

***Swings of the Pendulum: A Survey of Government - ESL
Textbook Writing in Sri Lanka***

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1. BACKGROUND

In 200 years of ELT, locally published ESL textbooks have a relatively short history. The story of ESL textbook writing in Sri Lanka begins with the Education Amendment Act of 1951, when the teaching of English was made compulsory in all schools from grade 3 upwards. This ended the duality between 'English' schools and 'vernacular' schools which existed during British rule. The gradual change in the medium of instruction from English to Sinhala and Tamil changed the status of English from an exclusive medium of instruction in a few select schools, to a common second language taught on a mass national scale to all learners. As Tongue (1985) points out, in the mid 20th century this was a phenomenon which was not only new but also extremely ambitious, so much so, that few countries were able to face up to the challenge and grapple with it successfully. Needless to say, the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka was unprepared to meet the enormity of the challenge. The ensuing period saw the emergence of several problems (Cumararatunga, 1982). Among them, the absence of clearly defined objectives, the lack of suitable text books and a relevant methodology for teaching a second language, and no national guidelines for schools to follow. These problems were exacerbated with the new demand for English and the influx of rural students into former urban 'English' schools, creating problems of classroom heterogeneity resulting in all round frustration and declining standards.

For purposes of discussion we have divided this survey into three phases, namely, the key events in textbook writing from 1960-1980, 1980-1995, and the challenge of the 21st century.

**2. KEY EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF TEXTBOOK WRITING
1960-1980**

By 1960 the teaching of English had become a national issue. A Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English in Ceylon Schools (the S.F.de Silva Commission) was appointed to resolve some of the problems. Their report stated that, "There is no series of English textbooks in Ceylon completely satisfactory for use as readers in the primary and post-primary classes". The most popular books at this time were, *An English Course for Ceylon* (Macmillan) and the *Oxford English Course for Ceylon* (1953).

In 1960, a special English Unit was set up in the Ministry of Education to sort out some of the issues related to the teaching of ESL. This helped to accelerate the pace of development. The English Unit selected the Graded Structural-Oral-Situational Approach to guide the preparation of textbooks. According to the Lanerolle Commission Report of 1973, this was the "...latest most popular and most promising of the known methods of teaching foreign languages..." (p.58). They identified the following features as being basic concepts of the method:

- Oral competence should be a prerequisite for development of other skills
 - Grammatical structures should be taught without reference to rules
 - In the initial stages, language should be reduced to patterns
 - Features of sentence structure should be made automatic through pattern practice
- Presentation of new language should be through situations

In 1963 the English Unit prepared a "Syllabus and scheme of work in English as a second language" which was based on Hornby's *the Teaching of Structural Words and Sentence Patterns* (1961). However, the Lanerolle Commission Report described this scheme as being, "unrealistic and difficult to implement"(1973:60). Around this time the Ministry realized the need for locally produced ESL materials in order to implement its second language policy. It appointed a panel of local writers to prepare the first set of ESL textbooks for Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, they made no attempt to study the current ESL situation and the working of the 1963 scheme. Instead its basic ideas continued to guide the new series called *An English Course*. These books were published between 1965 and '70 along with their course guides. They showed an extreme swing of the pendulum in the direction of structuralism.

A typical lesson opens with section a) 'Language Practice' which contained a series of often unrelated sentences where the new structure is presented using contrived situations. This is followed by oral practice using drills, substitution-tables, dialogues, etc. Sections b) and c) contained reading passages followed by different types of questions to check comprehension and finally section d) had 'Language exercise to reinforce the structure through writing'

Both materials and method emphasized the tenants of structuralism such as, the avoidance of mistakes, limited mother tongue use and teacher control. There was little scope for independent effort and experience with the living language. De Souza writing in 1969 said the materials were, "seriously defective" and the English "dehydrated", he concluded that "...our English programme on which so much time, money and effort is spent is a total failure". In 1981, the Halpe Commission Repot stated that the "present core texts

are dull" (p.12). In response to a questionnaire given by the Lanerolle Commission, teachers complained of the inability to "get results" from the suggested methods, where the same structures have to be repeated day after day, year after year. However, the Commission did say that, "With all their imperfections Ministry textbooks do make an attempt at grading and relating lessons to the pupil's environment. Exercises show a variety which is lacking in most of the textbooks previously used" (1973:79).

Writing a decade later, Mosback concluded, "It is now generally acknowledged that this course and the methods associated with it do not result even in a satisfactory level of reading ability, let alone in an ability to use English effectively in daily life, which is seen as an increasingly pressing need in Sri Lanka" (1984:179). The structural approach which had given rise to so much expectation did not stand the test of classroom implementation. It produced a set of learners unable to communicate in English thereby limiting their opportunity to secure employment in the emerging private sector. This resulted in a deep resentment towards English and its speakers and was a contributory cause for the social upheavals of the 1970s '80s. Change was overdue but it took time in coming.

3. KEY EVENTS 1980-1995

The end of the previous decade saw political change which had strong economic repercussions. Sri Lanka moved towards an open economy, eventuating in the opening up of trade and commerce, the setting up of free trade zones, new industries and employment opportunities at home and abroad. These changes convinced people of the importance of English as a tool for economic progress.

The current socio-economic developments in Sri Lanka synchronized with recent trends in the west about how languages are learned, and the concept of learner needs. This resulted in new approaches to language teaching and learning such as, the communicative approach and English for Specific Purposes. These ideas heralded change in both methods and materials and influenced Sri Lanka as well. Therefore, the 1980s saw the gradual withdrawal of the existing structural course and its replacement with three new series of textbooks- English for Me, English Every Day and An Integrated Course in English for A- Level.

Let us briefly examine these three series.

4. ENGLISH FOR ME

ESL at primary school was one of the most neglected areas of the school curriculum. Though theoretically compulsory it was rarely taught especially in rural areas due to the lack of teachers.

In 1980 the Ministry initiated a project with assistance from UNESCO and Norway to upgrade English at primary level by preparing a new set of learning materials and a teaching procedure that would capture the attention of young learners. English for Me was the outcome of this project. The package consisted of a Pupil Text, Workbook, a set of recorded cassettes and a Teacher's Guide. This series came into use in 1985 after twenty years of structuralism.

The pupil text contained dialogues built around communicative situations which were selected for their emotional, motivational and interactional qualities rather than for their language value.

The workbook had activities for reading and writing. The cassettes were intended for listening and pronunciation practice.

The teacher's guide explained the teaching procedure and gave suggestions for individualizing instruction. The teaching procedure emphasized a stress free child centered classroom with a less dominant teacher and greater tolerance of error. Children were encouraged to work in groups and use the mother tongue if they wished. The introduction of the new materials was accompanied by an extensive teacher training programme where 200 teacher educators and 8,000 teachers were given a materials specific training (Cumaranatunga, 1986).

3.2 *English Every Day*

In 1982, a parallel project was initiated, with British Council assistance, to rewrite the junior secondary materials, to bring them in line with the then popular communicative approach and to serve the new national need for English as a language of everyday communication in social and job oriented situations.

The actual writing of the materials was preceded by a two year preparatory period called "EQUIP"- the English Quality Improvement Programme, where over 2,500 teachers were introduced to the principles of communicative methodology, and initiated in the use of communicative activities through the use of a manual called "Talk English". Gerald Mosback, who was the British Council consultant attached to this project says that this "sampling period" was invaluable for it provided the nucleus from which the new course English Every Day (grades 7 to 11) developed (1990).

The learning package (1985)

The materials consisted of a textbook, teacher's guide and a set of cassettes. Each unit of the textbook had eight sections which provide an insight into its underlying principles.

They are:-

- Role play
- Finding out
- Word study\
- Listening
- Grammar in action
- Writing
- Learning together
- Every day conversations

As for the teachers' guide, beside describing the teaching procedure, it provided instructions on conducting group work, error correction strategies, questioning techniques, classroom language, and the teacher's role during communication activities.

3.3. E.S.L. at A- Level

Although the structural English course contained textbooks for grades 12 & 13 they were hardly used because as the Halpe Commission Report mentions, "By all accounts these courses usually degenerate into a farce because of lack of student motivation and the pressure of work in other subjects" (1981). Unfortunately, when these same students enter the University, their poor knowledge of English acts as a barrier to their academic progress and employment opportunities.

In order to resolve this dilemma the English Unit of the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) initiated a project with assistance from the Fulbright Foundation to prepare a new set of skill based learning materials for A-Level. The outcome of this project was "An Integrated Course in English for A-Level" (1986).

These materials had the following features-

- No themes or teaching units
- Materials were presented as activities under the four skills giving flexibility for teachers to individualize instruction

- Incorporated new ideas on process writing, and the sub-skills of reading
- Contained varying levels of activities that were both manipulative and creative.

The three sets of materials written in the 1980s marked a definite swing of the pendulum from structuralism to a more communicative orientation..

Let us briefly compare their features:

- The old textbook was a single stereotype course from grades 3 through 13 controlled by structure and pattern practice drills; while the new textbooks were three separate courses for primary, secondary and senior secondary, each providing a style and direction of its own. All three fell into the broad definition of communicative. The primary materials took its inspiration from the humanitarian movement of the late '70s and early '80s. The materials were seen not so much as 'content' but as an 'action resource' (Candlin and Breen, 1979) engaging the learner in the task of communication. Like Prabhu's Bangalore project these materials too had no predetermined syllabus. They fitted Tomlinson's description of a syllabus which, "develops organically from the materials" (1998:147). The secondary materials on the other hand had a delineated syllabus and relied on language acquisition through group work and communication activities. The A- Level course was skill based emphasizing the developmental nature of reading and writing by identifying their sub- skills and designing activities to develop them.
- While the former materials stressed reading comprehension and accuracy through language drills, the new materials (especially EFM & EED) gave prominence to developing fluency through role play, communication activities, games and songs.
- The old series was based on the traditional, lockstep classroom intended for whole class or individual learning. The new materials were based on new classroom arrangements meant for activity methods and group work.
- There was a welcome change in the role of the teacher as well - from a 'control freak' to a facilitator who moves around and creates a stress free, supportive, classroom environment.

4. FALLING OUT OF FAVOUR

After twenty years of structuralism, the new materials were greeted with much enthusiasm and created a revival in English language teaching, especially in teaching speech.

Unfortunately, however, this revival was confined to the primary and secondary classes. English at A-Level continued to be a neglected area of the school curriculum. The new materials simply gathered dust due to lack of student motivation and indifference on the part of the authorities.

If English at A-Level had been given the emphasis it deserved both the country in general and the students in particular would have benefited in numerous ways. Students would have been better prepared to handle English medium instruction at the universities, they could have enriched their Sinhala and Tamil medium lectures through wider reading in English, and they could have enhanced their employability by developing their English communication skills.

By the mid '90s , however , all three courses had fallen out of favour. Let us examine some of the underlying factors.

- In the case of "English for ME", as it often happens, many of the early principles of the materials got eroded in implementation. Although the Pupil Text was intended for speaking and role play it soon became a reader which could be completed in a very short time. The philosophy behind "English for Me" was to inspire and motivate the rural child, it was, therefore, far too simplistic for urban learners.
- Moreover, critics could not come to terms with the procedural syllabus, with its absence of systematic gradation and grammar teaching.
- In assessing the implementation of "English Every Day" Nagasunderam says that the problems encountered were not due to flaws in the materials per se, but in the teachers' lack of understanding of the communicative principles underlying the materials (1996).

However, Pollard, who reported on the Secondary Education Development Project of 1996 is of the view that the "English Every Day" series reflects a far too extreme swing of the pendulum in the direction of communicative philosophy, "unrealistically unstructured approach" which fails to give adequate emphasis to the teaching and learning of basic grammar. He suggests a more balanced curriculum, "in which the teaching and learning of basic grammar can be integrated successfully into a communicative system" (1996:5).

- The view that texts were more appropriate for stronger students rather than weaker students was also a cause for concern, especially in view of Pollard's statement that the materials contained, "a disproportionate amount of foreign content"(11).

- Our own view is that the materials placed a heavy onus on the teacher. Every unit contained eight sections each anticipated a different skill on the part of the teacher. Teachers who themselves had been nurtured through a Behavioral-structural approach found the shift from structuralism to a communicative approach far too exacting.
- By the latter half of the 1990s there was a general consensus that the current materials needed revision. The new requirements appeared to be for textbooks that would strike a balance between the practice of grammar and the communicative use of language; while at the same time selecting and arranging curriculum materials in such a way that it meets the needs of both stronger and weaker learners.

5. MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Towards the end of the 20th century socio-economic forces led to a strong demand for skills in Information Technology and English communication. The Educational Reforms of 1997 were an attempt to meet these claims. A key feature of these reforms was to strengthen the teaching of English at all levels (Raheem and Devendra, 2007). Not only were new textbooks published for primary, secondary and A-Level classes, the door was opened for the reintroduction of English medium instruction as well.

We will now examine the three sets of textbooks produced at the end of the century. By this time the task of curriculum revision and textbook writing came under the purview of the National Institute of Education (NIE).

5.1 *The New Secondary Series*

- The first set of new materials to be published was the Secondary series "The world Through English" grades 6 through 11. The curriculum team that worked on this project in 1996 critically examined the existing secondary series "English Every Day" and sought feedback from a variety of sources such as teachers, educators and trainees. At the end of these endeavors they came to the conclusion that, "the communicative approach has not achieved as much as had been hoped for at the time of its introduction" (Pollard, 1996:10). What was needed was to "strike a more realistic balance between the communicative approach and more traditional methods" (ibid). Once again the time was ripe for a swing of the pendulum. This time however, it swung back to a mid position combing the direct teaching of grammar with features of communicative language teaching such as role play, communication activities and

conversational language.

- "The World through English "comprised pupil text, workbook and Teachers's Guide. The materials followed a thematic approach, using broad themes such as Health, Environment, Information Teachnology, etc., through which to present related language. The materials were also a trend-setter in that, for the first time, some units used the content of Science in order to teach language. The Teacher's Guide comments that the, "selection of themes and the organization of content is based on the principle that learning is a thinking process. The themes stimulate children to think in new ways about their own experience and develop positive attitudes and healthy values to life."(Grade 6:2). Value education is thus a feature of these materials (Johnson, 1989). Each theme identifies the grammatical items and language functions pertaining to that theme at the beginning of the unit and then picks them up at the end for practice through activities and clarification through grammatical explanation."World Through English" presented a clear pattern of year to year gradation through its 'multi- strand' syllabus (Ur, 1996; 178) which included themes, grammatical items, language functions and vocabulary. It also provided a useful organizational structure which gave a clear sense of direction to both teachers and students.

The materials, however, fell out of favor in a relatively short period. Although no reasons were given for this, the initial first book for grade 6 was withdrawn in 2004, and replaced by a new book called "A Journey through English".

Pollard, in describing the rationale behind the "World through English "series says that it tries "to structure and organize curriculum content in such a way that it caters to two levels of language ability and performance." In actual implementation, however , with the exception of the reading comprehension questions, the rest of the materials do not demonstrate this two level approach. The inability to deal with the basic issue of classroom heterogeneity may have been a cause for its limited success.

5.2 *General English at A- Level*

Moving on senior secondary level, one of the remarkable features of the 1997 reforms was the emphasis it gave to English at A-Level, hithero a neglected area of the school curriculum. For the first time, ESL was given equal status as the other A- Level subjects and it was to be tested as part of the A- Level examination. A special advisory committee was appointed with the responsibility for preparing the necessary course materials. Through their efforts a new textbook entitled "General English for A-Level Classes" was published in 1999, initially as experimental material and later revised. The package consists of a

textbook, teachers' guide and a set of recorded cassettes.

The thrust of the materials is on English for daily life; for discussing every day happenings, contemporary issues, letter writing, telephone conversation, etc.. Emphasis is also given to developing skills to function in the workplace. To this end some units are devoted to official writing of different genres, office discussion and telephone conversation, speech making, and facing interviews.

The materials combine a thematic as well as a functional approach. The earlier lessons deal with introductions, describing people and emotions, while the later units are woven around topical themes such as "War and Peace", "Love and Marriage", "Landmines", etc. Considerable emphasis is also given to grammar teaching through exercises, grammar notes and grammar review. At the same time the book has a communicative orientation through task based activities, group work and the use of conversational language.

In many respects "General English" marks a departure in textbook writing in Sri Lanka. It makes effective use of colour, design and illustrations, and has an informal style. The content is varied containing such diverse elements as pop songs, fun rhymes, graffiti, and literary excerpts. A study done in 2002 (Wijeratne, Cumararatunga and Perera, 2004) found that the books were popular with a majority of students and teachers, even though some problems have surfaced in implementation. Many, if not most teachers lack the pedagogical skills needed to exploit the materials creatively. The above mentioned study found that many classrooms had conventional teacher dominated environments with little variation in activity. Some teachers lacked the necessary language skills to handle the more difficult lessons and grammatical explanations became tedious. Teachers felt that the materials are more suited to urban Science students, who have a certain threshold level of general knowledge and language competence, rather than for rural Arts students. The frequent occurrence of idiomatic language and culturally unfamiliar references contributed to this (Ibid, 123)

Above all, the intractable problem of classroom heterogeneity is most conspicuous at A-Level, with varying levels of competence between rural and urban schools and even between different streams such as Arts and Science. Although the textbook tries to handle this through a range of activities, teachers are not resourceful enough to do selective teaching. Consequently, some students hardly learn anything, they either fail or do not present themselves for the General English paper, resulting in what the National Education Commission in its "National Policy Framework" refers to as the, "unconscionably wide"

gap in pass rates between rural and urban areas (2003:51)

5.3 *The Primary English Language Project (PELP)*

Published in 2000, for years 3, 4 & 5, "Let's Learn English" is the last series that comes within the scope of this paper. The need of the hour was for a new English textbook that reflects the changes to the primary curriculum introduced by the reforms of 1997, namely the Activity Based Oral English Programme (ABOE) and the new national goals and basic competencies.

- "Let's Learn English" is the result of an NIE-British Council collaborative project. It was coordinated by a British Council consultant, while the local writing team was selected from practicing teachers through open competition. It is one of the most comprehensive learning packages prepared so far comprising, Pupil's Book, Workbook, Teacher's Guide, a set of supplementary readers, and a Training Manual with video for teachers.
- "Let's Learn English" marks a swing of the pendulum away from the earlier unstructured, process syllabus of "English for Me" to a pre-set multi-layered syllabus where the contents are delineated in terms of rationale, approach, topics, structures and vocabulary. At the same time the materials make use of activities and communicative strategies to present and practice all four skills. So it is not wrong to say that these materials reflect the more "balanced curriculum" that Pollard talks about (1996).
- The syllabus content is built around seven topics drawn from the experiences and interests of children and their immediate environment such as, food, toys, clothes, games, festivals, etc. Techniques such as animation and giving human characteristics to animals help to hold the attention of young learners. The materials are attractively presented with effective use of colour and illustrations. In assessing Sri Lankan textbooks Pollard commented on their poor physical quality, saying that, "it significantly affects the student's learning experience" (1996:43). These materials do not fall into that category. Besides its contribution to English teaching, an additional outcome of PELP was the excellent foreign and in-house training that the local project team received. Fernando, observes that it was the policy of the funding agent to leave behind "sufficient sustainable capacity in-country" so that future projects could be undertaken without outside help (2001:97). However, the extent to which the well trained personnel were later utilized in government projects remains questionable. Of more long term value, at grass roots level, was the PELP teacher training programme managed by the British Council and conducted through

the thirty -two Regional English Language Support Centers (RESCs) country wide (Westaway, 2008).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The preceding chronological survey of ESL textbook writing in Sri Lanka covers the period 1960 through 2000. The Ministry of Education published seven series of textbooks during this period; each ushering in a new syllabus and a new approach. The pendulum swung from extreme structuralism to a communicative system. After a full decade two of these series, "Let's Learn English" and "General English for A- Level Classes" still remain in use. The Secondary materials, however, have undergone change.

It is evident from this study that textbook writers in Sri Lanka confront certain critical issues. One, is to adapt changing ideologies and trends from the west to suit the socioeconomic realities of this country. Even the communicative approach would be difficult to implement in a tightly packed classroom of 45 to 50 students. Another is to prepare a single set of materials to meet the needs of divergent levels of language competence, once again created by socio-economic privileges and urban rural dichotomies. We may, therefore, have to think more seriously about a multi-book option or ways of diversifying textbooks. It must be appreciated, however, that this problem cannot be resolved purely through curriculum revision; it also necessitates large scale infrastructure provision and the upgrading of teachers and resources in less privileged schools.

A more recent issue is the appropriateness of ESL textbooks written for students studying in the mother tongue, for students now studying in the English medium. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to have an approach such as Content Based Language Instruction or Cognitive Academic Language Learning (CALLA) for English medium students so that they can come to grips with learning other disciplines through second language? Currently, the question of an instructional model has also come into the forefront. On the one hand, American English is expanding its boundaries and fast becoming popular with certain groups of learners. On the other, British English continues to have its share of devotees. Language specialists are promoting Sri Lankan Standard English (Gunasekara, 2010). And now, there is "English our Way"! Which of these will textbook writers choose as their instructional model? It appears the whole issue, to put it "My Way" becoming a real "achcharu" (pickle)!

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Appendix

Government ESL textbook series published during the period 1965 - 2000

- 1 Our English Course Grades 3-12 1965

- 2 English for Me years 4-6 1985
Textbook
Workbook
Teacher's Guide
Set of recorded Cassettes

- 3 English Every Day years 7-11 1985
Pupil's Book
Teacher's Guide
Set of recorded Cassettes

- 4 Our Integrated Course in English for A-Level 1986
Textbook
Teacher's Guide

- 5 World Through English years 6-11 1996
Pupil's Book
Workbook
Teacher's Guide

- 6 General English A-Level Classes 1999
Textbook
Teacher's Guide
Set of recorded Cassettes

- 7 Let's Learn English years 3,4 and 5 2000
 - Pupil's Book
 - Workbook
 - Teacher's Guide
 - Set of Supplementary readers
 - Teacher Training Manual