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## Overview of Changes in the Sri Lankan English Education System: From the Colonial Era to Present Day Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** This paper presents an overview of the Sri Lankan education system spanning from the colonial era to present day Sri Lanka. Beginning with the teaching of Buddhist scriptures, education has evolved through the influence of Portuguese (1505), Dutch (1656) and British rule (1796). English was given priority until Sri Lanka regained its independence in 1948. The Sinhala Only Act (1956) and reversed Act of 1958 reduced the role of English as an official language and allowed for the proliferation of schools in Sinhala and Tamil. The dominance of the regional languages shifted due to the implementation of open economy (1977) and spread of globalization. While the education system has attempted to integrate new changes like bilingual education and English as a life skill program to address the global needs of English, uneven distribution of facilities appears to be a continual problem faced by present day Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** bilingual, education system, English education, colonial impact, Sinhala Only Act.

### 1. Historical Overview of Education

The Sri Lankan education system goes back to the prehistoric period of King Devanampiyatissa who was the ruler of the country when Buddhism was introduced. The beginning of the formal education

set with the introduction of Buddhism by Mihindu Thero, the son of great Indian emperor, Asoka (260BC). Since then, the education system evolved around the Buddhist temples and Pirivenas (even today Piriven education plays a significant role in education of Buddhist monks and limited amount of ordinary students by engaging with the Ministry of Education). During this period education was only limited to the elite and Buddhist monks taught reading and writing solely for the purpose of religious knowledge. This education was primarily based on reading and writing of Sinhala and Buddhism. According to Mahavansa, Sinhala language was brought into Sri Lanka by North East Indians and it was influenced by many languages specially Pali and Sanskrit. The signs of early literacy still appear in Seegiri Graffiti, chronicles of Mahavansa and Deepavansa and archeological sites in Anuradhapura and Pollonnaruwa. Tamil education was based on Indian tradition and only privileged high caste young men received the opportunity to learn from Brahmin schools located near the Hindu temples (Punchi 2001). The temple centered education system changed with the invasion of foreign powers such as Portuguese in 1505, Dutch in 1656 and British in 1796. The British took over the sovereignty of the whole country in 1815 and transformed each and every aspect of the country including education during 1796-1948.

## **2. Emergence of English in the Education System During the Colonial Period**

The British period should be seen as the most dominant period – economically, politically, educationally and socially – since the Portuguese and Dutch were more concerned with trade and were not so interested in bringing big changes to the existing administration. The British, however, were not only concerned with the trade, but played a more prominent role in introducing the plantation economy with the introduction of tea and rubber cultivations. In fact, the traditional paddy cultivation based lifestyle was changed. They also changed the temple centered education system into the English based education system through the expansion of schools around the country in an attempt to produce English speaking locals who could assist them in their daily duties and law enforcement. The English language, therefore, became the dominant language just as their Anglo education system.

During the early period, missionaries were largely seen as responsible for the religious and educational activities. In fact, the whole education system was controlled by the Christian clergy (Dharmadasa 1991). This education system was aimed to spread Christianity and English language. The British Governor Lord North proposed to send two youths from state schools every year to British universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The scholars who were sent to Britain during 1812-1834 were specially ordained as Christian ministers. It was hoped to form a class “attached to their country by birth.” In fact, the major objective of the system was to create an English speaking Christian class (Pieris 1964). This predominant class later entered into the mainstream of the country and a majority of the sect continues to dominate the politics of the country. A British education system was established through a series of constitutional changes. Among these reforms, the 1833 Colebrook and Cameron reformation remain significant to the history of the Sri Lankan education system.

### **3. Important Constitutional Reforms**

The Colebrook and Cameron Commission (1833) remains a watershed moment in the Sri Lankan education system since this is the period in history where the church centered education was reduced. Through the introduction of strategic educational reforms, the nation was able to create an English competent local community that could support their administration. This step reduced the need to spend huge sums to bring over civil servants from their motherland (England). In fact, the reformation helped them to have native civil servants for lower salaries and natives (locals) were allowed to enter the civil service. Although during this period the higher administrators and higher technical cadres came from England, only clerical and lower grades of administration, teachers for the English language schools and minor government functionaries were recruited locally.

Liberal ideal changes in England caused the changing of attitudes toward the colonial nations like Sri Lanka. As a result, they thought to transplant the British institutions in the colonies and to change the feudal, caste ridden society. The existing Tamil and

Sinhalese schools were considered as insufficient to give knowledge to the contemporary needs (especially to serve the British administration). They recommended that “a competent knowledge of the English language should be required in the principal native functionaries” (Pieris 1964). Initially, they had appointed commissions to manage education and took control of education from the church to government. The first British model Colombo Academy was established in 1835 as the principal public school in the island as a result of the educational changes. Eleven English elementary schools were opened in 1835 and the number increased to thirty five in 1837. Government vernacular schools were discriminated and by 1839 there were only five government vernacular schools. Instead of that, they had implemented three superior English schools in Colombo, Galle and Kandy. The acquisition of English was encouraged as a means of civilization (Dharmadasa 1992).

With Macalam reforms (1910), Ceylonese was allowed to elect one member of the legislative council. The franchise right was given based on education and wealth. English speaking and English writing ability was considered the markers of the educated. Thus, English competency made the path to have the basic rights in the country. Indirectly, it also created the path for the upward social mobility providing access to a range of occupations that were considered more lucrative and prestigious in the colonial administration. The vernacular educated was confined to less aspiring jobs as a vernacular school teacher, notary or ayurvedic (local) physician (Punchy, 2001). According to T. Karunakaran (2011b) there were many reasons for Sri Lankans to acquire English. Among them especially English made the path to uplift the social ladder regardless of the existing caste hierarchy, which was well established in the country. This led to a transition in the middle class society in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankans received the Universal Franchise right in 1931 through Donoughmore commission reforms. This made revolutionary changes in the Sri Lankan society. A special committee was appointed in 1942 to observe the education system and it made suggestions to make available education free of charge for all, make national languages as the medium of instruction, provide instructions in the

religion of the child's parents, protect teachers from exploitation and make provisions for adult education. These recommendations still have the validity of the Sri Lankan education system. With the help of suggestions made by the committee, C.W.W. Kannangara who is the father of free education and the first Education Minister in Sri Lanka changed the whole existing British education system in the country in 1943. He introduced central colleges in the country to provide English medium education for all students in Sri Lanka free of charge. He established 54 central colleges around the country. Free education from kindergarten to university and introduction of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the primary were established in 1945. This led to minimize the social difference between the elite and non-elite. Christopher Bjork (2006) introduces C.W.W. Kananangara, the first Education Minister in Sri Lanka as the driving force of the education policies. Kananangara wanted to remove privileges and prejudices of education through equalization of educational opportunities for children. This resulted in a large expansion of the school going population. According to P. Isenman (1980) adult literacy rate gradually increased from 58% in 1946 to 78% in 1973. And school enrollment increased from 41% to 86% during the same period. The liberalization of educational opportunities caused the increase of literacy and school enrollment. Even after the centralization of English learning facilities, the attitudes of the elite remained unchanged. And the degree to which an individual's English reflects mother tongue interference was considered as the most powerful indicator of social class (Fernando, 1977).

#### **4. Change in Colonial Language Policy**

Sri Lanka received independence in 1948. After independence, Sri Lankans fought against the British language policies. In 1956, Sinhala Only Act (official language Act No. 33 of 1956) or "Swabasha Panatha" was passed by the parliament of Ceylon as the first step to realize S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's election campaign promises in 1956. The act replaced the dominance of English as the official language of Ceylon with Sinhala. The act was reversed in 1958 and introduced Tamil language special provisions due to the strong opposition of Tamil speaking communities. This also paved the way for the use of Tamil

language as the medium of instruction, and as a medium of examination for the admission of public service. The dominance of English language lost its ground following Sri Lanka's independence due to rising nationalistic sentiments. Ordinary citizens began to view English and British negatively and felt that they could enjoy better lifestyles by neglecting all things British. The national languages went on to play an important role and in accordance with the constitution chapter IV of Sri Lanka (1978), both Sinhala and Tamil were made the official and national languages of the country. According to the act, a person is entitled to be educated through the medium of either National Languages in primary and secondary school levels. However, this provision was not extended to the institute of higher education where the medium of instruction remained in a language other than the national language.

## **5. Recent Trends in English Education Policies**

Sri Lankan educational policies and goals focus on a holistic and sustainable development for the people of Sri Lanka (National Report, 2004). According to the accepted national policy, primary students are promoted to acquire Activity Based Oral English through conversational/situational approaches by the class teacher. Junior secondary students begin to learn English as a second language from grade 6 and they are expected to sit for the General Certificate Examination of Ordinary Level (G.C.E. O/L) in Grade 11 and they have to sit for General English Paper in General Certificate Examination of Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) in grade 13 (National Report 2004).

Following independence, Sri Lankan education policies remained largely focused on prioritizing the national languages (Sinhala and Tamil) in the country. The situation began to change due to the introduction of open economy in 1977 and spread of globalization. In that scenario English became the language of communication with the international community. The need of English as the communication tool wouldn't be separate from the life of the Sri Lankans as a service provider in the world. The enhancement of Information Communication Technology (ICT) bridges the gap too. In fact, English language recurs

as a compulsory component of the education system due to the existing needs of the world.

The bilingual education system has gradually been put into practice in Sri Lanka since 2001 as an effort to meet the current needs of the world. According to Priyatha Nanayakkara (Director, Bilingual Education Branch) the purpose of the program is to use English as a tool for thinking with the global mind while protecting and caring local languages and cultural identity (Algama 2009). Bilingual education from grade 6 was implemented under the adapted circular No. 05/2007 on 02.03.2007 (NIE 2007). English is considered as the second language in the curriculum and also considered as the link language of the country by the 13th amendment to the constitution. The bilingual teaching technique is currently applied only to a few schools in Sri Lanka. Majority of schools continue to follow the monolingual system of teaching either in Sinhala or Tamil and English is taught as a subject. According to the census of Ministry of Education (2011), there are 609 bilingual schools out of a total 9731 schools in Sri Lanka. Bilingual education is still in the primary stage and needs to be expanded to achieve the expected goal. Bilingual students exhibit a positive progress according to the 2007 G.C.E. (O/L) results. More than 65%, 74%, 84% and 77% of students were able to obtain credit, very good pass or distinction for the subjects of science, mathematics, health and physical education and social studies respectively (Source: Ministry of Education). Yet, these schools have continuous issues. Karunakaran (2011a) highlights the shortage of teachers in bilingual schools for the disciplines of social sciences. Further, he indicates that social sciences require an in-depth knowledge of English, but most of the teachers in social sciences are not very proficient in English and they teach in their mother tongue.

English as a Life Skill is a program initiated in 2009 by emphasizing the year 2009 as the ‘Year of English and IT’. Its aim was to teach English in an understandable way to use it without fear and reluctance. The continued failure of English learning in the country heavily influenced the ‘English as a Life Skill’. It was identified that the students’ lack of competence was in speaking English. In addition to that, global requirement of English made the path of the initiation.



## **6. Challenges**

The Sri Lankan education system is expected to provide equal opportunities to all primary and secondary students, but still it couldn't be achieved and rural students remain in lack of physical and human resources. Education for all as a key concept in the current education system needs to address the children in the disadvantageous settings. Moreover, poverty is a big challenge for education. The existing free supply of uniforms, text books, and midday school meal and health promotion supports for the economically disadvantaged children in the country is not sufficient to address the issue. Rural students, especially suffer due to lack of human and physical facilities in their schools.

## **7. Conclusion**

Sri Lankan English education started in British era and was subjected to change from time to time. Kannangara reforms (1943) liberalized the English education throughout the country by establishing Central Colleges in all over the country. Sinhala Only Act (1956) negated the importance of English in the country. In 1977, the constitution accepted either national languages as the medium of instruction in the education and English was considered as the second language in the school curriculum. Open economy and the spread of globalization uplifted the importance of English. Bilingual education and English as a Life Skill programs were introduced to face the global challenges recently. Anyhow, the difficulty of providing equal opportunities, including IT facilities, and other physical and human resources slowed down the expected progress in the education system.

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