

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING CLASSES

IN THE NON-FORMAL SECTOR:

THREE CASE STUDIES.

by

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the non-formal English tuition class phenomenon that attracts large numbers of students, island-wide, and which remains undocumented and is not monitored by the state. This study analyzes the language content, the extra-linguistic input (if any) and the teaching methods adopted in a selected sample of three non-formal English tuition classes in and around Colombo, conceptualizing English Language Teaching (ELT) as a political act. In this way, this study examines the ways in which the assumptions/ideologies concerning the role/function of English in Sri-Lanka (and the mechanics of their reproduction in the classroom) in three non-formal English courses reinforce or resist the overarching extra-linguistic context, where the socio-economic advantages remain with the speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English.

This study suggests that the ways in which the selected case studies both resist and reinforce the status quo is complex and ambiguous. First, this study conclusively proves that non-standard varieties of English were taught in all three case studies. The combination of the non-standard varieties imparted along with the inadequate teaching methods employed meant that these classes did not equip the students with even a mechanical knowledge of Standard Sri Lankan English. In this regard, the courses did not empower the students in socio-linguistic terms.

Secondly, this study revealed the different ways in which these courses communicated to the student population that a classed acculturation was integral to achieving fluency in English. The target culture or group was occasionally

invoked as British, but was more consistently identified as indigenous Lankan speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English. Extra-linguistic information – namely advice on how to impersonate members of this target group in terms of dress, deportment and behaviour – was interspersed throughout the teacher talk and/or lesson materials of the case studies. Such information was explicitly part of the curriculum in Case Studies A and C. While the advantages of learning English were emphasized in Case Study B, it focused on language instruction and was less concerned with imparting this kind of extra-linguistic input, than the other two case studies.

This study argues that such an emphasis on classed acculturation has complex implications. At one level it seriously devalues the actual experiences and personalities of the non-élite student population, and in turn reinforces the power wielded by Sri Lanka's influential Standard English-speaking élite by privileging their life-style and values. Moreover, in terms of Second Language Acquisition, Sri Lankan linguists fear that an emphasis on classed acculturation potentially alienates the students from the task of learning English. However, this study suggests that this did not appear to be the case in the classes observed. Instead, this study argues that while these classes emphasized the social distance between the student population and the target group, they simultaneously communicated to the students the idea that it is possible to become fluent in English and to become part of the advantaged group if they learn to speak and behave in the way they are instructed. The teachers' projected self-representation as providers of this extra-linguistic information and as mediators between the students' social milieu and the target group emerged as an integral component of these courses. This study's

identification of the teacher's role as a mediator is previously undocumented and is one of the most significant findings of this study.

While the teacher's 'message' of self-empowerment is clearly an oversimplification of a more complex situation (and designed to advertise the classes with the implied suggestion that the teacher provides information usually withheld in other classes) presenting the students with this kind of extra-linguistic information, particularly the criteria (which is not openly articulated by the gatekeepers of society because of the snobbery implicit in these values) by which they will be judged in a typical interview situation is potentially extremely useful for the students, who would perhaps be otherwise unaware of this information. Furthermore, such information potentially enhances the students' integrative motivation, especially in this situation where students want to be part of the advantaged group (or enjoy the advantages that accrue to this group) but have a low estimate of their chances of success. This is because they recognize that even if they become proficient in the L2, other factors of class and family background militate against their acceptance by the target group. These classes appear to be successful in convincing the students that learning English is not an impossible and insurmountable task, which is a recurrent problem that language teachers face in the formal sector. Informal student responses to the extra-linguistic input provided in class, as well as the large numbers of students attending these classes suggest the extent to which the popularity of these classes stems from this kind of information.

However, while the teachers induce high levels of motivation that are conducive

for language learning, they did not make optimum use of these conditions by failing to develop the students' language ability. Imparting extra-linguistic information without language proficiency is not empowering, and the failure to create L2 speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English means that these learners remain in their disadvantaged position. Ultimately, this study concludes that these courses do not resist dominant patterns of class stratification, and ultimately perpetuate the hegemony of the dominant group of Standard Sri Lankan English speakers.