

WHY LEARN ENGLISH? A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POPULAR BELIEF VS. BELIEF OF EDUCATED 'MASSES'

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INTRODUCTION

Currently there is much public debate on the advantages conferred upon and enjoyed by those who are 'good' speakers of English in Sri Lanka and the 'privileges' denied to those who do not 'know' the language. Ideas and opinions have been expressed by members of the public among whom are academics, English teachers, teacher trainers, persons representing professional associations, economists, politicians, policy makers, etc., Most point to declining of standards and attribute it to learner external factors while the learners themselves are seen as being disadvantaged as result of not being able to use English with '*passable fluency*' (Jayasuriya, 2011a). In most articles the discourse is framed from the perspective of anglophiles who want to share, what is seen as a valuable resource, with the 'low proficient, disadvantaged and deprived' masses.

This paper seeks to examine the views expressed in the written media, the beliefs and assumptions underlying these viewpoints and to investigate whether the opinions expressed are indeed reflected in the opinions and beliefs expressed by a majority of educated persons, i.e. persons referred to by anglophiles as the 'masses' who are deemed to 'have an inadequate knowledge of English'. Whether there is concurrence on the advantages that can be enjoyed by developing 'a good command' of English. Particularly since it is acknowledged that people, especially adults, learn anything only if they see the need to learn it and '*without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long term goals, and neither are appropriate curricular and good teaching enough on their own to ensure student achievement*' (Dornyei, 2005 : 25), motivation being the impetus that drives a person to initiate, expend effort and to persist with the learning of a second language.

METHODOLOGY

Over 25 features, articles, letters-to-the editor, statements etc., that appeared in different written mass media (in the past 24 months) were examined and some common viewpoints identified. On a) the level of competency in English among Sri Lankans and the way it is labeled b) the characterization of learners d) disadvantages of not being 'proficient' in English and the advantages gained by learning it. We also examined the underlying assumptions and the implications of the comments made.

These 'popular' beliefs were compared with information given by 2019 undergraduates (following LLB, BMS, BSc, BTech and MATE programmes) enrolled in the English language courses conducted by the Department of Language Studies of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). Since OUSL undergraduates are mature individuals who represent a broad cross section of Sri Lankan society, their opinions can be thought to mirror those of the 'average' educated adult Sri Lankan i.e. the educated 'masses'. Student responses to six statements, which reflect the popularly held beliefs as to why English is necessary were elicited through a questionnaire[†]. The responses were examined in terms of age of informants, sex, region they live in and the degree programme enrolled in.

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† Administered as a part of a larger study.

The informants were requested to rank order the statement according to what they thought was the most important to the least important. These statements can also be tied up with the factors identified by Brown (2000) as forces that drive people to learn something.

Statement :	Factors that Motivate People to Learn
'Knowledge of English is necessary... to obtain employment / to get promotions at work'	need for <i>manipulation</i> or effecting a change in the environment – the utilitarian dimension
for my undergraduate / graduate studies at the university'	need for <i>exploration</i> - for gaining and internalizing knowledge
to continue with higher studies, obtain scholarships'	need for <i>knowledge</i> , - to process and expand the results of exploration
for social prestige and social advancement'	need for <i>Ego enhancement</i> , (also tied up with Maslow's (1970) need for self-esteem belonging and social status)
to pursue other (wider) areas of knowledge'	need for <i>stimulation</i> , by ideas, thoughts and feelings

Table 1: Factors which motivate learning and the corresponding statement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

'Popular' Opinion

Only selected statements which exemplify the popular views are presented due to word-limit constraints.

View	Example statement	No of articles idea expressed in
Deterioration of overall proficiency	- ' <i>the sad and deplorable state of English in Sri Lanka</i> ' needs upgrading. (1)	6 (24%)
The type of English used	- <i>sub-standard</i> , ' <i>broken English</i> ', ' <i>inadequate skills</i> ' (5)	6 (24%)
Speakers	- ' <i>underprivileged classes</i> '(5) ' <i>dispossessed masses</i> '(8)	6 (24%)
Failure attributed to external factors	- ' <i>lack of chances of hearing the spoken word in English</i> '(7) - failure of successive teaching methods, curricula, inadequate teacher training, etc.,	18 (72%)
Characterization of learners	- deprived, disempowered and excluded by powerful learner external forces which have prevented " <i>thousands of students, who, for no fault of theirs, have been thrust to the margins and beyond of the so-called English speaking world</i> " (4).	10 (29%)
Aspirations	Either (a) <i>aspire to improve their English</i> , (2) (underlying assumption - that learners are aware that their knowledge is inadequate) or (b) ' <i>the dispossessed masses chose to reject it altogether</i> ' (8) as the 'kaduva'.	15 (60%)
Disadvantaged	- <i>Lack of English, hampers their prospects of worthwhile higher education and decent employment opportunities</i> (8) - ' <i>The denial of a good knowledge of English.... amounts to depriving them of the key to the treasure of knowledge</i> '. (10)	10 (29%)
English is empowering	- ' <i>knowing English is prestigious</i> ' (2) - gives <i>access (to) sources of knowledge beyond their reach before</i> (8) <i>'reaching the outside world of knowledge'</i> (9) - <i>A vital factor that holds the key to s success</i> (2)	15 (60%)

Table 2: Excerpts that exemplify the commonly expressed views

Opinions of the 'Masses'

Prior to enrolling for English language programmes, students sit for a placement test, on the basis of which they are grouped according to proficiency; Beginner (0-19 marks), Part I (20 – 49) and Part II (50 – 69). The students who are aware of the basis on which they were grouped, were asked to rate their own proficiency in English.

	Poor	Weak	Adequate	Good	Excellent	Not stated
Beginner (very low proficiency)	2.01%	10.44%	63.65%	19.48%	1.41%	3.01%
Part_1 (low proficiency)	1.98%	9.62%	59.16%	25.96%	1.05%	2.24%
Part_2 (average proficiency)	0.53%	5.12%	54.27%	35.74%	2.37%	1.97%
Total	1.44%	8.13%	58.42%	28.05%	1.64%	2.33%

Table 3. Self-rating of Proficiency in English.

A very large majority of Sri Lankans, whose current level of proficiency in is English either poor or weak, believe that their knowledge is adequate. People, especially adults, who believe that their current knowledge of a subject is adequate, would not want to pursue that subject further (Dornyei, 2005). Therefore the popular assumption that a large number of 'low-proficient' learners aspire to enhance their knowledge is not supported. Neither would they see themselves as being 'disadvantaged and deprived individuals'. This seems to be the view held by the 'outsiders' or the 'anglophile other'.

In the public discourse, 'there is near unanimity locally on the need for widespread use of English in Sri Lanka' (Colombo Page, 2010). The student responses to the question 'Is English is necessary to live and work in Sri Lanka' indicates 90.38% agreement. Only 6.59% say 'No' - thus dispelling the popular notion that SL learners reject English.

Rank	Requirement for English	Percentage
1 st	To obtain employment - (<i>manipulation</i>)	38
2 nd	For current u'grad/grad studies - (<i>exploration</i>)	36
3 rd	To gain social acceptance/ prestige - (<i>ego enhancement</i>)	11.3
4 th	To obtain promotions - (<i>manipulation</i>)	7.5
5 th	To continue HED, obtain schools - (<i>knowledge</i>)	3.8
6 th	To gain wider knowledge in other areas - (<i>stimulation</i>)	2.7

Table 4: The overall importance given by informants to the stated benefits of knowing English.

Ranking the necessity of English 'to secure employment' first and 'for tertiary education' the second highest, concurs with the popularly expressed belief. Less than one eighth of total population believe that English is necessary for - ego enhancement, knowledge or for stimulation

The importance assigned to the purposes for which English is required differs from age group to age group. The beliefs held by the youngest group coincide with the popular belief – that English is most necessary to obtain employment, while the older groups rank it as being less important than it is for scholastic purposes. The oldest group does not believe that English opens doors to employment.

Although English is considered necessary for scholastic purposes, none believe that it is necessary for higher education or to obtain wider knowledge of the world. English is a requirement only to attain current technical or subject knowledge. The popular view that English 'empowers' a person by facilitating career advancement, social prestige and access to a wider body of knowledge, are not shared.

Given the perceived lack importance of English for promotions, higher education and expanding knowledge, which are future events, it could be surmised that these students don't see a need for English in their future lives either.

The association of English with social acceptability seems age related - it is not endorsed by younger persons while the oldest group rank it as the second most important reason. Studies carried out in the last decade show that English was associated with upward social mobility (Smarakkody, 2001), It would appear that the perceptions of the younger people have changed over time whereas the perceptions of the older people have not.

CONCLUSION

There is agreement as well as mismatch between the opinions of 'the masses' and the 'popular' opinions expressed a) on the spheres in which a knowledge of English confers advantages and b) the level of competency deemed acceptable. The 'masses' agree that English is necessary to obtain employment and for education while it is not seen as being very necessary for any other popularly stated purposes.

A subject can be recognized as being 'necessary', because a) of a 'top down' imposition - where the knowledge or 'acceptance' of the subject by a more dominant group is imposed upon the less dominant or, 2) the subject gains acceptance as the learners' society is convinced that it will lead to advantages. Here, it appears that English is accepted as being relevant for employment and education by the learner's society, but the relevance it has in other spheres seems to be one largely held by the 'English-fluent' segment of society.

There is a problem in the way 'knowledge' of English is conceptualized. A mismatch is seen between what 'popular' opinion deems 'adequate' and what the 'masses', which includes teacher trainers (MATE students), believe to be 'adequate'.

A further observation - that inadequate levels of proficiency in English, after 13 years of teaching, may not be exclusively due to learner external factors as popularly believed. Although these are contributory, the problem seems to be within the learner too - an indifference towards English coupled with a firm belief that their current knowledge is adequate to fulfill their present and future needs. Ryan and Deci (2000a) use the term 'Amotivation' to refer to the unwillingness to learn something when that activity is not valued by the learner, when the learner cannot see the usefulness of the task or the relevance to his life as the case appears to be with a large number of informants.

The data throws up another question - are we witnessing a movement from a strong rejection of English as a weapon in the 1970's to a resentful acceptance of it in the 1990's to an easygoing acceptance of a self-chosen form for limited purposes in 2010?

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