
Dreams Deferred: English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka.

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ABSTRACT

It is a public perception that English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka is a failure. Quoting the results of the two major national examinations in the country, this paper argues that this is not just a baseless assumption. It then presents the historical background to ELT in the country, followed by the recent actions implemented to remedy the issues pertaining to ELT, viz. Activity Based Oral English, Junior/ Secondary level ELT curriculum/textbook changes, the introduction of bilingual education and reforms on the Advanced Level General English to enhance employability of school leavers. However, taking evidence from the official evaluation reports of the respective programmes, the present paper explains that all these implementations were not successful as was their target. While discussing the contributory factors for these failures, both at macro and micro levels, the researcher focuses attention on English Language Teachers' contribution to these failures. Finally, as a solution, the paper proposes a new model of school-based continuing professional development of English Language teachers, i.e. English Teacher Professional Circles (ETPC) where teacher empowerment and reflective practice, through action research, and peer coaching is emphasized. In concluding the paper, it is stressed that this model would be dependent on the attitudes of the respective schools' management as well as teachers' positive attitudes on collegiality and professionalism. Hence, it reiterates that a foundation to these positive attitudes should be laid during the initial teacher training programmes.

Key Words: Activity Based Oral English, A - Level General English, English Language Teacher Development

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a public perception that English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka has not been able to achieve its intended objectives. This failure in ELT, in my opinion, is not a baseless assumption. It is what we have experienced for the last forty or so years and evidenced by student performance at the two major examinations. For instance, the GCE (O/L) English language pass rate was 36.86% in 2006 and 21% at the GCE A/L, according to the Examinations Department. These results are further problematic as the majority of those who pass lack the necessary communicative skills in English required in the job market (De Mel, 2007). This situation is precisely expressed by Wijesinghe who states that "[a]t present, [...] the quality of English teaching in the mainstream is extremely low" (2004). The Presidential Task Force emphasizes that most the students, even after completing nearly ten years of learning ESL, could not use the language at an acceptable level (NEC, 1997).

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Language is a powerful tool, and English being associated with the former colonial powers has had a pervasive influence on the educational system in Sri Lanka, resulting in predominantly negative socio-political consequences due to some questionable policies implemented subsequently. The sociological factors that affected ELT are closely related to the social value placed on English as the language of 'power' as a result of the three-tiered educational system implemented during British rule where English Medium fee-levying schools were inaccessible to students who came from poor economic backgrounds. This ultimately resulted in a 'hatred' developed towards English, which was seen to have been used as a 'kaduwa' to undercut the opportunities of rural children (Kandiah, 1984). This attitude created a kind of psychological barrier or inhibition among the students, obstructive their learning of English in later years. However, later, as a result of the demands of nationalistic movements, vernacular languages were made the medium of instruction in schools later. In this context, the hegemonic status of English declined and the demand for English teachers decreased (Kandiah, 1984). Yet, English continued to be retained in trade and commerce in Sri Lanka as a modern nation. Hence, whatever the official planning espoused by the State to maintain indigenous languages, 'invisible planning' continued to maintain English as the language of power and wealth (Raheem & Ratwatte, 2004). However, today, in the globalized context of the 21st century, English is not considered the 'property' of one nation with many 'Englishes' spoken over the world (Kachru, 1986). It is considered more as a vital "Basic Life Skill" than a second/ foreign language, and its necessity, as a lingua franca, is felt in every sphere of Sri Lankan society irrespective of social, economic and political differences. Thus, it is no longer considered to be a 'weapon' by non-elite groups (Samarakkody, 2000).

3. CURRICULUM INNOVATIONS

In this context, several policy decisions have been taken from time to time to upgrade ELT. English was given administrative recognition and made the link language by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution while the 17th Constitutional Amendment made it an official language in the country. In addition, on recommendations by the Presidential Task Force, the National Policy Framework on General Education (2003) proposed the following, to improve ELT:

- Activity Based Oral English (ABOE) in primary grades
- Strengthen ESL in the junior/secondary levels
- Promote bilingual education from junior secondary classes in selected subjects and any subject in the GCE (A/L), subject to the availability of teachers
- Strengthen the A/L General English program to enhance the employability of school leavers

3.1 *The True Picture*

- The implementation of Activity Based-Oral English (ABOE) has not been successful in all 17 districts studied (Mallawa & Fernando, 2003)
- Policy measures and implementation at junior secondary level of English as a Second Language (ESL) have been less successful (Perera, Gunewardena & Wijetunge, 2003).
- Less than 1% of the student population followed English Medium Instruction in 2005 (Wijesekera, 2005).
- A large segment of A/L students do not attempt the General English Paper (Wijeratne, Cumaranatunge & Perera, 2003).

4. THE PROBLEM

Many factors contributed to these failures, both at macro and micro levels. Approaches to ELT, the nature of pedagogy, contextual factors and resources are some of them. Some factors at macro-level include planning drawbacks, a lack of consideration given to regional disparities, classroom realities and evaluation procedures. Stakeholders' commitment to planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring is very significant in curriculum management (Ron, 1991). More precisely, teachers are the most important stakeholders in relation to the final outcomes expected in the curriculum. The teachers' part in curriculum implementation becomes more exasperating with the extra burden of interpreting the curriculum to decide how to use it with relevance to local contexts when a centralized system exists. This task of 'interpretation' takes place according to the perception of each individual teacher, and therefore depends on her degree of

professionalism (West, 1997). Hence, to generate teacher-awareness of 'change' and provide them with the necessary skills is a major part of curriculum innovation. Moreover, as Ron (1991) says, given the enormous complexity, any implementation process can so easily go wrong, especially in ELT, as our knowledge of how innovation is effectively disseminated is still incomplete due to little research. In fact, effective educational change cannot occur without improvements to the working life of teachers.

Therefore, it is apparent that teachers are central to curriculum implementation and their repertoire of skills, professional knowledge, perceptions and pedagogic practice all contribute to the instructional curriculum or what they do in classrooms. Hence, my view is that the lack of sustainable and effective continuing professional development for English Language teachers, a very vital aspect in managing curriculum development and innovation at the implementation level, rightly must bear part of the responsibility for the failure in ELT. This has resulted in the

- lack of an efficient top-down/ bottom-up communication system so the messages of changes are not correctly received by the teachers,
- lack of an effective evaluation and monitoring system to check what actually happens in classrooms: how and why teachers implement reforms in the ways that they do - a key to promoting effective innovation at the macro level,
- failure to have wider perspectives on teacher education: both at the initial level of training and continuing teacher education.

5. TEACHERS' ROLE IN ELT FAILURE

- Teachers' language level and pedagogic competence make it very difficult for them to handle the Advanced Level General English materials with any degree of effectiveness (Wijeratne, Cumaratunge & Perera, 2002).
- Teachers were not provided with guidelines and training essential for successful implementation of ABOE. Where training was provided, it was inadequate for proper implementation of the project and the lack of competence in teachers resulted in low performances (Mallawa & Fernando, 2003).
- Teachers are not provided with necessary assistance to cope with the new initiatives in the Advanced Level General English (Raheem, 2004).
- The "Cascade Model" that was used for teacher training in curriculum change has failed to deliver the 'message' correctly. The introduction of new textbooks and the dissemination of information through teacher centers/ ISA visits have not been all successful. The 'message' gets diluted and distorted in the process of dissemination (Cumaratunge, 2001).

- The use of the Communicative Approach to ESL was not successful not because of the pitfalls of the approach, but due to delivering 'the message' incorrectly (Nagasundaram, 1996).
- Inefficient professional support, the inadequacy of supervision and an appropriate follow up mechanism and the concentration of In-Service Training programmes at the end of financial year just to spend allocations have contributed to failures (EFA Assessment Country Report Sri Lanka 2000).
- Dearth of competent teachers is a major reason for ELT failure (Gajadeera, 2002).
- Policy planners have to focus more on improving teaching abilities of English teachers (Karunaratne, 2009).
- Teacher inadequacies arising from the lack of experience, ill-developed pedagogical practices and the lack of proficiency are the challenges that have to be interceded through massive re-skilling of teachers (Raheem, 2004).

6. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND APPROACHES

Hence, it is of cardinal importance that we have both a national vision and mission to equip teachers with the necessary pedagogic skills, which have been given less importance in the system so far. Even though the system has its own weaknesses, it is also not unreasonable to direct some blame at teachers who await to be spoon-fed. Nevertheless, the non-existence of the capability of self-reliance on the part of the teacher, in my opinion, could have resulted from the way they were taught. A well-documented English Teacher Education policy which is implemented under a fully authorized and politically independent management body that can handle continuous evaluation and monitoring, can address some of the issues highlighted. I am of the view that whilst this necessity has already been recognized by the country, the attention given to teacher education and professional development in many cases has lagged behind.

6.1 *The Solution: Continuing Teacher Education*

The present researcher agrees with the views expressed by other researchers in the field that the fundamental principle of professional development for teachers is that it is a process. It should not be a 'patchwork' or one that is a hastily contrived remedy like what is in existence now.

What we, the teachers need is not 'courses' to earn certificates, but something practical to increase pedagogic skills that can be applied directly in the classrooms. On par with 'Education for Life' (EFA), I believe that School-Based Continuing Teacher Education (SBCTE) is the ideal solution in an era of ever-changing needs. This should be accompanied

by efficient communication and marketing strategies to 'market the change' so as to be sure that teachers receive the correct 'message' pertaining to innovations. SBCTE provides the necessary answers because the dissemination of information and collegiality are embedded in the SBCTE methods, which are discussed below. These techniques need minimal funds. Nevertheless, having positive attitudes of collegiality and professionalism, on the part of teachers as well as school management, is of paramount importance if the English Teaching Professional Circles (ETPC) model that I suggest, discussed later in this paper, is to be implemented successfully.

6.2 Approach to education/training in National Colleges of Education (NCE)

- The foundation for SBCTE should be laid during initial training at NCEs where teachers should be made professionals who are willing to continue to develop throughout their career through reflective practices and self-guided learning.
- For this purpose, the whole approach to education/ training at NCEs should be changed to an explorative, collaborative and self-guided one. For instance, without giving a lecture on "What is applied linguistics", trainees must be asked to gather information on the topic through resources, such as the internet, print material, and give presentations in groups and reflect on each other's work. In brief, teachers should be given the tools for reflective practice and training in how to use them during their initial training. As a result, they will become self-directed and self-reliant professionals who can move forward in their careers with the motto of 'Education for Life', and will continue to upgrade their skills and knowledge through self-guided learning. They will make use of the same methods and techniques with their students, (once they are appointed), so that students too will become self-directive individuals, which is the requirement of the country.
- During their internship they should be made to work under a senior teacher or a group of teachers in their respective schools using the mentoring approach. This can be easily done because trainees are sent to selected schools every year. The proposed English Teacher Professional Circles (ETPC) model is ideal to undertake this task.
- Once the trainees are appointed to schools as teachers, a monitoring system should be implemented with the aid of ETPC in their respective areas during their probationary period.
- Most importantly this whole process should not be limited to reports and recommendations, but be evaluated and monitored continuously by a fully authorized, competent and unbiased body to ensure quality.

- NCE lecturer promotions and scholarships should only be given based on the appraisal of lecturers by this body, answerable only to parliament once appointed. The re-establishment of a National Authority on Teacher Education and Appraisal is very much needed in this connection.
- To scaffold this whole process, NCE staff should undergo vigorous training under foreign or local expertise. What I propose is a kind of 'Brain Wash'.

6.3 *Teacher Empowerment & Reflective Practice*

Talay-Ongan (2001) defines empowerment as "the ability of individuals to become aware of their powers to be a capable decision maker and feeling in charge, often facilitated by personal experiences and interpersonal relations." (p...). So far, in the history of ELT, practitioners have been advised on what and how to teach by those who did not have any ground knowledge of what happens in the ESL classroom, and it has been a failure. Now it is time to start from the bottom. The professional teacher, being a reflective practitioner, must also be a researcher so that he/ she is able to find what is best for his/ her clientele. This teacher/ researcher position gives the teacher more power, opportunity and autonomy. The foundation for this should be laid at the NCE level.

6.4 *Action Research*

'Action Research', which means research 'while in action', can play a vital role in teacher empowerment. Reflective practice requires teachers to experiment with and reflect on what went wrong, why that was so and how it/ they can be remedied. Action research helps teachers to find solutions for specific problems, try out such solutions and disseminate findings to his/ her colleagues or take follow-up action for further research, which creates a cycle. Action research is, hence, contributory to teaching/ learning improvement, as well as teachers' professional development. Here, the teacher becomes the 'expert' who can make independent decisions without bowing to 'outside experts.' The findings of this kind of research have a significant impact on pedagogic practice, as well as in macro level planning, if they are taken into consideration.

6.5 *Peer Coaching*

Peer coaching is another way of upgrading teacher skills (and also extending support for the development of peers) through constructive feedback. I would like to term this as 'Experience-Sharing' through classroom observation. Observation should be done according to a pre-planned schedule under the guidance of the principal. The plan is agreed upon by the teachers themselves (through ETPC) and sent to the zonal and district professional

circles. Here, I suggest that for peer-coaching and experience-sharing, teachers from other schools should also be invited. In addition, teachers can take turns in going to other schools in their ETPC and doing demonstration lessons to receive feedback.

6.6 English Teacher Professional Circles (ETPC) - A New Approach

- This is a forum for participatory input where teachers have ownership. This is a network which starts from the school level and goes to zonal and district levels, where they will use all the techniques discussed above.
- Each district must have an "English Teaching Philosophy" (ETP) corresponding to National Goals but which takes into consideration their particular contexts, capacities and resources. This is originally a personal document that reflects and represents teachers as individuals (O'Farrell, 2003). However, I believe this can be applied to develop a Statement of ETP in the education zone, if not in the district.
- At the school level, ESL teachers form English Teaching Professional Circles (ETPC) can work out an ETP for their school. This is taken to zonal level, and then to district level, where a common philosophy for the district is agreed upon. According to Brookfield (2006), a teaching philosophy is a personal statement that should have four main purposes as follows:
 - a. Personal purpose: "a distinctive organizing vision - a clear picture of why you are doing what you are doing... crucial to your personal sanity and morale." (p. 16)
 - b. Political purpose: "a sense that your position is grounded in a well-developed and carefully conceived philosophy of practice..." (p. 17)
 - c. Professional purpose: "a commitment to a shared rationale... for the development of a collective identity...of professional strengths among teachers." (pp. 17-18)
 - d. Pedagogical purpose: "Knowing clearly what kind of a dent you want to make in the world -What effect am I having on students and on their learning?" (pp. 18-19)

- When the institutional ETP is prepared, based on the personal statements of ESL teachers at the school level, they should study and plan out institutional goals and then develop their stance as an organization. An Action Plan is then drawn to realize this stance through collaborative and reflective practice.
- This Action Plan should have a component to introduce a Standard Assessment Procedure to measure speaking and listening skills of the students on a Zonal/District basis, which have been neglected by the national assessment system.
- The other teachers, school management, parents and also the community will be stakeholders in the process. They will be made aware of the process beforehand as a pre-emptive measure.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This process will make the ESL teachers in the district a unified professional body, who work as a team where they can practice new techniques and discuss new materials with colleagues on a routine basis. They can engage in action research as individual or collaborative tasks, find solutions to learning/ teaching issues in their classrooms/ schools, disseminate the knowledge they gather or share their experience and then take this new knowledge to ETPC at the zonal level every month. This is easy as all schools will be working on similar targets which have been agreed upon in their ETP.

However, a recent survey conducted by this researcher shows that 99% of teachers have never read any policy document on ELT. 68% do not know the National Goals of Education and the five competencies emphasized (Wijesekera, 2007). As discussed earlier, the lack of a communication system to deliver the correct message is problematic. I suggest that every ETPC should have access to policy documents. Once the ETPCs are formed, the government should provide them with policy documents with necessary explanation, syllabi and other important documents on time. Video examples of lessons conducted by senior professional teachers with good pedagogic skills should be provided to each Circle at least at the zonal level by the NIE. For this purpose television and/ or internet facilities would be ideal. Teachers can watch them in groups, discuss and adapt them to match their contexts. In this sense, I hope, the teaching/ learning process in the area would maintain some level of standards.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that for all these to happen, the 'hierarchy' has some responsibilities to fulfill. Moreover, they should have positive attitudes and genuine willpower to work towards progress. The consultation of ELT professionals is necessary at every decision making juncture in macro level planning. Finally, it is of vital importance

that ELT teachers have positive attitudes towards the whole process and it should also be of vital concern that if the foundation for teacher training at National Colleges of Education has not been well laid, none of this can work.

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