

English as a medium of school instruction in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lankan government took a decision several years back to allow English medium teaching in schools where the school authorities feel that it is feasible to do so. The implicit objective of such a policy decision appears to be to encourage children to study and sit examinations in an international language, so that their learning and employment opportunities in a liberal economic environment may be enhanced. The success of such a policy naturally depends on a range of factors such as the nature of the prevailing learning environment, availability of educational resources at school level such as competent teachers, libraries, and equipment... etc. The purpose of this short article is not to make an assessment of the conditions prevailing in different parts of the country in terms of resources available. It is an attempt to look at the performance of school children at national examinations in English and draw some conclusions as to how feasible and justifiable such a policy can be given the present economic and social circumstances in the country.

In this article I first present some data on student performance in English at the GCE (O/L) examination. This examination does not expect the students to have a high level of competence in the English language. In other words, those who pass the English language paper at this level can not be expected to possess a reasonable working knowledge of English to be able to read, write and speak English effectively. Nevertheless, the examination results can be used as an indicator of the availability of learning opportunities in different parts of the country.

As table 01 shows, a majority of pupils in Sri Lanka who sat the O/L English paper over the last decade have failed the subject. In 2000, as much as 70% of the pupils belonged to this category. There are, of course significant regional variations in the above regard. For instance, in districts like Monaragala, and Nuwara Eliya, the proportion is over 80%. In the district of Colombo, where the facilities for English teaching are better, the failure rate is as low as 34%. In other words, most students in less developed regions do not acquire even a minimal level of competency in the English language, before they either move in to the Advanced Level or leave school for employment.

The above pattern becomes more pronounced when one looks at the proportion of students who reach a higher level of competency. Less than 5% of the pupils who sat the (O/L) examination had received distinctions in 2000. The situation has been worse in previous years. On the other hand, in a backward district like Monaragala, the proportion of students with distinctions is less than 1%. Colombo district has recorded a much higher percentage of students with distinctions, nearly 22.86% in 2000. Performance of students in other districts lags far behind that of Colombo district students. (see Table: 02). Even if we add those who score ordinary passes in the subject, those who get through the examination constitute a small minority. In some backward districts, the proportion is around 10% while in others the proportion is less than 25% (see Table 03).

What is evident from the data presented so far is that the vast majority of students in the country fail to get through the O/L English examination, which as mentioned before is even no proof of a reasonable working knowledge of the language. In other words, most students in the country, in

particular those living outside the Colombo metropolitan area clearly do not have the competency to engage in their further studies in the English medium (see Table 01).

The above situation is no doubt a reflection of the poor learning environment prevailing in most parts of the country. While the lack of competent teachers in most schools to teach English is no doubt the main constraint, the absence of libraries, audio visual equipment and opportunities for practical usage of the language etc. is also a major factor.

The adoption of a Swabhasha education policy after independence did away with the need to learn languages other than one's own. The result was the gradual spread of monolingualism throughout the country with serious social and political implications as current ethnic crisis illustrates (see Table 04). When older bilingual teachers retired from the teaching service, they were replaced by monolingual teachers. Many of the bilingual teachers who were still around in the 1980's were given the golden handshake in order to reduce the number of public sector employees as part of World Bank sponsored public sector reform. The result was further depletion of competent teachers with the ability to teach in English. Today the vast majority of teachers in the country are as monolingual as their pupils. This is the case almost everywhere in the country, with the exception of a few privileged public schools; overall private colleges and international schools in and around Colombo (see Table 04).

Conclusion

It is against the above background that we have to assess the viability and justifiability of the introduction of English medium instruction in schools. Given the present resource endowments of most schools in the country, it is certainly not a viable proposition, except in a very few state schools. The prevailing resource gap is so enormous that, it would require a major investment programme extending over a long period of time to rectify the situation. Given the budgetary problems that the government is faced with at the present juncture, it is difficult to imagine how such a major investment programme could be launched and sustained over a reasonable period of time. On the other hand, if the necessary resources are not given, it is equally difficult to imagine how the school system could adjust to the new challenge of imparting instruction in the English medium in an equitable and just manner. What will happen is not difficult to imagine. A few privileged schools may be able to provide instruction to a handful of students in a few urban centres, leaving the rest of the student population untouched. They will be further marginalized in an already polarized and segmented education system, on class and ethno-linguistic lines. Nevertheless, we

should take a policy decision to provide schools with the necessary resources and implement in the next few years so that students may be able to acquire English language skills. Moreover, we would have utilized the loan given by the Indian government to import English teachers from India, instead of vehicles to politicians and others. It is only then that we could provide the students with a choice with respect to the medium in which they want to undertake their studies, but what we have done is to put the cart before the horse. So much for the wisdom of our leaders and their advisors.

Table 1 - Percentages of students who failed at O/L examination in English

Education regions	1990	1995	2000
All Ceylon	68.65	63.55	70.16
Colombo	30.88	28.84	34.35
Kandy	23	63.03	65.49
Kurunegala	20.06	62.71	62.84
Galle	24.18	62.19	67.15
Kalutara	24.82	59.74	66.42
N'Eliya	16.92	67.66	80.45
Monaragala	14.17	79.5	83.61
Puttalam	17.3	N.A*	81.49

*Not available

Table 2 - Percentages of students with distinctions at O/L examination in English

Education regions	1990	1995	2000
All Sri Lanka	2.47	3.04	4.19
Colombo	16.88	16.85	22.86
Kandy	3.26	3.54	5.46
Kurunegala	1.14	3.12	6.15
Galle	2.13	3.07	4.85
Kalutara	1.62	2.81	3.90
N'Eliya	0.25	0.95	1.20
Monaragala	0.25	0.69	0.88
Puttalam	0.79	N.A*	1.06

*Not available

Table 3 - Percentages of students with ordinary passes at O/L examinations in English

Education regions	1990	1995	2000
All Sri Lanka	22.35	21.86	15.59
Colombo	30.88	26.72	20.23
Kandy	23.00	21.61	17.09
Kurunegala	20.06	22.51	17.90
Galle	24.18	21.46	16.63
Kalutara	24.82	23.97	17.65
N'Eliya	16.92	22.94	12.42
Monaragala	14.17	15.34	10.51
Puttalam	17.30	N.A*	12.01

*Not available

Table 4 - Sri Lankan Population (10 years and over) by literacy in the main languages spoken, 1981 (%)

Ethnic group	Languages		
	Sinhalese	Tamil	English
Sinhalese	89.0	1.7	10.4
Tamil (Sri Lankan)	12.0	86.6	16.7
Tamil of Indian origin	6.9	67.0	5.5
Moors	25.9	72.3	12.9
Malays	61.3	54.5	44.2
Burghers	68.5	16.8	77.2
Other	37.2	47.8	38.3

Source: Population Census, Dept. of Census and Statistics 1989