

## ***The English Medium Obsession...***

*“If we were taught in English medium like in the colonial era we were better skilled in English.”*

I hear this lament from many youths of my generation, who are trying to make Sinhala medium education responsible for their lack of English skills. Title of a *Colombo Telegraph* article, which I read recently reflects this mentality in a precious way - [“I’m a Victim of Sinhala Medium Education.”](#)

Many have [voiced](#) that reverting the education medium into English as the most effective treatment to the lack of English skills among students. This is not a new thing, it’s something we have already practiced. So it may be wiser to look at the impact of those colonial days, which students were taught in a language that was alien to them.

In a lecture given by Ajith Thilakasen under the topic 'සංස්කෘතික කාන්තාරයක් කරා'<sup>1</sup> (Our Way for the Desertification of Our Culture) Thilakasena quotes an observation by P. Arunachalam originally written in the census report of 1901 on this matter which I translates into English from the Sinhala translation by Bogoda Premarathna.

In fact, students of English medium schools are in a far worse state when compared to the students of schools which use native language as the education medium. This is because the students in schools that use the native tongue as the medium of education are at least being taught how to use their thinking. .... It’s truthful to say that, sometimes those who are learning in English medium, after learning only a vocabulary used in English will perceive as they gained the subject knowledge, deceiving themselves.

- P. Arunachalam<sup>2</sup>

So the ‘victims of Sinhala medium education’ must be proud of themselves about their victim states. The observation done by P. Arunachalam is something that was supported by the most recent researches on the subject. Following is taken from an article by Michele Gazzola under the title [‘Why teaching in English may not be such a good idea.’](#)

---

1 Thilakasena, A. (2007) "සංස්කෘතික කාන්තාරයක් කරා..." [Our way for the desertification of our culture]. Godage. (A paper read by Ajith Thilakasena in 10. 05. 1984 to a group of young enthusiasts at the Pitakotte. It was published in 1987 July issue of Mavatha magazine and later has been published as a book.)

2 Premarathne, B. (1969) "ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ අධ්‍යාපනය : සියවස ප්‍රකාශනය" [Education in Sri Lanka: A Centenary]. pp. 562

In addition, teaching in English arguably decreases the quality of teaching. The Rectors' Conference of German Universities, in a widely disseminated [resolution](#), pointed out this risk. For example, in one [study](#) conducted on 139 Austrian undergraduates with good English skills, students attended a lecture in English given by an Italian professor using English as a foreign language at a high level of proficiency.

The content of the lesson was better understood by students when teaching was interpreted into German by a professional interpreter, as opposed to listening directly to the original in English. Most importantly, teaching given directly in German by a native teacher had greater effectiveness in communicative terms on a German-speaking audience.

In the end, what matters most in the job market are the technical skills acquired by students and these are best acquired through their mother tongue.

One can imagine that if the giving instructions in English medium was such an ineffective way for Austrian undergraduates with good English skills, how much it will be detrimental to rural children of Sri Lanka who are not coming from households not speaking English. Effect maybe similar to that of after imposition of French on Algerians. When the French arrived to "civilize" Algeria, which included imposing French on local Algerians, the literacy rate in Algeria was over 40%, higher than that in France at the time. However, when the French left in 1962, the literacy rate in Algiers was at best 10-15%.<sup>3</sup> Those who advocating for compulsory English medium education or promoting English medium education as a solution for lack of English skills, accuse defenders of Sinhala medium education of protecting the class structures by not allowing rural students to getting good English skills through an English medium education. But it's making *English* the medium of education will make worse the class gaps by limiting the education only to the children of English speaking elites who lose the power after the revolution of 56. The *Bamunu Kulaya*, as Martin Wicramasingha called them, will rise again.

In the "[The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality](#)" by [Carol Benson](#) some myths regarding language teaching have been addressed, and following paragraph from it will liberate those who think that English must be the medium of education, to be proficient in it, from that myth. (emphasis in bold is mine.)

The either-or myth. This myth holds that bilingualism causes confusion and that the first language must be pushed aside so that the second language can be learned. The research evidence to date shows the opposite to be true: the more highly developed the first language skills, the better the results in the second language, because language and cognition in the second build on the first

---

<sup>3</sup> Canagarajah, Suresh; Said, Selim Ben (2010), "Linguistic imperialism", The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics, Routledge, [doi:10.4324/9780203835654.ch27](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203835654.ch27), [ISBN](#)

(Cummins 1999, 2000; Ramirez et al. 1991; Thomas & Collier 2002). Further, **there is no evidence that the L2 must be a medium of instruction to be learned well; countries like Sweden achieve high levels of L2 competence by teaching it as a subject and preserving the L1 for instruction.**<sup>4</sup>

In the same paper following comment have been made concerning using a foreign language as the medium of instruction.

Instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called “submersion” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Compounded by chronic difficulties such as low levels of teacher education, poorly designed, inappropriate curricula and lack of adequate school facilities, submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

The privilege English medium students are benefiting over the students of Sinhala medium is that (if it’s happening in the expected way) they are getting more time to communicate with the teacher in English and they are reading and writing more in English on various subjects not limited to certain paragraphs and essay topics like the students of Sinhala medium. All these opportunities can be given to the Sinhala medium students using the time they are learning English effectively, instead of changing the medium of other subjects they are learning and thus hindering their subject knowledge. (We’ll shed some lights into this later in this article)

What those who recommend English medium education don’t know is that, it’s not a method of language teaching, for its aim is not to “teach English” but to use it as a medium to teach other subjects. Yes, communicating via a language is also a method of teaching it, but for that purpose expressions should have to be expressed in native language also, a thing which we can’t see in an English medium education program.

In the article I mentioned at the beginning, which was written as a response to a statement made by Venerable Athuraliye Rathan Thero, its author – Anushka Kahandagama writes:

While we are aware of the fact that, 13 years or more English education is an utter failure in public education in Sri Lanka, can we expect a miracle of teaching a language after grade five?

Being unable to achieve expected results does not necessarily mean that the wrong is in the method being used. Maybe figures who were involved in the process haven’t failed to implement the method in its genuine form. There are many teaching methods

---

<sup>4</sup> Benson, C. “The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality”. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005. The Quality Imperative.

using or suggested to use in teaching second languages (such as Communicative Teaching, Content and Language Integrated teaching, Content Based teaching) which we have not tested yet. This means that there are so many alternatives we have to test before come to such a hasty conclusion without trying our best to find the underlying cause of the lack of English skills. One can say “we are aware the fact that 13 years or more English education is an utter failure in the public education in Sri Lanka” only after she has tested all the innovative teaching methods in second language teaching and found that none of them is not working as English medium education. The fact is that classroom education in Sri Lanka is still stuck into out-dated teaching methods in every subject including the English.

The skills most Sinhala medium students have been said to lack is speaking and listening. Why they are comparatively so much unskilled in these respects is because the education system is only focused on improving and measuring only two skills, namely reading and writing. Even these skills have not acquired sufficiently by many students. It's because they are learning English only using a limited amount of language inputs. To acquire a language one needs to engage in voluntary reading and writing (speaking and listening can also be added) in a great amount of time. How much one skilled in a certain communication skill depend on how much she has exposed to language inputs which may improve that skill. But Sinhala medium students are only reading paragraphs of the textbook and writing only a few essays or converting sentences given in certain tense into another tense.

This is a mechanical method which gives no meaningful language skill. Though such exercises may be useful to train grammar structures to the students, if teaching is limited to such activities, then there may be more useful phrases, expressions, and ways of combining sentences that students won't learn from this kind of teaching. Even if someone wants to acquire a skill in the Sinhala language it can't be acquired only through learning grammar rules in Sinhala. To know how we are innovating new patterns within that framework she had to engage in many self-reading and listening. Unless her language usage may be unnatural for natives or gives no sense nor flavor and maybe very poor.

What should have to be done is that after giving certain vocabulary and grammar knowledge, directing them to read or write what they are pleased in that language. Create enthusiasm in the mind of children and thus make them voluntary readers/writers for life so that they will acquire a remarkable proficiency just after few years. Teachers should forget the textbook (Unlike the case of other subjects English papers won't include questions referring to lessons of the textbook) or syllabus and instead should be focused on the needs of students giving special attention to their current proficiency, language needs, and expectations. They should provide resources and guidance needed for students who are acquiring a language through self-learning.

And to enable children to get essential practical communication skills in real life, teachers should spend more time conducting dialogue practices, giving chances and guidance to students who need to practice speech. In fact language teaching yields very innovative and interactive teaching methods unlike in other subjects which can be taught via only notes, explanations, and questions. We can also see how Social media (eg: youtube) has been an advantage for students of the new generation making them more familiar with English speech and pronunciation. If there are so moderate teachers they can incorporate not only these but also language pals with the teaching. There's no need for curriculum changes or supports from the government to be such a lovely innovative teacher.

However, to the surprise of some readers, it can be said that English teachers' lack of respect for the native language of the students too has contributed to the lack of English skills of Sinhala Medium students. The following is taken from the 'Continuum Companion to Second Language Acquisition' by Ernesto Macaro. (emphasis in bold is mine)

One sub-theme here has been language teaching. Most language teaching methods have prejudged the relationship of L2 to L1 acquisition by assuming that 'natural' L1 acquisition is the basis for all acquisition, however much they differ in what they understand by 'natural'. For example Total Physical Response 'simulates at a speeded up pace the stages an infant experiences in acquiring its first language' (Asher 1986: 17). From the Direct Method to Task-based Learning, language teaching has insisted on a mock target language situation, in which the first language plays a minimal part. Students are required to speak the second language from the moment they step inside the classroom and should not be allowed to revert to the first language; the teacher should make the classroom a monolingual target language situation, not a bilingual situation. While the first language necessarily exists in the L2 learner's mind, the accepted view is that it should be forcibly prevented from manifesting itself in the classroom. The implications of the multi-competence approach for language teaching have been spelled out elsewhere (Cook 2007). **But, to take a more neutral position, one should say that teachers at least should be wary of accepting advice about language teaching goals and methods based on the comparison of L1 and L2 learning rather than on the independent study of second language acquisition.**<sup>5</sup>

This was the experience we had in classrooms. Some teachers conducted the whole conversation in English, making their message in-comprehensible, thinking that teaching the English in English medium will enable us to acquire the English language from that exposure. Grammar exercises they gave never included a Sinhala sentence to compare and know the difference between the philosophies of two languages. Textbooks provided to us never included Sinhala meanings, expressions,

---

<sup>5</sup> Macaro, Ernesto, ed. (2010). Continuum companion to second language acquisition. London: Continuum. ISBN 978-1-4411-9922-5. pp. 156-157.

or explanations for difficult words, which if used would have helped us to understand the concept with its cultural connotations. There were even some teachers who encourage us not to refer English-Sinhala dictionaries, but only to use an Oxford Dictionary. Will they also instruct students who are learning Japanese, to use dictionaries that give meanings in Japanese only? Will these teachers use a French-French dictionary if they are learning French? Or will they use a French-English dictionary instead? Need not to say almost every teacher will be disgusted even to hear someone suggesting to encourage students to use Sinhala-English Dictionaries. But if we were instructed to use such a dictionary, we as Sinhala medium students would have enabled to know essential English vocabularies for science, mathematics, etc.

To some of them, English was not something to teach but was a fashion to show us or a power to intimidate us. The very language we expected to learn acted as a barrier for learning that language, thanks to this resentful attitude on the native tongue which may be a result of colonial mentality.

Another argument in the favor of English medium education by some people is that it will enable students to learn special terms used in STEM subjects and therefore, unlike Sinhala medium students, those who learned in English medium won't face problems in their higher educations where those subjects are taught in English medium. This too can be solved without changing the education medium. What is to be done is giving the opportunity to learn those technical terms to the Sinhala medium students by adding a glossary after each chapter or distributing a brochure containing those words. Additionally, teachers can direct students to write college papers or to do other homeworks doing researches on the Internet. This will give them the opportunity to familiarize themselves with these words. To ensure that this will happen as expected, a certain percentage of the marks from such studies can be made necessary for passing the G.C.E. OL. However, they must write even such papers in the Sinhala language though it must be imperative for them to read and gain knowledge from resources in English.

Anushka writes: “can we expect a miracle of teaching a language after grade five?” Rathana Thero did not say “teaching the English language” should stop in 1-5, instead he said teaching in English (teaching using English as the medium) in 1-5 should stop. And this is not a view only held by chauvinistic monks. British educationists like H. W. Green, who was the Director of Public education in Sri Lanka around 1833 and A. G. Fraser has held the same view. A. G. Fraser, who was once the principal of ‘Trinity College’ said that *the use of a foreign language as a teaching medium in the primary classes of secondary schools was destructive to the vigorous mental growth of students of eight to ten years.*

The mentality of ascribing all the ills to the Swabasha education, a prevalent political disease among those who bring the need for English medium education, which Kahandagama also shares, should also be addressed. According to her (and others

who make this claim) reason for all the ills after independence like, Tamil liberation struggle and youth insurrections of the south and unemployment of the arts graduates is Swabasha education. If we take youth insurrections of the south, joblessness hardly was a contributing factor for the second one which was triggered by the chaotic political atmosphere at the time - a phobia about an Indian invasion which came as a result of projecting the history and mythologies to current politics; the rise of radical separatist movements in North; public outrage against the president Jayawardhena's draconian ruling and tensions and burdens created by open economic policies; public opposition to the education reforms which was intended to privatize the education system. It's these factors should be seen as responsible for the 87-9 insurrection, not the Sinhala medium education.

When Kahandagama writes Swabasha education was a factor for the Tamil liberation struggle she has confused the Swabasha education with Sinhala-only movement. Swabasha education is meant to teaching someone in her mother language. Why would a Tamil take arms against the teaching in their mother language? (In the book 'භාෂානුරාගයේ දේශපාලනය' [Politics of Language Loyalty] based on his MA thesis, Professor Sandagomi Koperahewa shows how the Swabasha movement which initially insisted on giving education to anyone in her native tongue, after a time-restricted into giving that right only to Sinhala and Tamil people and how at the last ended in a Sinhala only approach, among many other observations) It's not the changing education mediums into Sinhala and Tamil languages created the ethnic problem. It was due to the making Sinhala the only official language in the country, not due to the decision to teach in Sinhala and Tamil students in their native languages. However, even this interpretation is biased as Malinda Senevirathna notes [in this article](#). Also in my view, our historical conflicts, geopolitical background (political and cultural influences coming from Tamilnadu to the Sri Lanka North) and most importantly nostalgia for the Tamil Kingdom in Yapanaya can't be neglected when considering the causes for Tamil liberation struggle though the academia and civil community have neglected them.

However for the 71 struggle, surely the youth unemployment was a major factor but that unemployment is not something due to lack of English skills like the unemployment of Arts graduates in the current day, since there was no such competitive environment or job market and private sector opportunities like today around 70s. While the problem of today's unemployment is lack of qualifications, lack of opportunities was the cause for youth unemployment which led to 71 uprising. So it's not correct to say even the 71 struggle was due to Swabasha education.

Kahandagama also criticizes the statement of Rathana Thero, which said "If a child is given a primary education in a language other than their mother tongue, that child would not be a citizen of that country" for being illogical.

Teaching in English medium to the student since the day she stepped into the school may undoubtedly demean her respect for her mother tongue. (Dr: Kumudu Karunarathna, a senior lecture of Sinhala language at University of Colombo, have argued that teaching in English medium won't be a threat to the Sinhala Language, pointing that in the era where English was the official language and the medium of education, students had a better knowledge on Sinhala language than today, and people like Ediriweera Sarachchandra, who learned in English medium did a great service to the Sinhala language. But this is a very spurious argument, for such people are just isolate examples and does not represent the majority of the time.) Look at the generations of today if you want evidence. You will see how many of them have no respect, love, pride, and knowledge regarding their mother tongue and even about the culture. You will see how many of them use English words extensively in their Sinhala usage and more prone to use English even among themselves when they are using online platforms for communication (This includes me also). You may see how they have detached from Sinhala language and more inclined towards English. This is because the “system” emphasizes more on the English language, gives priority for it, and demands only for it. If we promote this trend by promoting English medium education it will be the most unwise decision we are taking in this world where local languages of the third world countries like ours are facing to the threat of language endangerment, thanks to globalization and new media.

Following passage taken from an article named “[A National Language Represents the National Identity of a Country](#)” written by Asim Nawaz Abbassi, a Pakistani youth parliamentarian and software engineer, shows how the prioritizing of English language by the government of Pakistan has adversely affected the new generation's language skills and for the whole society.

Because of the Government's lack of serious effort, the current generations are far from their national language. We can clearly observe a gradual increase in the number of elite youth whose command over all the required four skills for the Urdu language seems to be on a downward trend. Instead, English is becoming the symbol of the upper-class elite and an inaccurate benchmark by which one's literacy is judged. The competitive examinations in Pakistan through which the bureaucracy of the country is filtered have a strong bottleneck because they use English to judge candidates' competitiveness.

I can't be sure if this was the concern Rathana Thero intended by that statement, But if we assume he said so in this meaning then he is perfectly correct. There's nothing illogical here.

In “[The African Renaissance and the Use of African Languages in Tertiary Education](#)” Neville Alexander shows how essential is the use of African languages in school and university education and in academic tasks to change the social positions of those languages and English.



My core proposition is that until and unless we are able to use the indigenous languages of South Africa, among other things, as languages of tuition at tertiary level, our educational system will continue to be skewed in favour of an English-knowing elite. We have to initiate a counter-hegemonic trend in the distribution of symbolic power and cultural capital implicit in the prevailing language dispensation in South Africa's higher education system.<sup>6</sup>

This is what Sri Lanka achieved decades ago. But now unfortunately some are attempting to reverse the victories we have achieved, and return to those dark ages we were in colonial era or to the state of African education still lags in today.

I would like to end this by referring to the opinion of the [F. L. Woodward](#), regarding the Education system and National Language. In his essay "[A tribute to the Late Mr: F. L. Woodward](#)", L. H. Mettananda who was a pioneer of the struggle of making Sinhala the only official language, writes, that "*Woodward asserted that of all the fundamental stones on which the nation is built, the main and corner-stone is the national language, and therefore in the national scheme of education he wanted the first place for the national language and the second for English.*"

One may wonder about those English educationists who criticized usage of English as the medium of education, being it their own mother tongue and at a colonial time and how they were so brave to challenge to a system which was meant to impose their own culture on societies which considered as inferior by their fellow people, while today we are seeing the reverse, those who were born after independence and born as Sinhala speaking people, are defending for English medium education. The reason is clear. Being born as Englishmen, having white skins, coming from noble families of England those English educationists had no inferiority complex as we have developed and thus they were able to see the harm done by it from a bias-free mind. If anything harmful done by the Sinhala medium education, I will say that it's making this inferiority complex.

- Sachintha Madhushan

---

6 Alexander, N. (2003) The African Renaissance and the Use of African Languages in Tertiary Education. PRAESA Occasional Papers No. 13. Cape Town: PRAESA.