

THE PURSUIT OF EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE IN ENGLISH THROUGH ENGLISH MEDIUM/BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE SRI LANKAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: EFFECTIVE STRATEGY TO MEET DESIRED END?

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Introduction

The medium of instruction in education is something that cannot be understood apart from language planning and the policies that are the result of such planning. Language policy, in turn, cannot be understood in isolation from the language politics that operate within a given polity at a particular point in time. The status a language enjoys is thus the outcome of planning, with education as one avenue through which such status is attained. Decisions regarding the choice of a medium of instruction are, therefore, never devoid of political motivation (Annamalai, 2003). In this paper, we examine a radical change in the medium of instruction in Lankan schools—from compulsory mother tongue instruction to the introduction of bi-medium instruction as a parallel stream to mono-medium instruction streams—in order to see how language politics shape the formulation of policy and its implementation at the ground level.

While bilingual education serves different functions in different countries, Sri Lanka's use of the methodology, first introduced in 2001, serves the purpose of L2 (or English) enhancement in a context where, despite decades of committing

resources, the attempt to turn English from a “weak second language” to a “strong second language” (Lo Bianco, 2008) has not been successful. The “return” to English via Bilingual Education therefore has to be understood as yet another attempt to expand and improve access to English in present-day Sri Lanka.

Materials and Methods

Our study, using data from 66 schools in the Central Province that offer the Bilingual Education Stream at their schools, attempted to find out how successful the strategy of BLE has been in achieving the desired objective of L2 enhancement. Our methodology which employed both survey-style questionnaires and in-depth interviews with ministry officials, principals, teachers, and students in BLE classrooms attempted to control for socio-economic, ethnic and regional factors in the selection of schools for in-depth study from the three administrative districts of the Central Province. Since 72% schools from the Kandy district, 14.6% from the Matale district and 12.5% from the Nuwara Eliya district had introduced the Programme, we selected 6 schools from the Kandy district, 2 from the Matale district and 1 from the Nuwara Eliya district.

Results and Discussion

While the Bilingual Education Programme announced a significant shift in the medium-of-education policy, i.e., *Swabhasa* Education, in post-independence Ceylon, it was not announced via a major policy document but via a series of circulars by the Ministry of Education. A critical review of the new policy as articulated in these circulars shows that while the policy makers were keen on assigning a new status and function to English, the functions assigned were somewhat contradictory in nature. Hence, the first circular (Circular 2001/05), which announces the introduction of Science subjects in English at the A/Levels, emphasizes the role that English can play in enhancing employability and closer integration of Sri Lanka with the global economy. However, this purely utilitarian function of English has been replaced by a symbolic one in the second circular (Circular HRD/EQD/2002/12) issued in 2002, to introduce the National Amity Schools Project, which assigns English the role of national integration and ethnic harmony. However, a further set of circulars subsequently issued by the Ministry of Education shows how difficult it is to re-shuffle the functions of a language overnight. So a circular letter issued on 17.12.2008, advising principles on measures to adopt in order to reduce tensions that might arise between the so-called English medium students and others, shows that English still retains its status as *Kaduwa*, a powerful weapon of division (Kandiah, 1984), in the popular imagination.

Our conversations with those who played a role in the implementation of the policy at the ground level such as principals, teachers, parents and students, only confirmed this finding that the assignment of status to language was not the exclusive prerogative of national-level policy planners. Take for instance the attempts by the Ministry to de-privilege English by mixing bilingual and mono-medium students. While some principals and teachers objected to mixing on pedagogical grounds, there were parents and teachers of students in the bilingual stream who objected to the mixing on class terms. To them, separate classrooms protected the children of “good families” from the “bad influence” of others. In every school we visited bar one, the teachers concurred that the “English medium” was creating a separate “class” who in speech and behaviour were different, some going to the extent of accusing the “English medium students” of being “swollen-headed.”

The more important question is whether, despite these drawbacks, the Bilingual Education Programme is achieving the objective of expanding access to English to the majority. The research yielded mixed results on this question. While every school had its own success story to relate of the student who had “made it” to the English-speaking world due to the policy, several factors militated against this expanded access. For one thing, the highest number of schools with the BLE stream is located in the Kandy district which underscores the regional disparities in access to *quality* education. For another, enrollment in

the “bilingual class” is voluntary so that the number enrolled was never more than 25% of the number admitted to that particular grade. Moreover, admission to the BL class depended on performance at a test which gauged *prior* English competencies, raising the question how much the Programme expands access to English to those traditionally deprived of access. Both the small percentages enrolled and the selection test suggest that while the new education initiative may expand access to English, it is in danger of creating a “regional elite” at every school offering BLE while the national education goal of achieving “English for all” still remains elusive.

We now come to the question of resources, human and material, that are essential to the successful delivery of Bilingual Education. None of the teachers had the special training required for content and language integrated learning (or CLIL), which is Bilingual Education. In the majority of cases, the teachers were originally English language teachers who had either volunteered or been asked to teach in the Bilingual classroom. Moreover, although over 50% of teachers said that the students’ English competencies were not satisfactory, only one school had a special English language programme for students enrolled in BLE. Nor did schools have the special auditory and visual aids that are considered an integral part of a good Bilingual Education Programme. It is, however, of importance to report that each school’s relative success or failure with BLEP was tied up with the school’s socio-economic profile. Schools drawing

upon a feeder pool of students from affluent backgrounds clearly had more resources and more linguistically competent students than schools without.

Conclusion

The results of the study outlined above make it clear that the laudable initiative to improve access to English cannot be divorced from the language politics that turn English into a symbol of privilege within Sri Lanka. The attempt to domesticate the *Kaduwa* will succeed only when the inherent disabilities associated with any attempt at democratizing English are adequately addressed.

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