

English Education in Sri Lanka with Emphasis on English Medium Instruction at Secondary and Tertiary Levels: The Past, Present and Future



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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the education system of Sri Lanka in the post-colonial and contemporary periods with a focus on English education. This review briefly explains how the changes were made by colonial rulers to introduce English education into the tiny island and how the local rulers attempted to diminish the importance of English education in the country in the post-colonial period. This review also assesses the reintroduction of English education and analyses different reasons for the changing roles of English education. Finally, this review explores the English Medium Instruction (EMI) at both secondary and tertiary levels and the underlying reasons for the success and failures of the EMI. Some brief suggestions are also made to overcome the present challenges in the system.

Initially, this review commences with a brief description of the country and the education system. This is followed by the English medium instruction at schools and universities, the challenges and recommendations.

KEYWORDS: English Medium Instruction, English as a Second Language, tertiary level, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION: DEMOGRAPHY, RELIGIONS AND LANGUAGE

Sri Lanka, a small island in the Indian Ocean, is located off the south-eastern tip of the Indian subcontinent. It is around 432 kilometres in length with a total area of 65,610 square kilometres. Sri Lanka is divided into nine provinces and 25 administrative districts. Each province has its own provincial council to govern the province and has been vested with limited power, such as education and health, but the authority of land, security including higher education, lies under the purview of the central government. Sri Lanka's current population has been estimated to be just over 21 million (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). The major ethnic groups are Sinhalese, Tamils (including Indian Tamils)¹ and Sri Lankan Moors. The religious affinity of each ethnic group varies. Within Sinhalese, the majority are Buddhists, while Tamils are predominantly Hindus. But there is a certain percentage of Christians within Sinhalese and Tamils while all the Sri Lankan Moors are followers of Islam.

Two major languages are spoken in Sri Lanka: Sinhala and Tamil. These are native to Sri Lanka. Sinhala is spoken as the first language by the majority of Sinhalese and a minority of Sri Lankan Moors and Indian Tamils. The Tamil language is the mother tongue of Tamils, as well as the Sri Lankan Moors. In addition, English, introduced by the British when they invaded the island in 1796, is spoken as a first language by a limited number of Sri Lankans, although official statistics of the number of speakers are not available.

Education in Colonial Sri Lanka

Ruberu (1962) suggests that with the arrival of western rulers from the beginning of the 16th century A.D. the indigenous system of education started to disintegrate. After the invasion by the Portuguese, the first western school was established on the island in 1505 (Sharma, 1976). At a later stage, the Dutch and the British were interested in establishing mission schools on the island. The mission schools established by the British provided education through the medium of English, while the missionaries who managed these mission schools had another function of propagating Christianity too.

The Sri Lankan education system reflected mainly the British model. In Britain there were two types of schools at the beginning of the 19th century. One was the charity and village schools, which catered to the poor working masses. The other was grammar and public schools. Of these, the latter group, public schools, served poor children, while the grammar schools accommodated

¹ They migrated from India during the British period, mainly as a labour force for the tea estates

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academically bright students from the working and middle classes. It is the latter type of school that was promoted on the island by the British. Also, it was claimed that the overall objective of establishing western schools was to teach Christianity (Sharma, 1976). During the latter stages of British rule three types of schools emerged: English schools (or private schools), Anglo-vernacular schools and vernacular schools (Warnasuriya, 1969). English schools were run mainly by the Christian missionary societies and they were private and fee levying. Children from the upper middle class were educated in these schools. These schools taught a curriculum similar to that of the public schools of England and prepared students for Cambridge Junior and Senior certificates (ibid). The subjects included Religion (Christianity), English Language and Literature along with History and Geography (of England). The Anglo-vernacular schools or bilingual schools were established to serve the officials working in the government sector. These schools provided instruction in the local languages at the lower level and English at the higher level (Raheem & Devendra, 2007) and prepared their students for the local examinations. The vernacular schools conducted the entire education in the mother tongue and provided only elementary education for the poor rural people.

In the early 1900s, realising the problems of the rural population in gaining education, the government promoted vernacular schools. Brutt-Griffler (2002) estimates that there were around 4,000 vernacular schools from the last decade of the 19th century through to the end of the colonial period. As a result, students attended these schools en masse and the literacy rate also rose. Even though private schools were also set up to provide English medium education for the middle class and urban elites, by the 1950s English was not taught to the students in vernacular schools at primary level (Raheem & Devendra, 2007). In addition, in the 1940s, the number of students attending the English schools was very low (around seven percent of the school going population), while the number of English schools (state owned) witnessed minimal growth – from 124 in 1889 to 255 in 1927 (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). In the same period, several other changes took place in favour of vernacular education. In 1939, the education ordinance act was established. In 1943, a special committee recommended that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction instead of English. In 1945, the then minister of Education, C. W. W. Kannangara, passed a bill in the state assembly to provide free education for all (Raheem & Devendra, 2007). As a result, students were given access to education in the vernacular languages: Sinhala and Tamil, and the importance given to English medium education waned at the time of independence in 1948.

English education in post-independence Sri Lanka

In post-independence Sri Lanka, the government tried in several ways to diminish the role played by the English language and to give the Sinhala language a firm root. One such measure was making Sinhala the official language of Sri Lanka in 1956. For political reasons, the then government, through the Official Language Act No 33 of 1956, made Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka. This policy enhanced the importance given to the teaching and learning through Sinhala medium, which affected not only English medium education but also the use of Tamil too (Canagarajah, 2005; Perera & Canagarajah, 2010; Samarakkody & Braine, 2005). Following the introduction of this act, the government systematically discouraged the establishment and running of English private schools. Raheem and Devendara (2007) describe the following:

A large number of private schools which had been supported by grants from the government had perforce to join the state system, which also required that teaching in the English medium be abandoned in favour of local language instruction. (P. 189)

Though the medium of instruction in the tertiary sector was English at the beginning, the free education policy of the government and the promotion of mother tongue instruction at secondary level had a major impact on the medium of instruction at the universities also. The national policy changes in the secondary education sector were immediately realised in the tertiary sector. In the 1960s, the University of Ceylon started to teach the students in the mother tongue (Raheem & Devendra, 2007). But, this teaching was confined to courses in the Arts and related fields, whereas courses in Science, Medicine, Engineering and science related subjects continued to be taught in English.

Even though successive governments in power neglected the importance of English medium education, they could not isolate the English language from society because of the importance it has as a global language. Canagarajah (2005) explains this phenomenon in detail:

Even though Sinhala became the official language of administration, and both vernaculars took over primary and secondary education (with English taught as a second language), it was difficult to dislodge English from many other domains. English remained the language of higher education, commerce, communication, technology and travel. In this sense, English was still a working official language in many institutional domains. Added to this was the power English derived from being an international language, which still assured it a prestigious position in the Sri Lankan society. (p. 423)

It is, therefore, understood that the attempt to develop the vernacular languages, mainly Sinhala over English, has not been as successful as expected. Canagarajah (2005) further explains that people, especially Tamils, continued to learn English, as they believed that '[...] English was still associated with certain material advantages, both within the island and outside' (p. 424). Raheem and Ratwatta (2004) also explain the firm role English had taken in society after independence. They argue that there was a

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contradiction between government policies and the practices on the ground. Though English had lost its status as an official language, it continued to be used in international trade and higher education institutes, etc. The teaching of Science and Medicine at tertiary level institutes continued in English, as mentioned above.

Furthermore, Kandiah (1984) argues that though nationalisation of private schools tried to promote the indigenous languages over the English language, the prominent role played by the English language could not be reduced by the government. Therefore, in the 1980s, when English started to capture its place back in the education sector, the immediate response came from private schools to provide English. These schools, also called international schools, mushroomed in the metropolitan areas, mainly in the capital, used English as the medium of instruction. However, their number is just around 1% only (Department of Census and Statistics, n.d.(c)) compared to government schools at the beginning of 1980s. These private schools, which were originally meant to accommodate the children of expatriates, later admitted locals who could afford to pay a handsome fee for these schools.

The government, realising the need for the development of the English language, took several steps at the end of the 20th century. A National Education Commission was established under the National Education Commission Act No. 19 of 1991. The function of this commission was to make recommendations to the President on educational policy and practice. The formation of the commission was followed by the formation of the Presidential Task Force on General Education. This committee comprising of eminent educationists and university academics studied the status of secondary education of the country and submitted its recommendations, known as the General Educational Reforms 1997.

One of the important recommendations pertaining to English education was the introduction of a subject called 'GCE A/L General English' from 1998. GCE A/L is the final stage of school education.²

Previously English was taught as a subject up to the GCE O/L only. Later students learnt English formally when they entered the universities, leaving a gap at the GCE A/L, except for a few who followed English Literature as a subject. In order to fill this gap, the General English course was introduced in 1998 and the first batch of students sat the examination in 2000, but the pass rate of this subject had not been satisfactory, as indicated later in this review.

The reforms also suggested introducing Activity Based Oral English (ABOE) at grade 1 and 2, the first two years in primary school. Previously the formal teaching of English language commenced from grade 3 only. This new initiative provided class teachers with a set of vocabulary and they were supposed to develop students' oral skills based on these words associated with their immediate environment, but the successful implementation of this is also an interesting question as the teaching of ABOE is dependent on class teachers who are trained in subjects other than English. Atugoda (2007) has pointed out in connection to this, that '[T]he drawback that has been there up to now was that all these Grade 1 & 2 teachers have not undergone adequate training to learn methodologies to be used in introducing English at these grades' (2007: n.d).

Another change that took place is the introduction of English as the medium for Science subjects. The government in early 2000 advocated the introduction of English medium instruction in different grades, especially for Science subjects. The reform suggests that at lower grades the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction but in Grade 6, Mathematics, Science and IT subjects could be taught in English along with the teaching of other subjects in Sinhala or Tamil. In addition, it was also recommended that in the senior secondary level classes (GCE O/L and A/L) students could be given the option of studying any subject in the English medium and the decision to select the subject would be dependent on the resources available in the schools. Based on these reforms some schools in the urban areas took up the challenge of shifting to English medium in the year 2002 (Perera, 2009). This change took place only in schools which had adequate resources, such as competent teachers, especially in the Science stream.

This policy of the government brought some problems. Perera (2009) found that there are inconsistencies over the policies in implementing this project in Advanced Level Science classes. Only those students who were already competent in English were absorbed into the English medium cohort while others were marginalised. This situation was seen as a threat to the policy of the government, which was attempting to improve the language proficiency of all students. In addition, a lack of textbooks and a lack of competent teachers were the other problems that hampered its wider implementation.

In 2003, it was estimated that only 1882 students (0.05%) were enrolled in the English medium classes in all grades on the island and in the year 2004, 334 schools conducted English medium instruction as bilingual classes; Sinhala and English or Tamil and English. Sometimes these classes were held as trilingual; Sinhala, English and Tamil. In 2006, 584 schools conducted English medium instruction and this number rose to 769 schools in 2016 (School Census Report, 2016). However, considering the overall student enrolment in the island, the number of students on English medium education was marginal. Only two percent (2%) of the

² The school education is divided into three phases: primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary. Students join schools in grade 1 when they complete five years of age and follow the primary education for five years. On completion of primary education students enter the junior secondary level and it lasts for four years (grade 6 – 9). This is followed by senior secondary level for another four years. Senior secondary level is made of two cycles: GCE O/L (General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level) (Grade 10 & 11) and GCE A/L (General Certificate in Education Advanced Level), for two years. These two cycles have the national level exit examinations for the school students.

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students study in English medium in schools out of around 4 million students in the schools. Hence, 30% of those who study in English medium are from western province (School Census Report, 2016).

The reasons for poor enrolment in English medium classes vary. Dissanayake (2009) claims that the problems pertaining to the English medium remain unresolved. He maintains that the problem of the acute shortage of competent teachers still prevails, even in the leading schools in the urban areas. Although some schools have already taken the initiative to conduct the English medium classes at the GCE O/L, they are unable to allow the students to continue their education in the same medium at the GCE A/L, owing to the shortage of competent teachers to teach for the A/L English medium classes. Therefore, Dissanayake indicates that these students have to go back to the mother tongue instruction in the GCE A/L. This situation has led the educational authorities being blamed for introducing English medium instruction without proper planning.

English medium education faced another challenge that is politically motivated. For example, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a political party, opposed the moves for introducing English medium in government schools. The JVP, indicating the poor performance of GCE O/L students who sat in the English medium compared to the mother tongue students, requested the government to give up the change in the medium of instruction (The island, 19 November, 2008), while the voice for more English education has also been raised (De Mel, 2007; Wanigasekera, 2010), opposing the above view of JVP (Illeperuma, 2008).

In the meantime, the government's initiative to improve the oral language skills of the students at secondary level is a new initiative undertaken with the collaboration of the Indian government. The year 2009 was declared as the year for English and IT by the government. The outcome of this project could not be witnessed and was virtually diminished with the change of the regime.

Having looked at how the English language regained its position and the government's endeavours to re-establish the English language in the country and the challenges faced in this regard, I am going to describe education in contemporary Sri Lanka next.

Education in Contemporary Sri Lanka

When passing the GCE O/L examinations students either enter the GCE A/L cycle or leave school and follow vocational training or technical education. If they decide to enter the Advanced Level studies, they select different streams such as Biological Science, Physical Science, Arts, or Commerce. This choice is more influenced by the performance at the GCE O/L and less on personal interest. Of the students who sat for the GCE O/L in 2019 as school candidates³, only around 62% passed the English Language examination. This percentage includes 25% 'S' passes (the lowest pass grade in the scale of A, B, C and S) (Department of examination, 2019). Similarly, in the year 2020 out of the 260,000 students who sat for the GCE A/L, 54% passed the General English language examination which include 25% of the students who got 'S' passes.

Students, upon their successful passing of the GCE A/L examinations, are admitted to universities on a Z-score system by the University Grants Commission (UGC). The students with a higher Z-score, which is similar to the GPA, from each stream (e.g. Biology or Mathematics) gain admission to university. Hence, gaining admission to university is a highly competitive task in Sri Lanka. Annually less than 20% of the eligible students are admitted to universities. For example, in the year 2008, out of a total of 130,120 candidates who were eligible to enter university, admissions were given to 20,069 students only. This number increased to 31,881 students in 2018 (Sri Lanka University Statistics, 2019)

The tertiary sector

There are 16 universities at present in Sri Lanka. All are funded by the government. The University Grants Commission (UGC), which was established under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978, is the apex body of the University System in Sri Lanka. It manages the admission of students to different universities and lays regulations to manage the universities. Sri Lankan universities offer education free of charge for their internal students admitted through the UGC.

Students enter universities at the age of around 20. As mentioned previously only less than 20% of all the qualified students from GCE A/L are admitted on a competitive basis. In addition to these university entrants, it is estimated that around seven percent of the qualified students go abroad to pursue their studies. The World Bank's (2009) report on higher education estimates that at least 390,000 students enrolled in higher education in the 2006/2007 academic year, of whom 88% were in the public sector and 12% were in the private sector⁴. In addition, around 58% of the 390,000 were following external degrees in different universities in Sri Lanka. The Open University of Sri Lanka, the only higher educational institute that provides a distance mode of education, enrolled eight percent of the students. This reveals that not all those students who are qualified to enter university receive opportunities for tertiary education in Sri Lanka as regular internal students of universities.

The constitution of Sri Lanka entitles a person to be educated through the medium of either of the national languages (Sinhala or Tamil). However, it stipulates 'provisions of this paragraph shall not apply to an institution of higher education where the medium of instruction is a language other than a National Language' (Ministry of Constitution and National Integration, n.d.). This clause

³ In the year 2005 another 25% sat the exam as private candidates.

⁴ Even though there are no private universities in Sri Lanka, some private institutes offer degrees.

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sanctions English medium instruction in universities. The medium of instruction in many of the universities has been English for Science, Engineering and Medicine disciplines. Also, some universities offer English medium courses for Management and other related fields. Generally, Arts and Humanities courses are conducted in Sinhala or Tamil. However, the University of Peradeniya, the biggest residential university in Sri Lanka, offers Arts courses in all three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English.

Recently, under the restructuring of university education there have been voices raised to convert the medium of instruction to English in the Arts and related courses too, but the universities are not showing any positive response due to the poor language proficiency of students as well as lecturers. Many of the lecturers teaching in Arts related courses followed their degrees in the mother tongue, so it is feared that they would not be able to cope with teaching in English. In addition, the IRQUE (Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education) project in Sri Lankan universities has spent a considerable amount of money on enhancing the English standard of the undergraduates. This was followed by the HETC project and presently the AHEAD project. There have been some improvements in the infrastructural facilities and learning materials development, but the outcomes of these projects are yet to be evaluated.

Teaching English at primary, secondary and tertiary levels

English is a compulsory subject from grade 3 of primary school to Advanced Level. In schools, at all levels (primary, junior secondary and senior secondary) English is taught as a subject for five periods. At primary level each period lasts for 30 minutes duration, while in the upper levels the duration is 40 minutes. Usually there are two term tests (1st term and 2nd term), followed by a year-end examination in an academic year. The first national level examination for the students including a subject in English is held at the GCE O/L.

In addition to English language examinations, limited number of students, who are already somewhat fluent in the English language, take an English literature examination also at the GCE O/L. Only the schools in the metropolitan areas prepare the students for this examination. It is noteworthy that nearly 50% of the student population to Sri Lankan universities come from the rural areas and so do not sit the GCE O/L Literature examination. Wickramasinghe (2018) states that 50 percent of students enrolled in state universities came from underprivileged families.

Traditionally at Sri Lankan universities, teaching English Literature was very popular compared to Language or Linguistics. Most of the academics attached to the Department of English of older universities (e.g. University of Peradeniya and University of Colombo) specialised in English Literature and they trained a small number of students for a special degree in English each year. In addition, the general degree programme of several universities for the Arts students offered English as a subject along with other subjects (i.e. Economics, Political Science, etc.) to be taught over a three-year period. The students who had already passed the GCE A/L English Literature were selected for these courses, though some new universities enrolled others too, based on their fluency in the language. Almost all these subjects in these degree programmes were relevant to English Literature, while only a few focused on Linguistics.

The result of the above situation was that English language courses were not available for the majority of the student population, and therefore in the early 1980s the University Grants Commission established the ELTUs (English Language Teaching Units) in all universities in order to teach optional English language courses during a pre-sessional academic programme to students irrespective of their medium of instruction. However, as individual universities are allowed to have their own programme, the content and length of the programmes vary between universities.

ELTUs in the 1990s, as indicated by Canagarajah (2005), taught EAP/ESP (English for Academic Purposes/ English for Specific Purposes) type courses for those in the English medium courses (i.e. Science and Engineering) and also started to teach ongoing English language courses for several degrees along with regular academic subjects. In addition, the standing committee on English teaching of the University Grants Commission has suggested teaching a General English component as a mandatory programme during the first semester of the first year in all higher educational institutes from the early 2000s.

English Medium Instruction (EMI) at universities

Even though it was assumed that EMI at universities may help improve the language proficiency of the students, the reality is not so. As the findings of a previous study by the researcher (Navaz, 2012) indicate that the English proficiency of the students who have followed their degrees in EMI is not as high as expected at the end of their course. In addition, students seem to have lecture comprehension problems, coupled with their limited language proficiency.

The important outcome of that study, which was undertaken in an EMI context, is that in Sri Lankan universities, the lecture delivery is mostly monologic. In monologic lectures lecturer-student interaction does not take place so the opportunities for students to interact in the classroom were limited. However, the few lecturers who attempted to develop interactive lectures were only partially successful for various reasons relating to the students as well as the lecturers, such as students' lack of cooperation in discussions

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and also it seemed that lecturers lacked the knowledge of developing interaction of dialogic nature where students equally participate in discussions. Before I go deep into this area, I would like to touch on the status of EMI in this Asian region and Europe.

EMI in Asia, Europe and Sri Lanka

Overview of EMI in Asia

In this review, I am going to look primarily at Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and Hong Kong, where the changes in the medium of instruction are visible. When we compare the situations in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, both located in the Asian region, there can be several parallels observed between these two countries, mainly in terms of the language policy. English was introduced to these countries by the British during the period of British colonial rule. When the British left these countries, usage of English in the society was at its peak. Later for political reasons, in Sri Lanka, 'swabasha' (mother tongue) was introduced in the 1950s, and the government, through the Official Language Act No 33 of 1956, made Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka (Raheem & Ratwatte, 2004), which later affected the entire education system including universities.

Similarly, in Malaysia, since 1957 Bahasa Melayu (Malay) has been the national and official language (Gill, 2006) and soon afterwards through the Education Act 1961, Bahasa Melayu was installed as the medium of instruction in schools, while English was reduced to the status of a second language from its height as the medium of instruction (Foo & Richards, 2004). In Malaysian universities also in 1983, Malay became the only medium of instruction for the first time (Mead, 1988, as cited in Tsui et al., 1999), though it is not known to what extent Medicine and Engineering courses were conducted in Malay.

These changes were not permanent in either country, because later they tried to reinstate English as a medium of instruction in schools and universities. In Sri Lanka the government wanted to introduce English medium instruction in schools in the year 2000, as an optional measure. Similarly, in Malaysia English was introduced for teaching Science and Mathematics in schools in 2002, while the mother tongue was used to teach other subjects.

At roughly the same time these changes were taking place in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, whereas in Hong Kong an opposite change was taking place. The English medium schools started to switch to mother tongue instruction from 1998 as per the decision of the ministry of education (Tsui et al., 1999) for the reason that the mother tongue is the 'best medium for learning' (p. 196), though some 114 schools were allowed to continue in English medium in the year 1999 as they satisfied the criteria required to conduct using EMI. Some of these criteria were students' and teachers' language proficiency, and the availability of bridging courses. This change was later followed by Malaysia, which decided to abandon its policy of teaching Mathematics and Science in English and reverted to Bahasa Melayu in national schools and Chinese and Tamil in vernacular schools. This reverse is to take effect from 2012 in Malaysia. The motive behind this change is described as political to satisfy those, especially Malay Muslims, who wanted a return to Bahasa Melayu, while the government claims that the change is necessary because there are not enough competent teachers to teach those subjects. The government also states that as a result of the shortage of competent teachers, students' mastery of English during the entire policy was around 3%, while the level among rural students was even lower.

Though India was decolonised like Malaysia and Sri Lanka, the importance given to the teaching and learning of English has not been reduced over several decades, despite policy level changes. Tsui et al. (1999) explain that the University Education Commission Report of 1949 suggested replacing the medium of instruction from English to any Indian language as early as possible in higher education. In addition, the education commission (1964–1966) advocated replacing English with the mother tongue (regional language), while it approved that English could be taught as a subject. Despite these measures, Tsui et al. (1999) further state that in India English was adopted as a medium of instruction at undergraduate level, while the regional languages are an optional medium of instruction in many states. In addition, they mentioned that English was the sole medium of instruction in small states. The reason for the high priority for English was that, they considered, unlike Malaysia, government intervention was less strong in India.

Graddol (2010) studied the situation of English education in India and found that a certain level of proficiency in English is increasingly regarded as an entrance requirement for university, as in other European countries, and some Asian countries (e.g. China). Even though a score equal to IELTS 4.00 is desirable, reaching this target could be a challenge in India but a minimum level is yet to be decided (ibid), though I later quote Graddol who argues that levels below IELTS 6.5 lead to a loss of educational quality. In addition, in India, he states, one perceived advantage of learning English at school is that it 'prepare[s] for the challenge of university courses taught through English, and provides the main source of students on postgraduate degrees' (Graddol, 2010: 73). In Sri Lanka where EMI is practised too, these assumptions are not true, because in Sri Lanka students are admitted to university to follow any course of study in English without considering their proficiency in English. Most of them, mainly those who enter from rural areas have neither passed the GCE O/L nor the GCE A/L English examinations. Moreover, they graduate from universities, having successfully passed a degree through the medium of English without achieving even a minimum proficiency in English. Sivasatkunanathan (2006) supports this view by stating:

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The very fact that Sri Lankan learners underperform in English, yet they still go through the educational system on the strength of passing specialist subject exams creates a system whereby linguistic deficiencies in English do not preclude students from completing their courses or graduating. (p. 11)

This view expressed by Sivasatkunanathan reflects the situation in Sri Lankan universities. It is worth mentioning that in the previous study by the researcher (Navaz, 2012) students who did not pass their school level examinations have passed the university examinations in English. In addition, one student claimed that even though his language proficiency was not to the standard of lower grade students at school, he was able to pass all the university examinations held in English. This has become possible because language is not taken into consideration in assessing students' academic performance.

Experience of English medium instruction at tertiary level in Europe and Asia

I try to echo the question raised by Hellekjær (2010: 11) as to 'whether the use of a foreign language for instruction has a negative impact on teaching and learning?' and another connected issue raised by Vinkie et al. (1998) as to 'whether the EMI leads to a loss of educational quality.'

Though these questions are suitable for EMI classes in general, there is a contextual difference between Asian countries (e.g. India and Sri Lanka) and European countries. In Sri Lanka, almost all the textbooks relevant to higher education are available in English and also the lecturers have followed their higher education in English. The lecturers are more comfortable with using English terms (technical vocabulary) than the Tamil or Sinhala equivalent, though the appropriate use of the English language cannot be assured. On the other hand, the situation in Europe is different. Their lecturers have already learnt in the mother tongue and the textbooks are available in the mother tongue. Lecturers in European countries where English is used as a medium of instruction at tertiary level have to switch their medium of instruction from their mother tongue to English.

Nevertheless, despite these contextual differences, the limited language proficiency of students has been a common issue in EMI tertiary classes, and has been the focus of studies in both Europe and Asia. Another common issue has been the limited language proficiency of lecturers, although this has generally been investigated in Europe rather than Asia. For example, Vinkie et al (1998) found that the switch from Dutch to English produced linguistic limitations in the field of vocabulary, redundancy, and clarity and accuracy of expression on the part of the lecturers. In Vinkie et al.'s study the survey questionnaires distributed among several lecturers were completed by around 130 lecturers from several educational institutes across three disciplines: Engineering, Agricultural Sciences and Economics. The findings reveal that though the lecturers did not feel any difference in teaching in Dutch and English, 67% reported that they had to spend more time in preparation for EMI teaching, while expressing themselves clearly was also difficult for around 60% of the respondents. In addition, the observation study, which was conducted by observing and video recording 16 Dutch lecturers lecturing in both English and Dutch, indicates that when lecturers switch from Dutch to English there is a reduction in redundancy of lecturers' subject matter presentation, speech rate, lecturers' expressiveness, and their clarity and accuracy of expression. The authors consider that these factors could affect student learning. The slower speech rate, for example, would reduce the amount of content covered per lecture, though it may have aided comprehension by students. The researchers, based on their findings, stress that only those lecturers whose English proficiency is high should be deployed to teach in the English medium. But the fact is that in Sri Lankan universities lecturers' English proficiency is not considered a factor for their recruitment to lecturer posts.

In India, Graddol (2010) argues that when teachers' and/or students' English proficiency is below C1 (C1 on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) equates to about Band 6.5 of the IELTS test), quality of education will suffer. He further explains that the C1 level allows a speaker, or writer, to communicate with the precision required in higher studies, and to fully participate in the discussions and debate which form a necessary part of any quality university classroom. Students who are less proficient will be marginalised and tend to fall back on note-taking and rote learning. Graddol makes this claim reflecting Henry Whitehead, Bishop of Madras (as cited in Graddol, 2010) who states that most of the university students are struggling to learn because 'the double burden of mastering their subjects and thinking in a foreign language is far too great a strain on them' (p. 101). Sreekanth (2014) expressed the same view that in EMI classes the students should not be forced to rote learning and they should be allowed to take active participation in classroom transactions.

In the Korean context also language problems have been highlighted. Byun et al. (2010) investigated the EMI policy in Korean higher educational institutes with a view to finding out how it influenced teaching, learning, and other aspects of university operations. Their study revealed that mandatory and unilateral implementation of EMI has led to problems because of the poor English knowledge of students and lecturers. Therefore, they suggest that 'it is crucial to take a more flexible approach which carefully takes into account the specific situation of an individual institution', mainly the instructors' and students' language capability.

In Sri Lanka, though both students and lecturers' language proficiency affect the quality of learning and teaching as revealed in this study, lecturers' language proficiency has not been the focus of any studies in Sri Lanka. Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate the lecture comprehension and related problems of EMI students in Sri Lanka.

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Sustainability of EMI in Sri Lanka

A debate over whether Sri Lanka needs English medium instruction at tertiary level may seem inappropriate because all Sri Lankan universities have conducted their courses, such as Medicine, and Engineering, in English from the inception of higher education in Sri Lanka, while for the last two to three decades, courses in Science and related subjects (e.g. Agricultural Science) are also being held in the medium of English. Further, English has been widely used as the medium of administration in most of the government ministries and departments, while the usage of English in the private sector is much higher. It may be suitable to claim that 'English has assumed its place as the language of communication within the new linguistic global order' as suggested by Marsh (2006: 29). Moreover, as a recent initiative, the government has urged schools to conduct English medium classes for selected subjects at primary and secondary level, subject to the individual discretion of the schools when they have enough resources, mainly the teachers. In connection to this, I have already pointed out earlier that schools that conduct English medium classes are limited in number and also these schools are confined to the metropolitan areas of the island.

Though English is already in use as a medium of instruction in Sri Lanka, the problems in English education as well as English Medium Instruction (EMI) are many. The majority of students undertake their school studies in the vernacular languages. As a result, the student population entering the university is highly monolingual. When the courses are offered in English at universities, most of these students find problems in understanding lectures and participating in lectures. Therefore, this situation leads to producing incompetent graduates in terms of English language skills. It is also claimed that 'the English language skills of a large proportion of graduates [in Sri Lanka] is well below the threshold expected by private sector firms' (The World Bank, 2009: E3).

Reasons for unsuccessful English education in Sri Lanka

The reasons for the failure of English teaching have been expressed in newspapers in Sri Lanka, though no systematic studies have been carried out so far. Perera (2009) claims that incompetent teachers and improper methodologies are the reasons for the failure of English teaching in schools. He explains that English is taught as a subject not as a language so students limit their learning within the classroom and their purpose of learning is to pass the examination only, as with other subjects. He further argues, if they were given opportunities to learn English as a language, by being given opportunities to use the language, they too would improve their proficiency. This point was reiterated by Wijayatunga (2018). She explains that the majority of teachers are not proficient enough in the language to teach in English which hampers the quality of the EMI programmes.

Moreover, the shortage of English teachers, mainly in the rural areas is one of the causes of failure for not only English teaching but also for English medium teaching in schools. The political influence in the appointment and transfer of teachers also affects mainly the rural areas. A survey conducted by Transparency International Sri Lanka reveals that premature transfers to better-off urban areas are done through political intervention (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2009).

Another reason for the failure is the absence of overall long term policies in the education sector that lead to not only a shortage of English teachers but also several other problems. For example, in the country the teaching of English has been subject to continuous change. There have been frequent changes in textbooks so that the teachers trained to use a particular textbook at school have to teach another new textbook, without any training available for them for the new textbook. In addition, there has been a disparity in the distribution of resources (e.g. textbooks, teachers). The sector paper published by the Asian Development Bank (2007) on Sri Lanka's education sector also criticises the disparity in access to resources and teacher deployment in less developed provinces, particularly in schools in the conflict-affected Northern and Eastern provinces and in the plantations.

One reason for university students' limited English proficiency is that students do not consider English as important for their studies. It is not compulsory to pass the GCE A/L English for university admission in Sri Lanka and in the university too the nature of lecture delivery and examinations make only few demands on students' English proficiency, as we discussed earlier. Only recently in Sri Lanka a commission appointed to investigate the post-war situation in Sri Lanka (Lesson Learnt and Reconciliation Commission) has suggested making the GCE A/L English paper compulsory for all A/L candidates (The Island, 6 April, 2011). Though the commission has not suggested that a pass in English is necessary for gaining admission to university, it is the first step in making English an important subject for university entrants. Though the failure in teaching English has been realised by the government, no constructive measures have been taken to rectify the situation. Having reviewed the situation of English teaching at secondary level, now I turn my attention to tertiary level EMI.

Perceived advantages of EMI at tertiary level

Several reasons have been cited for the conduct of EMI classes. One general reason is that in Asian countries EMI enhances the graduates' employment opportunities. Further, in some other Asian countries (e.g. Korea) it is considered to help the internationalisation of students and professors. With regard to this, Coleman (2006) lists seven reasons for conducting EMI in Europe. They are CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), internationalisation, student exchanges, teaching and research materials, staff mobility, graduate employability and the market in international students. Further, of these seven reasons, Chang

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(2010) considers academic internationalisation and CLIL as the most relevant reasons for the Taiwanese context, whereas in Sri Lanka the graduates' employability could be the main reason for the implementation of EMI.

In a pilot study conducted by Wu (2006) at Chung Hua University, Taiwan it was found that students in his study believed that following EMI may help them develop their language and also understand the textbooks in English, but 21 of the 35 participants in the study reported that their professors did not ask them to speak in the class. In addition, 75% of the students stated that they answered their examinations in Chinese. Some other problems listed by the students include their difficulties in understanding lectures, expressing their ideas well in content classes and the barrier in communication between the students and professors. These findings call the perceived advantage of developing the language skills into question.

Even though it is theoretically claimed that in EMI classes combining language and content in classroom has advantages, the evidence is from primary and secondary level content classrooms. Similarly, interactive teaching has also shown the advantages in primary and secondary level classes only, and tertiary level studies are yet to appear. In the previous study (Navaz, 2012) also students reported that EMI classes are beneficial when the lecturers involve students in interaction, but these claims should be studied further and tested empirically. Also, empirical evidence is needed to discover how interaction influences lecture comprehension and favours language development.

Perceived disadvantages of EMI at tertiary level

In the Turkish higher educational context, Sert (2008) suggests that though EMI is considered to be useful for language development, it is problematic in terms of the acquisition of the academic content. His study was based on a survey among three universities, which adopted three approaches to teaching: EMI, English Aided Instruction (EAI), and Turkish Medium Instruction (TMI). Of these three approaches, EMI students considered that the use of English is more effective than the other two groups (EAI and TMI). Nevertheless, they believed that it helped improve the spoken skills only but not other skills (e.g. listening or writing). Despite students' preference for EMI classes, they also reported difficulties in understanding the academic content, which might affect their ability in critical thinking. In that study the lecturers interviewed also stated that they had difficulties in making lessons lively as English was a foreign language for the lecturers, despite their high level of language proficiency. In addition, students who entered from the countryside with lower English proficiency found it difficult to cope with EMI despite their high academic knowledge.

Hellekjær (2010) considers that lecture comprehension problems in EMI classes occur as a result of students' as well as lecturers' poor language proficiency. Hellekjær investigated the lecture comprehension of three Norwegian higher education institutions and two German universities. The results of her survey indicated that 42% of Norwegian students and 72% of the German students reported lecture comprehension problems. Even though Hellekjær did not claim that the problems in lecture comprehension occur as a result of EMI, her argument is that the problems that already existed in L1 classes are exacerbated with the introduction of EMI.

In addition to the lecture comprehension problems, there are problems in language use too, as reported in a study conducted by Airey and Linder (2006) among the Physics undergraduates of two Swedish universities. In the interview students revealed that they did not have any problem in following the lectures in English. However, subsequent analysis of videoed lecture material and stimulated recall indicated that students found problems in asking questions because of their poor language proficiency, subsequently, students also reported that they had difficulties in answering questions for the same reason. Based on this, Airey and Linder argue that because of EMI, the students' existing problems have increased. This finding corroborates Hellekjær's (2010) findings, as mentioned previously. In addition, how the EMI teachers should deliver their content is not specified in either Sri Lanka or abroad. The lack of training and resources for the EMI teachers also have been a bottleneck for the successfulness of EMI (Dearden, 2014).

In another dimension, whether many lecturers are willingly involved in EMI or whether they are compelled to teach in English as a requirement of the institution they belong to is also a question for investigation. As revealed in the Chronicles of Higher Education (Labi, 2011), one lecturer in Denmark confesses that he does not like to teach in English. His dislike towards English is not because of his inability in the language but because of the fact that the students' cultural differences cause problems in communication and comprehension. In some cases, lecturers and students mutually blame each other's language proficiency for any difficulties, as reported in the same newspaper.

In Sri Lanka, even though as a policy EMI should be practised in classes, the quality of learning and teaching is in question. One reason is the lecture delivery style, mainly by junior lecturers. The junior lecturers practise a lecture delivery approach in which students are rarely given opportunities to interact in the classroom, while the lecturers used L1, as revealed in the previous study (Navaz, 2012). On the other hand, even though a few lecturers are willing to conduct classes with lecturer-student interaction, students' low level of English proficiency may hinder interaction with them. In addition, both the knowledge and practice of developing interaction are lacking in Sri Lankan EMI lectures.

The foregoing review suggests that even though EMI has been introduced in many countries in Europe and has been in existence in Asia, it is doubtful whether the benefits claimed for EMI have been witnessed. That is, in Asia one of the reasons for practising EMI

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is to enhance the English language proficiency of the graduates and lead to their enhanced employability. But the review above rarely indicates that such benefits have been seen in the contexts EMI is being practised. I quoted earlier from the World Bank report that Sri Lankan graduates' English proficiency is lower than necessary. Further, in Sri Lankan universities this side of the benefit has not been reaped yet for the reasons just mentioned above, except for a few students who were educated in metropolitan schools and entered university with higher proficiency in English. In rural areas the pass rate in English examinations is very low compared to in urban schools. For example, in 2006 in Colombo, the capital, the pass rate in English at GCE O/L was 80%, while it was 22% for the peripheral regions.

One way the benefits of EMI could be brought is by strengthening the English education in schools, which requires a massive policy change, along with the building of resources, mainly competent teachers. Nevertheless, in order to make meaningful suggestions, further studies are needed both at schools and higher educational institutes (e.g. universities) to find the practice and problems of EMI. It can be envisaged that unless the universities get students with higher English proficiency, the output from the universities will continue to be the same, laying the blame on the inefficiency of EMI or language instructors in the universities. It may be appropriate to call the Sri Lankan government's continued push for all undergraduate programmes to be taught in English a 'blind' decision, which is politically motivated to satisfy the donors (e.g. The World Bank). In the absence of any studies that investigate how EMI has impacted on students' content and language knowledge, further implementation of EMI should be considered carefully. By stating this, I end with a quote from Graddol (2010), though it is relevant to the Indian secondary sector, it is also equally applicable to Sri Lanka. He states:

Children do not learn English simply by being taught through English. A hasty shift to English medium without appropriate teaching of the language causes educational failure. Sustained education in, and development of, the mother tongue remains important. (p. 15)

As the backdrop of the foregoing review on EMI in Sri Lanka, it can be further suggested that even though the students' problems in understanding language and content cannot be solved permanently through EMI, a long term policy change along with some other interim measures may be useful in Sri Lankan universities. One such measure is introducing English courses and another one is changing the lecture delivery style/approach. I have discussed the importance of lecture delivery style in other papers (Navaz, 2020a; 2020b). Moreover, the point Bernard (2014) suggested was that switching to bilingual instruction or dual medium of instruction in universities should not be overlooked. This point merits further investigation in the future.

Although several measures can be implemented to improve the situation in Sri Lankan universities, one step could be the changing the lecture delivery style. However, each measure to be taken has its own limitations as well as challenges. Also, the root of the problem is coupled with English education in schools and the EMI at universities. Although EMI is a fait accompli, as I discuss, identifying the problems EMI has may help address the existing students' issues in a better way. Moreover, in countries in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions (e.g. Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Malaysia) students follow their degrees in English, while most of their school studies are in their mother tongue. Even though it can be assumed that the problems these students face may be similar, a closer look at the situations is necessary. Hence, the future studies should focus on the issues of EMI closely and research on the changing lecture delivery style to interactive.

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