

THE SRI LANKAN TAMIL ESL ARTS UNDERGRADUATES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA

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In second language learning there has been a shift in recent years from an emphasis on intrinsic motivation to a concern with extrinsic factors. Only a small minority of writers will argue now that the process of learning a second language is in itself intellectually beneficial or that it is learnt to understand other cultures. Quirk (1972) says " A second language is a language necessary in certain social, commercial and education contexts". Further, English is used in the home, church, playground, professions, administration, markets, politics and by armed groups.

In Sri Lanka the situation differs from what obtains in other countries. School students study the English language to get through the year - end examination. Undergraduates also study the English language to get through the examinations conducted by the English Language Teaching Units. This is common to the University of Jaffna also. In the degree course the English Language is an ancillary subject.

Considering these factors, this paper advocates the cause of the unfortunate students in general and seeks to promote language proficiency among the University of Jaffna arts undergraduates.

Tamil students enter the Faculty of Arts in the University of Jaffna from various part of Sri Lanka. In the University of Jaffna the English language is mainly used for academic reference by these arts undergraduates. And they learn it for the annual English language examination.

Mere entry into the University does not guarantee success for a student. Failure and disillusionment become a serious problem for those students who are unprepared for academic work.. Not only in the University but also outside a student has to satisfy the stipulation for English language proficiency laid down by institutions outside the University.

In Sri Lanka anyone who seeks employment in the majority of professions must have a firm command of English, regardless of their linguistic background. However, not all undergraduates approach this task from the same starting point. There are obvious advantages for privileged children from better backgrounds because they do not encounter any conflict between their home and the preferred

language standard in school, business, government, University, etc. Less fortunate children from unfavourable background homes do not share this exposure.

That is, where a student seeks employment he/ she has to be ready to fulfil the employer's expectation. Therefore, an undergraduate has to take into account the expectation in society. Otherwise his/her degree will be valueless and he/she can not expect a successful career.

In this country a student is continuously learning English from year three in government schools where education is provided free for all. Assessment is made annually according to the language curriculum specified by the Ministry of Education. The learning of English also continues up to the General Certificate of Education - ordinary level (G.C.E. - O/L), that is year eleven. At this level an examination is conducted by the Ministry of Education throughout the island. The English language is also tested in this Examination with seven other subjects. Very recently the Ministry of Education again introduced English literature from year nine to year eleven but that is optional.

As soon as a student completes the G.C.E. - O/L examination he/she will be allowed to follow a two year university entrance course known as General Certificate of Education - Advanced level. In this course the English language is not a compulsory component. A student can offer four subjects and he/ she who scores the required average level in all four subjects can enter the University. Therefore, students concentrate only on the four subjects in their entrance course (G.C.E.- A/ L). As far as the English language is concerned, regular classes and assessment are available only up to year eleven (G.C.E. - O/L).

LINGUISTIC GAP

In the general education curriculum, the English language has been provided equal status. But because of the lack of teaching facilities, the limited number of trained teachers, absence of parents' encouragement and the financial situation in the government schools, students who learn English as a second language generally do not reach the required proficiency level. These students can be called less fortunate students. Many private schools take this as a challenge and try to boost the students' English language proficiency. These leading private schools make additional efforts through the use of effective English language teaching aids and increase the number of hours to promote the students' proficiency.

Anyhow these opportunities are only available to those who are able to pay money and gain admission to private schools. These students can be called fortunate.

nate students.

In the regular English language learning programme there is a gap between the year eleven students and the University entrants. During their two year G.C.E. - A/L period they will not study the English language unless they are highly motivated. This gap further affects the less fortunate students, specially those who are financially unable to join private schools.

LINGUISTIC BRIDGE

To bridge this language learning gap, the government has introduced an English language learning programme known as General English Language Teaching (GELT). This course is available free of charge for those who have passed the G.C.E - A/L and are awaiting University entrance. This was introduced in 1988 by the Ministry of Education and the University Grants Commission. The prescribed duration for this programme is six months. But again there are some problems in implementing this programme fully in the North and East because of the prevailing civil disturbances. Therefore, when they enter the University most of them are not able to attain the required level.

OTHER INFLUENCING FACTORS

There are a number of factors influencing a student when he/she is introduced to a language other than his/her M.T. As far as Tamil student's are concerned, the following factors have been identified as those influencing ESL teaching.

- 1) Lack or exposure to the English language and limited teaching facilities.
- 2) Linguistic and cultural mismatch between the home and the University.
- 3) Factors associated with socioeconomic status.

(These factors need to be analysed separately).

Many scholars often tend to criticize students from the rural areas and those coming from poor financial backgrounds for their low level proficiency in English without taking sufficient account of the students intelligence and abilities. This paper tries to seek remedial measures for the less fortunate undergraduates whose abilities have been thus ignored. John bough says (1987) "Social status and linguistic behaviour are closely aligned". That is, students from the better socio - economic background are able to perform well in the language classroom and the examination because they have done the academic reference required by the Uni-

versity. This is because they come from a home where equal care is taken by the parents about English language proficiency, whereas the less fortunate students from rural schools and poor financial backgrounds may not be able to compete with the fortunate students, in the English language examination and even in doing academic reference.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO AN UNDERGRADUATE

These less fortunate students are directly affected because they are unable to successfully face the internal English language requirement and examination annually conducted by the University. If they do not get through this language examination they will not be provided with the degree certificate even though they score well in their main subject / subjects.

Secondly, these less fortunate students are unable to do the necessary academic references in English for their main subjects. English academic references are vital for University undergraduates to achieve a high standard in their respective main subjects. Even though they may be more intelligent students, because of the lower English language proficiency they are unable to do the academic references. This situation also indirectly affects their prospects of obtaining a class in their main subjects. For them it is difficult to beat the fortunate undergraduates. If a student fails to get pass marks in the English language final examination, his/ her result will be withheld.

The chief aim of ESL in the University of Jaffna is to provide all students with skills that are competitive and marketable, regardless of their social background.

PARTICIPATORY LEVEL OF UNDERGRADUATES IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Generally the student participation in the school classroom for all subjects is very minimal from year one to twelve, because the traditional school classroom set up moulds them to be passive. Teachers are the main actors and students are passive. Teachers are the main actors and students are passive in schools (the syllabus also is a teacher - centered one). This is applicable even to the ESL classroom in schools. In the University too undergraduates exhibit the same passive behaviour in the ESL classroom. In a language classroom active participation is a must; since undergraduates are new to this role in the language classroom, they are reluctant to participate. Though, at University level, undergraduates are in-

formed about the valuable role that active participation by the students can play in ESL, years of playing a passive role in the school classroom constitute an almost insurmountable barrier. The existing assessment system for the English language also allows them to be passive. That is without any active role, undergraduates can pass in their ESL examination. This prevailing system itself also discourages the active role of the undergraduates.

CONCLUSION

Steps should be taken simultaneously from various angles to improve the language proficiency level of the undergraduates. In the University of Jaffna for the first year undergraduates, general English is taught. Specially, general grammatical items are included in the existing syllabus. Then for the second and third year it becomes a subject-oriented course.

But what is envisaged is a student - centered programme. At this tertiary level, teaching English grammar is not a challenging one. That is, grammar should not be taught in isolation.

A curriculum which is suited to develop specific English language proficiency can be vital for the undergraduates to attain their goals. To stimulate the students to play an active role in the language classroom, a student - centered programme is vital. This student centered syllabus should be organized around the particular kind of skills the student needs to master. Of course this type will not provide opportunities for the learners to 'acquire' the English language properly. But the type will guarantee their language proficiency in and outside the campus. On the other hand this will boost the motivational and participatory level of the undergraduates. The language teacher should strive to develop systematic interaction among the students. Usually, in the University of Jaffna ESL classroom students reveal their oppositional tendency against the prevailing system by drawing pictures, writing messages to the opposite sex and modifying the visuals available in the English language text. (See, e.g. Suresh Canagarajah, TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 27, P 601 - 625). If they are involved in interaction these abilities can be fully utilized in the language classroom.

A nontraditional classroom evaluation should be introduced in language classes. There are many different techniques available which language teachers may employ if they so desire. Some of them are proficiency rating scales, Close tests, performance - based rating scales, discrete point tests, counselling interviews, standardized self-assessment profiles, self reports, and analysis of tape and video re-

cordings. This system may create greater self awareness among the undergraduates.

In the case of learner - centered language teaching programmes, it should be obvious that much greater demands are placed on language teachers. They need highly developed skills in needs assessment, counselling, objective setting of tests and their evaluation.

The existing administrative systems are still based on a subject - centred view of English language learning. It should look into student's benefits as far as language is concerned. According to the number of the students, funds should be allocated for these language learning facilities.

At the University level, the traditional classroom setup should be modified according to present needs and requirements. For example, audio - visuals (Projector, over - head projector, T.V., radio etc.,) and specially electronic media like computer, should be introduced for English language teaching. For the tertiary level English language teaching, chalk, board, and talk will not help to promote language proficiency. These modern teaching aids on the other hand, may create an awareness among the undergraduates about language learning. This system will eradicate the habit of playing a passive role by sitting with a note book and a ball point pen, and instead encourage undergraduates to play an active role.

The English language teachers in the University should be considered as an asset of society and they must be encouraged to participate in seminars and workshops related to modern language teaching methods. The University itself should organize link programme with leading foreign Universities to upgrade the teaching skills of the language teachers.

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As a means of evaluation, this quality in second language learning should be seen as the government in order to provide a more effective and efficient way of learning. The importance of this paper is to provide a more effective and efficient way of learning. The importance of this paper is to provide a more effective and efficient way of learning. The importance of this paper is to provide a more effective and efficient way of learning.

In order to make a valid comparison, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the nature of the data. The data in this study are based on a series of interviews with teachers and students. The data in this study are based on a series of interviews with teachers and students. The data in this study are based on a series of interviews with teachers and students.

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