LANGUAGE PLANNING AND ETHNICITY: ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS FROM THE EDUCATION SECTOR[1]

Introduction

South Asia is a region in which linguistic diversity has been the rule rather than the exception for centuries, even before the effects of colonization began to be felt. Shapiro and Schiffman (1983) observe that in the area encompassing Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, at least five major language families and sub-families are represented – Indo Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Iranian. European colonial invasions, bringing with them Germanic and Romance languages, added further complexity to the linguistic diversity of this area. In the colonial periods of most South Asian nations, the imperial standard, whether Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish or English, became the *de facto* official language for obvious reasons of subjugation and administration (Ashcroft, Tiffin, and Griffiths 1989, Parakrama 1996). However, the indigenous languages, although marginalized to varying degrees, continued to be used in spheres other than those of the colonial administration.

In the years immediately following Sri Lanka's independence, the dispute over whether Sinhala or Tamil, or both, should be the country's official language/s became a primary political issue, and the core of the ethnic violence that erupted in the late 1950's (De Silva 1998). To a certain extent, the roles and statuses of Sinhala, Tamil and English have still not been satisfactorily resolved. Although the country has not seen widespread, uncontrolled ethnic rioting since 1983, and Tamil was elevated to the status of an Official Language in 1987, there is evidence that the issue of language and language rights is still a volatile one in both speech[2] communities. For instance, in 1999, the Sri Lankan government proposed the implementation of an Equal Opportunity Bill (EOB), described as

> An act to make unlawful, discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, religious or political opinion, language, caste, age or disability, in employment, education, access to public places and means of transportation, and in the provision of accommodation, goods and services; to provide for the formulation of equal

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[2] I use the term speech community throughout this paper as defining a group or community of people who are native speakers of the same language.

> opportunity programmes by employers, to provide for the establishment of an Equal Opportunity Commission and an Equal Opportunity Tribunal; and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

This Bill met with vehement public protests, from both Sinhala speakers and Tamil speakers, causing it to be withdrawn even before it could be taken up for debate and eventual ratification by the Sri Lankan Parliament. The protests against the EOB seem to indicate that some sections of both the Sinhala speaking majority and the Tamil speaking minority oppose the idea of anti-discriminatory legislation. This raises several interesting questions about the linguistic perceptions, attitudes and ideologies prevalent in Sri Lanka today. For example, do the protests indicate that linguistic and ethnic ideologies have not really changed a great deal from the decades immediately following independence? Are these protests based on an understanding of how the EOB might affect the current Constitutional status of Sinhala, Tamil and English, or are they fuelled by an imagined threat to language, and by extension, self and community? Seeing that two prominent schools in the country's capital were in the forefront of the anti-EOB protests, what ideas and opinions do teachers and students have about the current policies that apply to language use in education?

In order to answer these questions, two groups of informants – one of teachers and one of students – were selected to respond to a questionnaire designed to elicit their knowledge of and attitudes towards Sri Lanka's language policies in general, and more specifically, their opinions on language planning in education. Since language and ethnicity are so closely enmeshed in Sri Lanka in many ways, the student group was constructed in such a manner that it would contain two sub-groups of Sinhala and Tamil speakers, to facilitate the analysis of how these two factors impact and influence each other.

Education was chosen as the focus of this study primarily because teachers and students were in the forefront of public protests against the EOB. Also, Sri Lanka's system of free education means that an unusually high percentage of the population has access to the country's education system. Recent reforms proposed by the Presidential Task Force on General Education[3] recommend the teaching of Sinhala to Tamil students and Tamil to Sinhala students at the secondary school

[3] This Task Force was appointed by the President of Sri Lanka in 1996 and was headed by the Minister of Education and Higher Education, a Ministerial position that has changed since 2001.

level, and indicate that language planning is being looked to by the government as a mechanism of conflict resolution between two different speech communities. Thus the questions addressed in this paper assume an importance that goes beyond the mere logistics of assigning appropriate roles and functions to two linguistic codes which, taken together, are used by close to 99% of Sri Lanka's population.

Historically speaking, there are conflicting views on the roles and status of Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka. De Silva (1981: 12) claims that "there is no firm evidence as to when the Dravidians first came to the island, but come they did from early times, either as invaders or as peaceful immigrants", lending support to the argument that the two communities were not always at war with each other. However, other modern interpretations of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict adopt a historical view of the Tamils as invaders who caused conflict. For instance, Dharmadasa (1992: 2) claims that:

> The intensity with which the Sinhala identity is expressed in modern times appears to be the outcome of over 2 millenia of mainly conflictual contact with Dravidian neighbours, particularly the Tamils.

Arguments counter to this view can be found in Spencer (1990: 12), who claims that the history of the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils has been "essentially a political history, in which particular cultural resources have been deployed to suit the interest of key political actors". Gunawardana (1990) also claims that current views of Sri Lanka's past have been radically refashioned by Sinhala ideology in its contemporary form, with all its associations with language, race and religion. He points out that in both the Sinhala and Tamil languages, it is difficult to find a satisfactory equivalent to the word "race". He argues, therefore, that it does not seem likely that racial consciousness existed as far back in the history of these two linguistic groups as those who agree with Dharmadasa (1992) like to claim.

More support for Gunawardana's argument can be found in several authentic historical records that provide evidence of the coexistence of the two languages in use. A stone inscription found on a pillar dating from the 10th century A.D., dictated by a Sinhala king, Kassapa V, contains Tamil names and words, revealing some degree of blending of the two codes in the language of the court at that time (Coperahewa 2000). More recently, of the eleven chiefs who signed the

treaty handing over governance of the Kandyan kingdom to the British in 1815, five signed their names in Tamil (Coperahewa 2000).

Today, the Constitutional status of Sinhala and Tamil is that they are both designated as National as well as Official Languages of Sri Lanka. The functions of a National Language as defined by the Constitution are its use in Parliament or any other local government authority, its use as a medium of instruction in education, and the enactment and publication of laws and subordinate legislation. An Official Language is described as the language of the courts, and the language of administration throughout Sri Lanka. The term "link language" is also used in the Constitution in reference to English, although no further definition of its use and status in relation to Sinhala or Tamil is offered.

Language planning in multiethnic, plurilingual societies

It is not uncommon to find two or more languages or language varieties in conflict with each other in terms of status or use in multiethnic, plurilingual societies in many parts of the world, not just in South Asia. Fishman (1999) observes that in many of these societies, a particular ethnic group identifies itself with a particular language or language variety, which then becomes emblematic of self and community. It is not possible, therefore, to discuss language planning in such societies without also discussing the links between language and ethnic identity. As Dharmadasa (1996: 1) observes:

> ... "language" *per se* is not a bone of contention. It is what language stands for and what it represents that goad communities and individuals to take it up as a cause. Language is a crucial feature of ethnic identity. It is regarded as part of ethnic "being": it issues from the body and is therefore viewed as part of the genetic continuity that stands as the heart of ethnicity.

Early discussions in the literature on language planning recognize these issues, and define language planning as a process that brings together the social, political and ideological aspirations of a multilingual community or nation that desires some kind of policy or legislation to define the status and function of its multiple languages or dialects. The complex nature of the issues involved in language planning is well illustrated by Schiffman, who makes the point that language policy is ultimately grounded in linguistic culture, which he defines as "the set of behaviours, assumptions, cultural forms, prejudices, folk belief systems,

attitudes, stereotypes, ways of thinking about language, and religio-historical circumstances associated with a particular language" (1996: 5).

In linguistically diverse, multi-cultural societies, language planning has often been the response of the state or federal government to the demands of its people that their languages be accorded due recognition and status. Jernudd (1990: 52-53) outlines the ideals of language planning as:

> ... proactive, organized language management which typically but not necessarily proceeds with government-authorized involvement ... In the language planning process, people negotiate what seems to them to be the most satisfactory solution to a (set of) language problem(s) within their limits of control and cognition.

If the ideologies and aspirations of the people who language planning will affect are not taken into consideration, the policies cannot fail to be seen as discriminatory by some segments of the population. As Dharmadasa (1996: 4) observes:

> It has often been proved that attempts to evaluate, alter, regulate or improve a language or its functions, without adequate attention to the socio-cultural ramifications involved, would result in failure, if not opposition and upheaval.

The perception of language planning as a means of achieving some ideal goal in the future is probably the reason for Saulson (1979) and Jernudd (1982, 1990) among others, to emphasize the "future orientation" of language planning. However, the opposite function of language planning – as a means of repealing or amending already existing legislation or policies – is equally valid. This brings to language planning the added dimension of a retrospective orientation (Kandiah, personal communication).

It is against this backdrop that the attempted implementation of the EOB and its subsequent withdrawal in the face of public protest should be considered. The numerous twists and turns linguistic legislation has taken over the last 45 years in Sri Lanka have been discussed far too often to bear repeating here. What needs to be reiterated is that the heightened sensitivity towards the language one speaks, and by extension the ethnic community to which one belongs, cannot be overstated in the context of a climate of mutual suspicion. Both the Sinhalese and the Tamils have

rich cultural and linguistic traditions stretching back thousands of years. There are members of both communities who view any threat to their language as a threat to their traditions, their culture, and their very being. One of the principal reasons why legislation that would be fair to both communities has been so difficult to design and implement is because the granting of linguistic or ethnic rights to one group has often been seen as a threat to the linguistic rights of the other.

The existence of such attitudes is apparent in the following responses given by teachers of the research sample when asked what they knew of the EOB. These responses are not only inaccurate in terms of the content of the Bill, but also undoubtedly racist in terms of linguistic ideology:

> a) It's a Bill to suppress the Sinhala Buddhist community by forcing 80% majority community to learn the language and culture of the minorities.
>
> b) It is a mechanism to rid the Sinhala people (of) the little rights they enjoy.

An article published in *The Ceylon Daily News* which discussed the reasons for the opposition to the EOB indicates that these perceptions were not confined to the participants of this study:

> Many Buddhist Sinhalese fear the government may bow to demands from minorities to set aside quotas for them in schools now exclusively for their children, though the government has sought to dispel their fears. (October 19, 1999)

Since such sentiments are the exception rather than the rule in the results of my study, I hope that the same proportions hold true of the rest of the Sinhalese community in the country. Most of my respondents articulate a need for better communication between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and it is these voices that need to be heard.

Data collection and sample populations

The data for this study were collected by means of an anonymous structured questionnaire which participants responded to in the language of their choice. A questionnaire was selected as the most appropriate method of data collection because it reduces the possibility of variability in the questions asked, which could happen in an oral interview. Also, as Leavitt (1991) points out, when participants are asked questions about race, the race of the interviewer can have an effect on their response. This was avoided by having the questionnaire distributed by someone other than the researcher. In the case of the teachers, the Principals were given the questionnaire for distribution; in the case of the students, the Instructors responsible for each class were given the questionnaire for distribution. The questionnaire was translated into both Sinhala and Tamil so that participants could respond in their first language. This minimized the risk of any questions being misinterpreted. The English version was also made available to anyone who wished to respond in English, and the responses received in Sinhala or Tamil were translated into English for analysis.

The two groups of subjects chosen for this study were teachers and students, the two populations that are most directly affected by language policies in education. The demarcation of schools in Sri Lanka (except for International schools) both by the principal medium of instruction as well as by religion has the potential to create a segregated population of both teachers and students, not only in terms of language, religion and ethnicity, but also in terms of ideology and attitude. In order to obtain a representative sample of teachers in terms of these factors, as well as to ensure that the two principal language communities, Sinhalese speakers and Tamil speakers, were equally represented, I drew the 41 teachers of my sample from three schools—one in which the principal medium of instruction is Sinhala, one in which the principal medium of instruction is Tamil, and finally, an international school, in which the principal medium of instruction is English. The questionnaire was distributed to teachers who were responsible for teaching classes geared towards the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A/L) examination. It is these teachers who prepare students for the transition from the secondary school system to the tertiary school level, and their attitudes and opinions on the inclusion of two or more languages in the primary and secondary school curriculum and their ideological position on the status of English, Sinhala and Tamil in the country's education system are therefore an integral part of this research. Since the international school I sampled did not offer GCE A/L classes, the questionnaire was

given to teachers who were responsible for teaching students in the highest class offered, i.e., Year 11.

The sample of 63 students was drawn from the University of Colombo's entering class of 2000. The rationale here was that these students, having recently transitioned from the country's secondary school system to the tertiary level, would be an ideal population to research attitudes, ideologies and linguistic consciousness among students in both sectors. Of the six Faculties of the University of Colombo (Arts, Education, Law, Management and Finance, Medicine and Science), the Faculty of Arts was selected from which to sample the students, as it is the unit whose student enrollment is most heterogeneous both in terms of geography as well as in terms of urban, semi-urban and rural populations.

The entering students had already been screened for their English proficiency, and those who were determined to be in need of pre-academic English instruction had been placed in classes of 30-35 students. It was from this group, a total of 548 students, that the sample of 63 was randomly drawn, on the premise that the current language policies in Sri Lanka are not likely to have a negative personal impact on an exempted student—i.e., one who has the required proficiency of English for academic purposes at the university level. Also, students who have such proficiency are the exception rather than the rule in the Faculty of Arts.[4] University students who have a low or marginal proficiency in English find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing current research, presenting papers at national conferences or publishing in recognized journals, or even simply understanding a lecture given in English, and it is these students whose needs have to be addressed through efficient language planning in the education sector.

Data analysis

The student group consisted of 32 native speakers of Sinhala and 31 native speakers of Tamil. The reason for constructing the student group to investigate relationships based on language and ethnicity was that certain factors such as age and educational objectives (all of the students had been admitted to a single Faculty in a particular university in the same year) that could affect the outcomes were fairly constant in this group. The same could not be said of the teachers.

[4] In 2000, out of a total of 576 students, only 28 were exempted from the Intensive Course in English.

The proportions given in all of the following Tables are percentages with the correct response (wherever applicable) highlighted. Table 1a illustrates the responses to the question "What is/are the Official Language/s of Sri Lanka?" The range of responses shows that there is some confusion in both sample populations on this issue.

Table 1a

	students N=63	**teachers n=41**
Sinhala	23.8	19.5
Sinhala & Tamil	47.6	73.2
Sinhala & English	6.3	--
Sinhala, Tamil & English	22.2	4.8
Tamil	--	2.4

The difference between the proportions of correct responses from the two populations is significant at the 5% ($p<0.05$) level. This means that the levels of awareness between the teachers and students that Sinhala and Tamil are both Official Languages in Sri Lanka are different. About 73% of the teachers were able to answer the question correctly, while only 47.6% of the students were able to do the same. In other words, more than half of the students in the sample were not able to correctly say what Sri Lanka's Official Languages are; and if students who have gained admission to one of the more prestigious universities in the country through a rigorous method of selection are not aware of the Constitutional status of Sinhala, Tamil and English, it is difficult to surmise that the average Sri Lankan student (or non-student) would be better informed.

Table 1b shows the responses given to the same question by native speakers of Sinhala and native speakers of Tamil in the student sample.

Table 1b

	sinhala N=32	**tamil n=31**
Sinhala	34.4	12.9
Sinhala & Tamil	53.1	41.9
Sinhala & English	3.1	9.6
Sinhala, Tamil & English	9.3	35.5

As can be seen, just over half (53.1%) of the Sinhala speakers gave the correct answer, while in the case of the Tamil speakers, the proportion was close to 42%. However, the differences between these proportions is not significant at the 5% level, indicating that knowledge (or lack thereof) of the official status of Sinhala and Tamil is similar in both groups.

Also interesting are the proportions of Sinhala speakers who believe Sinhala to be Sri Lanka's sole Official Language (34.4%) and the proportions of Tamil speakers who believe the same (12.9%). Going by simple percentages alone, is this an indication that Tamil speakers are better informed than their Sinhala-speaking counterparts? This is however an unlikely conclusion, because Table 1b indicates that 35.5%, or more than one third of the Tamil speakers, responded incorrectly that Sinhala, Tamil and English were all Official Languages in Sri Lanka. The proportion of Sinhala speakers who responded similarly is very much smaller – i.e., 9.3% – a difference that is significant at the 5% level.

The question "What are Sri Lanka's National Languages?" also generated a wide variety of responses, as Table 2a shows:

Table 2a

	students	**teachers**
Sinhala	38.1	19.5
Sinhala & Tamil	34.9	60.9
Sinhala & English	3.2	2.4
Sinhala, Tamil & English	19.0	--
Tamil & English	--	2.4
English	1.6	--
No response	3.2	--

Overall, 65.1% of the students and 39.1% of the teachers did not answer this question correctly. Even more surprisingly, 20% of all the participants responded that English was one of Sri Lanka's National Languages. This response is difficult to explain as English is no one's nation or nationality in Sri Lanka. Also, equating English with Sinhala and Tamil as a National Language is a complete reversal of the nationalistic sentiments that formed the basis of the dominant linguistic ideology of the early 20th century in Sri Lanka. Perhaps the confusion is a result of an inability to clearly distinguish between the functions of an Official Language and a National Language; it can certainly be argued that the Constitutional description of these functions does not provide a clear distinction between the two.

The difference between the two populations in terms of correct responses to this question is significant at the 5% level. I conclude therefore that in comparison to the students, the teachers are more knowledgeable about what Sri Lanka's National Languages are. A comparison of Tables 1a and 2a shows that, in the case of both populations, the knowledge of what the country's Official Languages are is higher than the knowledge of what the country's National Languages are. The relevant proportions are 47.6% and 34.9% in the case of the students and 73.2% and 60.9% in the case of the teachers. This difference in awareness is interesting, given that both terms, i.e., Official Language and National Language, apply to the same languages in the Constitution. I can only conclude that the term "Official Language" is more easily understood in terms of the functions associated with a particular language. Both Sinhala and Tamil appear on almost all government documents and correspondence such as passport applications, telephone and electricity bills, circulars etc. The two languages are therefore very visible in most official contexts in the country, and the participants were probably drawing on this awareness to answer the question correctly.

While there is no significant difference at the 5% level between the proportions of Sinhala and Tamil speakers who correctly identified Sri Lanka's Official Languages, the same cannot be said for the correct identification of the country's National Languages, as Table 2b below illustrates:

Table 2b

	sinhala	**tamil**
Sinhala	31.2	45.2
Sinhala & Tamil	**53.1**	**16.1**
Sinhala & English	--	6.5
Sinhala, Tamil & English	15.6	22.5
Tamil & English	--	--
English	--	3.2
No response	--	6.5

53.1% of the Sinhala speakers and only 16.1 % of the Tamils speakers answered this question correctly. It is difficult to surmise why the Sinhala speakers appear better informed than their Tamil counterparts on this issue. A possible explanation is that most native speakers of Tamil are accustomed to thinking of Sri Lanka as a Sinhala nation, with the predominant race being the Sinhalese, and thus conclude that the country has a single National Language – i.e., Sinhala. If this is a

widespread belief, such a misconception can easily lead to a native speaker of Tamil feeling that Tamil, the language spoken by the second and third largest minorities in the country, has been deprived of its rightful status as one of Sri Lanka's National Languages.

Although English is supposed to be a second language in all schools irrespective of their denomination, the teaching of English in most schools is far from successful. It is in this context that the responses to the question, "How many language/s should be taught in Sri Lankan schools, and what are they?" (Table 3a) should be interpreted.

Table 3a

	students	**teachers**
Sinhala, Tamil and English	63.5	75.6
Tamil and English	4.8	--
Sinhala & English	3.2	4.8
Sinhala/Tamil & English	3.2	9.8
Sinh, Tamil, Eng & French	3.2	--
Sinh, Tamil, Eng & Arabic	1.5	--
English	4.8	--
Don't know	1.6	--
Response unclear	6.3	--
No response	7.9	9.8

As can be seen, more than half of both populations responded that all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English, should be taught in schools. The difference in these responses (63.5% of the students and 75.6% of the teachers) is not significant at the 5% level, an indication that a majority of both populations feel that Sri Lanka's primary and secondary school system, which only provides for bilingual proficiency at present (at least in theory), should actually be providing trilingual proficiency. The second part of this question, which required participants to explain their responses, indicates some of the main reasons underlying this need.

> a) All should learn English. All Sinhalese people should learn Tamil and Tamilians should learn Sinhalese compulsorily. By this, the link between the people improves. (Teacher, Tamil speaker)

b) Sinhala, English and Tamil. While it should be compulsory for everybody to know English as an international language, the Sinhala and Tamil languages should also be known by every Sri Lankan. This will make domestic and international communication, education and jobs easier. (Teacher, Sinhala speaker)

c) Three languages, Tamil, Sinhala, English. All three languages must be taught as people of three linguistic communities live in Sri Lanka. In fact, most people do not know Sinhala and English and hence teaching all three languages is very useful to these people and this makes them get a broader outlook. (Student, Tamil speaker)

d) Three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English should be taught in all schools. Because ours is a multiethnic country, the teaching of Sinhala and Tamil should be compulsory. English should be taught because international relations brings us in contact with the rest of the world. (Student, Sinhala speaker)

First, these responses show that there are both teachers and students who believe that links between the two major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka can and should be established through language. In the years immediately following independence, mother tongue instruction, with English as a second language, was thought to be sufficient, and no particular concern was shown towards teaching or learning a second indigenous language. The present study provides empirical evidence to show that today, opinions and ideologies have changed, at least among some segments of the Sri Lankan population. At this point I can only speculate as to the reasons for this change, but an obvious difference between the situation in the 1950's and at the beginning of the 21st century is that fifty years ago, the possibility of racial conflict on the basis of language was either scoffed at or dismissed as improbable; today, it is a reality, with the country having experienced at least eighteen years of civil war. Based on the responses to this question, I would argue that the conflict that has devastated Sri Lanka has had at least one positive outcome – that it has inspired in some segments of the population a need for greater interaction between the country's two principal ethnic communities, and that language is being looked to as a means of effecting such communication.

Secondly, the need articulated by a majority of both the teachers and students for the teaching of English in the school system is in contrast to the nationalistic sentiments expressed in 1956 which led to the *Official Language Act*

No 33 spearheaded by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and the subsequent expulsion of English from the education system. It appears therefore, that in Sri Lanka, a reversal has occurred in the post-colonial pattern familiar in many newly-independent nations – that of rejecting the hegemony of the colonial language and supporting education in the indigenous language/s. Clearly, it is becoming increasingly apparent to many people in Sri Lanka that a low proficiency in English is a serious disadvantage in terms of maintaining a competitive edge not just in higher education, but at whatever point a person enters the job market as well.

The Sri Lankan government is aware of this need. In 1997, the Presidential Task Force on General Education recommended that English be used as a means of communication from Grade 1 onwards, while the formal teaching of English will commence at Grade 3 (General Education Reforms, 1997)[5]. However, in terms of Sinhala and Tamil, the reforms only state that "children will be encouraged to continue the use of the National Languages other than their own in play and activities" (:14). The phrase "will be encouraged" without any specific suggestions or recommendations on how this is to be accomplished does not inspire confidence that a National Language other than their own will be used at all, or that a knowledge of a second National Language will be developed among children at the primary or junior secondary school levels. What is more likely to happen is that the two languages for which a curriculum and syllabus already exist – i.e., a student's mother tongue and English – will be focused on, and the teaching of a second National Language will be forgotten unless a Ministerial decree demands that students have to demonstrate a knowledge of a second National language by means of a proficiency test. However, during a personal interview in Colombo, a sectional Head of one of the schools chosen for this study informed me that the Ministry of Education had, by a government gazette notification, directed the teaching of Sinhala in Grades 7-9 in all Tamil medium schools and the teaching of Tamil in the same grades in all Sinhala medium schools; she further informed me that such a programme had already begun in her school, although the lack of teachers for whom Sinhala is a first language in a Tamil medium school had proved to be a problem. If such a programme is implemented in all schools, government and private alike, it would at least be a beginning for some level of trilingual education.

Table 3b illustrates the responses given by Sinhala speakers and Tamil speakers to the same question.

[5] This publication uses the term Grade 1 instead of Year 1.

Table 3b

	sinhala	**tamil**
Sinhala, Tamil and English	56.2	71.0
Tamil and English	9.4	--
Sinhala & English	6.3	--
Sinhala/Tamil & English	6.3	--
Sinh, Tamil, Eng & French	6.3	--
Sinh, Tamil, Eng & Arabic	--	3.2
English	9.3	--
Don't know	3.1	--
Response unclear	3.1	9.7
No response	--	16.1

There is no significant difference at the 5% level between the proportions of native speakers of Sinhala and Tamil who stated that all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English, should be included in the curriculum. In fact, a majority of the Sinhala speakers (not counting those participants whose responses were unclear, a few who wanted only English taught, and two who responded with "Sinhala and English") state unequivocally that Tamil should be taught to all students. Although one might expect to find some Sinhala speakers at least shifting the onus of learning another National/Official Language to Tamil speakers, based on the belief that it is the responsibility of the minority group to become proficient in the language of the majority in order to foster better communication, the following responses from speakers of Sinhala in the sample indicate a different ideology:

> a) All three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English should be taught in Sri Lankan schools. By this everyone will be able to express their ideas without misunderstanding. Given the current situation in the North, in order to develop cooperation between the (two) races, Tamil should be taught to those whose mother tongue is Sinhala, and Sinhala should be taught to those whose mother tongue is Tamil. Both these groups should be taught English as well, so that they can face the future's technological world.
>
> b) Sinhala, Tamil and English. This will help to make society united. Most of the time it is only the Tamil students who speak in Sinhala (not vice versa).

Responses from the Tamil speakers follow along the same lines; however, a point of interest is that the two groups differ markedly in the manner in which they refer to Sri Lanka's current ethnic divide. The Tamil speakers do not hesitate to problematize the country's discrimination and conflict, using phrases such as "discrimination based on language", "conflict based on religion and language", and "hatred and indifference". One respondent even stated, "It is sad that one language is being given preference over another."

> a) English, Tamil, Sinhala. Language should be learnt by all without discrimination based on language. Only then will the discrimination between language tend to reduce.
>
> b) Three. They should be taught just as the mother tongue and official language is taught. Only then can students solve any problem/conflict that might arise in the future.
>
> c) All three languages should be taught right from primary school. Apart from mother tongue, it is important to get proficient in other languages also. Under today's life in school and jobs, we live together as hindu, muslim, sinhalese, christian etc. Inability to understand others' rights cause hatred and indifference.

In contrast, the rhetoric of the Sinhala speakers is more euphemistic, containing phrases such as "interpersonal relations", "good relationships", "build peace" and "the prevailing situation in the country". I interpret this as a distinct difference of ideologies. The Tamil speakers' responses can be interpreted from a subaltern perspective (Guha 1986) based on linguistic discrimination and marginalization, while the predominant tone of the Sinhala speakers' responses is one of accommodation, and references to the ethnic conflict are made in an indirect manner. In fact, most of the Sinhala speakers avoid any mention of the conflict and/or any linguistic discrimination, while the Tamil speakers are insistent on doing so. This could be a reason why members of the Sinhala speaking community were dismissive of the EOB; even though they cannot fail to acknowledge the existence of the conflict, if they believe that there is no discrimination against the Tamils, what necessity is there for a Bill which would give the Tamil-speaking minority equal rights and opportunities?

Because the Equal Opportunity Bill (EOB) proved to be so controversial, I was interested in knowing how its proposals were viewed by both teachers and

students. It was with this objective in mind that participants were asked to respond to the question "Have you heard of the EOB?" and "Do you know what this Bill was about?" Table 4a below gives the responses of teachers and students to the first question:

Table 4a

	students	**teachers**
Yes	39.7	56.0
No	30.1	14.6
Not sure	1.6	--
Don't know	4.8	9.8
No response	23.8	19.5

As can be seen, 39.7% of the students and 56% of the teachers responded that they had heard of the Bill, and the difference between these proportions is not significant at the 5% level. The same conclusion holds true of the "No" responses; i.e., at the 5% level, there is insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that the difference between the proportions of students and teachers who were ignorant of the Bill is significant. My next question was aimed at discovering if the students and teachers of my research sample who had heard of the Bill were aware of the issues involved. Reports published in newspapers at the time of the EOB controversy stated that school admissions were the principal issue of contention. The relevant section in the Bill states that it shall be unlawful for a person exercising control over an educational institution to discriminate against a person on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, religious or political opinion, language, caste, age or disability in who should be offered admission to such an institution, who should receive the benefits of such an institution, and who should be subjected to disciplinary action in such an institution. However, the manner in which the teachers of my research sample responded to the question "How do you think the EOB might affect education policies in Sri Lanka?" highlights interesting issues in their knowledge of the Bill. For instance, 22 out of the 41, or almost half the teachers in the sample, did not respond to the question; three responded with "I don't know"; and of those who did answer the question, many gave vague, inconclusive or irrelevant responses, some of which are reproduced below:

a) Students who had primary schooling in their mother tongue find the transition to another language very difficult.

b) Languages augur well for spreading education among the masses.

c) Education will be more productive.

A few teachers were able to respond with some degree of accuracy regarding the true implications of this Bill. Interestingly, all these responses came from teachers belonging to one school:

a) This is about giving equal opportunities to the minorities as well as the majority. Eg: recruiting for jobs, admissions to popular schools

b) Very simply that there will be no discrimination – whether it is gender, race, age, profession etc.

c) All students will enjoy available resources and facilities irrespective of their race.

It seems fairly reasonable to conclude that most of the teachers in my research sample are not aware of the implications of this Bill that are particularly relevant to them – i.e., admissions of students to educational institutions, and the policies that should apply to students in such institutions. Although the research sample of this study is not representative enough to extend my conclusions to the country at large with a high level of confidence, the implication is that awareness of the aims and objectives of the EOB is fairly low among many of Sri Lanka's teachers.

The responses of the students to this question are equally surprising in terms of my expectations that university students would be fairly well-informed about legislation that affects education since most universities have highly active student unions which keep their members apprised of any legislation that could have an impact on education. However, of the 63 student participants of this study, 19 did not provide a response to the question and 20 said "I don't know" or "No idea". These numbers together comprise about 62% of the total student sample. Interestingly, the students who had heard of the Bill appear to be better informed of

its contents and objectives than the teachers are, as the following responses illustrate:

> a) This Bill stated that when admitting students to prominent schools, everyone, i.e., Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim should be admitted according to a certain percentage. To register their opposition against this, the students of Ananda and Nalanda participated in a protest.
>
> b) That when admitting students to state schools, Tamil students would be guaranteed equal admission opportunities according to a ratio determined by the number of Sinhala students.
>
> c) By not letting racial, religious and other polarities interfere with the fundamental right of education.

Although lacking precision, the responses above show that the students' responses approximate the objectives of the Bill more closely than the teachers' responses do. I conclude therefore, that the student participants who have heard of the Bill are somewhat more knowledgeable of its contents and objectives than the teachers are. Although I have no supportive evidence, it is possible that some knowledge of this Bill was disseminated within the university system, and was conveyed to the students who would be the system's new entrants in 2000.

Table 4b shows the responses given by Tamil speakers and Sinhala speakers to the same question. These percentages indicate that there are clear differences between the two groups in terms of their knowledge of the EOB:

Table 4b

	sinhala	**tamil**
Yes	68.8	9.6
No	18.8	41.9
Not sure	3.1	--
Don't know	9.3	--
No response	--	48.4

The difference in the proportions of "Yes" and "No" responses given by the two groups is significant at the 5% level. This could be an indication that in this case at least, native language and ethnicity are factors that have an effect on a person's

knowledge of the Bill. In the case of the "Yes" responses, almost 69% of the Sinhala speakers claim to have heard of the Bill, but in the case of the Tamil speakers, this proportion is less than 10%. In the case of those who answered "No", the proportions are reversed – i.e. almost 42% of the Tamil speakers have not heard of the Bill as opposed to about 19% of the Sinhala speakers. Furthermore, a large proportion of Tamil speakers (48.4%) did not respond to this question at all. There are several possible explanations for these results. First, it is possible that the Bill was not given sufficient publicity in the Tamil news media and many people therefore had no knowledge of it; secondly, it is possible that because the Bill had been so controversial, the Tamil-speaking participants, already overly conscious of negative reactions towards their language and ethnicity, preferred to leave the question unanswered. In striking contrast, not a single native speaker of Sinhala left this question unanswered. This is a difference that has serious implications if it is an indication that one speech community has better access to information about linguistic legislation than the other in the country, especially if that legislation represents their interests in a stronger way than they currently believe.

The responses to the question which asked participants for their opinion on including a course titled General English in the GCE A/L curriculum, received the response I had expected, from teachers, students, Sinhala speakers and Tamil speakers alike. Close to 95% of all the participants welcomed the new course, for reasons ranging from obtaining better job opportunities to the importance of English in higher education, to advancement in an increasingly technological environment. Interestingly, in spite of the Constitution using the term "link language" to describe English, not a single participant of this research mentioned the use of English as a link between the two principal speech communities. Thus, contrary to Constitutional specifications, and perhaps the presumed hopes of those responsible for language planning in Sri Lanka, the codes that the participants of this research see as necessary to perform the functions of a link between the Sinhalese and the Tamils are Sri Lanka's two National Languages, not English. English seems to be regarded principally as a language of higher education and professional advancement by both communities.

The native speakers of Tamil were not so insistent about the need for teaching English. Some of them did, however, express the feeling that one of the National Languages, i.e., Sinhala, was being given preference over Tamil in the school system, as the following responses illustrate:

a) About Sri Lanka's equal opportunity policy, Sinhalese is given predominance in some places. This should be avoided and all languages should be given equal opportunities.

b) Opportunity is not being given to Tamil.

c) Tamil, Sinhalese and English are the languages of Sri Lanka. As Sinhalese is getting a preference, all others are getting affected.

Clearly, these responses express a perception of linguistic discrimination. It will be remembered that a similar ideological difference was apparent in the responses of these two populations to the question "How many languages should be taught in Sri Lankan schools, and what are they?" I believe that this is sufficient evidence to conclude that in spite of both Sinhala and Tamil having parity of status as Official and National Languages in Sri Lanka's Constitution, the country's Tamil-speaking minority still feels that their first language has a subservient status to Sinhala, especially in the sphere of education.

Conclusions

First, one of the principal research questions underlying this study was an attempt to discover if linguistic ideologies in Sri Lanka had changed in any way from the 1950's to the present. If the unequivocal desire expressed by most of the teachers and students, and the Tamils and Sinhalese alike for teaching and learning both Sinhala and Tamil in the school system is any indication, this is a significant change indeed. However, the protests against the EOB by sections of both communities is baffling. I can only conclude that these protests were not based on an accurate understanding of the Bill or its contents, as the responses given by participants of this study to the open-ended questions of the survey amply demonstrate. Furthermore, the manner in which the government attempted to implement the Bill – without sufficient description or explanation of its contents to the public, and the lack of reassurances that none of the ethnic groups would be unfairly discriminated against, doomed it to failure. The findings of this study suggest that, for any future language planning to be successful in achieving its objectives, the designers and implementers of such policies must take the responsibility of ensuring that the public receives sufficient and accurate information about the proposed legislation.

A second question underlying this research is what expectations students and teachers have of language planning policies in education, and it is not surprising to discover that a majority of all population groups perceive a need for trilingual education. If this is a widespread trend beyond the limits of my research sample, it is indeed a reversal of the educational ideology of the 1940's and 1950's, which was heavily grounded in mother tongue education. Moreover, the Sri Lankan government seems to have recognized this shift in ideology, acknowledged it, and is now attempting to address it by means of wide-ranging education reforms in the country's primary and secondary school system especially through the phased re-introduction of English into the curriculum.

Thirdly, the empirical data of this study suggests that native speakers of Sinhala and Tamil have distinctly different perceptions of the linguistic status quo in Sri Lanka. This is evident from the language used by the speakers of Tamil in their responses, which is very different in terms of both vocabulary and function from that of the speakers of Sinhala. The pervasiveness of this difference is not surprising, when one remembers that it is the articulation of a community that has been subjected to various forms of linguistic marginalization for almost 50 years. While there does not appear to be much more that can be done constitutionally to ensure parity of status between Sinhala and Tamil, the government's recent education reforms could be a step in the right direction to reduce some of the disparity between the *de jure*[6] language policy stated in the Constitution and the *de facto* policy as it operates at most levels of education and other sectors; but the lack of a proper infrastructure to support the reforms will be a considerable problem in implementation. For example, a question that immediately comes to mind is the lack of teachers competent to teach English, not only in rural areas but also in the major cities; a lack of textbooks and appropriate curricula for the teaching of an additional National Language in all parts of the country; and the lack of teacher-training programs in language teaching, which requires a different methodology from content teaching. It remains to be seen what measures will be implemented by the Ministries of Education to overcome these challenges and ensure that Sri Lanka's primary and secondary school system has a language policy that is both efficient in terms of the country's needs, and accepted by the country's two principal speech communities as well.

In conclusion, it is clear that there are several serious issues related to language planning and policy in Sri Lanka. Many people are not aware of the

[6] The terms *de jure* and *de facto* are used in relation to language policy as found in Schiffman (1996).

existing policies, especially as they are set out in the country's Constitution; when new policies are proposed, accurate and sufficient information is not conveyed to the public about the proposals and their implications. Of particular concern is the finding that the Tamil community seems to be significantly less informed about linguistic legislation than the Sinhala community, which in itself is a form of discrimination. If the Sri Lankan government is to succeed in its hope of using language planning and attendant equal opportunities to promote national unity and thereby economic development within the country as a whole, all of these issues will have to be acknowledged and addressed in greater detail than they are being dealt with at present.

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