

English Language Teaching Training Programme for the non-English Teachers of the Vavuniya and Mannar Districts in Sri Lanka: A Study

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Abstract

When the war ended in 2009 Sri Lanka, the situation improved in the war-torn districts and many returnees arrived from abroad after some years of displacement. But they have to face a lot of challenges with regard to reintegration into local communities. Many children returning from Tamil Nadu received English lessons in Tamil Nadu and their English skills are more developed and the poor standard of English in Sri Lankan schools in Mannar and Vavuniya districts required more attention of the educationists of the districts. In order to support the development of English language skills in the education system in these districts Vavuniya Campus of the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka took the task of training non-English teachers whose English language teaching skills need to be developed. A six-month programme to promote the English language skills of the teachers with the objectives of empowering the professional level of the teachers was introduced with the hope of enabling the non-English teachers to be active in the classrooms with required knowledge of English. The paper will study qualitatively how the programme was conducted and how the proficiency level of the teachers was developed. It is noted to record the participants' involvement during the course and to see whether the course was able to increase their level of proficiency in English and improve their standard of English with regard to communication skills and the teaching methodology.

Keywords: Proficiency, professional level, empowering, participant's involvement.

Introduction: Challenges and Issues

While conditions were improving in Sri Lanka with the end of the war in 2009, many returnees arriving from India after years of displacement continue to face challenges regarding reintegration into local communities. Many children returning from Tamil Nadu, India received English lessons in classrooms when they were in refugee camps. In India, children's level of English is often well-developed through the local school system due to the English medium education. However in the north of Sri Lanka - while there are English teachers - they are often not well trained in teaching language and they do not practice their English for communication. The Zonal Directors of Education in the North complain that the quality of English language teaching is very poor. This is a particular challenge for returnees from India who have expressed a significant concern relating to the loss of English medium schools. While Tamil is their first language, their English skills are more developed than those of children in the north of Sri Lanka and there is concern from parents that English language skills would be lost on return to Sri Lanka. These challenges can lead to situations of exclusion for young returnees and encourage dropouts and a lack of participation in classroom environments. Therefore, assistance needs to focus on making educational opportunities attractive, and on creating productive environments for children to participate and engage with their peers.

Objectives of the study

The present study is to find out the improvement of non-English teachers who underwent training for six months to promote effective language teaching at school level and to see whether the objectives of the six-month English language teaching training provided to the non-English teachers have been achieved. The objectives of the course were to:

- provide intellectual input and training related to English language teaching (ELT) for teachers from the Government schools in Vavuniya and Mannar districts.
- enhance proficiency level of English and empower the professional level of teachers in the districts
- enrich their interactive and communicative skills in English.
- update with the latest trend in methodologies and approaches in ELT.

Research design and method of the study

The research was done making references to relevant books and journals along with interviews conducted with the administrators at the University and the Child Fund, academics, teacher participants and researchers. Questionnaires were also used to collect necessary information from the teacher participants and data in relation to English language teaching at primary and secondary level in the schools. The researcher undertook the present study of evaluating the progress of the English Language Teaching Training Programme at the University of Jaffna (Vavuniya Campus) in order to see the possibility of motivating teacher participants to learn the language successfully. The study was carried out with a sample population 48 non-English Teachers who followed the ELT training course at the Vavuniya Campus of the University of Jaffna for twenty-four weeks. Classroom observation, intervention by the researcher cum teacher with task-based and theatre based teaching methods and Computer Assisted Language Learning methods exploited during the sessions (Nunan 1989; Shriganeshan 2008). More of action- oriented and activity –oriented teaching sessions with more of participant involvement were introduced. Evaluation too was done on the basis of day to day participation and submission of portfolios at the end of every month. Model teaching and Team teaching were encouraged with presentations using multi-media projectors (Brumfit 1984). The teacher trainers were requested to submit the self evaluation reports collected from the teacher trainees. Their communicative skills were assessed in group sessions and their ability to communicate in English was evaluated by instructors and lecturers.

The Study

In order to support the development of English language skills in the education system in the project districts namely Vavuniya and Mannar in Sri Lanka, the Child Fund, a Non-Governmental Organisation identified Vavuniya Campus of the University of Jaffna to train government non-English teachers who had limited English teaching skills which needed to be developed. The concentration was focused on the non-English teachers who are expected to teach English in the primary classes due to the shortage of trained or qualified English teachers in the target districts. The English language knowledge level of the participants is below the standard of the persons who got credit pass in G.C.E. (O/L) English. Therefore, the Child Fund made a formal request the Campus Board and it readily agreed to conduct a six-month programme to promote the English language skills of the non-English teachers who are involved in the teaching of English along with the other major subjects like Tamil, Religion, Maths, Social studies etc in the primary schools in Mannar and Vavuniya districts.

Teacher training with more input

The Vavuniya Campus of the University of Jaffna provided advanced English training to selected non-English Teachers, 48 in number. The course provided teachers with advanced English language skills. The course was commenced on the 8th of April 2017 and completed on 29th October 2017: (24 weeks x 09 hours - 216 hrs) during weekends; Saturday 5 hrs and Sunday 4hrs at the Faculty of Business Studies, Mannar Road, Pambaimadhu, Vavuniya with the academic contribution of the professors, senior lecturers, lecturers and experienced teachers from various parts of the country. The course was conducted in two modes: Lecture mode with 144 hours handled by the staff with Post-graduate qualifications and practical sessions of 72 hours of handled by degree holders (or staff with equivalent qualifications) and experienced English Special Trained Teachers. The Course continued for six months. However, it had to be extended to another one month up to 29th October 2017 due to practical difficulties. The awarding ceremony was conducted on the 4th of November 2017. The Guests' comments on the performances like role plays, speeches, songs and drama staged by the participants were also accommodated in the process of evaluation.

Contents: Modules taught

The Course contents were as follows:

- Module 1: Grammar and Linguistics (2 hr Lx 24 wks = 48 hrs)
- Module 2: Language Teaching Methods & Learning Theories (2 hr L x 24 wks = 48 hrs)
- Module 3: Literature for Language Teaching (2 hr L x 24 wks = 48 hrs)
- Module 4: Teaching Language Skills (3 hrs Practical x 24 weeks)
 - Advanced Reading Skills (24 hrs)
 - Different Writing Skills (24 hrs)
 - Communication Skills (24 hrs)

Teaching methodology and the academic standard of the resource persons

The Course provided participants with required knowledge of English language skills and the training to teach English well using recognised methodologies. The Campus facilitated the staff with digital lecture halls where the lecturers were able to utilise the internet facilities and the multi-media to run an efficient teaching programme. Most of the resource persons introduced more activity-oriented methodology to teach grammar, reading and writing lessons. Listening activities were done with prepared listening CDs and recorded voices. The speech practices were done in groups and pair works (McCafferty, (Ed.). 2006). Stories, short poems and songs were introduced in order to provide lively teaching exercises to the participants (Maley and Alan, 1982; Gillian, 1993; Shriganeshan, 1999). Pieces from newspaper cutting and magazines were utilised to make them improve in reading comprehension and word stock. Stories and fables were also enacted in the classroom theatre in groups and role plays and simulations were improvised and performed in order to make them improve in their speaking and communication skills (Hill, 1986; Jones, 1982; Ladousse 1987; Gillian 1993, Shriganeshan, 2008). Role playing and simulations were part of the strategies exploited by the staff.

Results and discussion

Teachers showed their keen interest in their performance during the weekly lectures. In fact, teachers have had their difficulties in attending all the lectures. But their performance was assessed based on their day-to-day performances and with the final portfolios submitted at the end of the programme (Wainryb, 1992). The outcome achieved is analyzed in the next section as per the evaluation of the portfolios. Forty-eight non English Teachers were admitted as the need of the districts was to train the teachers who teach in the primary schools where no English teachers were available. Thirty-seven teachers were able to complete the course as most them come from very remote corners of the districts where public transport system is at minimum level.

Language skills improved

The participants got involved in many group activities (dialogues in pairs, simulations and role plays) and individual performances (solo acting, speeches and singing) in order to prove their improvement in their listening, speaking skills and communication skills (Hines, 2005; Woodland, 1993). As the participants got involved in performances their ability in speech was assessed. 80 % of the participants were able to produce appropriate responses to the questions raised by the fellow participants:

- Eg: Q: How do you conduct conversation practice in the classes
 A: I put them in pairs and practice short dialogues like “Where do you have lunch?
 “What do you do at your leisure?”

Their reading comprehension abilities were also tested during classroom activities. The participants were given newspaper cuttings to read and submit the summary of the news item. After writing down they were asked to present it to the fellow participants. Two instructors assessed their performance which was recorded in different ranges varying from 60 % to 70 %.

The participants started to speak in English with the fellow participants and it is interesting to note that they have started to speak in English in their respective classrooms. As for the speaking test the participants were given the task of teaching a particular unit from the respective class text as a teaching practice session with lesson plan. Their exercises provided a chance for the evaluators to check with

their teaching methodology in the classroom. 65 % of the participants prepared the lesson plan and taught the lesson to a group of students brought to the Training Centre and the examiners were satisfied with their performance in using classroom language effectively.

Ninety percent of the participants improved in their writing skills during the six-month period. It is noted as the instructors submitted their scores in three different performances of the tests conducted at the beginning, in the middle and in the final phases of the course. From the interviews made with the students it is found out that the net lessons used to promote grammar and listening helped to write correctly in their writing tests.

With different listening audio texts recorded in local and foreign voices the participants were given chances to practice their listening ability. They responded that as they were listening to various voices of the staff who conducted the lessons they become familiar with the accent and pronunciation of the English language and the net audio texts were also helpful to develop their listening skills. In the final assessment 90 percent got through the Listening Test with more than 80 marks.

As they do their micro teaching sessions their proficiency level was observed by the Instructors. Finally all the teachers were asked to submit a report on their teaching experience in English. They submitted in writing and their presentations were also assessed, too. 60 % of the participants were able to communicate and present their portfolios well. Thus, the output of their presentation skills was evaluated.

Further the teaching methodologies adopted by them to teach different units from the class texts were appropriate to the objectives and the themes of the texts. The examiners made suggestions as they continued with their teaching practice.

Knowledge of grammar increased

As the teaching of grammar was conducted through activity-oriented tasks with the support of internet lessons and the exercises selected from various books like “Steps to Mastery in English Grammar” by Bertram Chinnaiyah (1999) and “Applied English Grammar” by P.C. Das (2007/11). The interest created among the participants went to the level of buying a copy for them. Along with the traditional methods of introducing grammatical items one by one like tenses, prepositions, pronouns etc the participants were exposed to various exercises through task-based activities (Nunan, 1989) and internet lessons and it facilitated to learn the grammar in situations with proper English pronunciation (Widdowson, 1978).

At the beginning of the programme a diagnose test was conducted. It was one and half hour paper with a reading text, with three exercises testing the ability of grammar (Tenses, prepositions and conjunctions); similar to a paper set for G.C.E (O/L) conducted by the Sri Lankan Government. Less than 30 % received 40 marks for the paper checking the ability in grammar. It was found 20 % of them got 10 out of 35 marks allocated. After the session in the final test 80 % of the participants got 70 marks in the final test. Out of 35 marks they scored 30 marks for grammar. This indicates their improvement in their knowledge of grammar. It was also noted in their portfolios and presentations, too.

Skills developed in teaching methodologies

As one of the objectives of the programme is to promote the skill of handling the lessons with different methodologies and approaches the resource persons from various parts of the country delivered the necessary input theoretically and introduced the lessons exploiting various methodologies themselves during lectures with micro class teaching methods (Richards and Rogers, 1986/2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Littlewood, 1981; Jones, 1981; Holliday, 1994). Participants in small groups practised their teaching methods with their colleagues as students (Richards, & Lockhart, 1996). Therefore, the participants themselves were motivated to learn more. In their final portfolio the participants mentioned that the different methods and strategies adopted by the resource persons paved way for their learning of these different methods and utilising them in future in their respective classrooms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The participants’ involvement during the course was inspiring. The course increased their level of knowledge of English and improved their standard of English with regard to communication skills and the teaching methodology. Their professional level of teaching has been increased due to the

empowerment they have had with regard to the training and knowledge of methodologies of teaching. The course was able to achieve the intended outcomes of it by fulfilling English language needs of the participants. That is to have an understanding of the English language skills and the methods and approaches of teaching

English in the primary classes and the efficiency of utilizing them where necessary. It is noted that the participants were empowered with language proficiency and their professional level has been upgraded. The staff tried their best to provide intellectual input and training related to English language teaching (ELT) for teachers and enhance proficiency level of English and empower the professional level of teachers in the districts. The sessions enriched their interactive and communicative skills in English. The variety of teaching methods adopted by the lecturers and instructors and updated with the latest trend in methodologies and approaches in ELT motivated the participants highly to pick up and utilise them in their teaching. It is observed in their team teaching and micro teaching classes. Thus, the aims and objectives have been achieved and it is expected that the participants will be able to make use of them in the English classrooms in future. The performances done by the participants on the day of the Awarding Ceremony are a testimony to their language improvement. After the initial course, an English Language Teacher's Development Course - Phase II is recommended to be provided to the successful candidates in order to increase their language expertise. The limitation of the study was the inability to record the performances of the participants with a video camera and assess their development.

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