

## The Importance of English in Ceylon\*

ANGLO-AMERICAN is the mother tongue of over 200 millions.<sup>1</sup> In the British colonies and in what was once the British Empire, in the American colonies and spheres of influence, it is a second language occupying a position of great importance in the culture of these peoples as well as in the practical conduct of affairs. In the interval between the two world wars it was being increasingly learnt as a second language throughout Asia and Europe.<sup>2</sup> In the U.K., South Africa, the African colonies, the West Indies, India, Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Australia, New Zealand, the Americas, the Philippines, and some of the Pacific islands, English is used by more than 540 millions, and it is learnt as a *lingua franca* for trade or cultural contacts in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, China, Japan, and many of the countries of Europe. It is easily the most widely used language in the world.

Already it is in fact practically a world language, and it is therefore natural that the claims of English to be the International Auxiliary Language, desiderated by language-planners interested in the problem of international communication since the latter half of the 17th century, should be persuasively argued, especially by the Anglo-Americans themselves. During the brittle solidarity between the allies created by the war some lip-service was done to the idea of making English a world language. But the objections to adopting English, or any form of simplified English, as a World Auxiliary Language are political, and stronger than ever to-day. With the world feverishly dividing itself into great hostile camps, and talk of an Anglo-American bloc, no one would dare to suggest the universal adoption of Anglo-American as a second language.

The ideal of English as a medium of inter-communication throughout the world is in eclipse, but the practical problem of making English easily available to those who wish to learn it—a still increasing number—is as important as ever. During the war the knowledge of English was spreading, and it continues to spread. Practical considerations make this inevitable. There can be no doubt that the use of English as a second language in those countries which have already adopted it for historical reasons will spread, and that people of other countries will continue to learn English for practical or cultural reasons. Forms of simplified English, and techniques for teaching English to foreign students will therefore continue to be developed.

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\*A modified version of Chapter 2 of *The English Language in Ceylon*, Ph.D., thesis, University of London, August, 1948. For Ch. 1, see the *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, November, 1943.

1. Bodmer, *The Loom of Language*, pp. 405-6.
2. See C. K. Ogden, *Dehabelization*.

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English has an assured place in the world to-day as a means of inter-communication between peoples living in widely separated parts of the world and also as a *lingua franca* of educated people in those countries, like Africa and India, which have a large number of local dialects. Over and above this, English must remain for a considerable length of time the medium of higher education in the colonies and ex-colonies, which have for a long period had 'English schools', i.e. schools using English as the medium of instruction.

In Ceylon at present English is the medium of instruction in the post-primary classes of the English schools, in the Ceylon Technical College, the School of Agriculture, the Law College, the Government Training College, and the University of Ceylon.<sup>3</sup> It is, and seems likely to continue to be, the *lingua franca* of educated people throughout the island.

It is the language of society, of commerce, of the professions, and of the government;<sup>4</sup> it is the medium of pleasure and of business. In our intercourse with the world outside Ceylon, English already performs the function of an International Auxiliary Language. There is an almost universal desire to learn a language which so greatly enlarges one's opportunities.

The opposition to English comes from a certain class of nationalists and from those who fear that in insisting on "English, more English, and better English", Ceylon may continue to neglect her own native languages. It is ironical that the greatest hostility to 'English education' comes from those who enjoy its benefits; it may be that those who have neglected the 'great heritage' of their native languages now have a guilty conscience about it.

But when the heat and dust of controversy have subsided, it will be realised that more than a hundred years of English education have left their

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3. See *Report of the Special Committee on Education (Ceylon)*. Sessional Paper XXIV,—1943, ch. IV, para 47: "The majority of the schools use Sinhalese and Tamil as *media* of instruction . . . There are also a few not very successful bilingual schools. Except in a few cases all secondary education leading up to higher appointments and the professions is given through the medium of English . . . Technical training is given in the Ceylon Technical College . . . the 125 Industrial schools operated by the Department of Commerce and Industries and the School of Agriculture and Agricultural schools operated by the Department of Agriculture . . . Professional education is given in the Faculty of Medicine of the University, in the Law College, maintained by the Council of Legal Education, in the Government Training College, and in some measure in the Ceylon Technical College. University education is limited to the Faculties of Oriental Studies, Arts, Science, and Medicine".

Agriculture, Veterinary Science, and Law have since been added.

"Most technical, professional and University education is given through the medium of English".

4. Sinhalese and Tamil are to be made the *media* of Administration and Instruction by 1957, according to the *Report of a Select Committee of the State Council*, S.P. XXII of 1946, entitled *Sinhalese and Tamil as Official Languages*. The document is reviewed by Sir Ivor Jennings, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ceylon, in the *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. V, No. 2, October, 1947. To quote Dr. Jennings, "the proposals impose a strain on the imagination".

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ineradicable impress on our ways of thinking and feeling. In Ceylon learning to speak and write English has implications which go far beyond the conception of English as a common language or means of inter-communication locally and with the world outside. The English language has kept Ceylon in contact not merely with England, but with modern civilization.

Our everyday life consists largely of typical recurrent contexts of situation. The component terms of these contexts are people, events, things. The people bring to the situation their specific 'sets' or behaviour, which is of two kinds, non-verbal and verbal. Speech is thus only one component in a context of situation, and is part of the typical pattern of behaviour of the social group to which the people belong. Our ball room dances, the games we play, the music we hear, the films we see, the clubs and hotels we go to, the furniture, the tools and machines we use, the very food we eat have at most a local colouring and flavour. "Say when" exactly reproduces an English context of situation. What are the songs sung at parties, or by University students in their moments of relaxation or excitement, or even by the errand boy on his cycle? More significant, what songs did the boys of Ceylon's wartime army sing or march to?

Even the villager's palate is being conditioned to chocolate and cigarettes, and 'miris hodda' and the betel leaf are becoming exotic in urbanized populations. The behaviour situations of the working classes have much more in common with the kind of civilization which is spreading over the world than with their ancient culture. The speech used by the workers and peasants will gradually adapt itself to the inevitable cultural changes, which our 'nationalists' wish to arrest, and there can be no doubt that English will assist in the adaptation.

### Official Policy

Chapter VIII.—MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION—of the REPORT of the SPECIAL COMMITTEE on EDUCATION (Sessional Paper XXIV.—1943) shows a clear grasp of the position English must occupy at present and in the immediate future in the educational system of Ceylon. Its references to the national languages are, naturally enough, touched with idealism, and this results in a certain element of contradiction. There is an ideal towards which it looks:

"Apart from our historical association with the United Kingdom and the fact that as far as higher education is concerned Sinhalese and Tamil have yet to be perfected as competent instruments for acquiring modern knowledge, we cannot see any reason why English should be retained as a medium of instruction at any stage in the educational process except for those who have adopted it as their mother tongue . . . Though it may be urged that for the purpose of mental training and acquisition of knowledge it should not matter

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what the medium of instruction is, we consider that the mother tongue is the natural medium of education and the genius of a nation finds full expression only through its own language and literature. We are therefore of opinion that the ideal should be the mother tongue medium at all stages of education ”.

In moving towards this ideal it is even prepared to coerce parents :

“ It was pressed on us that those children whose home language is English should be permitted to be taught through the medium of English even in the primary stage. People desire things that confer such material benefits as secure employment, wealth and social position to the neglect of less tangible advantages . . . After all is said and done, except in the case of the Burgher community, it is only in a few Ceylonese homes that English is still the language of ordinary conversation. For the sake of this few, we are not prepared to violate a principle to which we attach the greatest importance, namely, the use of the mother tongue, as far as possible, during all stages of education ”.

In the interest of one principle it is proposed to violate another, that contained in the sentence next following :

“ Educationally also, the child should begin his education in the language he actually uses at home ”. In order to do this, and because the home language of many educated Ceylonese is English, ‘ mother tongue ’ has to be specially defined : “ By ‘ mother tongue ’ we refer primarily to Sinhalese and Tamil, the languages of the two major communities in the Island ”.

But paragraphs 91-94 show a realistic approach to the problem of the medium of instruction in post-primary education and the proposals are oriented to a definite end.

*Para 91*—deals with the indispensability of English as being the only language common to all the communities in the Island (mainly the ‘ English educated ’ classes), the only possible medium for higher education (“ For some years to come. . . ”), and a world language.

*Para 92*—lists the reasons why post-primary education cannot be conducted through the sole medium of the mother tongue straightaway.

*Para 93*—recognises the deficiencies of Sinhalese and Tamil as media of instruction, and recommends a ‘ bilingual medium ’: “ In fact they (i.e. Sinhalese and Tamil) have been the media of instructions in the majority of the present day secondary schools, but their deficiencies as media of instruction for post-primary teaching have to some extent contributed to the lower standard and content of education in these schools . . . By bilingual medium we refer to the language combinations English and Sinhalese or English and Tamil . . . We think it desirable that English should be permitted to be used as sole medium for all pupils in the higher departments of the secondary and senior school.

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*Para 94*—enlarges on the question of a bilingual medium ; it contains the sentence : “ At the beginning there should be no objections to the dominance of the English medium except in the practical school where it is unnecessary to teach many subjects through English ”.

*Para 95*— deals with the question of a second language. “ If the medium is English, Sinhalese or Tamil shall be a compulsory second language . . . In higher departments where the medium is Sinhalese or Tamil, English shall be a compulsory second language ”.

(The result of this would be to bring about the thorough-going bilingualism suggested by me, in my article on *The English Language in Ceylon*, University of Ceylon Review, 1943, pp. 58-9, as the only method of revitalising the languages and literature of Ceylon).

The chapter closes with the sentence : “ Even when the mother tongue becomes the universal medium for all types of education, English will still have to be retained in the educational system, for we have no doubt that it will generally enrich education ”.

These proposals were discussed by The State Council in June, 1945, as Recommendations 7, 8, 9—MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION :—

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the mother tongue, but English shall be a compulsory second language. The Medium of instruction in the lower department of the post-primary school may be either the mother tongue or bilingual. The medium of instruction in the higher department of the post-primary school may be English, Sinhalese, Tamil, or bilingual.

The recommendations were adopted with one modification introduced by the ‘ nationalists ’: “ But English shall be a compulsory second language ” was changed to “ with English as an optional language ”.

English at present is the only medium of higher education in Ceylon, meaning thereby not merely school, university and technical training—the preparation for earning a living—but that whole process of bringing human potentialities to their fullest possible development which is understood by the term ‘ Liberal education ’. It develops sensitivity to and awareness of the immediate and wider environment of the modern man, and also judgment and control of it. The best way to realise the essentiality of English is to try to work out the consequences of a complete change over from English as the vehicle of business, pleasure and education to the national languages. Ceylon would immediately lose contact with the modern world.

### **The Standard of English in Ceylon**

In 1921, 3·7 per cent. of the population was literate in English, in 1946, 7 per cent. In Ceylon, with the exception of a small minority of priests and

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pundits, practically all those who have any claim to be called educated are 'English educated'. Wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of this small percentage of the population.

Since education in Ceylon means at present 'English education', it follows that there is a rough correlation between 'education' and proficiency in English. This accounts for the concern shown by our educationists over the 'standard of English in Ceylon'.

When the 'standard of English in Ceylon' is referred to as good, bad, or, deteriorating, it is not possible to be sure of what is meant without examining the context of the remark. One must take into consideration (i) the speaker—his intention, his qualifications to judge, the standard by which he judges (ii) whom he is referring to—rickshaw pullers, waiters, salesmen, clerks, school-boys, undergraduates, professional men, and (iii) what he is referring to—speech, writing, understanding, performing, pronunciation, (including sounds, intonation, stress and rhythm) fluency, idiom, style.

The speaker may be a casual English visitor who is ignorant of the educational system of Ceylon, and surprised and flattered by the ease with which he can communicate with 'natives' in his own language. His expectations and standard of judgment will be very different from those of the principal of a school in Ceylon, and one principal's judgment will differ from another's according to his race, intentions, etc.

For our purposes 'the standard of English' may be defined as the degree of control of the language attained by English-educated persons in Ceylon. This includes (i) the ability to listen to and read the language intelligently, and (ii) the command of an educated English style in speech and writing.

From time to time the voices of educationists in Ceylon rise in protest at the deterioration in the standard of English in Ceylon. In 1935 the Rev. R. S. de Saram, Warden of St. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia, asserted at the annual prize-giving:

"Any schoolmaster will tell you that the standard of English in Schools has fallen as compared with twenty years ago. This is a serious charge but I repeat it without the slightest fear of contradiction. Boys have far less command of English, they read less, and there has been a great falling off in easy and graceful writing. And this weakness affects all their work. Quite obviously it affects the study of the classics and of such subjects as history. No boy without some facility of expression in English can do his Latin or Greek well. But, if less obviously, it affects all other studies too. If a boy is to understand his Mathematics or his Science, English must be a ready instrument in his hand. The deficiency is a double one. It makes it difficult for a boy to understand what is being taught him; more often even if he understands he cannot express himself with clarity and force". (Ceylon Daily News, August 7th, 1935).

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In 1947 Mrs. C. E. Hibbard, Principal of the Southlands College for Girls, in the report which she read at the annual prize-giving, said :

“ I am not saying that the general standard of spoken English in Ceylon is really bad, but I am quite sure that it is deteriorating. I see no reason why a good knowledge of her own tongue should prevent any girl from having a good knowledge of English as well ”.

(Though Mrs. Hibbard refers specifically to ‘ spoken English ’, it is clear that, like the Rev. R. S. de Saram 12 years earlier, she has in mind the command of English both in speech and writing).

Commenting editorially on Warden de Saram’s report under the caption ENGLISH, MORE ENGLISH, BETTER ENGLISH, the C.D.N. of August 8th, 1935 remarks :

“ It is in no way to detract from the value of Mr. de Saram’s verdict to say that twenty years ago the opinion of schoolmasters was that the standard of English had fallen as compared with a previous generation ”.

If this process of deterioration had gone on for so long, the English language in Ceylon would already have reached the condition of being “ a queer dialect, understood by no one but the Ceylonese themselves ”, which many predict for it, if the course of degradation is not arrested. As this has not yet happened, it is necessary to examine what is meant by the deterioration which seems to have continued for nearly two generations.

Briefly, it is a lowering of the *average* attainment in English due (i) to the spread of English education among classes to whom it is a foreign tongue, and (ii) to the neglect of any corresponding development in the number of teachers capable of giving instruction satisfactorily in this medium, and of a technique of teaching English adapted to the changing needs of the situation.<sup>5</sup>

5. This is generally recognised by educationists, but in the present educational chaos in Ceylon no systematic or expert attempt to achieve a solution can be expected.

On July 23rd, 1936 a Paper by the late H. S. Perera, then Principal of the Government Training College, was discussed at a well attended meeting of those interested in education, at the Training College Hall, presided over by Mr. L. Mc D. Robinson, acting Director of Education. Mr. J. Dalby, Principal of Richmond College, Galle, said that the situation to-day was that they had a large quantity of English of a poor quality. He saw the problem as one which called for better, more effective, and more economic teaching of English. This was the need stressed by Mr. Perera’s own Paper (English as Adopted Language).

Mrs. Hibbard, in the Report already referred to, made the same point :

“ No one who has any regard for education can quarrel with my contention that if English is to be taught at all it must be properly taught, with due attention to pronunciation and idiom . . . It is obvious that now that the medium of instruction in the primary classes is Sinhalese, the pupil will be less conversant with English, on entering the post primary classes, than she used to be ; and it seems to me that this makes it all the more important that both languages should be well taught from the beginning, since the early steps matter so very much. *It is high time that a course in the teaching of languages were made available for teachers* ”. (My italics).

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There is a great deal that is unsatisfactory in the content of education and in the methods of imparting instruction in Ceylon. The educational confusion has been aggravated by bungling, ill-considered schemes to restore the native languages to the position in the curriculum from which they had been completely ousted in the English schools. Teaching through the medium of English has suffered without any corresponding gain to education in the national languages. The tendency has been to produce in some cases persons with no adequate medium of expression of any kind.

But the best schools have struggled to maintain their traditions and standards, and there are more good schools than before, so that the present achievement of the best education is at least as good as that of any previous generation and no worse than that of educated people with the same opportunities anywhere in the world. But the average proficiency in English has been lowered as increasing numbers of pupils from non-English speaking homes have entered English schools. (The percentage of English educated has doubled between 1921 and 1946). There is thus more English of a poor quality than before, and it is this that strikes the attention of principals of schools and teachers of English and even casual observers, and leads to the assertion that 'the standard of English is deteriorating'.

There is no real contradiction between those who praise the achievement of the Ceylonese in English (for it is solidly there) and those who lament the deterioration in the quality of the English used by so large a proportion of the products of our schools.<sup>6</sup>

An educated person must be skilled in the use of at least one language; an English-educated person must obviously be skilled in the use of the English language, be able to speak and write it accurately, listen to it and read it intelligently. For speaking and listening, reading and writing are parts of

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In India the pattern of change has been similar if more complicated. Cp. *The Vernacular as the Medium of Instruction, Modern Languages*, XVII, No. 2, December, 1935, pp. 39-42 :

"Mr. F. K. Clark, Educational Commissioner with the Government of India, in his report on Education in India, states that the use of the vernacular for instruction and examination purposes is increasing and will continue to do so . . . Also with the change the use and application of the English language have deteriorated . . .

Meanwhile Anglicists continue to impart knowledge in the higher stages through the medium of English. It is believed that only by such can the younger generation absorb correctly the advanced science, keep in contact with progress and research as recorded in the technical journals, and fit themselves to take their place in their chosen subject, working in understanding with their European colleagues and the world at large". Cp. also *The Teaching of English in India* by Wyatt and Thompson.

6. I have offered some evidence of both bad English and remarkably good control of the language at the University Entrance level in an article *Education and the English Syllabus for University Entrance and Higher School Certificate, University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. V, No. 2.

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the same skill. What has to be resisted in Ceylon, as in any part of the world, is the shoddy and slovenly use of language. This is the business of education.

In Ceylon the case for good English has been confused by being mixed up with the mother tongue controversy. The developing use of the national languages need not, indeed must not, involve the progressive neglect and deterioration of English. As long as English continues to be used in Ceylon, it must be the aim of education to give those who learn it a command of good English.

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