

## **Kaduwa or Manne? Issues and Tensions Related to Bilingual Education Policy in Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

Policies related to language have had far reaching consequences for social inequality in Sri Lanka as they have had in many other post-colonial nations. Consequently, language policy, specifically language in education policy has been frequently mobilized in efforts to address social inequality, with varying degrees of success. This paper focuses on a decade of implementation of such a policy that was conceptualized to address inequality - the bilingual education (BE) policy of 2002 initiated primarily in order to effect changes in language learning and thereby deal with issues of inequality based on differences in levels of language proficiency. Utilizing a methodology that includes document analysis, focus group interviews and semi structured interviews with important stakeholders in the bilingual education project this study attempts to report on the status of an initiative after more than ten years of its implementation, with regard to attitudes, issues and challenges. It was revealed that unresolved tensions to do with the demand and clamour for English due to its market value and the forces of globalization on one hand and the struggle to maintain a national and local identity on the other are reflected both in the circulars and in the structural and attitudinal factors related to implementation. The study revealed the emergence of a new 'elite' group among students, those who, because they study in the 'English medium' see themselves as superior and distance themselves from the mother tongue medium students, and the ineffectiveness of ministry circulars and campaigns to position English as a tool rather than a weapon

**Keywords:** Bilingual Education, English medium instruction, English in Sri Lanka, Medium of Instruction policy

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## **Introduction**

Language policy in Sri Lanka, as in many other parts of the world, has had far reaching consequences for social inequality. Correspondingly, language policies, specifically language in education policies have been frequently utilized in attempts to redress social inequality in this country, with varying levels of success. Approaches to Language policy in general can be divided into those related to Language practices, to Language ideology, and to language planning activities that attempt to modify the practices and ideology of a community (Spolsky, 2004). The question of which language(s) should be used as the/a Medium of Instruction is a significant activity related to what has been termed 'Acquisition Planning' (Cooper, 1989). As such, this paper focuses on the bilingual education (BE) initiative implemented in 2002 in Sri Lanka in order to effect changes in language learning and thereby address issues of inequality based on differential access to English, which constitutes significant linguistic capital in Sri Lanka and many other countries today.

## **Bilingual Education in Sri Lanka**

Learning subject matter rather than the target language directly has been found to be more effective in second language acquisition. This is attributed to the fact that since "school subjects are what children need to talk about in school", learning content in the target language medium "provides the motivation and opportunity for meaningful communication". Conventional 'English as a second language' instruction on the other hand tends to create artificial situations and unreal contexts which do not provide the same degree of motivation for meaningful communication. The concept of learning subject matter in a language that is not one's own in order to learn both the subject and another language can be traced back many centuries. However, the contemporary notion of Bilingual Education – which has come to be understood as synonymous with English medium instruction - is often viewed as being controversial because of the political implications of which language is chosen as a medium of instruction and the tensions it has come to create.

Rubin (1983) defines the decision as to what language to use as a medium of instruction as a "language problem" which "organizations ...given a mandate to fulfill" purposes of language planning, need to solve by deciding "which variety/language will be used by certain sectors of the polity" (p.4). It has also been noted that the language

of the school begins to assume much importance and such an important status is one not usually accorded to other contexts for language use.

The current Bilingual Education Policy has its official origins in a Ministry of Education (MoE) circular dated February 2001 which makes GCE Advanced Level science stream courses available to students in the English medium. The first reference to Bilingual Education is in Circular 2001/05 titled *Teaching of A/L Science Subjects in the English Medium*. The Circular directs Principals to start teaching A/L Science Subjects in English for the following reasons:

- i) The growing importance of English as the language of global communication in an increasingly more globalized world;
- ii) The need to facilitate the transfer of students to either the world of work or to higher education in the sciences.

The policy at junior secondary level (Grades 6-8) was initiated as a follow up initiative to the one which permitted GCE (Advanced Level) Science stream students to study their subjects in the English medium, beginning in May, 2001. Interestingly, the only 'research' which justified this initiative was that 26% of all students in Type 1AB and Type 2 schools<sup>2</sup> who sat the GCE (Ordinary Level) exam in 2000, expressed their desire to study in the English medium and 50% of Science-graduate teachers in all Type 1AB schools expressed a desire to teach in the English medium<sup>3</sup>.

By introducing these initiatives in government schools it was assumed that all would have equal access to linguistic capital, thus improving equity. In a country where the richest 20 percent receives nearly 55 percent of the total income, while the poorest 20 percent receives only 5 percent (Department of Census and Statistics, 2007), issues of equity abound in educational debates and policy making. Thus, the policy aims are consistent with what Gibbons (2003: 247) points out: "for students who are learning ESL in an English-medium school, English is both a target and a medium of education: they are not only learning English as a subject but are learning

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<sup>2</sup> 1 AB – School having Advanced Level Science stream classes, 1 C - School having Advanced Level Arts and /or Commerce streams but no Science stream, Type 2 - Schools having classes only up to grade 11, Type 3 - Schools having classes only up to grade 8. (<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Newsletters/Education%20Bulletin.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Education (MOE) Circular No: 2001/05 of 23.02.2001 to all zonal and provincial directors of education.

through it as well. In these content-based classrooms, the construction of curriculum knowledge needs to progress hand-in-hand with the development of English". The rationale behind the introduction of EMI was that the ELT project "had failed miserably in this country for more than forty years"<sup>4</sup>. The National Education Commission (2003) justifies this claim thus:

While English has been a compulsory second language in all schools from grade 3 since the 1940s, the teaching of English as a subject confined to one period a day has not enabled the vast majority of students to communicate in English effectively or to be equipped with language skills to explore the expanding world of learning, resulting in a decline in the quality of higher education" (p. 115).

Some of the many tensions that revolve around 'English as a medium of instruction' and language in education policies are those that exist between preserving the value, proficiency and status of local languages and empowering young people to be successful in the wider world via proficiency in English, between English medium instruction policy and the implementation of that policy, between teaching content and teaching English in the subject classroom, and between students who are more proficient in English and those who are not.

Many other post-colonial countries which were left with the dubious legacy of English as a language of privilege and the divisions created thereby, have tried to negotiate the tensions between local languages and English, first in the face of decolonization and nation building and more recently in the face of globalization. It is in the language acquisition policies of these countries that this tension is most visible. For example, Malaysia has introduced two major policies regarding the Medium of Instruction. The first one involves the sudden change from Bahasa Malaysia to English for Mathematics and Science in 2003, and the second, a reversal in 2012. This has resulted in the introduction of a new language policy, that is, '*To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia & to Strengthen the English Language*' (MBMMBI) (Ha *et al.*, 2013).

Social transformation oriented curriculum attempts to increase the life chances of disadvantaged groups. It aims "not to transmit the past to the future but to change the present for the disadvantaged"

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<sup>4</sup> Rajiva Wijesinha, one of the two principal architects of the EMI reforms and member of the Presidential Task Force on Educational Reforms 1997-2002, in interview (Medawattegedera, 2011).

(Lo Bianco, 2001: 460). As such, the government currently in power has focused on changing the ideological associations of English with power and prestige to those associated with function and pragmatics. A widespread media campaign featuring popular sports figures, film actors and other public personalities to whom English was not a language spoken in the home but a learned second language was launched to popularize the concept of English being an instrument and not a tool of oppression, not a *Kaduwa* (sword = weapon) but a *Manne* (machete = tool)

It is against this background that this study seeks to answer the following research questions in an attempt to investigate the issues and tensions in implementing bilingual education and in Sri Lanka over the last decade

### **Research Questions**

- What trends and tensions can be discerned from the scrutiny of Ministry of Education circulars?
- What are the current issues and challenges related to stakeholder attitudes and the implementation of the medium of instruction policy?

### **Methodology**

The methodology included a document analysis i.e. the scrutiny of all the Ministry of Education circulars issued to schools on the implementation of Bilingual Education since its inception more than a decade ago, an in depth semi structured interview with the current Director of the Bilingual Education Programme of the Ministry of Education and the relevant officer at the National Institute of Education, semi structured interviews with teachers, principals and deputy principals, and focus group interviews with teachers, principals, in-service advisors, coordinators of the bilingual education programme in department of education zonal offices, and randomly selected students studying in bilingual medium classes from grades 6-10.

The participants - approximately 150 - were drawn from three provinces; the Western, Southern and North Western Province based on convenience sampling, when this researcher visited these provinces for research purposes related to a commissioned study done for the National Education Commission.

## Findings

In 2001 there was no clear or overt policy on Bilingual Education or English Medium Instruction when it started, having been initiated via a Cabinet paper. So the current bilingual education initiative originates with a Ministry of Education (MoE) circular dated February 2001 which makes A/L science stream courses available to students in the English medium titled *Teaching of A/L Science Subjects in the English Medium*. It was meant to be an egalitarian policy to redistribute the linguistic capital of English more evenly among the diverse social classes and was first called “English Medium Instruction”. Just like the more recent “English as a Life Skill campaign” the Circular packages English in terms of its instrumental uses. The reasons it provides are

- The growing importance of English as the language of global communication in an increasingly more globalized world;
- The need to facilitate the transfer of students to either the world of work or to higher education in the sciences;

However, calling this new initiative “English Medium” turned out to be a ‘mistake because it was misunderstood and taken as a green light to reverse existing policy. Schools, under pressure from parents, among other reasons, started having ‘English medium’ for all grades. How this was perceived and practiced by stakeholders can be seen in the tone of circulars which were consequently issued by the ministry to try and control the misunderstandings.. First, a Circular was issued which decreed that GCE Advanced Level candidates can choose to mix media of instruction in their choice of Science subjects for the examination thus allowing them to do one subject in English and the others in Sinhala/Tamil was issued.

Next, a stern directive issued via Circular 2003/18, expressly forbade the start of exclusively English Medium classes especially at the primary level and points out to principals that they only had authorization to teach *select subjects in English* from Grade VI onwards (emphasis added).

By 2008 the Ministry seems to have decided that it must ensure compliance with a name change from “English Medium” instruction to “Bilingual Education” via yet another circular. The content of the circular dated 2008.04.21 titled “The Implementation of the New Syllabus in Grades VI-XI”, is in essence an elaborate explanation of the change in name. It states that the aim of the initiative was:

- To promote English through teaching select subjects in English without devaluing the status of the two national languages, Sinhala and Tamil; (Which sounds very similar to the current Malaysian language medium of instruction policy);
- Because of the need to bring about an attitudinal change among people who regard English not in its purely instrumental sense but *as an ornament* that can be used to bring about social division as evident from certain incidents reported to the Ministry ;
- To turn English into a tool available to all and thereby to encourage people to see it as something “ordinary” and not the prestige language that it is today;
- To encourage communication among students through the use of two languages and thereby to advance cognitive development.

The now infamous incident where a student in the ‘English medium’ at a prominent girls’ school in Colombo had a fight with a student from the Mother tongue medium class and called her “you Sinhala medium bitch” was reported to the ministry. Such incidents also prompted the change to ‘bilingual rather than English medium’ Thus, although the circular issued in 2001 had attempted to turn English into a purely instrumental language, its interpretation by the stake holders shows us the symbolic value that it carries as a prestige language. Wickremagamage *et al.* (2010) in a study focused on the Central Province of Sri Lanka, which also did a critical reading of the Ministry of Education Circulars, point out that the later circulars of the Ministry contain “a belated recognition of the inextricable link between language politics and language policy” (2010:18).

With effect from 2009, another circular was issued, enforcing a directive to schools to have bi medium classes, and setting up a maximum number of subjects (5) that could be done in English medium, ruling that bilingual students should be taught a higher number of subjects in their mother tongue than in English medium and explicitly forbidding teaching of History in the English medium. This can be interpreted as an effort to demonstrate that the Mother Tongue is more important and valuable than English.

However, a number of schools rejected the decree spelt out in the circulars to have 'bi medium classes', or in other words to group together those who studied entirely in the mother tongue and those who were doing selected subjects in English.

Interview data from teacher interviews revealed that many teachers agreed with the notion that students should not be separated into monolingual and bilingual groups, and thought it was a clever strategy to prevent "English medium" students from feeling superior. However it was also found that in many instances schools do not follow the circular which specifies that bilingual classes should not be separated ; firstly due to pressure from influential parents, and secondly due to scheduling and time tabling issues which arise from attempts to do so. Further, there are incidents where parents even strongly objected to having their children (who are doing selected subjects in English medium) being grouped together in one class with the mother tongue medium students. Interview data with the ministry officials revealed that there was even one incident reported from Hambanthota where parents petitioned the then President about their objections and he then requested the principal not to mix the Binlingual Education (BE) stream (popularly referred to as 'English medium') and Monolingual stream students in one class. This incident echoes the one referred to in Wickremagamage *et al*, (2010:18) who found a similar incident a few years ago in the Central Province:

"Another incident they cited involved an "English Medium" student from Medawachchiya who had complained to the President in writing that s/he found it demeaning to remain in the same class with his/her *Sinhala Medium* counterparts and asking the

President's intervention to maintain separate classrooms at his/her schools".

Thus, having monolingual and bilingual students in the same class created tensions among the students and affected parents to the extent that in some cases, complaints were even referred to the President of the country. Interviews with Principals reveal similar findings, including an example of an incident in a prominent school in the Southern Province, where students had formed "English Medium" clubs, which included members from English medium classes in other schools in the region. Thus a group identity was constructed where the members went to the extent of printing T shirts in order to identify the members out of school hours. (Specimens which had been confiscated later by the school were shown to the researcher as proof)

Interview and focus group data also reveal that in some instances, school principals provided extra facilities to 'English medium' classes such as extra fans and better classrooms. On the other hand, interviews with students in bilingual medium classes revealed that monolingual teachers 'treated them differently' and 'were always finding fault' with them. Interviews with teachers revealed that there was a perception that 'English medium' students had a 'superiority complex' and though 'they were better than the rest' Teachers also believe that English Medium teachers should get extra recognition because they have a dual role: teaching language and teaching subject matter. In many schools, the English teacher is called upon to teach subjects such as Geography and Science in the English medium. This indicates a shifting role, extra challenges and new identities for the English teacher.

Although a few studies have shown that the notion of *Kaduwa* to represent English seems to be fast disappearing (Widyalankara, 2009, Samarakkody, 2001 ) and although the previous government has marketed English as a tool (Manne) rather than a weapon (Kaduwa) and as a 'life skill' spoken "our way" rather than as a dominant world language with the power to divide, the analysis of the circulars as well as the perceptions and practices of the stakeholders reveal the tensions that still exist regarding English in Sri Lanka. These tensions spring from the demand and clamour for

English due to its market value and the forces of globalization on one hand and the struggle to maintain a national and local identity on the other and are reflected both in the practice of BE and the Government circulars on the subject.

## **Conclusion**

A decade later, Bilingual Education Initiative still has no policy document but functions as an evolving policy which has taken the form of a string of Ministry of Education (MoE) Circulars. Each new circular seems to be an attempt to rectify misunderstandings because of the lack of clarity in policy. The circulars also reveal tensions between local and global realities. Further, beliefs and attitudes towards languages cannot be changed via ministry circulars and directives, nor by large scale campaigns just as, in Lo Bianco's words "Languages cannot be invested with new value overnight" (Lo Bianco, 2007, cited in Wickremagamage *et.al.*, 2010). As such, despite state-sponsored efforts to turn English into an almost banal and unremarkable 'life' skill such as literacy, its sociocultural and political resonance still persists.

This study reveals that the elitism associated with English is still being reproduced among students for whom it is neither a first language nor a language used at home with their families but a mere medium of instruction at school. Teachers and administrators too continue to invest the English language with a divisive role, colluding with students (by treating them differently) and thus seeming to signal that English is superior and has more value than the national languages. The fact that there is no consistent policy about and for selection of students to study in the bilingual classes is also a pertinent issue which needs to be resolved equitably.

It appears as though the *Kaduwa* syndrome has renewed itself via new wielders of the English language as a weapon – a weapon which may yet take a few more decades to transform itself into a tool.

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