewardenepura has put in place with the help of the National Library of Sri Lanka.

1.1 The need for change: have we even got the name of this process correct?

Perhaps Sri Lanka termed English as a Second Language here, and the process of teaching it, TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) on the basis that "SLA refers to the process of learning another language after the native language has been learnt" (Gass and Selinker, 1994). But the relevance ends there.

¹ The paper carried 60 marks (which is calculated up to 100 for the statistics here), with 40 given for two speaking tests. I left speech out of the calculations entirely as this paper deals with making a case for reading, for, though that would also affect the confidence one should have for speech, that is not the main concern here.

² This arguably is the highest number of hours given per week for basic English in any state university in Sri Lanka.

³ This fact was verified by teachers of the course.

⁴ Gunawardene, Nalaka. 2015. "Was #PresPollSL Sri Lanka's First Cyber Election?" Groundviews. <https://groundviews.org/2015/01/13/was-prespollsl-2015-sri-lankas-first-cyber-election/>

What they have given as examples for second language situations are German speakers learning Japanese in Japan or Punjabi speakers learning English in the United Kingdom which they define as “the learning of a nonnative language in the environment in which that language is spoken” (Ibid). As examples of foreign language situations, they give French speakers learning English in France or Spanish speakers learning French in Spain, Argentina, or Mexico, where “learning of a nonnative language in the environment of one’s native language” (Ibid), is what happens. In a second language situation, people are naturally exposed to the language situations hearing it in the mass media, as language instruction and official usages and in a foreign language situation, that language does not affect the daily life of the citizen (Broughton et al., 1978)⁵. This alone is sufficient to realize what the teaching of English should be called in Sri Lanka.

Why this nominal concern is raised here is because how we look at something influences the way we act, for example, we must factor in the role a language has in society especially when designing pedagogy with regard to it and so on (Broughton et al., 1978). If English is called a second language in Sri Lanka, we miss the fact that for many, this is not an easily accessible language especially if there is no money to spend on it; if we teach accordingly, we are already on the wrong path.

1.2. Learning vs Acquisition

To make the point that this paper wishes to make, we need to speak about the difference between language learning and language acquisition, though some theorists like Rod Ellis do not admit of such a divide, saying it is simply language acquisition in natural (untutored) or classroom (tutored) settings (Ellis, 1985). Krashen defines language acquisition as something that happens subconsciously, where learners “are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication”, and language learning as gathering “conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them” (1982). The way he refers to second language acquisition is, as “a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop their ability in their first language” (1982). I will be using these terms the way Krashen has utilized them, to make the point that pleasurable reading is one of the best ways in which anyone can acquire competence in any language.

1.3. The power of reading in language acquisition

Reading is beneficial not only for second language acquisition but first language development too. Krashen has said, with regard to first language development, tested on reading, vocabulary, writing and grammar, that “when free reading and direct (traditional) instruction are compared directly, free reading

⁵ They go immediately to say, however, that a foreign language doesn’t play a role in socio-economic advancement, which is not the case in Sri Lanka, and this is an example of the conundrum we find ourselves in.

is as good or better, and in long term studies, free reading is a consistent winner" (2004). He goes as far as to say that "there is abundant evidence that literacy development can occur without formal instruction. Moreover, this evidence strongly suggests that reading is potent enough to do this entire job alone" (2004). Second language acquisition also is similar in these ways, Krashen feels (2004). Reading in the first language helps with reading in the second language, and if there is reading matter in the second language provided while teaching happens in the first language, those can "teach English as well as or better than programs in which children are taught in English all day" (Krashen, 2004), a point particularly interesting to Sri Lanka where there is talk, on and off, of the necessity to change the medium of instruction in schools to English.

1.4. The English for Fun Project

Trying to give access to English through storytelling, poems, rhymes and songs has already been started as a joint project between the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the National Library of Sri Lanka. In 2022, a digital platform was created in the library webpage of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura that had material from pre-school level to the undergraduate, with genres added and subtracted according to suitability at each level. The web page carried the audio tracks of the material with the text being translated into both Sinhala and English at

nursery and primary levels⁶. The National Library accepted the proposal to distribute the material to chosen public libraries which had the digital capacity to make children come and access this material free of charge – English Language Acquisition Centres are what they can be called if a name had been necessary – and these are spread throughout the island. This chance was given to twelve nurseries under the Colombo Municipal Council as well, with teachers trained for this at a session at the Colombo Public Library. Once a month, the on-site reading aspect of this project is carried on in the Colombo Public Library, where reading is made fun and exciting by readers, and children enjoy themselves while they also learn at least a few words in English and being comfortable within the framework of this language. The National Library has also joined the English for Fun project by having zoom sessions where a story is read in English and translated into Sinhala and Tamil immediately by the reader and a staff member of the library. Since the resource people work free of charge, all these happen without any additional cost to the government. Therefore, the suggestions made in this paper are done with at least a year's experience of having seen how cost-effective ways of teaching English can be put in place if we only we are willing to challenge and change existing systems, or, even just work on adding value to what already exists and utilizing resources that may have been under-utilized before.

⁶ Hopefully all levels will be translated soon. The site will be added with more and more material as time goes on, and is even now in the process of uploading stories for the upper school and undergraduate levels.

2. Methodology

This is a paper that will advocate for a particular change in the field of English language teaching and thereby will limit itself to explaining why and how a particular pedagogy can be brought to Sri Lankan schools and universities. I ask the question “How can we bring in an impactful, low-cost solution to improving the learning of English in Sri Lanka?” and answer it by suggesting reading for pleasure as an alternative pedagogy for learning a second language. The aim of this paper is to show, through secondary material, how reading has been seen as being effective in improving language competence in other areas of the world, as it is necessary to have research backing whatever new methods are suggested anywhere. It will give evidence from leading theorists in the field of Second Language Acquisition to bolster the arguments made, using Stephan D. Krashen’s insights mainly, as he is arguably one of the best theorists of SLA at present and has always argued a case for reading, the last one being as recent as October 2023, when he spoke at a TESOL seminar⁷.

It will also deal with why we need to think of cost-effective methods at this time, as not just the state but also the people themselves are strapped for funding. What is suggested are ways of networking among already existing institutions like the public library system and the university system, to show how we have the resources needed in Sri Lanka for change, and very often only need to connect with each other

to provide better and more effective service to people very much in need of it. Therefore, what this paper will attempt to do is call for making reading literature an essential part of any language course for children or adults where they have a chance of acquiring this language in a low-anxiety, pleasure-filled environment, after giving justification as to why this method is something we should think seriously about.

3. Why the acquisition of language needs to be looked at seriously

Philosophers like Humboldt (1836) had said that “one cannot really teach language but can only present the conditions under which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way” (Chomsky, 1965). Chomsky posited a language acquisition device in the brain and the ability for humans to acquire competence in the language they are exposed to, by the ability of that device to come up with a universal grammar that is applicable to any language (Chomsky, 1964). This device is believed to work best at childhood (Penfield and Roberts, 1959, Eric Lenneberg, 1967), Lenneberg especially believing that language development correlated with the motor development of a child (1969). He amassed evidence in support of the view that first language (L1) acquisition is a biologically constrained process, with a specific time table ending at puberty (Hakuta, 2001). That childhood alone is where language acquisition takes place has been challenged by later theorists like Hakuta who has worked on the language learning

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lk0N1SMesSQ>

abilities of groups like those of adult immigrants. He has shown that a steep drop after puberty in the ability to acquire a language is not proven by evidence (1991) though he does say that it is an ability that gradually declines with time (Op. Cit. 204). Krashen too disagrees with the view that acquisition ceases to matter as people grow older, saying “the ability to “pick up” languages does not disappear at puberty” (1982). This is one of the main reasons that this paper calls for more chances for acquisition to be given to adult university students, through the activity of reading.

3.1. What reading offers

3.1.1 Input

The Language Acquisition Device needs input to get to work on making anyone understand and produce language. Input is defined as “what we read and hear” (Krashen, 1982) and, according to him, the Input Hypothesis “may be the single most important concept in second language acquisition theory today” (1982). This hypothesis, Krashen says, goes against what is normally accepted in second and foreign language teaching, where we believe that we develop fluency by first learning the structures and then practicing them in communication” (Krashen, 1982). “The input hypothesis says the opposite. It says we acquire by “going for meaning” first, and as a result, we acquire structure!” (Ibid). Children will especially benefit by this, which is the reason why the English for Fun projects targets preschool children first – but adults too, need

input if their language acquisition device is to even have a chance to forming some universal grammar concepts with regard to a second language. This is where reading comes in.

Nevertheless simply exposing learners to a language is not enough. It has to be, above all, first, comprehensible, or it will be just noise; it has to be interesting or relevant; does not have to be grammatically sequenced; and must be available in sufficient quantity for the learner to access (Krashen, 1982). Comprehensibility can be attempted by letting students have graded readers if they are in a second language environment. For input to be compelling Krashen suggests that it has to be a little bit above the learner’s current level of language competence (which he symbolizes as *i*. Therefore, input has to be at the *i + 1* level). Input does not have to be only at *i + 1* level though; what he believes is that “[w]hen communication is successful. When the input is understood and there is enough of it, *i + 1* will be provided automatically” (1982). It is important to make the focus, the message, not the form, so that the input “is so interesting and relevant that the acquirer may even “forget” that the message is encoded in a foreign language” (Krashen, 1982). He also says that input does not need to be grammatically ordered and that what is needed is comprehensibility, where meaning is successfully negotiated (1982). As can be seen, all these conditions are met in books suitable for the language level of the reader.

So what is crucial in getting young people to read – and they still do that, according to

Krashen, contrary to popular belief (2013) - is to give them access to comprehensible and interesting books, with no pressure on being tested on what they read, in a relaxed and pleasant environment (Ibid).

3.1.2. Stress free environment

The insistence on a stress-free environment brings us squarely into the arena of the extra-linguistic elements that affect language acquisition, with theorists like Lozanov coming up with methods like Suggestopedia (Larsen Freeman, 2000) where anxiety factors are kept to a minimum, just for this purpose. This aspect relates to the Affective Filter Hypothesis of Krashen's which "captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters" (Krashen, 1982). Of the three variables of motivation, confidence and anxiety that Krashen speaks about, motivation is a given in Sri Lanka, as the importance of learning English has probably been told to children from their childhood, such awe do we have of it, and feel we need it both in the instrumental and integrative⁸ sense. The two latter variables are linked in the sense that, lesser the anxiety, more the confidence – and both these things can be served well through reading, a quiet activity that does not involve judgement, which lowers the anxiety filter which in turn allows more input to come in (Krashen, 1982).

Reading in any case is an activity, if carried on for pleasure, involves no production or is related to evaluation, both these being connected to stressing out learners. Getting students to speak before they are ready (Krashen, 1982), and error correction, which Krashen has said "has little or no effect on subconscious acquisition, but it is thought to be useful for conscious learning" (Krashen, 1982) both put up the filter connected to anxiety and does not help the learner.

3.3. Evidence exists for the effectiveness of reading for language learning

Work on what reading did to adults had been done by Pitts (1986) who followed students called "intelligent but under prepared" at college level, who were read works by writers like Twain, Salinger, Poe, and Thurber. They were read to one hour per week in a course which lasted 13 weeks, where discussion also followed the reading. Krashen says that "Pitts reported that the class that was read to checked out more books and better books from the reading lab than did students in other basic skills classes. In addition, the class that was read to did better on the final essay" (Krashen, 2004).

Krashen says that those who have a large vocabulary and good writing skills do not normally claim to have got them through formal study. He shows a study done by Smith and Supanich (1984) who tested 456 company presidents and found that they scored significantly more on vocabulary tests, than a

⁸ Taken at the level of social class.

comparison group of adults did. They were asked what they had done to increase their word power since leaving school, and if they, in fact, had done anything at all. 54.5% said they had made that extra effort. Half of that mentioned that they had done it through reading. Only 14% (3% of the total group) mentioned the use of vocabulary books (Krashen, 2004).

Much work has been done on the effectiveness of reading for children to acquire language. Krashen gives evidence from the schools which had run reading programmes for first language acquisition, with students who underwent more traditional programmes by which he meant those that “emphasized assigned reading and direct instruction in grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and spelling” (Ibid) and showed that the former students were consistently more effective than the latter (51 out of 54 comparisons, actually, 94%) (Krashen, 2004). Krashen considers the reading option better, even if the results were equal, because it would develop the general knowledge of the student and can beat classroom instruction in being more pleasant and appealing (Op.Cit 3). There is even evidence from Sri Lanka to support this pedagogy. Warwick B. Elley who has done much practical research in Third World countries did his "Books in Schools" Programme in Sri Lanka from 1995-1996 with the National Institute of Education, Sri Lanka. They gave 100 books per school (donated by Wendy Pye, Ltd, New Zealand) in 20 schools at Years 4 and 5. The book reading was for just 15 minutes a day and the teachers were trained

in the shared reading method and techniques of story reading in workshops that ran for four days. They could run this only for only five months but in an 1996 article, Elley could say that after a long break caused by the Civil War, language test showed that the pupils in the project had progressed in reading at three times the rate of the pupils who were working on the national textbooks in English. There were similar gains in writing, listening and improvements in attitudes to reading (Elley, 1996)

Krashen has also spoken of Elley’s work in Singapore, South Africa and Sri Lanka, saying that it has shown that "in every case the readers outperformed those in comparison classes, and the gap widened with each year of reading" (Krashen, 2004).

It is due to reasons like these that the whole EFF project starts with children, but even within universities, even with a late start, perhaps we could look at reading as a means of getting students more exposed to the language, especially since language competence alone is not what is given with this kind of exposure.

3.4. How reading affects personality

Reading can also produce good thinkers, very much needed in Sri Lanka now. Though is not easy to find direct evidence of cognitive development that occurs through reading (Krashen, 2004) Krashen does say that “There is little doubt that reading influences cognitive development” (Ibid). He gives a study by Simonton in 1988 which concluded that “omnivorous reading in childhood and

adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success" (Krashen, 2004) and the instance of Emery and Csikszentmihalyi (1982) comparing 15 college professors who had come from blue collar backgrounds, and 15 other men who could not get out of the blue collar context they were born in and found out that "the future professors lived in a much more print-rich environment and did far more reading when they were young" (Krashen, 2004) making him conclude that "Good thinkers, however they are defined, read a great deal and have read a great deal" (Ibid). He has pointed out that many eminent people are testament to the fact of how much reading has helped them to become what they are. He cites work by Simonton (1988) who had summarized a number of studies of the development of creativity and concluded that "omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success" (Krashen, 2014).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Make reading fun

The Sri Lankan system of education tends to be examination based, and the reading of books for fun, or even for acquiring knowledge, is generally not found in a very note-based system, whether it be primary, secondary or even tertiary education. With regard to the last level mentioned, where academic reading is very necessary, it is reading for pleasure that will get students there (Krashen, 2013). To

make adult students read anything voluntarily, it has to have some value first as entertainment for them; what learners might pick may be what is called 'light reading', something promoted by Krashen to whom that means comic books, teen romances, and magazines and so on. "I suspect that light reading is the way nearly all of us learned to read," he says (2004), and is the variety "that schools pretend does not exist, and a kind of reading that many children, for economic or ideological reasons, are deprived of" (Ibid).

What we need to do in universities is to see that students know where to find reading material which might prove interesting to them, no matter what we as teachers think about those texts, as long as they carry a good standard of writing.

4.2. Give students time to read

Time is another factor needed for this activity, and often, in countries like Sri Lanka, where the pressure to perform well at exams is very high and time reading story books might easily be considered "wasted", this might be the most difficult to find⁹. If reading has not been encouraged at younger ages it will not be easy to instill this habit in adults, but it will be possible for English proficiency classes like the ones run by Departments of English Language Teaching to ask that students read anything they like – maybe once a week – and come and speak about it in class and so on, so that this reading

⁹ The situation is not very different at least with regard to testing, in the USA too, if we are to believe Krashen who takes a strong stand against standardized testing in the USA and says it's a waste of money and time (Krashen 2013, 26-27). He asks that both be invested in getting children books to read, and the time to do so.

is also considered part of their learning, and the time spent on reading for fun will not be considered a “waste” when judged against the time spent in “studying”.

For children, sustained silent reading programmes in school might be a good solution for this time problem, Krashen has shown, saying that those who have gone through these “read more on their own than those who have not, both immediately after the program ends. . . as well as years later. There is also strong evidence that students really use SSR time for reading” (Krashen, 2004). Perhaps, an ESL classroom can also provide time for this, though the normal two to four hours a week that is allocated for English teaching in the arts faculties of universities would make it very hard for this to be implemented, especially since it goes against what is taken as good traditional teaching where the teacher takes centre-stage normally, in Sri Lanka. But given the availability of good literature on the internet, and the ubiquitousness of smartphone, students can indeed be encouraged to do some silent reading in class at least for fifteen minutes, so that they can continue to read afterwards if they so wish. The start might have to be encouraged within the system though.

4.3. Get reading programmes in to supplement traditional teaching

This is not a call to do away with traditional teaching altogether. Though Krashen has said that for language development in the first language, “the case against direct instruction is overwhelming” (2004), and that “there is

abundant evidence that literacy development can occur without formal instruction. . . [and that there is evidence that] strongly suggests that reading is potent enough to do this entire job alone” (2004), the situation changes slightly when it comes to second language acquisition, and for those who have come out of childhood, where the classroom “seems to be of great benefit” (Krashen, 1975). A series of studies done by him and others in the 1970s have shown him, he says, what many language teachers already knew: that “for adults, formal instruction is in general of more benefit for second language learning than is exposure to and use of the second language in “natural” situations” (Krashen, 1975). However, he adds that

Our responsibility goes beyond the language classroom. Indeed. . . our task is to provide the students with the tools they need to continue improving without us. We need to provide enough input so that they can gain the linguistic competence necessary to begin to take advantage of the of the informal environment, the outside world” (1982).

4.4. Get libraries involved

Krashen has shown how libraries, and the networking between libraries and schools (Krashen, 2014) have helped students from economically weak backgrounds have access to books and be able to perform well in reading tests (Krashen 2011, 2013, 2014). Given the cost of books and the unavailability of especially readers in English for the majority of Sri Lankans, the best solution is to link the

strong national public library system we have in this country with the education system, like what we have been doing in the English for Fun project; or linking the main library of universities very closely with the Departments of English Language Teaching like we have done at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura where there is a special room, named the English Learning Zone, stacked with graded readers and simple fiction books for the students to peruse anytime. Through close contact with the National Library System, we can actually get fiction across to students waiting to enter university; or through the University Grants Commission, we can give a reading list of simple English books to be read before they enter university. There are enough donor agencies willing to supply books to the public library system; even if not, we can suggest literature that is freely available online, or pass them PDF copies of books with permission from the writers and publishers.

Broughton et al say, reading “is clearly the easiest way of bringing the foreign learner into sustained contact with a substantial body of English”, and that “there is no reason why extensive reading should not form a part of regular EFL teaching from the most elementary stages” (1978). We need to do this. In a second language situation, “there will be chances for learners to access the language being learnt outside the classroom situation”, Gass and Selinker have said (1994); if we have called the process of what we do in Sri Lanka TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), let us at least try to make it deserve its name by

asking for a movement towards making this language more accessible to all Sri Lankans by encouraging reading in English from a very young age.

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