Introduction

English was the language of government administration under the British rule (1796–1948) in Sri Lanka as well as the medium of instruction in the prestigious English medium schools. These schools were mostly fee-levying and catered to the needs of the elite and privileged of the society and were generally inaccessible to the majority of the population. The English medium schools were mostly administered by Christian missionaries, whereas schools that used the native languages were under government control. Thus the country had a dual system of education; this remained in place until the 1960s when – with just a few exceptions – all schools in the country were taken over by the government.

English became the inevitable tool for government employment, social mobility and prestige which created two ‘nations’ in the country: one which spoke English and enjoyed the fruits of social development and the other which spoke Sinhala and Tamil and lived in utter frustration and hopelessness (Jayasuriya 1969). This situation continued unabated and unchallenged amidst the dissatisfaction of the deprived majority until the Sri Lankan people were given a reasonable share in the governance of their own country under the Donoughmore reforms¹ in 1931. The agitation and struggle to give the national languages their due place in the state administration as well as in education turned into an unhealthy dog-fight with the unimaginative political purpose of dethroning English without recognising its relative and emerging importance in international trade and communication. This senseless and visionless action unfortunately denied the next generation their right to communicate effectively in a global context, reduced their capacity to pursue higher education in world class universities and also dwarfed their chances to compete in the global jobs market.
Suddenly awakened to this stark reality, the policy makers once again introduced English medium education in the early 1990s without proper planning and preparation. This led to confusion among children and parents in schools where English as a medium was hastily introduced without an adequate number of qualified teachers and resources such as textbooks. Consequently, quite a number of students who had opted for English medium education had to transfer back to Sinhala/Tamil medium after a while. This unsatisfactory situation, which is detrimental for the educational future of the children of this country, has not yet been addressed by the policy makers.

This chapter investigates this situation as it played out in the northern part of Sri Lanka. In the light of its analysis, it offers suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of English medium education in the future. But before we come to the study, it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with the salient features of the language policy regarding the medium of instruction in Sri Lanka in its historical perspective.

Medium of instruction in Sri Lanka: A historical perspective

Sri Lanka being a multiethnic and multicultural society, language has always been a bone of contention in the Sri Lankan polity, particularly in the post-colonial period. The lack of a vision and far-sightedness among the policy makers and legislators in developing and sustaining a language policy – which ought to be able to promote ethnic harmony, social cohesion and overall socio-economic development – has led to misunderstanding, mutual suspicion and hatred among the different communities in the country.

In 1956, the Bandaranaike government made Sinhala, the language of the majority ethnic community, the official language of the country. This showed scant respect to the sensibilities of the Tamil community; it was a decision based solely on political expediency and political insensitivity and it has continued to cause irreparable damage to the well-being of the country right up to the present time.

This confusion and uncertainty on language policy naturally also included the issue of medium of instruction in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The English language held a position of pre-eminence in the educational and administrative set up of the country whilst the languages of the native people, Sinhala and Tamil, occupied an insignificant place. Only seven percent of the population, however, was literate in English (Jayasuriya 1969). This situation opened the doors of employment and social mobility to only those who were English educated. Disgusted and frustrated by this unacceptable state of affairs J.R.Jayewardene – who was a member of the State Council (1931–1947) and destined to become the President of the country in 1977 – grieved and exclaimed:

… this country is always in danger of being governed by a small coterie who go through these English schools, whereas the vast majority who go through Sinhalese and Tamil schools must always be in the position of hewers of wood and drawers of water … (quoted by Jayasuriya 1969)
However, in spite of the fact that he was concerned with both the native languages, in 1943 Jayawardene brought a motion in the Council to make Sinhala the medium of instruction in all schools and also a compulsory subject. He thus forgot Tamil, the language of the second major community in the country. But he later agreed to add ‘and Tamil’ after the word ‘Sinhala’, in a positive response to an amendment proposed by V. Nalliah, another member of the State Council, and the motion was later passed in the State Council.

Meanwhile, the Special Committee on Education – also known as the Kannagara Committee – published its report in November 1943 in which the existence of ‘two types of education based on the medium of instruction’ was criticised. The report stated:

The first major defect is the existence of two types of education according to the medium of education. The great majority of our pupils are taught in the vernacular schools where Sinhalese or Tamil is the medium of instruction. With a few exceptions, the rest are taught in ‘English Schools’ where English is the medium of instruction. (Jayasuriya 1969)

The report argued that this situation was unacceptable because:

1. English has become a badge of superiority, thus dividing the population into two more or less watertight social compartments, namely the English educated and the vernacular educated;
2. Sinhalese or Tamil, the ‘natural’ medium for Sinhalese or Tamil people respectively, and the best medium through which they can effectively contribute to the world of literature and art, has not been developed; and
3. the absence of equality of opportunity, the development of our educational system having resulted in two types of schools – one attended mainly by those who can afford to pay fees and the other attended by those whose means do not permit them to do so. (Jayasuriya 1969)

The strong opposition to English medium education was mainly based on socio-economic factors: 1) Knowledge of English was a mark of social prestige; 2) English was required for employment in government as well as in the corporate world and thus laid the path for affluence and 3) English was required for higher studies.

However, the Committee was extremely careful in its recommendations in dethroning English all at once and placing the national languages in its place, because they justifiably understood the importance of English and its place of pre-eminence in world affairs. Hence, the Committee made the following recommendations in May 1944:

1. The medium of instruction in the mother tongue shall be the mother tongue;
2. The medium of instruction in the lower department of the post-primary school may be either mother tongue or bilingual;
3. The medium of instruction in the higher department of the post-primary school may be English, Sinhalese, Tamil or bilingual. (Jayasuriya 1969)
These recommendations demonstrate that the Committee was quite visionary in its deliberations and wanted the transition from English to mother tongue as medium of instruction to be incremental and well-prepared. Though extremist legislators like J.R. Jayewardene demanded the immediate dethronement of English, moderates like W. Dahanayake – who later became a Minister of Education – moved amendments such as this one:

… the mother tongue shall be made medium of instruction in all schools [and] English [shall be] a compulsory subject.

However, both these amendments were defeated and the recommendations of the Committee prevailed (Jayasuriya 1969).

The provision that allowed the pupils who learned through the mother tongue in the primary classes to join the English medium in the secondary classes clearly showed the confusion in language policy:

Compulsory English for all the children in and above Standard III is one of the greatest deceptions perpetrated on the people of this country. ... about 20 to 25 percent of the schools never had a single English teacher. ... in 1957, out of the total 2,727 schools 1,728 did not have an English teacher. (Jayasuriya 1969)

In addition to the shortage of English teachers, the quality of the available English teachers was also questioned.

In spite of the many attempts in parliament and elsewhere to give the native languages their due place as medium of instruction, the pre-eminence given to English did not change for a long time because entry to lucrative jobs – both in the private as well as in the government sector – depended on one’s knowledge of English. The non-availability of curricular material in the native languages contributed to the utterly confused policy regarding the medium of instruction and to the preservation of higher education as being exclusively in English. It was a policy of vacillation and indecision.

The year 1956 has been acclaimed as a turning point in the post-colonial history of Sri Lanka. The party that came to power on an ethno-nationalist cry dethroned English overnight from its colonial pedestal and made Sinhala the official language at the expense of the ethnic harmony and social cohesion which had prevailed between the two major communities in the country for a very long time. However, the new government was also unable to formulate a viable and development-oriented policy regarding the medium of instruction. Hence the perennial situation of confusion and indecision continued.

But the government that came to power in 1960 took a firm decision with regard to medium of instruction. Mrs Srimavo Bandaranaike, who became the world’s first woman Prime Minister, with the support of left wing political groups with their policy of egalitarianism firmly abolished denominationalism in the school system in Sri Lanka and effectively ended the unjustifiable grip of some religious groups on the national education system. All schools except a few non-assisted schools were ‘taken over’ by the government, thus ending the dual system in education. This new situation also paved the way to find a
solution to the issue of medium of instruction. The Jayasuriya Commission in its interim report recommended that the use of English for teaching selected subjects should cease (Jayasuriya 1962). The White Paper on Education (Ministry of Education 1964) finally made Sinhala and Tamil the languages of instruction in all schools and effectively stopped the enrolment of students to English medium classes from 1965. Consequently the universities also commenced teaching science based course in the native languages in 1970.

The ‘homecoming’ of English medium education

As mentioned earlier, the political decision to completely eradicate the position of pre-eminence that English had in Sri Lankan society was short-sighted and disastrous for the future generation of students in this country. In 1977, the United National Party government introduced a liberalised economic policy which enabled international companies to set up factories in Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka. Globalisation was taking place with labour migration and the whole world became a job market. The young Sri Lankan who was not competent in English apparently lost his or her competitive edge to counterparts in India and elsewhere. On the other hand, human knowledge in many fields was exploding and someone without knowledge of English could not enjoy the benefits of such new knowledge. All these factors collectively created an irresistible demand for English medium education in the country. But, following the Assisted Schools and Training Colleges Act of 1960, it was now illegal to establish English medium schools. However, before long people realised that it was possible to circumvent the Act by establishing ‘international schools’ – where instruction was in English – and soon these were mushrooming all over the country.

Hence, the government has to reconsider its medium of instruction policy in response to the emerging global situation. In 2000, the government gave permission to commence English medium classes in government schools but unfortunately this was done without adequate planning and preparation. The National Education Commission approved the new policy, under which (a) science subjects preparing pupils for the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE AL) examination could be taught in English, (b) selected subjects could be taught in English from Grade 6 and (c) English could be the medium of instruction from Grade 1 in particular schools, without prior approval from the Cabinet, if adequate resources were available in those schools.

Many schools, particularly those in urban areas, commenced English medium classes after this new policy had been introduced, in spite of the fact that there was a serious lack of teachers who were competent to teach in English. Even the few available teachers who were competent in the language did not have experience in teaching their subjects in English. In addition, English medium textbooks and other materials were not available in sufficient quantities and the process of translating textbooks from native languages into English was tedious and time consuming. Yet, despite all these issues, English
medium education was introduced and consequently many, many students became victims of their parents’ ambitions and their school’s unprepared and ill-planned implementation of the new policy.

The study

In 2003, English medium education was introduced in Vadamaradchy Education Zone (VEZ), one of the five Education Zones in the Jaffna District. The Zone has 80 government schools distributed across three Education Divisions. English medium was introduced in eight schools – seven 1AB schools and one 1C school. (1AB schools have a science stream in GCE AL while 1C schools do not have such a science stream.)

At the time that English medium education was introduced, the situation on the ground in terms of the availability and qualifications of English teachers was serious, not only in VEZ but throughout the whole of Jaffna District. There was a shortage of 996 English teachers at the district level while in VEZ there was a shortage of 120.

Yet, English medium education was introduced in VEZ as a knee-jerk reaction to pressure from parents, as they justifiably thought that their children would be left out in the job market because English medium education had already been introduced elsewhere in the country. Thus it can be seen that the introduction of English medium education was generally an ill planned activity which did not take into consideration the unfavourable reality at ground level. After five years the Planning Division of VEZ (Planning Division 2008) discovered that although ten per cent of students opted to join English medium education later 56 per cent of these students transferred back to Tamil medium schools. This disturbing and distressing fact – which indicates that there is something seriously detrimental for the educational future of Jaffna’s students – was the basic foundation for this study.

The major objectives of the study, therefore, were to analyse the effectiveness of the English medium policy in Jaffna District and to make recommendations for the implementation of this policy. The specific aims of the study were a) to study the prevailing situation in English medium classes with regard to the teaching–learning process and b) to identify the reasons why English medium students shift back to Tamil medium education.

Theoretical foundation of the research

There have always been differences of opinion among academics in Sri Lanka with regard to the medium of instruction in this country. From Prof. J.E. Jayasuriya (1969), the pioneering educationist in Sri Lanka, Arumugam (1999), Jeyarajah (2007), Karunanithy and Sandarasegaram (2006), Sathiaseelan (2005), Sivasegaram (2005) and Sivathamby (2005) were not in favour of English medium education. They argue that the best medium of instruction must be one’s mother tongue and not English. Jeyarajah (2007) argues that it gives a double load for a student who is not learning in his/her
mother tongue, namely the load in learning the content of the curriculum and the extra load of learning the foreign language. He says that it might take six to seven years for a student to achieve reasonable competency in a foreign language of instruction whereas a child becomes reasonably competent in his or her mother tongue within the first five to six years.

But some other researchers (Ravindran 2004, Suntharesan 2005) argue that learning in English helps the child to become competent in both languages. Suntharesan found that in Jaffna about 60 per cent of parents think that their children can learn in English.

Methodology

The study was based on a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach and a survey research design was adopted to collect relevant data from the participants in the research. Out of the eight schools where English medium education is implemented four schools were selected (three 1AB schools and one 1C school). A random sampling method was used to select 25 students – 12 boys and 13 girls – from across the four schools. Out of these 25 students, 14 were still studying through the medium of English whilst the remaining 11 students had ‘transferred back’ (that is to say they had opted to leave the English medium programme and had returned to Tamil medium classes. Further the principals of the four schools, 13 teachers, one Zonal Education Officer (ZDE), two Assistant Directors of Education (ADE), 14 parents and six community leaders were identified for data collection.

Questionnaires were given to students, teachers and parents; ZDE, ADEs and community leaders were interviewed. A check list was used to collect information about the physical facilities in schools. The collected data was analysed using simple descriptive statistical techniques.

Findings

Seven principal findings emerged from the study. These are summarised below.

1. The students who were still following their studies in the English medium generally speaking had a reasonable level of competence in English, although there was some variation. Interestingly, 28 per cent of them said that they never communicated in English, either at school or at home. In contrast, the English language competence of the transferred back students was generally weak: only about 40–50 per cent were able to speak, read or write in English and more than 60 per cent had problems comprehending English.

2. Why did students join the English medium programme in the first place? There was a marked difference in the responses of the two groups of students: 86 per cent of those who were still in the English medium programme said that it had been their own decision to take this route,
whereas 65 per cent of those who had transferred back to Tamil medium education reported that they joined the English medium in the first place because of pressure from their parents.

3. Why did students decide to leave the English medium programme? Students gave many reasons, of which the most frequently mentioned were:

- There was no-one to help them with their studies at home
- They were unable to communicate in English
- They had difficulty in memorising material in English
- They were fearful of what the examinations would be like
- They were unable to comprehend examination questions
- They experienced difficulty in finding Tamil equivalents for technical terms in English
- Textbooks were not available on time
- There was a lack of competent teachers
- They were subjected to unpleasant comments from teachers if they scored low marks.

It was not possible to rank these nine reasons as they all seemed to be more or less equally important to the respondents. In the light of these difficulties, the students’ decision to drop English medium study and return to Tamil medium is understandable.

4. In contrast, teachers had different perceptions as to why students gave up on English medium and returned to Tamil. The most important reasons stated by teachers are:

- Parents’ wish
- Parents’ economic situation
- Parents’ poor knowledge of English
- Low numbers of students in the class
- Teacher’s incompetence in English
- Students’ difficulty with technical terms in English.

5. What did the parents think lay behind their children’s decision to opt out of English medium education? The most important reasons given by parents are listed here:

- They were unable to help their children with their studies: ‘They do pester us for help ... but how can we help them? We do not know any English.’
- They were unable to communicate with their children in English.
- ‘Financial difficulty.’
- Teachers do not complete the syllabus.
- There are no textbooks or the books are delayed.
- No tuition classes

Although some parents claimed that there were no tuition classes where their children could obtain additional support outside school, we found
that in fact there were tuition facilities in Jaffna for English medium students. The parents’ complaints therefore seemed to be unfounded.

6. Most teachers were trained. About 70 per cent held the Post Graduate Diploma in Education while 15 per cent were trained teachers. However, nine per cent were not trained and had only GCE AL qualifications. Furthermore, although they were graduates some teachers taught subjects for which they were not qualified. Regarding competence to teach in English, only 30 per cent of teachers were themselves graduates of institutions where they had studied their main subjects through the medium of English.

7. Did the teachers have any problems? Of course, yes. They reported many problems and issues relating to teaching through the medium of English, including the following:

- They felt that they were not sufficiently competent in English.
- There were not enough in-service training programmes for English medium teachers and even those which were available were of low quality.
- There was a lack of additional books and other reading materials.
- There were no teachers’ manuals for the subjects they had to teach. Furthermore, any information that was made available by the authorities was not delivered on time.
- Most learners could not comprehend their lessons because they were so weak in English.

The findings summarised above reveal some sad facts about English medium instruction in the Jaffna District. Most of the children who returned to Tamil medium had originally joined the English medium because their parents wished them to do so. The home language of these children was not English and English was not used at home; this is unlike the situation in many Tamil homes in Colombo where English is also widely used alongside Tamil for general social communication. Basically, Jaffna society is monolingual and English is rarely used for social and official communication.

Interestingly, most of those children who continued to study in the English medium had selected that medium by themselves; they were not in English medium education because of parental pressure. These children also showed that they possessed a reasonable level of competence in English.

On the other hand, one can understand the parents’ desire for their children to take part in English medium education, because they perceived that there were considerable advantages of learning in English and naturally they hoped that their children would also be recipients of such advantages. But learning in the medium of English inevitably needs some basic prerequisites, such as appropriately qualified teachers, relevant text books as well as supplementary books and additional support for needy children to help them to acquire mastery in that language. The study shows that these prerequisites were hardly available in most schools in the District.
This situation should have been addressed in advance by headteachers and other relevant authorities by counselling parents about the risks of choosing English as the medium of instruction for their children. (This could be a topic for a separate study, as it is not known whether such counselling was provided for parents before they selected English medium instruction for their children.)

English medium instruction has not been a total failure in Jaffna District. Nevertheless, resources could have been saved and the mental distress experienced by those children who returned to Tamil medium education could have been avoided if the authorities had been proactive. This might also have helped to increase the success rate of English medium education in Jaffna District.

Recommendations

The study generated a number of recommendations, of which the twelve most important ones are listed below.

1. Teachers should motivate English medium students. They should endeavour to reduce fear and encourage self-confidence among the students.
2. Special projects to enhance competency in English should be conducted, including intensive English programmes and exchange programmes. British Council support programmes should be utilised and attempts should be made to convince the British Council to establish a branch in Jaffna.
3. Library facilities must be improved. English magazines and books should be bought for the library and time should be allocated for students to use them.
4. The classroom environment must be improved. Exhibit students’ creative work. Encourage students to produce a wall newspaper.
5. Ensure competency in English from Grade 1. Communicative English can begin in Grade 1; this will strengthen students’ English before they get to Grade 6. Highly qualified English teachers are not required to achieve this; class teachers are already doing this successfully in other parts of the country.
6. Apply flexible, innovative and interesting teaching techniques such as projects and assignments. Work in this area has already been started by the National Institute of Education.
7. Support programmes should be provided for parents, as required, to help them to improve their competence in English. Parents complained that they were unable to help their children at home.
8. Bring together students from both language groups (English medium and Tamil medium) whenever possible. Foster a sense of ‘We are equal.’ Do not allow English medium students to develop a superiority complex and Tamil medium students an inferiority complex. Knowledge and competence in both Tamil and English will support each other.
9. Increase parental participation and involvement in school activities with regard to English medium education. Give them a chance to talk to the teachers about their children’s progress.

10. Bring in teachers and In-Service Advisers (ISAs) from other parts of the country, for example by organising exchange programmes. Let teachers from the south come and work in the north for some time and vice versa. This will also help to develop Sri Lankan national harmony and social cohesion in addition to improving English language competence.

11. Ensure that textbooks, teachers’ manuals and other materials reach schools on time. Coordinate with the relevant authorities.

12. Conduct professional development programmes for English medium teachers. These can take place in school and also elsewhere.

Although most academics in Sri Lanka have argued in support of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, this study did not come across any parent – whose child was participating in English medium education – who argued that the English medium should be scrapped and that everyone should go back to Tamil medium schooling. Consequently, our recommendations focus on how the current situation regarding English medium education in the District of Jaffna might be improved.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that the majority of children in Jaffna are still educated through the medium of Tamil and study English just as a subject. Our study was restricted only to those schools with English medium classes; all of these schools also have Tamil medium classes and there is no school in the district where the medium of instruction is exclusively English.

Conclusion

Language policy in Sri Lanka with regard to the medium of instruction has always been a matter of confusion and uncertainty. In the past the policy was based mostly on ethno-nationalism and political expediency rather than on the educational needs of the child and the needs of the country as a whole. Policy was not based on educational research and thought. English, which was the medium of instruction and the language of state administration in colonial Sri Lanka, was replaced after independence by the native languages, but without adequate planning and preparation. This thoughtless action had a serious impact on the Sri Lankan polity. Unfortunately, the same poor planning and unpreparedness prevailed when English was brought back as the medium of instruction in the 1990s. This study carried out in an educational zone in Jaffna district is a small effort to highlight the detrimental effects of politically motivated language policy regarding the medium of instruction on innocent children as well as on the educational development of the country.

Competence in English is essential for personal success in today’s globalised world. But the ways and means of achieving such competence have to be carefully decided by the authorities, taking into consideration the research
findings of Sri Lankan scholars and also making use of the experiences of other countries that have similar characteristics and colonial legacies as Sri Lanka. There may be very effective ways of reaching a high level of competence in English while maintaining the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. This would be beneficial for both urban and rural children. The authorities should make genuine efforts to develop a viable medium of instruction policy that will narrow the urban–rural divide in terms of competence in the English language.

Note

1 The Donoughmore Commission decided that a universal franchise should be given to the people of Sri Lanka. It also established a State Council which became responsible for all matters excepting finance, the judiciary and administration, which remained under the control of the British. Seven Executive Committees were established. The Executive Committee on Education was chaired by Mr C.W.W.Kannagara. The State Council functioned between 1931 and 1947.

References


