Sri Lankan English: An appropriate model for the teaching of English in Sri Lanka?

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Introduction

Since the launch in 2009 of a ‘Presidential Initiative’ to promote ‘English as a life skill’ in schools – popularly known as ‘Speak English Our Way’ – the subject of Sri Lankan English (SLE) has become a controversial topic. Some welcomed the initiative as a way of taking ownership of the English language, stripping it of its colonial baggage and making it more relevant to the practical needs of Sri Lankan learners; others saw it as a sign of falling standards, creating and validating a devalued variety of English which would disadvantage Sri Lankans on the world stage.

This chapter looks at the background to the ‘English as a Life Skill’ initiative and examines the arguments for and against promoting the local variety of English as a model for learners. It also discusses the background to the Sri Lankan English debate and the extent to which SLE is understood and accepted by Sri Lankan teachers, learners and speakers of English.

English as a Life Skill

During 2009 the government launched the Presidential Initiative to promote ‘English as a Life Skill’ in schools. This was an ambitious programme which aimed, within an 18-month period from June 2009, to achieve the following:

- training 21,984 teachers in spoken/communicative English
- training of teachers as Master Trainers at the English & Foreign Language University (EFLU) in Hyderabad, India
- introducing spoken English into the school syllabus and examination system
- preparing new teaching materials in spoken/communicative English
• introducing public examinations for learners and teachers of English
• producing a television programme for distance teaching of spoken English
• training public servants in English as a Life Skill
• introducing spoken/communicative English to private ‘tutories’.

This list of aims is summarised from Fernando (2009).

Some of the rhetoric surrounding the initiative was interesting. In the same document, Presidential Advisor Sunimal Fernando wrote about a ‘paradigm shift’ in English teaching, from:

… the old, conservative, outdated, elitist Sri Lankan ideology of English that still enjoys an unwarranted amount of social legitimacy and power, which sees English as an instrument of social oppression, the prized possession of a privileged class and an exclusive emblem of upper class status, to be therefore spoken as an English person would speak – with unblemished diction, perfect grammar and technically perfect pronunciation. This anti-national ideology of English was crafted by our Anglo-centric urban elites as one that provided the gateway to the West and a repudiation of our own values and heritage.

to:

… a new Sri Lankan ideology of English that … sees English for its utility value and not for its social worth, English as a skill for employment and a vehicle for reaching out to the external world of knowledge and learning, English as a straight and simple tool of communication stripped of its historical baggage, English as a common property resource to be owned by all – ‘English as a Life Skill’ similar to other natural life skills such as the skills to ride a motor-cycle or drive a car or use a computer. (Fernando 2009)

And in an interview in March 2009, Sunimal Fernando spoke of building on the achievements of 1956:

What we disempowered, or shall we say destroyed in 1956 was the ideology of English as an instrument of social oppression, English as the repudiation of our own cultural values, English as the prized possession of a privileged class. What we are bringing in now through the Presidential Initiative is ‘English as a life skill’… We disempowered one kind of English, one ideology of English, and we are bringing in another kind of English which has another kind of ideology. (Kahandawaarachchi 2009)

In his keynote speech at the Language & Development Conference in Colombo (Fernando 2011), Sunimal Fernando reiterated this theme, drawing comments from the audience expressing the widely held view that 1956 represented a severe setback in English language education in Sri Lanka.

As part of the Presidential Initiative a publicity campaign was launched in which celebrities such as Sanath Jayasuriya (cricketer and parliamentarian) and Susanthika Jayasinghe (Olympic athlete) spoke of the importance of English and emphasised that they were happy to speak English ‘their way’. 
The motto ‘Speak English Our Way’ was adopted by the programme, together with the symbol of the *manna* knife (symbolically replacing the earlier image of English as a *kaduwa*, or sword). As a publicity campaign it seems to have been remarkably successful. Suddenly everyone was talking about ‘English Our Way’. The comments at the time seemed to divide roughly evenly between those who welcomed the initiative as a way of taking ownership of the English language, stripping it of its colonial baggage, and making it relevant to the practical needs of ordinary Sri Lankans and those who feared that it was a sign of falling standards, creating and validating a devalued variety of English which would disadvantage Sri Lankans on the world stage.

The existence of Sri Lankan English as an area of academic research – and the idea that a local variety of English exists and has been validated by ELT professionals – fitted very conveniently into the agenda of the Presidential Initiative. It seemed that scarcely a day went by that there was not an article about Sri Lankan English or ‘English Our Way’ such that the two terms started to be used interchangeably. The confusion was understandable, but I feel it is important to differentiate between the terms because of their different origins and connotations.

‘Sri Lankan English’ is – or ought to be – an inclusive term, accommodating all the various ways in which English is used in Sri Lanka, by people from different regions, different ethnic and linguistic groups, different religions, different generations, different social classes and so on. This point is emphasised by the fact that the chapter on SLE in the *Routledge Handbook of World Englishes* (Mendis and Rambukwella 2010) is titled ‘Sri Lankan Englishes’, acknowledging the increasing recognition not only of SLE itself but also of its various sub-varieties.

But in the political context in which it was introduced, the term ‘English Our Way’ aroused suspicions that the ‘our’ was not an inclusive term but one which defined English the Colombo way, or the Sinhala way, or some other way which was not necessarily what everyone could call ‘ours’. I followed the debate closely, partly because it related to my own area of interest, Sri Lankan English, but also because, from the perspective of World Englishes, I saw it as an interesting development in that it was – to my knowledge – the first time that a national government had so enthusiastically embraced its own local variety of English.

Among the criticisms of the programme mentioned at the time was a deep mistrust of the Indian involvement in the training process. People seemed to think that Sri Lankans would suddenly be teaching their children ‘Indian English’ instead of ‘Sri Lankan English’ or any other English; this idea was anathema to them. The criticism implied the inferiority and unsuitability of the Indian model and provided a cue for several disparaging remarks about Indian English in the press. But in fact the involvement of EFLU Hyderabad was merely in a trainer-training capacity, so there was no reason why the process should have any effect on the English of the teachers themselves or on the language that they would be teaching.
Another widely held fear was that ‘English Our Way’ meant abandoning standards altogether, a free-for-all where anything goes and no one cares. A more insidious variation on the same argument was the fear that somehow the programme was deliberately designed to lead to the creation of a two-tier system, where the Colombo elite would continue to speak a standard SLE almost identical to the international standard, while promoting a low-grade, ‘not-pot’ variety for the masses.

My own concern at the time was that perhaps too much faith was being placed in Sri Lankan English, elevating it to the status of a magic wand which would transform attitudes to English, allowing everything else to fall into place. But in reality it was just one element in a hugely ambitious project. The danger was that placing too much emphasis on SLE would detract from the much greater challenges facing English language educators in Sri Lanka – including teacher training, methodology, syllabus design and materials development – all of which elements of the Presidential Initiative needed to be given equal or greater weight. Another danger was that over-emphasising SLE provided ammunition to the detractors who wished to undermine the effectiveness of the whole project by focusing on this one rather controversial aspect of it.

One task which was undertaken as part of the programme was an attempt to codify standard Sri Lankan English. A committee was set up in May 2010 under the auspices of the Presidential Initiative and the Ministry of Education, tasked with defining what is meant by ‘standard Sri Lankan English’ and drawing up a guide for teachers. This was the only part of the Presidential Initiative in which I myself was involved, as a member of this committee alongside Sri Lankan ELT professionals from the universities and the National Institute of Education (NIE).

It was my personal hope that the committee could succeed in defining standard Sri Lankan English in terms which were compatible with current thinking in the ELT field, so that ‘English Our Way’ would not mean abandoning standards as some feared but would produce something more relevant for the contemporary Sri Lankan context. But the work of the committee was never completed and appears to have been abandoned. This was a missed opportunity.

Standard Sri Lankan English

The term ‘standard Sri Lankan English’ is used by Gunasekera (2004) to describe the variety of English used by Sri Lankans who speak English as their first language, or who are bilingual in English and Sinhala or Tamil. Although ‘standard Sri Lankan English’ itself has not yet been adequately codified, it is a more precise term than ‘Sri Lankan English’, which as mentioned earlier is an umbrella term covering all the different ways in which the language is used in Sri Lanka. Some of the features of standard Sri Lankan English, in the areas of lexis, grammar and phonology, have been documented in my book, A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English (Meyler 2007) and in the website www.mirisgala.net.
Relevance to English teaching in Sri Lanka

So what is the relevance of all this to the teaching of English in Sri Lanka? On one level, it is stating the obvious. It means creating learning and teaching materials relevant to the local environment in which, to take a simple example, students talk about ‘mangoes’ and ‘rambutans’ rather than ‘blackberries’ and ‘gooseberries’. It is also perfectly natural, because since teachers themselves are Sri Lankan, speak Sri Lankan English and share the Sri Lankan culture and environment of their students, they will inevitably, and subconsciously, model the language in a way which is locally appropriate, whatever materials they are using.

But it also needs to go further, because for as long as the official standard is one which is outdated, or alien, or unrealistic, there will always be uncertainty about what exactly should be taught and what should be achieved at the end of the process.

Syllabus designers and materials writers should ensure that the content of the courses they design are relevant to the local context and that the language introduced is consistent with the local standard. However, this is not to say that other varieties of English have no place. Especially at higher levels, students should be exposed to as many different varieties as possible. The vast resource of authentic material provided by the internet should be exploited, not only as a source of language but also as a window on the world and as a prompt for further discussion and research.

Testing is one area that cannot possibly be undertaken without agreement on accepted standards. It is unrealistic and unfair to test students’ English ability according to an alien and outdated standard. This applies particularly with the introduction of a speaking test as part of the O-level examination, which is one of the objectives of the Presidential Initiative, planned to be introduced in 2012.

Sri Lankan English is also relevant in the area of teaching and learning resources, such as dictionaries, which are seen as valuable resources for language teachers and learners. And yet the most widely available and authoritative dictionaries are of limited relevance to the local context. Take the Oxford Intermediate Learners’ Dictionary of English for example. Looking through the C words, most are core words which are likely to be relevant to any learner of English anywhere in the world: cabbage, cable, cage, cake, call, camel, camera, candle, car, cat, catch, caterpillar, cattle, …

But there is also a number of marginal words: cagoule, Calor gas, car boot sale, cardigan, carnation, cashmere, caviar, Channel Tunnel, chestnut, chicory, chilblain, chimney sweep, chip shop, chrysanthemum, ciabatta, clementine, clotted cream, conker, cress… These are standard English words, which students might come across at some stage, but they are very specific to the UK and/or the US and therefore are not priority language for an intermediate Sri Lankan learner.

On the other hand, another set of words is missing altogether: cadjan, carrom, chena, chilli powder, coir, copra, cowpea, curd pot, curry leaves,
custard apple… These are all English words (not Sinhala or Tamil loanwords) which are needed by Sri Lankan learners to describe the world around them. And they are not necessarily specific to Sri Lanka as many of them would also be used in India and elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia.

Also under the letter C, collocations of the word coconut tell an interesting story. If we look up coconut in a standard British dictionary, we find coconut matting, coconut milk and coconut shy. Of these only coconut milk is used in SLE.⁵ We do not even find an entry for coconut tree, which is surely common to many varieties of English, but which in standard British English is referred to as a palm tree.

Apart from coconut milk and coconut tree, the word coconut is also found in a wide variety of other collocations in SLE: coconut arrack, coconut estate, coconut flower, coconut husk, coconut oil, coconut plucker, coconut sambol, coconut scraper, coconut shell, coconut toddy, and so on. None of these collocations appears in a standard British English dictionary.

An Intermediate Learners’ Dictionary for Sri Lankan learners, taking account of these factors, would be a valuable resource. It could be a simpler and more affordable publication than the Oxford equivalent. It would need to make use of notations identifying those words which are unique to Sri Lanka, or to South Asia, and so on. Such a dictionary would serve not only as a reference book for learners but also as a resource for teachers and materials writers, for example when choosing which elements of the target language are to be introduced to learners or for checking how words are used, or spelt, in SLE.

This is just one example of an area where acknowledging the relevance of SLE to English teaching in Sri Lanka could lead to the development of resources which would be of genuine practical value to learners and teachers of English.

Conclusion

So what became of ‘Speak English Our Way’? After a flurry of publicity in 2010, it seemed to fade away. I cannot comment on the overall effectiveness of the Presidential Initiative, because I do not have any direct experience of the programme myself. But as far as the question of Sri Lankan English was concerned, it seems that there were three issues which led to it being quietly dropped from the agenda:

• resistance from the general public, manifested in the form of a number of articles and pronouncements, in the press and elsewhere
• resistance from teachers and other ELT professionals (including perhaps from within the Education Ministry itself) who remained unsure about what was really meant by Sri Lankan English and therefore felt uncomfortable about being told to teach it
• resistance from academics and ELT professionals in Jaffna, who felt that ‘Sri Lankan English’ was a Colombo-centric concept which did not take
adequate account of the way English is used by all language communities and especially by Tamil speakers.

Fernando (personal communication) has confirmed that this resistance was indeed a significant factor in the decision to drop SLE from the agenda. Anandakumarasamy (2011) has shown that recent English language textbooks designed for use in schools all over the country actually include a large number of Sinhala words which are presented as ‘Sri Lankan English’ but which are not familiar to Tamil speakers in the North, even though many of these words have English and/or Tamil equivalents. A similar criticism can be made of materials in the Teacher Guide produced by the English as a Life Skill programme.

‘Sri Lankan English’ should be an inclusive term, incorporating elements of the way the language is used in all parts of the island and by all communities. But it is true that the majority of the people who have written about the subject have been Colombo-based and/or Sinhala-speaking. The danger then is that fears about the true meaning of the ‘our’ in ‘English Our Way’ can seem justified while the inclusion of a few Tamil words like kovil and thosai in SLE wordlists can seem tokenistic. For this reason it is vital to involve Tamil-speaking ELT professionals in the process of defining standard SLE, so that it is genuinely inclusive and is seen to be so.

In his public comments, Sunimal Fernando has suggested that in the absence of standard Sri Lankan English as a model, ‘English Our Way’ means encouraging learners to speak English their own way, giving them the confidence to express themselves in English, even if they make mistakes. This is accepted communicative methodology, but it is only one part of the picture because it assumes that learners are exposed to a standard model of the target language so that they can learn from their mistakes and improve. But, in a classroom environment, this may not be the case. This is why an agreed standard is so important. I believe that ‘standard Sri Lankan English’ can provide a relevant, realistic and definable standard.

Notes
1 tutories = tutorial college (Sri Lankan English)
2 Kaduwa is Sinhala for ‘sword’, a popular metaphor for the English language, a symbol of power which divides those who have it from those who do not. A manna is an everyday knife used for everything from cutting branches to opening coconuts. Here it is a symbol of English as a tool for ordinary people.
3 ‘Not pot English is a derogatory and/or humorous term used by speakers of “standard Sri Lankan English” to describe the way first language speakers of Sinhala and Tamil pronounce the language. The words “not” and “pot” are pronounced with an exaggeratedly closed “o” sound to imitate an accent that is widely perceived as socially inferior.’ (Michael Meyler, A–Z of Sri Lankan English, www.mirisgala.net/SL_English_A_to_Z.html)
4 Sunimal Fernando (personal communication) has confirmed that the codification of SLE was indeed dropped from the agenda of the English as a Life Skill programme, for reasons which are outlined later in this chapter.
5 Coconut milk is often wrongly defined in standard dictionaries as the liquid inside a coconut. In Sri Lanka and elsewhere this liquid is referred to as coconut water, whereas coconut milk
is the milk-like liquid made by squeezing grated coconut with water, a basic ingredient of many Sri Lankan curries.

References


