

**Employment as a reason to achieve fluency in English? The beliefs of Secondary School learners and undergraduate students of 21<sup>st</sup> century Sri Lanka.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In 21st century Sri Lanka, the lack of good communication skills in English i.e. fluency is cited as the primary reason for unemployment among the state educated learners, by powerful persons in different spheres: private and state sector employers, politicians and policy makers, educationists and funding agencies. Multiple interventions that seek to upgrade the curricula, text books, teaching methods, infrastructure and the quality of the teachers have been introduced. Learners are exhorted and encouraged to develop good communication skills and to consider it as a life-skill devoid of hegemony. This paper attempts to gauge the views of the learners who are thus targeted to find out whether they think fluency in English will secure good employment, whether they intend to develop fluency and whether they wish to associate with users of English in Sri Lanka. Responses were obtained from secondary school students from 08 provinces and undergraduate students from 09 conventional universities (N=410). The responses clearly indicate that learning English in Sri Lanka is not a 'value-free, pragmatic and egalitarian activity' (Canagarajah, 1999) as assumed by the authorities. Half of the learners do not subscribe to the view that English facilitates the securing of employment and less than half intend to become fluent users, while less than ten percent wish to associate with users of the language. Multiple contextual and social realities seem to give rise to complex differences in views between female and male learners, Sinhala and Tamil speakers and between secondary school students and undergraduates. The outcome raises questions such as whether the majority of learners share the widely held world view which*

*embodies the global neo-liberal ideology and, whether the ideals of 'success' and the values upheld give rise to subtle resistance to the spoken form of English and its users.*

**KEYWORDS:**

*Fluency in English, resistance, social-identity and language, English and neo-liberal ideology*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

*“Even a decade ago, the university degree was perceived to be the key to the almighty white-collar job, and the stability, prestige and standard of living that were associated with it. Today that is no longer the case; with the decline of our university system and ever faster globalisation, command of the English language is now the passport to success.” (Phipps, 2012)*

As the above quotation illustrates, the ability to communicate in English is a highly valued commodity in the globalizing world where neo-liberal economic policies prevail. This study was prompted by several seemingly contrary factors; on the one hand, the wide ‘promotion’ of fluency in English in Sri Lanka by different significant groups and the large number of varying interventions introduced to encourage learners and to upgrade pedagogy and, on the other, what appears to be learner apathy towards becoming competent users as evidenced by the results obtained at the GCE (General Certificate of English) Advanced Level and the University Test of English (UTEL).

The promotion or endorsement of English manifests in different forms; a) the views expressed by politicians, policy makers, other influential persons as well as by members of the general public which are expressed in the form of public speeches, letters, articles and discussions in the media. b) employers both in the private sector and at higher levels in the state sector expressing disappointment at public forums regarding the inadequate competency in English of prospective employees coming through the state education system as opposed to the private education institutes. c) scholars,

researchers and international bodies expressing similar views and recommending interventions, and d) the multiple interventions made at secondary and tertiary levels by the State to upgrade communication abilities and thus, to make young persons more 'employable'. However, since learning a language is not 'a value-free, pragmatic and egalitarian' activity (Canagarajah (1999) as it is assumed to be, it would be of interest to find out the views and attitudes of the group that is targeted and exhorted to become fluent users of English in order to become more employable.

Studies carried out in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century clearly indicate that the resistance to English as the 'weapon' which the colonizers and then the English educated elite of Sri Lanka wielded to retain power is receding (Gunasekera, 2006, Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012, Ratwatte, 2012, De Silva & Devendra 2014). In other words, the younger, media exposed generation are less affected by what has been identified as the 'Kaduwa' effect. Kandiah (Kandiah, 1984, 1989). Since the recent studies (cited above) have focused on undergraduate students enrolled at the Open University and one faculty of an urban conventional university, the present study focuses on the attitudes and views of two other groups of learners to whom English is promoted as the means of succeeding in a globalizing world. The opinions of secondary school learners and university undergraduates (from conventional universities), on the relationship between fluency in English and securing employment, on becoming fluent speakers and attitudes towards users of English in Sri Lanka, will be examined.

### **1.1 Linguistic Profile of Sri Lanka**

In order to understand the underlying complexities in the use of language in 21<sup>st</sup> Sri Lanka, the fluctuations in attitude to the language and users need to be considered.

In the island nation of Sri Lanka in 2016 the total population of 22.235<sup>1</sup> million, comprised 74% Sinhala first language (L1) speakers and 18% Tamil L1 speakers. English is spoken competently by about 10% of the population who are bi or tri lingual. Sinhala and Tamil, the two indigenous languages

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<sup>1</sup> All statistics relating to demography obtained from [http://www.indexmundi.com/sri\\_lanka/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/sri_lanka/demographics_profile.html).

of the country are the official languages while Sinhala is the national language. English was declared the link language in an amendment to the constitution in 1987. The political, social and economic dynamics associated with the three languages and the associated tensions have been the focus of many studies (Coperahewa (2009), Kandiah (1984, 1989), Parakrama, (1995), Raheem & Ratwatte, (2004)).

English which was the language of the colonizers (from 1796 – 1948) was the acknowledged language of power and privilege up to independence from Britain in 1948. English was also the language of education in elite schools and the then University of Ceylon since it was the colonial policy that English educated native administrators and professionals should assist the colonizers in ruling the country. The administration of Sri Lanka during this period, except at the lowest level was in English. Similarly, the courts of law, private and State sectors functioned in English. As described in Raheem and Ratwatte (2001) although Sinhala was accorded the status of National Language and only official language by independent Sri Lanka and English was ‘dethroned’ (Gunasekera 2005), this overt change of power was not reflected in actual practice. The higher courts of law continued to function in English as did State sector administration at higher levels. The private sector never adopted either of the two national languages as the working language. The implementation of open economic policies in 1977 ensured that English continued as the most used language in commerce technology and science. Furthermore, English was also considered socially prestigious since persons who held high-ranking positions in state as well as private institutions as well persons who were politically influential were also fluent speakers of English. Thus, economically and socially, fluent users of English continued to be privileged resulting in the well documented resistance to English known as the ‘Kaduwa’ (Kandiah (1984, 1989), Parakrama (1995)). The metaphor of the sword ‘Kaduwa’, was used during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the masses who felt disempowered despite changes to the linguistic policy, to signify how English continued to be used as the means of subjugation (Kandiah 1984).

The habitual use of English as a first language by bilingual first language speakers of both Sinhala and Tamil as well as its continued use in the higher courts of law, as the medium of instruction in some disciplines at universities and the extensive use in the private sector paved the way for a distinct variety of English, now known as Sri Lankan English<sup>2</sup> (SLE). Therefore, in Sri Lanka, when one refers to users of English, the reference is to persons who habitually use SLE at the work place and /or as the home language. Largely, the habitual users of English in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were found in the more urban areas of the country. In the run up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the increase in the number of international schools in semi-urban area and in other areas further away from the capital, witnessed an increase in the number of people who can speak English in other areas as well. With the arrival of satellite television, the world wide web, mobile phones (SMS) and social media, English has become more common place, and as noted in (Ratwattte) (Ratwattte, 2015a) translanguaging (using two or more languages in the same conversation) is the norm rather than the exception. The use of English when speaking in Sinhala or Tamil can take the form of whole sentences, phrases or words depending on the speaker's level of fluency. It is an accepted fact that even those who are 'mono-lingual' frequently use English words except in very formal interactions.

However, in the Northern part of Sri Lanka where Tamil is the first language, who the interlocutor is, impacts on translanguaging, not because both interlocutors are not bilingual but because of ethno-linguistic identity. Canagarajah (1999) describing the use of language during the conflict years when Tamil speakers were fighting for a homeland and Tamil language served as a symbol of identity, found that speaking in English was frowned upon socially and that even the use of English words when speaking Tamil was strongly discouraged. He goes on to state that in some cases where Tamil did not have an equivalent word e.g. 'hotel' or 'ice cream', new Tamil words were coined (Canagarajah, 1999:68). One reason for the exclusion of English was as a means of disempowering the English educated bilinguals who, as in the Sinhala dominated areas, exerted influence.

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<sup>2</sup>Michael Meyler's Dictionary of Sri Lankan English

However, in the last decade or so, in all parts of Sri Lanka including the North, large numbers of young people have begun attending the ubiquitous private tuition classes advertising spoken English. This seems to suggest less antipathy towards English overall. The change in societal attitudes towards English among adolescent learners in the Central Province is indicated in a recent study which looked at factors that motivate 17-18-year-old students to learn English in a government mixed school (Gunawardhana, 2016). It was found that parents of the target group as well as students themselves believe that they should learn English to be considered educated people, to gain respect from peers, family, and teachers and also to get a good job. Another study conducted by Ratwatte in 2012 which looked at the views 2019 undergraduates<sup>3</sup> towards English vis-à-vis employment, higher studies and social mobility found that students in all faculties considered English as being important for higher studies and employment but not as a means of social mobility. These findings are further confirmed by Ranasinghe and Ranasinghe (2012) who investigated the perceptions of 96 university<sup>4</sup> students in Management studies on the role of English in career choice and social mobility. Students rated proficiency in English in relation to higher education and securing attractive employment in the private sector highly. De Silva & Devendra (2014) carried out a content analysis of 100 undergraduate<sup>5</sup> essays to find out what the needs and expectations of students registered for an English for General Academic Purposes at the Open University of Sri Lanka are. It was found that of the three types of 'needs' identified by the students, the highest was the need for using English for academic purposes with the need to use English for social purposes next and English for occupational purposes the last. All these recent studies clearly show that undergraduate students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century too acknowledge and accept that English is necessary for success in higher education and also seem to be aware of the widely-held view that English plays a role in gaining employment. This is in contrast to the views of undergraduate students in the 1980's whose resistance to learning and teaching of English at

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<sup>3</sup>Enrolled at the Open University

<sup>4</sup> From the Faculty of Management studies – Uni of Sri Jayewardanapura and the Open University

<sup>5</sup> First year (Appadurai A. , 1990)

university is aptly captured in the Sinhala metaphor used to refer to the English Language teaching Units (ELTU) of universities - 'kammala' (or the blacksmiths who turn out sword). The resentment towards English and its speakers is also shown in another Sinhala term used in that era for female students following degrees in English literature- the derogatory term 'kadu meddiyo' (i.e. 'meddio' being medical students. In this case as persons who thought no end of themselves as they were students of English literature).

As mentioned previously, the recent studies in this area sought the views and opinions of undergraduate students who are adults and in many cases already employed. This study was undertaken to find out the beliefs of secondary school learners and undergraduate students enrolled at the other conventional universities<sup>6</sup> who have been exposed to the rhetoric regarding the importance of English for securing employment. They have also been exposed to at least one of the many interventions implemented to enhance competencies in English.

### **1.2 What Is Globalization and how does it impact on the lives of ordinary Sri Lankans**

The view that communication skills in English plays an important role in today's world can be linked to globalization and its impact on the daily lives of ordinary people across the world. The globalizing world is becoming interconnected in many diverse ways making countries and people inter-dependent in a historically unprecedented manner. We are inter-connected across geographical spaces and across time in complex ways. Appadurai (1996) views these interrelated forces that are 'complex, overlapping and disjunctive' in terms of flows or 'scapes' a) ethnoscapas or flow of people. Almost all Sri Lankans in all parts of the country have firsthand experience of the movement of people across geographical boundaries; family members as workers in other countries, as students in overseas universities or universities affiliated to other countries, as pilgrims, tourists or as refugees and migrants. Flow of people bring exposure to foreign cultures, ideas and languages. b) mediascapas or flow of information. The internet, satellite Television, even Facebook has made the flow of information instant and widespread. No one in Sri

Lanka was ignorant about the 2016 US Presidential elections or Donald Trump whereas only a minority would have been aware of George Bush being elected or even Barack Obama in 2008. The social interconnectivity that is taking place is exponential. People who previously were able to connect socially with persons in the neighbourhood (family members, neighbours) and at work (colleagues, customers students etc.) can now connect with people who they have not seen for many years through Facebook, Skype, What's APP, Viber etc., and become aware of not only significant events in their lives but even what they did over the week-end or ate for dinner the previous night. c) technoscapes or flow of technology. Computers, medical equipment, vehicles, cement mixers, threshing machines used by farmers, bank ATM machines etc., that are brought over from across the world are being used by all Sri Lankans even in the so called remote areas. Technical knowledge required to operate and manage these technologies are the less visible flows. d) Financescapes or the flow of money. For example, the discussions among ordinary people about the recent bond scams and the national stock exchange, GSP+ given for garment factories, granting of land in Hambantota in exchange for loans, is commonplace. e) Ideoscape or flow of ideas. The scale of penetration of global ideas among Sri Lankans are hitherto unseen – e.g. the discussion and ratification of the Right To Information Act, the discussion and rejection of the gay rights Act, environment etc., At the socio-cultural level, ideas with regard to mode of dress, food, socially acceptable behavior etc., are also changing as a consequence of the widely watched Indian Television dramas and films shown over satellite TV, videos, migrant workers returning home, Facebook etc.,

Thus the globalizing world is ever changing and, as illustrated, impacts on the lives of all citizens irrespective of their level of education, economic or social status. However, the intrinsic part of all these 'scapes' is the flow of ideologies. In this case, the transmission of the ideologies of the powerful, largely Western, dominant groups whose interest lies is maintaining the status quo worldwide. Those in other parts of the world who buy-in to these ideologies perhaps unconsciously, endorse the established values because, by holding on to these values, they profit. The views on education and employment held by the authorities, masses and the learners need to be interpreted against this backdrop.

## 2. EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND ENGLISH IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY.

The rise of neo-liberal thinking coincides with globalization. Phillipson (2008) referring to linguistic imperialism of the neo-liberal empire points to the key 'role of language in corporate-driven globalisation' where 'English [has become] the lingua franca of business, commerce, science, arts, literature of the whole world' (Nesa 2004:8 cited in Wijewardena Yong & Chinna, 2014). Thus, as English has become the language of corporate driven globalization, in a world where global economic competition prevails, individuals and organizations that possess the attributes to compete in the market, in this case fluency in English, 'succeed'. Within Neo-liberal thinking, one of the goals of education, particularly of higher education are to be providers of human capital. The global situation is replicated in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sri Lanka as the views expressed below illustrate;

- (1) *'It is not without good reason that the market chooses to prize sound linguistic skills in English over a university education. Employers find that candidates with a thorough knowledge of English are able to communicate more effectively; both with one another in multi-ethnic workplaces and with foreign parties, an increasing common occurrence'. (Phipps, 2012:1) .*
- (2) *"it is vital that today 's graduates be well versed in English in order to increase their employment opportunities, be able to use and communicate via the internet, communicate with foreigners, increase their knowledge and travel to other countries and thereby widen their horizons in their future lives and bring empowerment to their lives". (Wijewardena, Young and Chinna 2014:142)*
- (3) *'English appears to change individual's attitudes making them more receptive to new ideas, realize the backwardness of many of their ways and understand the competitive threat of globalisation' (Phipps, 2012:2).*

The quotation by Phipps (1) embodies the commonly held view that it is reasonable for new-liberal ‘markets’ in a globalizing world to value English over a university degree. Due to economic and other types of migration even the workforces in so-called mono-lingual countries have become multi-lingual and Phipps presents the view of employers in Sri Lanka whose employees need to interact closely with international customers and partners.

The quotation from Wijewardena et al.(2) implies that in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sri Lanka the ability to communicate in English and a university degree enjoy parity of status and states that the former has the added ability to empower users not only economically but also by increasing their knowledge and making them aware of practices and opinions of people in other countries as well. That it is not merely linguistic competence in English that persons who view the world through a neo-liberal-globalized perspective values is illustrated in Phipps comment (3). A knowledge of English is seen as bringing about attitudinal changes and a transformation in ideology because they are more informed due to having greater access to media discussions, global thinking etc., which are only available in English. He goes on to say that the vernacular speakers’ assumptions and beliefs therefore remain unchallenged as they are not exposed to different viewpoints. English, in Sri Lanka, has thus been firmly linked to empowerment in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sri Lanka in more ways than one. The views expressed in the above quotations are an articulation of the values embodied in neo-liberal thinking. At the same time, people who hold such views devalue university education because it fails to orient learners to the world view held by the global status quo.

## **2.1 Education and Fluency in English**

Education has been accorded a high social value in Sri Lanka from ancient times due to the influence of erudite monks and educated rulers. This tradition continues and as only 2-3% of students who enroll at Grade 1 have the opportunity to obtain state university education (UGC,2012), a university degree is coveted. Obtaining a degree is the primary goal of most young people and their parents and is socially esteemed.

However,

*“majority of students who competitively obtained the available limited university places were compelled to follow lectures in the Arts stream in the national media as the only available option. Successive governments were fully aware that Arts graduates, proficient only in the national media had no chance of obtaining employment here or abroad except in the public sector of Sri Lanka” (Perera, 2009)*

As mentioned above, obtaining entry to university is highly competitive since the number of places are limited and, Perera implies that a majority of students who gain entry have no choice but to study in the mother tongue because only the degrees in the Arts and Humanities which are offered in the L1 have places. The assumption being that Arts graduates, who have studied in the mother tongue, cannot secure employment in the more globally oriented, competitive private sector. However, recent studies reveal that unemployment is not limited to graduates from Arts Faculties. Nawaratne (2012) investigated employment statistics of unemployed graduates and found that 54% of graduates, from all faculties, are unemployed.

*Table 1: Unemployment status of graduates in Sri Lanka No. Faculties*

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>%</b>
Faculties of Agriculture	30%
Faculties of Arts and Culture	76%
Faculties of Engineering	07%
Faculties of Management	40%
Faculties of Medicine	10%
Faculties of Science	30%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>54%</b>

*(Source: Nawaratne, 2012)*

Thus, despite the esteem with which education is regarded socially and the efforts parents take to ensure a good education for their children, views such as those given below are often expressed:

*“Graduates from State universities in Sri Lanka have proved themselves to be workplace ready in respect of their subject knowledge but, when compared with their counterparts from private universities, are sadly lacking in their English proficiency. This leaves the employers with Hobson’s choice in employing graduates from private universities, thereby causing a major social impact in the population .....”.*  
(Wijewardena, Yong & Chinna, 2014:137)

Thus, the hegemony of English continues to prevail through globalization.

The claim that a majority of young people produced through the State education system in Sri Lanka lack fluent communication skills in English seems to be substantiated by student performance in General English at the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination as well as the performance of undergraduate students in the UTEL (University Test of English Language).

*Table 2: Performance of candidates at the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination – General English*

Year	2001	2005	2010	2014	2015
Number Sat	127,058	180,259	179,537	242,284	248,482
% that passed (A+B+C+S)	41.09%	24.83	29.75%	40.83%	39.19%

*Sources: Department of Examinations ; Statistical Handbook (2005-2007:179) , Statistical Handbook (2008 – 2010:115) and Performance of Candidates, 2015*

The data shows fluctuations over the years in the number of young persons attaining proficiency in English. Table 2 shows that, in 2001, the year the G.C.E Advanced Level (A/L) General English Examination was conducted for the first time, 41%

of the total number of students who sat passed the examination while in 2005 and 2010 the percentage dropped to below 30%. In 2014 and 2015 the percentage that passed have increased again to approximately 40%. It must also be noted that in 2001 only 127,000 students sat for the examination while in 2015, since nearly double the number sat for the examination, double the number has also passed the examination. Therefore, even though a majority have failed in English, there is wider proficiency. Furthermore, as can be observed from the statistics in Figure 1 given below, the percentage of persons between the ages of 15-19 who sat for the A/L General English examination have more than doubled over a period of 15 years.

Year	Total population between 15-19 years	No sat for A/L GE	% of total population that sat for GE
2001	1824000	127058	6.97
2015	1677000	248482	14.82

*Figure 1: Calculation of the percentage that sat for A/L General English from age group population*

*(Sources: Central Bank of Sri Lanka: Economic and Social Statistics 2015 page15 and table 2 above).*

Overall, a much higher number of students have sat for and passed the A/L General English fifteen years after it was introduced. The fact that a higher number of young people sit for the examination shows that more people are exposed to a higher level of English than previously. The higher number of passes also indicate more young people in 2015 have a higher competency in English than in 2001. Overall, a higher percentage of young persons in the country have a fair knowledge of English even though they may not be fluent speakers of the language.

At University level the University Test for English Language (UTEL) which resembles international English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL evaluates reading, listening, writing and speaking skills. In evaluating, each component is quantified using a band score ranging from 0 to 9; where 0 represents the lowest level in that skill and 9 represents excellence. In formulating the competencies for the

benchmarks of UTEL although the language needs for higher education have been given emphasis, the skills required for employment have also been incorporated as indicated:

*“A benchmarks table has been formulated to serve ‘a real world’ within an academic context. ... However, as a means of addressing the need of employability skills in local graduates, some aspects related to the wider ‘real world’ have been included in this document where they naturally merge with the academic content” (ELTU University of Colombo, 2011-2012):3)*

UTEL Benchmarks range from 0 – 7 and undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities are expected to reach a minimum of UTEL 5 when they graduate. The UTEL tests were initially developed in the late 1990’s and was piloted in 2000 (Ratwatte, 2001). The on-line tests were conducted for the first time during the academic year 2013/14 at all the state universities and around 13,000 students from all 15 universities took the test in 2013/14. Only 11.26% (N=1499) students obtained a band score of the stipulated UTEL 5 or above in all four skills which indicates poor proficiency.

## **2.2 21<sup>st</sup> Century Interventions to upgrade competency In English.**

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century multiple interventions were initiated by the State, the UGC as well as individual universities to improve the English language proficiency of secondary school students and university undergraduates. The reasons for bringing English back to the fold this time round were prompted not only by exogenic factors but endogenic factors as well;

*“ Present day revival of English is due to reasons completely different from those well-ingrained colonial beliefs about the need for English language imposition... it is solely due to the increasing dominance of English in public life and its rise as a world language. .... (It is) the language that links ethnic groups within the country and the language that links with the global community.” (Nanayakkara, 2004)*

In addition to serving the demands of globalization, information explosion and technological developments, Sri Lanka's urgent need for a neutral link language between the Sinhala and Tamil speakers contributed greatly to the revival and promotion of ESL teaching in Sri Lanka.

The change in attitude towards English education is documented in the National Educational Commission Report of 2003 and in the objectives of the national curriculum for English Language G.C.E Ordinary Level.

NEC Commission Report:

- a) English has emerged as a critical factor in graduate employment, particularly in the context of a shrinking public sector and an expanding private sector
- b) English is currently the main language of information and communication technology and is a gateway to a vast exciting store house of knowledge to students. (page 176)

National Curriculum for English Language<sup>7</sup> states that the objectives of teaching English at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level are, among others,

1. To create opportunities for the Sri Lankan child to achieve the competencies in a link language.
2. To create facilities to learn a language which can be used to build ethnic harmony.
3. To enable the students to learn an international language which could be made use of in their later life for employment.

At university level too the goals of teaching English language as noted by Gunasekera (2013) have changed from the earlier need to 'broaden the minds of graduates or to engage in the discourse of contemporary issues' to a mix of English for academic purposes, English for professional purposes, and English for social purposes'.

Thus, local socio-political realities and globalization have contributed to the shaping of education policies in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sri Lanka.

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<sup>7</sup> Given in the G.C.E. OL Examination 2010: Evaluation Report, Research & Development Branch, National Evaluation & Testing Service, Sri Lanka

We will consider briefly the specific interventions that resulted from these policies where emphasis is laid on the need to align education with employment and to address the ‘failures’ of past interventions.

**A. Interventions in General Education – Primary, Secondary and Senior Secondary**

One of the goals of the Education Reforms of 1997 was to address the issue stated above and to strengthen learners’ skills in communication skills in English deemed required for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. In the 1997 Reforms measures were adopted to enhance English communication skills from primary school to senior secondary school.

<p>1. <i>Activity based Oral English (ABOE) for primary graders introduced in 2000</i></p>
<p>To introduce young learners (aged 5) to commonly used words in English and encourage them to communicate for real purposes and in real situations. Although many short-comings have been noted in the implementation of this programme, it is still in place in the school system. The younger informants in this study (15 year old) would have been exposed to this intervention</p>
<p>2. <i>PELP project ( The primary English Language Project) - for grades 3 to 5 introduced in 2000</i></p>
<p>‘Let’s learn English’ introduced for grades 3,4 &amp; 5 - the primary curriculum text which <u>reflects the goals of the education reforms of 1997</u>  Most informants would have been through this programme</p>
<p>3. <i>Secondary levels – The world Through English for grades 6-11 in 1996 and replaced in 2004 by “A Journey through English’</i></p>
<p>The material was considered innovative “ the materials were a trend-setter in that, for the first time, some units used the content of Science to teach language” (Cumaranatunga, 2012):9). <u>Due to shortcomings in the materials and the inability to implement it</u> due to classroom heterogeneity , the book for grade 6 learners was withdrawn</p>

4. *Senior Secondary Level – Until A-level General English (Advanced Level) was introduced in 1999.*

Until the education reforms of 1997, the teaching of English at schools stopped with the Ordinary Level Examination – year 10 and only content subjects were taught in at senior secondary level in Sri Lankan schools. For the first time ESL became a part of the Advanced Level Examination, although it was not counted towards entry to the university. The course introduced Sri Lankan English formally to the school curriculum. The package initially comprised 2 course books, Teacher’s Guides and 2 audio cassettes to expose learners to the spoken language. However, in 2001 it was shortened to one text book. The goal of the course was to enable learners to communicate in English at the work place and socially. Therefore, official writing of different genres, telephone conversations, facing interviews and participating in official discussions as well as engaging social conversations are included. Moving away from textbooks conventionally used in Sri Lanka, the book contained elements such as pop songs, graffiti, poems, and uses a multi-modal approach with pictures, colors and photographs, in order to appeal to the teenage learner. Although teachers in non-urban areas face difficulties due to lack of conversational skills and poor general knowledge of their learners, the book is still in use 16 years after it was introduced... All informants in this study over the age of 15 will either be following or have followed the A-Level General English Course.

5. *Introduction of the bilingual stream of education 2001*

Initially introduced to selected schools to foster amity between Sinhala and Tamil speakers and to enable learners to learn content and develop proficiency in English simultaneously. It was subsequently opened out to any school that had the required resources.

## 6. *English as a Life Skill*

An attempt to de-hegemonize English and present it as a life skill and not as the property of one group (or nations) was the idea behind the ‘English as a Life Skill’ program for secondary schools introduced in 2013. It was spear headed by a specially appointed Presidential Task force as a means of increasing the number of users by recognizing English as one of the languages used in Sri Lanka and through the perception that it was a common resource to be wrested from the elite who use it as means of social oppression (Ratwatte, 2015b). The teachers were re-trained in India and spoken English was emphasized.

### **B. *Interventions at University Level***

All universities in Sri Lanka offer a mandatory English language course (EAP, ESP, General English etc.) to 1st year students during the first three months. In addition to this ‘intensive’ English course, some universities also offer on-going courses to second and third year students (e.g. Universities of Sri Jayawardenapura, Wayamba, Jaffna and others). Although, these programmes are not entirely problem free; inadequacies in infrastructure, availability of qualified staff, the extent of commitment to English by content teachers and administrative staff, among them, the University Grants Commission and the individual universities are committed to enhancing the English language competencies of undergraduate students.

In the last decade alone, the government, in collaboration with international organizations such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) set out to enhance the English language teaching capacities of the ELTU teachers, upgrade the infrastructure and make courses more attractive to students. For example, the government borrowed US\$40 million to upgrade the Higher Education sector;

*“The World Bank today approved three projects totaling US\$108 million for Sri Lanka, consisting of ... US\$40 million for the Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century Project; The higher education sector currently faces a number of*

*urgent challenges. Foremost among them is the inability of a large number of graduates to secure employment in the private sector due to a lack of soft skills, insufficient competency in the English language, and inadequate Information Technology skills “ (World Bank, 2010)*

Some of the key outcomes of this and others projects (such as the ADB grants) resulted in more attractive ELT programmes, on-line teaching, more qualified teachers (PhD), a common University Test of English (UTEL), alignment of English language courses offered by the ELTU's in the 15 State Universities to the competencies identified in UTEL benchmarks as well as infrastructure development.

Although the majority have not developed good communication skills, the performance at National Examinations show that more learners are acquiring higher competency in English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than previously.

The purpose of this study was to find out whether learners intend to develop fluency in the language, and to find out if learners believe that fluency in English will facilitate securing economically advantageous employment in an increasingly globalizing world. Since English in Sri Lanka is used by habitual speakers socially as well as in their places of work, on becoming a fluent user, the learner too will be comfortable in such environments. Hence the question whether learners would wish to associate speakers of English in Sri Lanka was the third issue that was investigated. In other words, whether employment and the current users serve as motivators to become users.

### **C. *Learner Motivation***

Research in motivation studies have shown that learner motivation has a significant impact on the learning of a second language (Gardner (1985), Gardner and MacIntyre, 1992, 1993, Dornyei (1994) (2005) (2009), Far, Rajab, & Etemadzadeh (2012) (Dornyei & Chan, 2013). According to the theoretical paradigm proposed by Dornyei (2005, 2009) on L2 motivational self-system, the self-system comprises

three components: the Ideal Self, the Ought-to Self and the L2 Learning Experience. Both Ideal-Self and Ought-to Self refer to one's future possible selves. That is, Ideal-Self is what one would ideally like to become – for example to speak the L2 proficiently, thereby reduce the difference between the actual self and the ideal. Ought-to Self is what one believes one ought to become to meet one's own or familial expectations or to avoid possible negative outcomes, for example 'I ought to learn English in order to get a good job' or 'if I cannot speak fluent English I will not get a job'. Ought-to Self derives from the beliefs held by the learners' society and from significant others. L2 learning experience refers to learners' past learning experience. The research issues investigated in the present study fall within the Ought-self ; a) the learner ought to become a fluent speaker of English to get a good job and, b) the learner must become a fluent speaker in English to be comfortable among people who use English.

In an earlier conceptualization of L2 motivation theory, Gardner (1985) proposed that the purpose for which the learner learns a second language can either be more instrumental i.e. Utilitarian, (such as to obtain employment, meet the requirements for graduation, to attain a higher social status) or Integrative i.e. to fit in, become a part of the community that speak that language (such as to engage in social interactions, integrate with speakers of the target language etc.,). Viewed from the perspective of integrative and instrumental motivation issue (a) employment, is instrumentally oriented and issue (b) association, has a more integrative orientation.

### **3. Methodology**

The researcher began to investigate learner attitudes towards achieving competency in English in late 2015. The informants (N= 435) were students engaged in secondary, tertiary and vocational education between the ages of 15 – 24, i.e. those who would have formed somewhat independent views on the relevance of education to life. This paper will focus on the responses obtained from secondary school learners and university undergraduate students.

A questionnaire was used to obtain information from 274 secondary school learners in 08 provinces of the country and 136 undergraduate informants (N 410) from 09 conventional universities in Sri Lanka: Kelaniya, Sri Jayawardenapura (Western province) Sabaragamuwa (Sabaragamuwa), Uva\_Wellassa (Uva), Ruhuna (Southern), Wayamba (Wayamba), Jaffna (Northern), Rajarata (North-Central) and Peradeniya (Central).

### **Data collection**

The sampling was based on availability of informants. Information was gathered from 1st year undergraduate students who attended classes conducted by the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) on the day that information was being collected. Information was gathered from schools in a similar manner. All the information was obtained within the same week from all locations by qualified research assistants (English teachers and ELTU instructors) who distributed and collected questionnaires during a lesson. It was ensured that teachers did not collect information from their own students.

Information was gathered by means of a questionnaire where students had to indicate their beliefs by ticking the preferred option on a 4 point Likert scale; strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. There were a total of 30 questions. The questionnaires were translated into Tamil and Sinhala and informants responded to questionnaires that were in their L1. Data will be compared in terms of gender and first language of the informants and province where relevant.

Responses given by learner-informants to three questions will be examined

- a) English and employment: If I learn to speak English well, I will have a better opportunities to get a good job
- b) Desire to become fluent users of English: I intend to learn to speak English well
- c) Attitudes towards users of fluent English: I would like to interact with people who speak English

## Data Analysis

Table 3a: Number and distribution of informants from Secondary Schools

Province	Number	%
Western	81	29.56
Sabaragamuwa	35	12.77
Uva	23	8.39
Southern	34	12.41
North Western	22	8.03
Eastern	22	8.03
Northern	28	10.22
Central	29	10.58
<b>Total</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table 3b: Number and distribution of informants from universities.

University	Province	Number	%
Kelaniya & Sri J'Purara	Western	28	20.59
Sabaragamuwa	Sabaragamuwa	15	11.03
Uva-wellassa	Uva	15	11.03
Ruhuna	Southern	15	11.03
Wayamba	North Western	15	11.03
Jaffna	Northern	21	15.44
Rajarata	North Central	12	8.82
Peradeniya	Central	15	11.03
<b>Total</b>		<b>136</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 (a & b) shows the number of informants from the different provinces. In the case of the university students, information was obtained from different universities which are located in different provinces. However, it has to borne in mind that students who enroll for degrees at a particular university are not necessarily from that particular province.

Table 4: Gender and First Language (L1) of informants

	Secondary School learners			Undergraduates		
	Sinhala	Tamil	Total	Sinhala	Tamil	Total
Female	134	52	186	70	19	89
	68.02	67.53	67.88	64.81	67.86	65.44
Male	63	25	88	38	9	47
	31.98	32.47	32.12	35.19	32.14	34.56
Total	197	77	274	108	28	136
	71.90	28.10	100.00	79.41	20.59	100

71.9% of the Secondary school learners were Sinhala L1 speakers and 28% were Tamil L1 speakers. Among the undergraduates 79.41% were Sinhala L1 speakers and 20.59% were Tamils speakers. This reflects the demographic distribution of Sinhala and Tamil speakers in Sri Lanka in 2016. The female to male ratio is also approximately similar among the Sinhala L1 speakers and Tamil L1 speakers in both groups – the secondary school learners and undergraduates, with females constituting around 65% .

The average age of undergraduates was 21.72 while the average age of the secondary school learners is 16. Thus there is about a five year age difference between the two groups.

The paper will first look at student perceptions on the impact fluency in English will have in securing good employment.

### 3.1 English and Employment – Learner perceptions

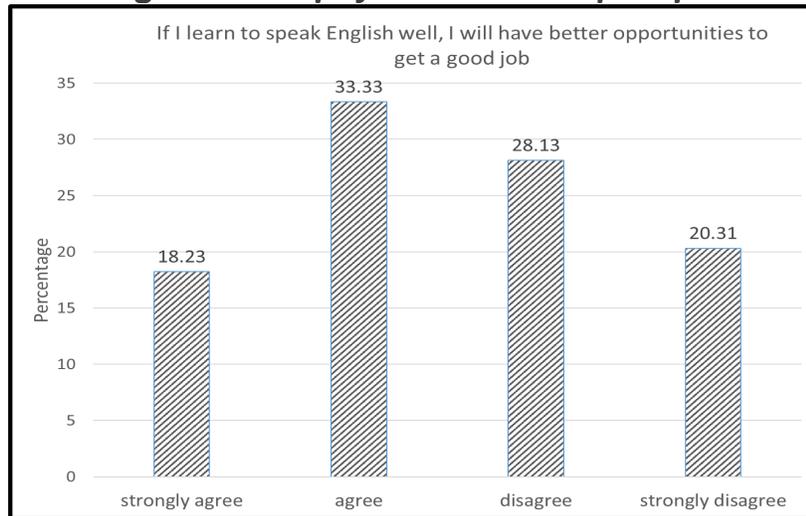


Figure 2: Student perceptions on the impact fluency in English will have in obtaining employment – Overall

Figure 2 shows that a majority of students (51.56%) agree with the view that fluency in English will facilitate employment. However, 48.44% do not agree with this view. Among these, 20.31%, a little less than a quarter, strongly disagree. It is necessary to see which type of student holds views contrary to the views expressed by authorities and employers. The larger number however, appear to subscribe to the commonly held neo-liberal views that in a globalizing world, fluent communication skills will facilitate the securing of employment.

Table 5: Student perceptions on the impact fluency in English will have in obtaining employment – Gender and Level

	Secondary school learners			Undergraduate		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
strongly agree	19.40%	16.70%	18.60%	16.67%	13.16%	15.45%
agree	35.70%	34.60%	35.40%	26.39%	26.32%	26.36%
Total agree	55.10%	51.30%	54.00%	43.06%	39.48%	41.81%
Disagree	24.50%	34.60%	27.40%	30.56%	36.84%	32.73%
strongly disagree	20.40%	14.10%	18.60%	26.39%	23.68%	25.45%
Total disagree	44.90%	48.70%	46.00%	56.95%	60.52%	58.18%

It can be seen from table 5 that a higher percentage of SSL (54%) than undergraduates (41.8%) believe that fluency in English will facilitate securing employment. Also, that female students both at secondary level (55%) and undergraduate level (43%) agree with the position that fluency in English facilitates obtaining employment. More than half the male SSL (51.3%) share this view while 60.52% of the male undergraduates do not subscribe to this view. Of those who disagree, nearly a quarter have very strong views. Thus it would appear that it is the male learners in Sri Lanka who do not believe that fluency in English will provide more employment opportunities while females are more likely to link English to employment.

Table 5 also shows that female SSL students hold stronger views than males, i.e. nearly 20% either strongly agree or disagree while the percentage of males who hold such strong views are lower. Thus, it appears that although more young females link English to employment, those who disagree with this position oppose it strongly. In the case of undergraduate students although the difference in the number of male and female students who either strongly agree or disagree is less, a very high percentage – almost one fourth of the cohort, do not believe that fluency in English will facilitate employment. This view is common to both female and male students although once again a higher percentage of females have stronger view. These views are contrary to the views expressed by authorities, policy makers and employers. A comparison of the views of female secondary school learner (SSL) with female undergraduate students show that the percentage that agree with the view has fallen from 55% to 43% and the percentage male students has fallen from 51% to 39%. Thus, 12% of students, of both genders, appear to have changed their point of view between school and university. We will next investigate whether similar beliefs are held by Sinhala first language speakers and Tami L1 speakers.

Table 6: Student perceptions on the impact fluency in English will have in obtaining employment – Sinhala and Tamil first language speakers

First Language	Secondary School learners		Undergraduates	
	Sinhala	Tamil	Sinhala	Tamil
Strongly agree	11.60%	42.20%	11.36%	31.82%
Agree	36.70%	31.30%	23.86%	36.36%
Total agree	48.30%	73.50%	35.22%	68.18%
Disagree	29.00%	20.30%	35.23%	22.73%
Strongly disagree	22.70%	6.30%	29.55%	9.09%
Total disagree	51.70%	26.60%	64.78%	31.82%

Table 6 shows a considerable difference in the views expressed by Sinhala L1 speakers and Tamil L1 speakers. 73% of the Tamil speaking SSL's agree with the position that fluency in English facilitates employment while only 48% of their Sinhala speaking counterparts do so. This pattern is reflected in the undergraduate learner views where 68% Tamil speaker agree while only 35% of Sinhala L1 speakers do. Thus, a higher percentage of learners from the majority community, both SSL and undergraduates do not hold the view that becoming fluent in English will enable them to get employment. On the other hand, a very high percentage of Tamil speaking learners both SSL and undergraduates link English with employment.

Given the socio-economic and political context in 21st century Sri Lanka, this is understandable. The primary language the State sector functions is Sinhala. In Tamil speaking areas of the country, both Tamil and English are used as the working languages by State institutions. Therefore, Sinhala L1 learners who envisage obtaining employment in state sector organizations do not need to be fluent in English unless they are planning on working at the management level or in the private sector which largely functions in English. Tamil L1 speakers therefore, if they are fluent in English, can obtain employment either in the State sector or in the private sector.

A comparison of SSL viewpoint with undergraduates' views show that 13% of Sinhala speakers and 5% Tamil speakers, who perceive a link between English and employment tend to change their point of view to disagree. It would appear

therefore, learners assume that once they obtain a degree, the qualification is sufficient to secure good employment. If they do not have a degree, English is seen as being more important.

*Table 7: Student perceptions on the impact fluency in English will have in obtaining employment – province wise*

	Secondary School learners				Undergraduates			
	strongly agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	strongly disagree%	Strongly agree %	agree	disagree	Strongly disagree
Western	16.10	34.30	32.10	17.50	17.86	21.43	25.00	35.71
Sabaragamuwa	12.80	43.60	30.80	12.80	0.00	25.00	58.33	16.67
Uva	9.10	9.10	9.10	72.70	12.50	12.50	50.00	25.00
Southern	2.90	41.20	35.30	20.60	5.00	30.00	25.00	40.00
North Western	35.70	35.70	14.30	14.30	0.00	37.50	25.00	37.50
Northern	81.80	9.10	9.10	0.00	33.33	42.86	14.29	9.52
North Central	37.50	43.80	12.50	6.30	50.00	0.00	50.00	0.00
Central	16.70	41.70	8.30	33.30	11.11	11.11	66.67	22.22
Total	18.60	35.40	27.40	18.60	17.30	28.18	30.00	24.55

It can be seen from table 8 that SSL students in the Northern, North Central and North Western provinces strongly agree with the view that fluency in English facilitates employment while more than 50% of SSL in the Western, Sabaragamuwa, and Central provinces agree with this view. More than half the SSL informants in the Uva and Southern provinces on the other hand disagree with this view.

The fact that demographically a majority of Tamil L1 speakers are in the Northern province explains the responses. While private sector organizations and higher level state institutions are found in the Central, Sabaragamuwa and North Western provinces, largely only state sector institutions are visible in the Uva province. Hence employment opportunities for fluent English speakers are less and could be impacting on the responses of learners in the Uva province. Although many private enterprises and higher level State institutions exist in the Southern province, it is also the province where the majority are Sinhala L1 speakers. The voting patterns in a particular area give an indication of the underlying ideology

of the voters. The fact that ethnic identities have played a role in Sri Lankan voting patterns is confirmed by research (Warnapala and Yehiya 2008). An examination of the political ideology expressed by presidential candidates and the voting patterns of the districts in the Southern province; Matara, Hambantota and Galle in the 2005 and the 2009 presidential elections show that these are the traditional stronghold of more nationalist Sinhala ideology.

*“this study shows that all the winners of the presidential elections (except in 2005) won them by appealing across racial and religious boundaries with a popular mandate. In 2005, there was a shift; the winner was able to secure victory by promoting a hard-line pro-Sinhala nationalistic platform” Warnapala and Yehiya (2008:1).*

Thus, learners in the Southern province too could hold views that reflect the wider Sinhala nationalist ideology, where English or any other language is seen as being secondary.

We will next look at young Sri Lankan learners’ intention to become fluent speakers of English.

### 3.2 Learner Intentions to become fluent speakers of English

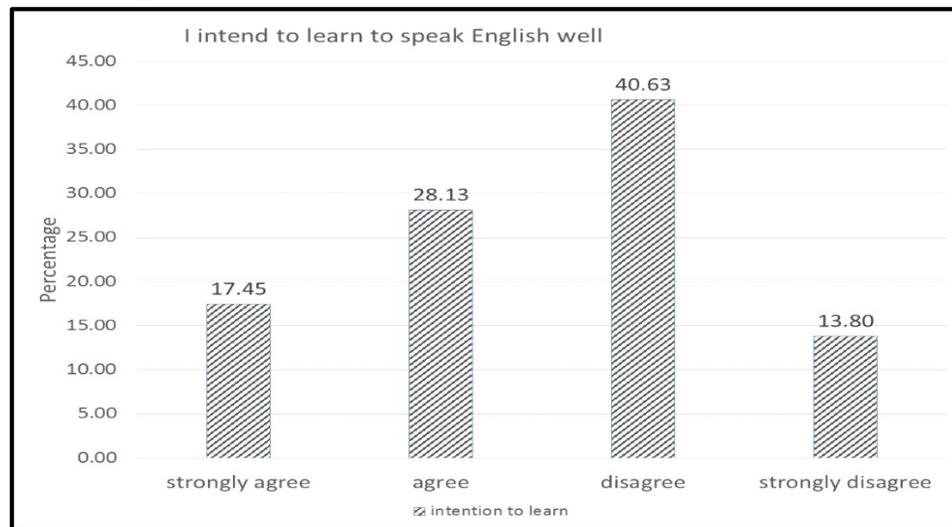


Figure 3: Intention to develop fluency in English - Overall

It can be seen from figure 3 that a majority of learners (54.43%) have stated that they do not intend to develop fluency in English. Of these, 13.8% have expressed strong views. At the same time, Figure 2 also shows that 45.57% of respondents do envisage acquiring good communication skills in English. Therefore it would appear that unlike in the past a considerable proportion of young people in Sri Lanka do intend to develop good communication skills in English.

Table 8: Learner intention to become fluent in English - Gender and Level

	Secondary school students %			Undergraduate %		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
strongly agree	19.40	16.70	18.60	18.06	7.89	14.55
agree	29.60	29.50	29.60	23.61	26.32	24.55
Total agree	49.00	46.20	48.20	41.67	34.21	39.10
disagree	39.30	37.20	38.70	43.06	50.00	45.45
strongly disagree	11.70	16.70	13.10	15.28	15.79	15.45
Total disagree	51.00	53.90	51.80	58.34	65.79	60.90

Table 8 shows that 48% of SSL learners and 39% of the undergraduate intend to develop fluency in English. Similarly, 51% of SSL and 60.9% of undergraduates have responded saying that they do not intend to develop good communication skills in English. Therefore, almost half of SSL and more than half of undergraduate students do not envisage becoming fluent in English.

There appears to be a link between perceiving the importance of fluency in English for employment purposes and the intention to become fluent. It was noted that 53% of SSL believe that fluency will facilitate employment (table 5), table 8 shows that 51% intend to become fluent. Table 5 showed that approximately 58% of the undergraduates did not believe that fluency facilitates securing employment and a similar percentage 60.9% say they have no intention of becoming fluent in the future (table 8).

When considering the responses of the females and male learners, it can be seen that the difference in intention between male and female SSL learners is small. In the case of undergraduates however, there is a marked difference in intention between female and male students. 41.6% of female learners intend to develop fluency while only approx. 34% of the male students do. At secondary school level, an almost equal percentage of male and female learners intend to develop fluency in English whereas at undergraduate level 10% fewer male undergraduates intend to become fluent.

A further observation of the data in Table 8 shows that the percentage of female learners who intend to become fluent at undergraduate level has decreased by 9%. In the case of male students about 12% change their views. As mentioned previously, it is possible that as undergraduates they believe that fluency in English is not a requirement for their future lives. It would be interesting to do a follow up qualitative study to find out what prompts this change in perceptions and intentions.

*Table 9: Learner intention to become fluent in English – Sinhala and Tamil first language speakers*

	Secondary school students		Undergraduate	
	Sinhala	Tamil	Sinhala	Tamil
strongly agree	15.90%	26.60%	7.95%	40.91%
Agree	25.60%	40.60%	27.27%	13.64%
Total agree	41.50%	67.20%	35.22%	54.55%
Disagree	44.90%	20.30%	46.59%	40.91%
strongly disagree	13.50%	12.50%	18.18%	4.55%
Total disagree	58.40%	32.80%	64.77%	45.46%

A comparison of Sinhala and Tamil SSL learners show that a much higher percentage (almost 26% more) of Tamil L1 speakers intend to develop good communication skills in English. In the case of undergraduates too a similar picture emerges though the difference is less. It is also interesting to note that almost an equal percentage of Tamil and Sinhala SSL have expressed very strong dislike or lack of intention to developing fluency. At undergraduate level the percentage that has strong opinions among Sinhala speakers has increased, while among the Tamil speakers the percentage has dramatically fallen to 4.5 %. However, it is also interesting to note that while about 68% of Tamil L1 undergraduates perceived a link between fluency in English and employment (Table 6) only 54% intend to enhance their communication skills in the future. It would appear that 14% who perceive the link do not intend to enhance their skills.

Table 9 also shows that the percentage of Sinhala L1 learners who wish to develop communication skills reduces only by about 6% from SSL to university while among the Tamil L1 speakers there is a drop by about 12% from SSL to university level. There could be many reasons for this difference. It must be borne in mind that during the 30 years of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka which ended in 2009, language and identity played a significant part. The Tamil speakers felt disempowered when Sinhala was declared the only official language in the country. Although Tamil was used by State institutions in Tamil speaking areas of the country, the default language in which official forms, correspondence and documents were available in, until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was Sinhala. It was expected that state sector employees even if they were Tamil L1 speakers will have a working knowledge of English and Sinhala. Thus, ideologically Tamil played and continues to play a significant role in the process of empowerment. Therefore, even though the Tamil L1 speakers recognize that fluency in English would be advantageous in securing employment, they may not want to 'betray' Tamil. The Tamil L1 learner of English in post conflict Sri Lanka is in a way at the periphery of the periphery. As pointed out by Canagarajah (1999), Sri Lanka as an ESL/EFL community is on the periphery. Within Sri Lanka, the Tamil speaking learner is not at the centre. The school text books and the national curriculum is planned in the South

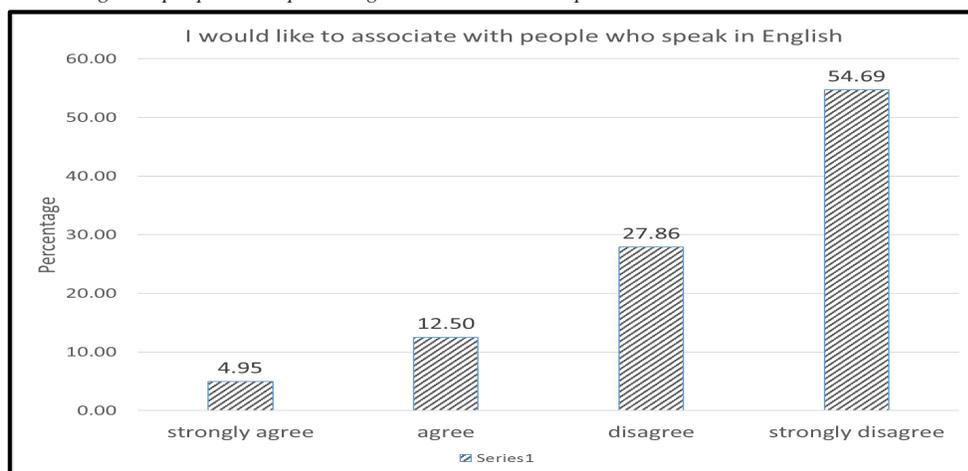
by predominantly Sinhala L1 speakers. These complex responses may yet be further manifestation of the resistance referred to by Canagarajah (1999).

### 3.3 Learners' views on associating with speakers of English

The third aspect that is investigated is the learners' desire to associate with people who speak in English. Although habitual English speakers may not be living in the learners' immediate neighbourhood at present, once the learner begins to seek employment and after securing employment it is very likely that s/he will encounter English speakers. Even if the learner does not have to interact closely with fluent bilinguals s/he may not be able to completely avoid such persons in the current world. In such situations, if the learner is fluent in English s/he will be comfortable in either a predominantly monolingual English speaking context or in a bilingual context.

Moreover, if a person perceives something or someone as being attractive or likeable, that person would wish to associate with the likeable other or, at the very least, have no objection to the association. In order to find out the learner attitudes towards persons who are fluent in English therefore, this question was included.

*Interacting with people who speak English – Learner Perceptions*



*Figure 4: Wish to interact with people who use English*

Figure 4 shows student responses to the question on whether they wish to associate people who speak in English in Sri Lanka. It can be seen very clearly that only a very small percentage (17.45%) wish to do so while the overwhelming majority (82.55%) decline. Of those who do not wish to, those with very strong views constitute the majority (54.6%) while those who have a strong desire to interact with people who speak in English constitute 4.95% of the total. Thus it would appear from the data analyzed up to now that learners do not reject the language but do not wish to interact with the users of the language. English is used in the work places by a larger majority than the habitual speakers by persons from varying backgrounds, and, translanguaging occurs naturally. Therefore, the wish to desist from associating with users of English would include both groups.

It is possible that the learners are resisting the ideologies of those who use English in Sri Lanka. It is not as if even those who can be considered monolingual in Sri Lanka, do not use English words such as 'hospital' 'doctor' 'injection' 'salon' 'taxi' 'ticket' 'phone' 'call' etc., in their daily encounters with family members and in other social interactions. Perhaps what speaking in English stands for, how they will be viewed by their immediate community – friends and associates etc., if they start communicating in English with each other or with fluent English speakers that is at play.

Table 10: Learners' wish associate with people who speak in English - Gender and Level

	Secondary school students			Undergraduate		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
strongly agree	1.00%	0.00%	0.70%	2.78%	0.00%	1.82%
agree	4.60%	5.10%	4.70%	2.78%	7.89%	4.55%
Total agree	5.60%	5.10%	5.40%	5.56%	7.89%	6.37%
disagree	44.90%	39.70%	43.40%	27.78%	31.58%	29.09%
strongly disagree	49.50%	55.10%	51.10%	66.67%	60.53%	64.55%
Total disagree	94.40%	94.80%	94.50%	94.45%	92.11%	93.64%

94.5% of SSL and 93.4% of undergraduates do not wish to associate with people who speak in English (table 10). Thus less than 10% of young people who are currently learning English, wish to interact with persons in Sri Lanka who use English. 94% of both male and female SSL learners and 94% female undergraduates and 92% male undergraduates hold this view. In this instance, unlike with the two previous questions, percentage of students who wish to associate English speakers is higher at undergraduate level (6.37%) than at SSL level (5.4%). Although the increase is minimal, the very fact that it has not decreased is of interest.

The pattern of responses of the two genders is interesting and contrary to what was noted previously. In response to the previous questions with regard to English and employment and the desire to learn more females responded positively, among the SSL as well as undergraduates. In this case however, an equal number of female and male SSL wish to interact with people who speak English (Table 10). In the case of undergraduates more male students wish to associate with speakers of English than female. It is of interest to find out which category of male students hold this view since male

undergraduate students were the most opposed to developing fluency in the language. Similarly, it is the female undergraduates who indicate the strongest dislike (66.6%) for associating with people who speak English. A slightly lower number (60.5%) of male undergraduates share such strong views. Among the SSL however, the pattern is reversed. More male students dislike to interact with English speakers (55%).

In order to find out whether it is the Sinhala L1 males or Tamil L1 males who least dislike associating with English speakers, it is necessary to look at the data in terms of the first language.

*Table 11: Learner intention to become fluent in English - Sinhala and Tamil first language speakers*

	Secondary school students		Undergraduate	
	Sinhala	Tamil	Sinhala	Tamil
strongly agree	1.00%	0.00%	0.00%	9.10%
agree	4.30%	6.30%	4.50%	4.50%
Total agree	5.30%	6.30%	4.50%	13.60%
disagree	47.30%	31.30%	26.10%	40.90%
strongly disagree	47.30%	62.50%	69.30%	45.50%
Total disagree	94.60%	93.80%	95.40%	86.40%

Table 11 shows that at SSL level both Sinhala speakers (94.6%) and Tamil speakers(93.8%) dislike associating with people who are bilingual in their communities. However, among the Sinhala speakers the distribution is equal between those who strongly dislike and mildly dislike. In the case of Tamil SSL speakers, the majority (62% ) express a strong dislike. Among the undergraduates however, this pattern is reversed with more Sinhala speakers (69%) strongly disliking while only 45% Tamils speakers express such antipathy. When

we consider the data in tables 10 and 11 together it would appear that it is among the Tamil speaking male learners whose dislike to associate with English speakers reduces once they enter university.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings indicate that in the 2nd decade of 21st century Sri Lanka the beliefs of young people between the ages of 15 – 24 regarding the commonly voiced assumption that good communication skills in English is a necessary skill for obtaining ‘good’ employment, are divided. About half the informants disagree with the view while the rest appear to subscribe to this view. The data also shows that the intention to develop fluency in English is linked to their perception of the importance of fluency in English is in securing employment. Thus, half of the learners at SSL level both believe there is a link between English and employment and express their intention to develop fluency. Less than half the undergraduates associate fluency with securing employment and less than 40% intend to become fluent. Therefore, a large percentage of learners, especially undergraduates, even though they are aware of the number of unemployed graduates protesting in public places and hearing it being attributed to poor communication skills in English seem to ‘refuse’ to hear the widely-proclaimed message conveyed by influential persons. This could be interpreted in many ways. Attribution of failure to poor methods, curriculum, teachers and facilities, though true to some extent is too simplistic.

As was discussed previously, the world-view presented by those who are in powerful or influential positions reflects the globally held neo-liberal views and assumptions. Many of the interventions introduced to facilitate this transition are supported by development agencies whose interests are also served through the maintenance of the global status quo. Therefore, the ideals of ‘success’ upheld are the ideals commonly held world over by the urban professional middle classes, quoted at the outset of this paper – i.e. ‘white-collar job, prestige, standard of living<sup>9</sup>’ These values are also upheld and perpetuated in television dominated Sri Lanka thorough advertisements of food, gadgets, hair and make-up (for women) and life style. It is possible that learners who do not subscribe

to these views have an alternative view of what being 'successful' entails.

Another possible reason is the pedagogy itself. It is now accepted that pedagogy, especially in ELT cannot be value-free. The ELT curriculum in Sri Lanka is largely designed by English teachers and experts from the centre who may be transmitting the assumptions of the dominant global community. It was mentioned that the interventions implemented did not yield the expected outcomes (Cumaranatunga, 2012). In addition to barriers noted in other studies, one possible reasons for the interventions not achieving the intended outcomes is perhaps that the implementers of these interventions at the grass root levels are responding to local needs and ideologies and are thus adapting and appropriating only what is required.

Complex differences in the beliefs of male and female learners were noted. Although a higher percentage of female students both at secondary and undergraduate levels agree with the position that fluency in English facilitates securing employment females who opposed this view had very strong views. At university level a very high percentage – almost one fourth of the cohort, males in particular, do not believe that fluency in English will facilitate employment. A considerable difference also exists in the views expressed by Sinhala L1 speakers and Tamil L1 speakers with a significant majority of Tamil speaking SSL's agreeing with the position that fluency in English facilitates employment while less than half their Sinhala speaking counterparts do so. Overall a shift in the point of view from SSL to university was noted. It is possible that as undergraduates they believe that fluency in English is not a requirement for their future lives as their qualifications will be sufficient to secure employment and a comfortable life. The possibility also exists that they do not aspire to the neo-liberal values of success in society based on competition and individualism that is touted by the global as well as the local status quo. It would be interesting to do a follow up qualitative studies to find out what prompts these changes in beliefs, perceptions and intentions at undergraduate level and the noted gender based differences. The sample of informants from individual universities in this was small. Also as all of the informants from universities were in the ESL

classroom, the views represented are the views of undergraduates who have been required to follow the ESL course as their English is weak. This may not reflect the general view of all undergraduates.

The difference of opinion between the Tamil and Sinhala speakers and among the Sinhala speakers could be due to the socio-economic contextual realities such as the availability of employment in the respective areas. It was also noted that despite the Tamil speakers linking English with employment and aspiring to some degree of fluency in the future, they vehemently resist becoming a part of the English speaking community even through association. Thus the acquisition of proficiency and becoming users of a language is not a clinical pragmatic exercise as assumed by politicians, scientists, employers and persons in authority. Learner responses are conditioned by the influences and socio-political and economic factors in their particular context. This was further demonstrated in the responses of even the younger learners in the Southern province of the country. Also the responses of the Sinhala speakers demonstrate that availability of opportunities for employment is not a deciding factor. In areas where the wider society in the majority community display strong ethno-linguistic identities fewer learners are even willing to acknowledge the link between English and employment.

Motivation is a crucial as well as a determining variable to be considered in second language acquisition. The responses indicate obtaining 'good' employment is not linked by half the learners to good communication skills in English. Thus it is clear that there isn't much instrumental motivation in the form of employment to develop fluency in English. Learners particularly at undergraduate level do not believe they 'ought-to' develop fluency in English either for the advantages conferred or to avoid the difficulties they may have to face due to the lack of it. Learner responses to the question with regard to the desire to interact with English speakers strongly indicates that they are not driven by integrative motivation either.

An overwhelming majority of secondary school learners, undergraduates, females, males, and Tamil as well as Sinhala

L1 speakers do not wish to interact with users of English. Of those who do not wish to those express a strong dislike constitutes the majority. A further difference to be noted is the difference between Sinhala and Tamil speakers in strongly or mildly disliking associating with users of English. The majority of Tamil SSL, expressed a strong dislike. The reasons for this difference could be, as discussed previously, the strong ethno-linguistic identity fostered in the North by the LTTE. However, data from previous studies show that learners do not reject the English language, which they believe enhances higher education and access to knowledge while this study has shown that they dissociate themselves from the users and the spoken language i.e. fluency. Given that all Sri Lankans who use English are bilingual and tend to use both languages (i.e. translanguaging) frequently and do not belong to a particular social class as was the case earlier, learners' refusal to associate with users is perhaps because their use of language represents an ideology which they do not subscribe to.

It could also be the manner in which the English user unconsciously presents him or herself to the world as well as how others perceive them. Language and identity are inextricably inter-twined. Communicating in a particular language and, in a multi-lingual context such as ours choosing a language to communicate in are inextricably bound up with identity. Tajfel (1974), points out that communication is a means of negotiating social identity and language contributes significantly to the construction, development and maintenance of social identity. Thus, using English means changing the way one chooses to present oneself. Associating with users of English which entails a change in one's own use of the language requires a shift in identity. It was noted before that it is the spoken language or fluency that is rejected. Therefore, it is not a total rejection of English, but what speaking in English stands for, how they will be viewed by their immediate community – friends and associates etc., if they start communicating in English with English speakers or with each other (which would be rather unnatural) that could be giving rise to these complex responses. For unlike learning a foreign language or learning to use English in another country, when Sri Lankan learners are requested to become English speakers they are also being requested to

make changes to their social-identities. The fact that a majority of learners are not comfortable with the social-identity of habitual Sinhala/Tamil – English bilinguals is clearly displayed in the responses.

These responses also show that although the authorities, employers, policy makers etc., view the inability of qualified persons to find suitable employment as disempowerment and, attribute poor communication skills in English to inadequacies in the teaching materials, methods, the quality of the teachers etc., the reasons are more complex. Learning a language, as pointed out by Canagarajah (1999), especially in Sri Lanka where English has never been a neutral foreign language, is not value free. Therefore, viewing the teaching - learning process as being a pragmatic enterprise which is devoid of associations and deep seated beliefs is too simplistic. The responses given even by the SSLs, brings out learner internal conflicts that they themselves may not be aware of.

Providing only pragmatic solutions such as the training of teachers, upgrading and modernizing of material and introducing on-line and other modern modes of learning based on the assumption that it is a pragmatic, cognitive and value-free activity is not sufficient. It is apparent that there are subtle and may be unconscious resistance to many factors including the world view that is presented. In contexts such as Sri Lanka, where three languages with varying and complex associations co-exist and there is an urgent need for reconciliation and mutual understanding within the country as well as the requirements mandated by the wider global context, learners face a complex situation. Learners need opportunities to re-negotiate the roles played and the values associated with all three languages while forging unique Lankan identities that combine the different ideologies, values, culture and world-views.

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