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ENHANCING ENGLISH SKILLS FOR THE STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO S COURSES IN ENGLISH

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University work in English Language Teaching (ELT) to young adults commenced in Sri Lanka in 1960, with an intensive course in English to new entrants to the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya. Similar work commenced in Colombo in 1964 with the inauguration of the so-called “Ashva Vidyalaya”. The policy for this intensive course came from Faculty recognition of a need for Sinhala and Tamil medium Arts entrants, to enhance their English skills in order to cope with their advanced academic reading tasks in English. Although the 1960 course conducted by James Sledd at Peradeniya addressed more than the reading tasks, the immediate needs of academic reading were central to its policy.

Within the next four decades, universities in Sri Lanka multiplied, intensive courses were extended to all faculties and also to on-going courses in Faculties of Arts, Law, Management etc. Some faculties conducted their courses in the English medium, and therefore their immediate needs extended from academic reading tasks to listening to lectures, taking notes, following instructions at ‘practicals’, speaking at tutorial and discussion groups, writing assignments etc.

In addition, by about the 1970s, international research in ELT influenced university work in Sri Lanka, where communicative methodology recognized the teaching of all four skills, i.e. Listening, Speech, Reading and Writing, emphasizing the use of meaningful communicative activities rather than the teaching of formal grammar, meaning over form or structure and fluency over accuracy. It also began to be recognized that undergraduates were not achieving adequate reading proficiency in order to cope with their advanced reading tasks. Research on second language acquisition had started to show that tying students to academic reading and the study of grammar had not shown sufficient benefit. In response to all these issues, the initial policy widened to developing all four skills with more communicative activity.

By about the 1980s, Sri Lanka began to experience serious problems regarding the use of English. Due to the underplaying of English in the national policy, it became clear that English skills were desperately needed not only by undergraduates, but also by thousands of young adults and adults in Sri Lanka. State departments and institutions and private sector industries and companies were experiencing massive problems over recruiting suitable staff and managing their routine career tasks that needed to be done in the English medium. As a result, objectives underlying ELT developed from the narrow objective of meeting immediate pre-sessional needs through relatively short intensive courses to a comprehensive aim of providing for the total immediate and deferred needs of adults and young adults through on-going in-sessional courses in tertiary educational institutions and through pre-service and in-service career courses.

The Extension Courses in English in Colombo were inaugurated in 1984 in response to these needs. Being the metropolitan university, the University of Colombo could and should cater to as many adults and young adults who were in need of English skills, as a former Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Stanley Wijesundera, recognized. As a result, he encouraged the Department of English & ELTU to run modestly priced service-oriented courses for outside persons, using the expertise and resources available to set up relevant and competent courses.

The needs of such persons can be identified as follows:

- a. General life skills in listening, speech, reading and writing in English.
- b. Interaction with the surrounding media available in English in big city life.
- c. Occupational skills in listening, speech, reading and writing in the content area of individual students.
- d. Strategies for dealing with English-medium situations in occupational and professional life; and strategies for developing professional skills as these situations increase in complexity.

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ate in English for Careers and Certificate in English for Law, The course at the advanced level, i.e. Diploma in Advanced English for Administration and Academic Purposes, concentrates on advanced professional life, especially taking into account the last need above.

The Extension Courses in English commenced with 350 students, ten teachers and one course. Within the first ten years, work was extended to three courses. Numbers increased dramatically to about 6000 students annually and over a hundred teachers. As demonstrated in Table 1, the students come from a wide range of employment and places. The table gives details of sixty students selected from the files. They range from unemployed persons and students, through self-employed persons, middle level employees like assistants, operators, cashiers, clerks, nurses, officers, teachers etc., to higher level administrators and professionals like executives, principals, accountants, engineers and a Deputy Director General. They come both from government departments and institutions as well as the private sector. They live in the city of Colombo or its suburbs like Ratmalana, Nugegoda, Rajagiriya or Battaramulla, or commute from medium distances like Homagama, Panadura, Wadduwa or Kelaniya, or travel from much further places like Nittambuwa, Kurunegala, Weligama, Kahawatta, Rakwana, Madampe, and even from as far as Matale, Gampola, Dehiowita, Embilipitiya and Trincomalee.

Evaluation forms are administered annually and the completed forms are relatively complimentary. Numbers remain in the thousands and applications for admission are eagerly awaited. Many students stay with the Extension Courses for as many as four years. The courses have been sustained without breakdown for all these years. Therefore it seems that these courses have met with much satisfaction from the students.

One reason for this success is that students enter the courses at the point of their need. It is observed that attendance of these students is 80 % or more. In contrast, when a university dictates a need for English skills, the attendance drops below 60%, sometimes to even zero. Similarly when a workplace dictates the need, attendance correspondingly drops very low. A course was conducted on a consultancy to the Central Bank in 1990, and again in 1991, and attendance there dropped predictably to 60 %.

Of course, it is not that Extension Course students do not have difficulties in attending. Some students commute from as far as Trincomalee, Puttalam, Embilipitiya etc. A number of them have small children, and in some cases both husband and wife attend the courses, some of them bringing their children to stay in the premises throughout the class hours. However, in these cases the Extension Course students have paid for their courses themselves and sacrificed time willingly, thus acknowledging their needs. It is this that has provided the impetus or motivation for their studies. They receive a certificate at the end of the course, which is certified as equivalent to a pass in the GCE O/L or A/L by the Department of English & ELTU. Many of the institutions in which the students work accept these certificates for purposes of promotional advancement.

Another reason for success is that many students have simultaneous exposure to English medium work at their workplaces. In universities, Arts students seem to develop very little in their English skills. In contrast, Science students seem to acquire English skills in a year or two. The contrast is mainly due to the amount of exposure to English medium work in their respective faculties; where the Faculty of Science adds the compulsion of writing in English as well. Correspondingly Extension Course students who have exposure to more challenging English tasks in workplaces usually do better than those who do less challenging tasks. Such students often do even better than unemployed students, who are generally exposed minimally to English.

A third reason for success is that these courses are open to anyone who has passed any six subjects in the GCE O/L. As a result, one class may contain Asst. Directors, clerks and unemployed persons. Some may have to deal with clients in English, while others speak entirely in Sinhala or Tamil. Learning together in such a group provides leverage to students who have less exposure to English.

What do Extension Courses in English do for other stakeholders like employers? No research has been done so far on the needs of employers, or the employers' satisfaction with the performance of graduates. However there is one point that I would like to make to such stakeholders: The Extension Courses in English, or for that matter, any English course, will not be able to produce a person who has full proficiency in English. This situation will not

es, knowledge, infrastructure, technology etc. This is because full with other participants in their English tasks.

ts with are strategies for dealing with English medium situations. If students go out to situations in which English skills are regularly used, they will have regular practice in using these strategies. If English skills are not regularly used, there will be a washaway effect on their skills. These skills will erode with each year of unused skills. In addition, if students go out to contexts in which they meet intimidatory employers, colleagues or clients, there will be a restrictive effect on their skills. Restrictive interaction will soon reduce skills to nothing.

The Extension Courses in English have so far employed just one of their own graduates to teach on the courses. However in this case, her personality combines great initiative, hard work, thoroughness and patience. Whenever a lesson is introduced, she never fails to attend the briefing session, take careful notes, check back personally with the course director on any point of difficulty on grammar, spelling or pronunciation and prepare her lesson very thoroughly. It is not often that a personality like this is encountered.

There are diverse types of learners. Two types of learners have been distinguished by Pask and Scott (1972), and discussed by Widdowson (1987), as serialists and holists. Serialists take the strategy of following a direct route, proceeding step by step, and avoiding digression and irrelevance. On the other hand, a holist's strategy is to advance on a broad front, allowing access to all kinds of information that might help him or her to find the way. Neither type, on graduation, attains full proficiency.

A serialist when faced with complications in English in his workplace, will proceed step by step, perhaps checking with former teachers, textbooks, or the employer, if they are sympathetic and able to guide him or her in English. Each time he/ she works out one problem satisfactorily, proficiency develops. Holists may not be as worried by such problems, and at each point they will find access to useful information. Of course, they would not be able to achieve accuracy, and of course, some employers will be frustrated or disgusted by their performance.

Another two types of learners have been distinguished by Hudson (1967), as reported in Widdowson (1987), as convergers and divergers. Hudson defines them with reference to types of intelligence tests. Hudson gives an example of an item in an intelligence test as follows :

Brick is to house as plank is to (orange, grass, egg, boat, ostrich).

A candidate knows that there is one solution that is correct, and his task is to find it out through reasoning, that is he **converges** on the answer. Less rational but perhaps more creative candidates, or candidates from different cultural contexts, find it difficult to work out such answers, and do badly on such items. However they are able to do quite well on an open-ended task, which invites a 'creative' or a culturally unrestricted response, as in the following example:

How many uses can you think of for a brick?

Here "an individual is invited to **diverge**, to think fluently.....without examining any one line of reasoning in detail" (Hudson 1967:50).

Graduates of the Extension Courses in English too have diverse cognitive skills, being serialists, holists, convergers, divergers or combinations of these to different extents. Real life produces problems in English that they have to work out on their own. While they are students, if they are simultaneously working in English medium or bilingual workplaces, they will have the support of the courses once a week. Where they encounter problems after graduation, the main support they can get will be through their workplaces, or from their own cognitive skills. On some occasions a problem will be too complicated for a converger to converge on the correct solution. At other times the graduates may be too divergent, too 'creative', and will come up with the wrong results. Some employers get irritated and shout "Why aren't you able to write even one grammatical sentence?", while others are more understanding and tell others "He's (or She's) still learning". Whenever employers, colleagues or clients are of the first type, the English skills of these graduates will suffer restrictive effects.



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perform in. In Latvia, medical professors do not demand perfect their assessment of such Sri Lankans accommodates their lecturers in Sri Lankan Faculties of Medicine, Engineering etc. s. (Giles and Smith (1979:45-65) provide a further view of their Accommodation Theory). All over the world, adults do not demand full proficiency when their infants start using language. Instead they are proud of their achievements. They do not inhibit or retard their progress, instead encourage them, even responding with correspondingly 'malformed' baby talk or 'motherese' (Snow 1972:549-65; Ferguson 1975:419-39). Workplaces need to take account of these facts. The Extension Courses in English cannot produce persons who have full proficiency. Their full proficiency and accuracy in English depends upon the participatory interaction of the workplace. These workplaces should be non-threatening places of encouragement and accommodation.

Sri Lanka badly needs enhancement of English skills for the general public, both for those seeking and already employed in careers. The universities can extend their expertise and resources in outreach programmes for such persons. However the success of these programmes depends not only on the contribution of the universities, but also on the motivation of the students and the sympathetic cooperation of the employers. Further support can be added to sympathy for students who have low levels of English when employers can be given an understanding of the problems and difficulties in the acquisition of a second or foreign language, the peculiarities of English grammar and differences between English and Sri Lanka's mother tongues. Providing employers with education in these areas will help them to interact with employees in such a way as to develop their skills to a fuller proficiency in English. This is one of the next tasks that university expertise, and the Extension Courses in English, could address.



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