

English for Equality, Employment and Empowerment

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Introduction

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This publication brings together selected papers presented at the Fourth International Conference of the Sri Lanka English Language Teachers' Association (SLELTA) held in August 2006 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The theme of the conference was "English for Equality, Employment and Empowerment", was selected to invite discussion and debate on three important aspects that are linked English in Sri Lanka.

Under this broad theme, the conference addressed the following four sub-themes: Good Governance and Language Policies, English, Power and Ideology, English for/in Employment, and English in Teaching and Learning. The papers published here represent research and discussion pertaining to one or more of these sub-themes. Some of the issues dealt are the empowerment of teachers and learners, designing ELT courses geared at improving English skills required in the workplace, the importance of incorporating authentic language-in-use data in teaching, and best practice methods of skills-based teaching in a second language classroom.

A. EMPOWERMENT OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

The two papers in this section focus on the empowerment of the teacher and of the student. An interesting overlap, dealt with in extremely different ways in the two papers, is the subject of gender in ELT. The first paper reveals several gendered differences in language learning based on the under-performance of female students inside and outside the classroom. The next paper suggests, through the consistent use of the pronoun *she*

a very ordinary type of speech situation—conversational interaction—through a discourse analysis lens, he shows how preference structure and turn-taking conventions intersect with adjacency pairs, discourse markers, and formulaic utterances to form a complex system of communication. He then makes an important observation—that most dialogues found in ELT textbooks do not reflect these characteristics of everyday conversation. His advice to language teachers faced with what appears to be an impossible task — i.e., teaching students to be ‘natural’ conversationalists in a second language — is to recognise and place oral fluency as operating in specific contexts of language use.

Harold Thampoe, focusing on a 1990’s development in the field of discourse analysis initiated by John Swales — i.e., genre analysis — argues in his paper that genres are sites of linguistic hegemony. He observes that, in so far as a genre’s norms and conventions are established and maintained by ‘expert’ users who speak and use English as a first language, a learner for whom English is a second or third language and who is struggling with issues of communicative competence is at a disadvantage when attempting to participate as a member of the discourse community that engages in that particular genre.

Thampoe admits, however, that there are certain academic genres which learners need to master if they are to be successful in higher education contexts where English is the principal medium of instruction. To this end, he recommends using a bottom-up approach to the teaching of genre in the ELT classroom, as opposed to the top-down approach of analysis perpetuated by genre theorists. This, he says, would be a means of empowering learners and equipping them with the tools necessary to become successful users of academic/research genres.

Agra Rajapakse’s paper focuses on a community of speakers — the Sri Lankan Burghers — who have the most legitimate claim to being first language speakers of Sri Lankan English, but who have unfortunately been ignored in census statistics as well as in linguistic research. Using Chitra Fernando’s admittedly dated grouping of Sri Lankan English bilinguals (in the absence of any other recent categorization), Rajapakse demonstrates that the profile of the Sri Lankan bilingual speaker of English needs to be revisited and reframed according to the phonological, lexical and grammatical features evident in the speech of her subjects. Rajapakse’s study carries weight because her conclusions are based on recordings of empirical data from members of the Burgher community, and therefore reflect authentic language in use.

C. APPROACHES TO TEACHING

The four papers in this section focus on areas that have remained neglected not only in English Language teaching research but in the curriculum and in classroom approaches. All these papers have implications for teacher training as well as for curriculum developers

to rethink decisions and approaches in the present context of English language teaching in Sri Lanka.

Kamala Wijeratne's paper is based on a national level study of the Advanced Level subject General English that was introduced in 2002. She focuses on the areas of the teaching materials, student perceptions on the materials, the teaching methodology as well as on the general curriculum issues such as the number of weekly lessons to study English. This study supports with statistics some of the frequent complaints about teaching AL General English: the lack of skilled teachers, the unequal access to materials, the ineffective teaching methods, all leading to a lack of correspondence between official time and 'real time', with the number of classroom hours allocated for the subject corresponding little with what the learners learn during the lesson.

Interestingly, learners' voices are heard in this paper. The large number of Advanced Level students interviewed for this study has made it possible for a usually silent majority at the bottom of the stakeholder pile in curriculum development to get a hearing. The students' views, when consolidated by empirical data such as this, should influence national policy as well as approaches to teaching. Wijeratne's findings reveal an enthusiasm on the part of students to learn English, but also a negative perception of the teaching methods and a lack of enjoyment in the learning process. This suggests serious and far reaching implications for improving teaching methods, and by extension, for teacher training, and the need for constant monitoring of curriculum changes -- a major recommendation made in this paper.

Siromi Fernando's paper deals with a much neglected area in ELT in our country: that of English phonology and the teaching of pronunciation. Long fallen to disfavour by communicative teaching methods that focused on fluency, teaching pronunciation was a neglected area in the ELT classroom. Reflecting on her own experiences and approach, which she admits also ignored the teaching of pronunciation, Fernando now examines the significance of pronunciation through a detailed analysis of two vowel sounds in the Sri Lankan speaker's phonology: the open mid back vowel as found in "hall" and the close mid back vowel as found in "hole". Through her observation and analysis, she justifies the existence of several dialects of Sri Lankan English based on phonological differences, stating that the hitherto accepted "Standard" is now increasingly accommodating features of pronunciation that were earlier considered 'non standard.'

This paper touches on the issues of power, social prestige and acceptability that are closely linked with the phonology of English in Sri Lanka. It also illustrates the fact that this is a complex and dynamic area of sociolinguistic research, arguing that stigmatised vowel sounds are now gaining acceptance, and even power, over what used to be the standard

version, and in turn, threatening the power and the prestige of the standard variety. This paper forces us to rethink the position of the Sri Lankan teacher of English who is generally advised to ignore the teaching of pronunciation. It suggests serious implications for teaching, as well as for curriculum developers who promote Sri Lankan English as the model for teaching English in Sri Lanka.

Susan Holzman's paper on teaching reading skills focuses in particular on another neglected aspect of ELT in the classroom, teaching reading comprehension. Based on the hypothesis, backed by research, that it is a knowledge of vocabulary, rather than syntactic or grammatical knowledge that a learner most needs to develop reading comprehension, she analyses three areas of intervention in the reading classroom: knowing (i.e., building lexical knowledge), guessing, and looking it up. She supports the pedagogical implications for these three areas with useful classroom activities. With evidence from research studies, she discusses guessing as a complex cognitive activity that is ineffective during independent reading. However, she argues that when it is used as a strategy in guided classroom activities, it can develop reading comprehension, which, in the long term, promotes reading fluency.

Shivaneel Ilangakoon in her paper discusses the process of planning and conducting an intensive language teaching course for undergraduates of the University of Colombo under the World Bank funded Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) English Enhancement Skills program. This paper fills a niche in the documentation of teacher reflections and experiences of planning, implementing and obtaining feedback on a performance-based ELT program—an important part of teaching that most of us teachers of English often neglect. Her candid account of the process, detailing the constraints and shortcomings as well as the very satisfying achievements that she experienced, reflect the reality of ELT in our universities today. This includes the oft-elided issues of student and staff strikes, program disruptions and the inadequacies in institutional procedures that are often not taken into consideration in programme planning. The effects of such disruptions on the programme itself are studied even less.

D. LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY

Ideologies attached to language have long been ignored by linguists, language planners and policy makers, to the detriment of teachers, learners and users. Today, the many roles played by English as a lingua franca, as a link language and as a medium of instruction are subjects of serious debate. The two papers in this section present detailed discussions of the shifting ideologies of English in Sri Lanka, and the need for gearing ELT in India to address the global role played by English as a lingua franca.

Manique Gunesekera views the use of English in Sri Lanka as a site representing ideological changes. She traces the public ideologies vested in and articulated by the use of English from the 1950's to the present. She shows how the use of English in the media, especially in commercial advertisements, by allowing for the mixing of Sinhala words and phrases to form new Sinhala-English compounds which then quickly enter the mainstream colloquial discourse, points to a relaxing of the older, more conventional linguistic constraints underpinning Sri Lankan culture and ideology. Refreshingly, Gunesekera sees this 'relaxing' of the norms as a sign of progress, but acknowledges that in the ELT classroom, the question of whether the change in ideology is a progressive or regressive development, is yet to be discussed.

K. Durga Bhavani reiterates the point that the development and spread of English as a global language requires us to rethink native speaker models and in fact, the concept of the native speaker itself. Leading on from this, she states that pedagogical approaches, ELT materials, and methods of assessment—especially in reading and writing—should reflect the cultural diversity and socio-political consciousness of both teachers and learners. Bhavani argues that learner empowerment is achieved by encouraging students to bring their discipline-specific knowledge and learning into the ELT classroom as an aid. She concludes by emphasizing the importance of seeing ELT as a collaborative process in which both the teacher and the learner are important stakeholders in curriculum design and the choice of teaching strategies.