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### REINTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN SRI LANKA: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JAFFNA

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#### ABSTRACT

*English is now introduced in grade 6 once the children finish their primary education in vernacular. The main aspect of the way in which English is used as medium of instruction is that in government schools some subjects are taught in English while some other subjects are taught in Tamil. This helps the students be balanced bilinguals because they constantly learn their first language while acquiring mastery in L2. Eventually, it is assumed that this will facilitate the additive bilingualism and children would be balanced bilinguals. This paper tried to appraise the potential success of one decade –long English medium program and also see the different perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the English medium education. This study captured the views of parents, teachers and children: English medium and vernacular children.*

**Key Words:** English medium, Vernacular medium

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#### INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the impact on reintroduction of English as medium of instruction in Sri Lanka. English was brought back as medium of instruction after the state had used vernaculars as media of instruction more than half a century. An effort is made to look into the different perspectives of the stakeholders involved with the reintroduction of English as medium of instruction: Teachers, learners and parents. Methodology and the tools used for data collection are also elaborated with adequate information. This study analyses the effects that resulted in the learner's performance after they had opted for English medium education. The findings of the study are presented and suitable recommendations are given to offer a better English medium education in the schools.

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## **ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION**

The government of Sri Lanka introduced English as a medium of instruction to General Certificate Education of Advanced Level (G.C.E.A/L) in science classes in Sri Lanka after the vernaculars had been used as media of instruction for half a century. First, in 2001 English was permitted to be used as medium of instruction along with the two local languages in certain selected schools. Different competing theories, such as the conspiracy theory and the grassroots theory, offer to explain the world wide spread of English as medium of instruction at present. Conspiracy theorists claim that there is a planned, calculated effort by both British and American agencies to assert the dominance of English and to persuade other countries to accept it as superior to any other language (Phillipson, 1992 cited in Karunakaran, 2011). Grassroots theorists argue that English has an economic role to play in the world that induces its spread independently of the political and cultural hegemony of one nation or nations (Fishman, Cooper and Conrad, 1977 cited in Karunakaran, 2011).

In Sri Lanka, English got its position back as medium of instruction in secondary schools in 2003. Indeed, English medium education is an optional one and those who wish to learn their subjects in English medium can continue their education in the English medium once they complete their primary education in vernacular. In Jaffna peninsula, at the initial stage the national schools and missionary schools offered the English medium education. The first batch of learners in English medium sat for the General Certificate of Education of Ordinary Level (G.C.E.O/L) in December, 2008 (Karunakaran, 2011). In this backdrop, it is very necessary to assess the success and progress of the English medium education implemented in state-owned schools.

## **METHODOLOGY AND THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

This study is purely based on qualitative method and exploratory in nature. Data was collected from two schools: Jaffna Hindu College and Vembaddi Girls' High school. The reason behind the selection of those two schools was that not all schools offer the English medium education in Jaffna. Unlike the bilingual schools in the UK, the USA and India, in Sri Lanka a conscious decision was made to implement English medium education only in certain select schools based on the resources available. These two schools are not only the national schools administrated by the central government but also well-equipped and well-established schools that have a long pedigree in shaping the children in Jaffna. Two distinct student-groups of grade nine were selected from each school as sample for this study one of which was English medium group and other a vernacular medium group. The purpose of selecting these two distinct groups was to compare the performance level of the learners. Questionnaires were distributed to both the English medium and vernacular medium groups of the two schools. Since the English medium teachers and vernacular medium teachers were selected for the study, Questionnaires were also administered to both the English medium and vernacular medium teachers teaching in these two schools. Depending upon

the responses from the learners as well as the teachers, interviews were held with selected learners and teachers. Parents of English medium and vernacular medium learners were also interviewed and their responses were taken into account for analysis. This study was conducted in Jaffna Hindu College (JHC) and Vembadi Girl's High School (VGHS). These two national schools are very old in Jaffna Peninsula. These two schools admit learners from upper middle class, middle class and lower middle class of Jaffna society. Learners admitted to these schools come with varied sociolinguistic backgrounds.

All together 80 subjects participated in this study. Forty students from JHC and VGHS were selected for the study and out of forty students 22 students were from English medium classes and 18 students were vernacular medium classes. 30 teachers took part in this study and 18 teachers were from English medium classes and 12 were from vernacular medium classes. In the case of parents, 10 parents whose children were in English and vernacular medium classes actively participated in this research. Sampling was based on purposive sampling as researcher felt this would bring out the clear picture of the English medium education practices in these two schools.

Out of 22 English medium students, 10 were boys and 12 were girls and out of 18 vernacular medium students, 10 were girls and 8 were boys. Out of 18 English medium teachers, 11 were female teachers and 7 were male teachers. Out of twelve vernacular medium teachers, eight were female teachers and 4 were male teachers. In the case of parents, 7 were mothers and 3 were fathers. It was apparent females were more in number in all spheres of Jaffna society and it showed females were able to contribute a lot to the development of the school, society, etc.

## **TEACHER PERSPECTIVE**

In this study, teacher perspective questionnaires were administered to 25 teachers and twenty of them were interviewed to get more authentic data regarding the current English medium education implemented in JHC and VGHS. They seem to have different opinions about English medium education program offered in these two schools.

## **ACCOMPLISHMENT OF OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of the English medium education program is to make the learners proficient in L2. The data also showed that 90% of English medium and vernacular teachers accepted the fact that English medium learners perform better in all domains than the vernacular medium learners. They came out with the following reasons in support of their view:

- 1) Knowledge in more than one language helps them understand relevant subjects at a satisfactory level;
- 2) They can refer to various books;
- 3) They are more confident;

- 4) They are eager to know other languages;
- 5) They memorize easily;
- 6) English medium learners have more supplementary books; and
- 7) Parents also help in their studies.

As far as the objectives of bilingual education stated in the policy document are concerned, evaluation has not yet fully been done to see whether the desired goals of English medium education have been achieved. The responses from English medium teachers indicate two things: (1) they need more time to study the progress of English medium education; and (2) the objectives have been fairly met. 50% of the English medium teachers said that English medium education has met its desired goals. The response from an English medium teacher attached to JHC is as follows: "In the last year GCE (O/L) exam held in 2008, they produced 100% results." Another response from an English medium teacher in JHC claims "the goal is achieved at a satisfactory level." Some English medium teachers are of the view that 70% of the goals have been met. The sectional head expressed her view on the goals of bilingual education as follows:

"We still need more time to see the impact of English medium education in Jaffna, but the job opportunities in the private sector need English speaking graduates."

## **LEARNER PERSPECTIVE**

Learners from Grade nine in JHC and VGHS were the subjects for this study. Altogether, learners from four divisions were selected for the study and in the interview learners from English medium classes spoke in English. Responses from the questionnaires indicated that they had improved their proficiency after switching over to English medium education. A few learners in English medium classes found it difficult to speak in English but they said that they could write well in English. English medium children can write well because they usually write a lot in English. This makes them good in writing rather than speaking. Almost, all the English medium children go for private tuition where they seem to get additional comprehensible linguistic input (Krashen, 1981). They also get meaningful contexts to interact with teachers and learners in tuition classes. From the learners' responses, it is evident that some meaningful interaction takes place in tuition classes. In comparison with vernacular medium children, English medium children use English to a large extent whereas learners in the vernacular medium by and large do not use English. A few learners who come from rich language background get a chance to use English in vernacular classes. Almost, 90% of English medium learners have a positive attitude towards English medium education.

### **Interaction in English**

As far as the interaction between learners and teachers is concerned, it does not take place as expected. Many children are of the opinion that English medium teachers do not interact with them

in English very often. Generally, teachers don't use the target language adequately in the classroom in these two schools. Because of this, learners are deprived of the language learning situation where they could get adequate comprehensible input. Learners trust tutors in the private tuition classes where teachers generally interact with them in English. An English medium student from JHC said: "Teachers do not always use English and use Tamil to explain, but sometimes they repeat the same in English but in tuition they mostly use English."

Sometimes, the teaching-learning conditions differ depending on the use of English language. A few teachers use English to a large extent in the classroom so that learners get more exposure to English and this makes them generalize that all the teachers always use English for interaction quite efficiently. But this is not always true. A student from VGHS described that all the teachers teach the subjects in English well but most of the English medium learners do not agree with this statement. Also, some learners seem to think that they should not say anything negative about teachers, and this also makes them say that all the teachers are quite proficient in English.

English medium children seem to be improving their skills immensely after being enrolled in the English medium classes. They all speak and write in English and also improve the other skills like listening and reading. In particular, one can see an enormous growth in speaking skills of the learners. Generally, in Jaffna there are a few occasions when people could speak English in their day to day life. As a result, though people could write in English, their speaking ability is minimal. In the case of English medium children, the environment forces them to speak English. Because of this, they pick up their speaking competence to a large extent. A response from a vernacular medium student proves this: "English medium class spoke very well vernacular medium class can't spoke English very well."

Responses from the vernacular medium children point out that children in English medium classes have enormously enhanced their English proficiency. A response from a vernacular medium student is as follows: "They can speak English very well, but we can speak English very hard." Another response from vernacular student approves the capability of use of English: "English medium learners speak, write English well. Vernacular medium learners can't speak, write English well."

## **PARENT PERSPECTIVE**

Many parents are of the view that English medium education has given a different personality to children and teachers teaching in English medium classes also conform to that view of parents. However, some learners and the parents emphasized that some teachers teaching in English medium schools do not have the required skills to teach the content of the subjects in English. Consequently, they mostly use their first language (Tamil) to illustrate the subject matter. Learners also made similar comments on teaching ability of teachers teaching in English. However, learners

took tremendous interest in developing their skills in English. Most of them use the internet for educational purposes though parents do not allow them to access email and chatting. They get a lot of study material from various sources and do well in their school based tests. A mother of two children commented on the outcome of the English medium program as follows:

“Learning in English medium would bring a lot of advantages to learners and they gather a lot of information with regard to their studies.”

English as a way of communication promotes one’s position in the economic, professional and social status (Fishman, Cooper and Conrad, 1977). In Jaffna too, parents believe that a good proficiency in English might open new gates in the globalized world. A father whose are in the English medium program revealed his view: “English is instrumental to connect people from different countries, and it is inevitable that we need to be part of the globalized world.” His view has an implication that children are forced by the situation imposed on them by some agencies. English is ,by and large, inseparable from political and economic interests, the Anglo American economic and political interest in particular (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1989). When a student was asked if she felt handicapped in answering the questions very elaborately in English, she expressed her views very confidently: “Sometime, when I answer Science and History, I find it difficult to use the appropriate words suitable to that question. Otherwise, it is ok.”

When she was further asked if she was able to speak English fluently before being enrolled in English medium classes, she said: “I was able to speak slowly in English before going for English medium classes. Now, I have improved a lot.” In Jaffna, many children are bothered too much about the pronunciation when they speak English. This impedes their natural flow of speech. Being second language speakers, it is very common that accent is influenced by first language. Since there are too many varieties of English like Indian English, Sri Lankan English, Australian English, Cambridge English, etc, they should not pay scrupulous attention to the accent. There are varieties of English in the world (Rushdie, 1992). Some learners in English medium classes have a view point: “learners in vernacular medium classes feel shy to speak English. This is because the children are brought up in a society where people pass over their cultural beliefs to their kith and kin.” Culture and Language are inseparable (Mickan, 2006; Mackey, 1977). Parents understand the importance of English well because it makes inroads for many opportunities. When parents were asked whether their children struggled to get along with the English medium education at the beginning, a father of three children is of the following view:

“After switching over to English medium education, children tend to speak English at home and among their peers. This happened because of English medium.”

## **FINDINGS**

The data showed that English medium education has been given an esteemed place by the people in Jaffna though some of the participants of this study were skeptical about the success of the English medium education.

### **Limited English Proficiency Learners**

The academic achievement of Limited- English-Proficient (LEP) learners has been a big issue in developing countries like Sri Lanka. LEP learners are supposed to use English as a tool for learning subject matter. To make them use English, it is very essential to design programs that accelerate the achievement in L2. Usually, the successful program models that develop the academic achievement of LEP learners are those which make learners develop academic skills while learning English. In places where a sizable population of LEP learners speak the same native language as seen in Sri Lanka, English medium programs would be more effective, because English as medium of instruction accelerates the acquisition of the target language.

### **Socio-Economic Background**

A large number of learners in the English medium program in the schools in Jaffna are from low socio-economic background which, according to Genesee, (1987 & 2004), affects the performance of the second language learners, but in the case of Jaffna English medium learners, this does not make any significant change in acquiring the target language. Children from low socio-economic families equally participate in the classroom and sometimes they outperform the children from better socio-economic background. Genesee (1987) also says that socio-economic status of the children would not always affect the acquisition of L2. However, children from very poor socio-economic background, sometimes, might suffer in the English medium classes when they get admission to ordinary English medium school with limited infrastructure. Generally, they are unable to get admission to good schools which have efficient English medium teachers and other resources to offer an effective English medium education. In Jaffna, the capital city of north Sri Lanka, children from poor families get admission to ordinary English medium schools which are not well-equipped. But, popular schools in Jaffna operate English medium education in a constructive way by empowering children to attain competency in target language.

## **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, it is obvious that the use of English as medium of instruction set a good impact on the learner's attitude, learning styles and personality. This program has been operated in the schools in Sri Lanka for nearly 12 years and the outcome of English medium education has to be evaluated by taking many factors into account. The findings of the study show some beneficial points of the use of English as medium of instruction in the secondary schools in Jaffna. However, we need to observe more to take a complete coverage of the English medium education program being

operated in the schools in Jaffna. This study, of course, would be a preliminary one and an in-depth study needs to be carried out in this area. It can be concluded that English medium education has received support in the Tamil community in Jaffna because English is considered as a prestige language and English is a tool through which one can reach the horizon of the world but the successful operation of the program still has a long way to go to address the expectation of the Tamil community in Jaffna.

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