

**A Comparative Study of the Language
Policies in Education in Sri Lanka and India**

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Abstract

Language policies play a pivotal role in shaping a country's education system, especially in defining the medium of instruction across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. These policies are formulated by central governments and policy - making bodies, and are often enshrined in constitutional provisions. The effective execution of these language policies is important to the functionality of education systems in the respective countries. This study conducts a comparative analysis of educational language policies in Sri Lanka and India, with a particular focus on their development, implementation, and socio – political underpinnings. Accordingly, this

study provides an overview of the broader language policy landscapes in both countries, focusing on decisions related to educational language policies. Utilizing a literature review methodology, this research explores major themes such as educational language policies, language planning, language contact, meta – linguistic knowledge, and the diffusion of English. Thematic analysis reveals similarities and divergences between the two nations. These themes reflect a convergence of trends between Sri Lanka and India. Nonetheless, this comparative study reveals shared factors about the implementation of language policies in their education systems. In conclusion, the study highlights India’s significant influence on Sri Lanka’s language policy landscape and emphasizes the importance of critically examining language policy to understand its broader implications in education.

Keywords: Educational Language Policies, Language in Contact, Language Planning, Meta-linguistic knowledge.

Introduction

A language policy is a body of ideas, laws, regulations, and practices aimed at orchestrating language change across societies or systems. (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997: xi)

This study explores the intersection of Language Policy, Language Planning, and Language Policy Introduction in Education to assess their roles in India and Sri Lanka's linguistic development from pre-colonial to post-colonial eras. The selection of these two countries, India and Sri Lanka, stems from their historical proximity and the intricate social and cultural ties that have developed over time and attempt is made in this study to compare and contrast India's vast linguistic diversity with that of Sri Lanka's more limited range of spoken languages. A comparison of language family distribution highlights significant differences in linguistic diversity. Yet both countries predominantly use Indo – Aryan and Dravidian language families in various regions. In India Indo- Aryan languages dominate the north, while Dravidian languages

are prevalent in the south. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Indo – Aryan Sinhala is widely spoken, with Dravidian Tamil prominent in the north and east. This overlap justifies a comparative study of their educational language policies. A clearly articulated research problem lies in the inconsistent and often politically charged implementation of language policies in educational systems in South Asia, specifically in Sri Lanka and India. The central research questions are:

1. How have historical, political, and socio – cultural factors shaped the language policies in education in both countries?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the development and implementation of these policies?
3. How do current policies address or perpetuate linguistic inequalities?

As Indians speak many languages, the languages spoken in India belong to many language families. Table 1.1

indicates the language families and the percentage of people who speak a language in the given language family, in India.

Language Family	Percentage
1. India – Aryan Languages	78.05%
2. Dravidian Languages	19.64%
3. Others (Austroasiatic, Sino – Tibetan, Tai- Kadai	2.31%

Table 1.1 – Language families in India

Table 1.2 shows the language families and the percentage of people who speak the language in the given Language family, in the Sri Lankan context.

Language Family	Percentage
1. Sinhala-Indo-Aryan Language	74%
2. Tamil-Dravidian Language	18%
3. Other Language	8%
Total	100%

Table 1.2 – Language Families in Sri Lanka

Tables 1.1 shows that there is a vast difference between the linguistic diversity of these two nations. But most notably it is very clear that the higher percentage of people in both countries use Indo Aryan Languages and Dravidian Languages. The people living in North Eastern and Up Country in Sri Lanka speak Dravidian languages and in the rest of the regions they speak Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language. The people of southern part of India speaks Dravidian Languages and in Northern part of India, most of the people speak Indo-Aryan languages. Therefore, it is very clear from the above explanation that the Sri Lanka's linguistic landscape is highly influenced by India due to many reasons. Therefore, it is very important to analyze and interpret how the language policies in education of these two nations have been utilized in order to provide the people of these two nations a sound education. The study delves into policy implementation within the contexts of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras,

shedding light on the intricate interplay of language policies and educational systems.

Language policies in education are central to the development and identity of a nation's education system. These policies, influenced by historical, political, and socio-cultural factors, guide the choice of languages used for imparting knowledge at various levels of education. The present study engages in a comparative analysis of language policies in education in Sri Lanka and India, shedding light on their respective approaches, historical trajectories, and contemporary implications. Through thematic analysis and exploration of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial contexts, this discussion underscores the critical role of language policies in shaping the educational and linguistic landscapes of these two nations.

While the linguistic diversity in India is broader, both nations have Indo- Aryan and Dravidian roots shaping their educational and policy landscapes. Therefore,

examining how these common linguistic roots influence modern educational policies remains central to this study.

Pre-Colonial Period:

The pre-colonial education system in Sri Lanka reflects a period of historical development characterized by the influence of Buddhism and the establishment of monastic education centers. After the arrival of King Vijaya and the proliferation of Buddhism around the 3rd century BC, a distinctive educational structure emerged, with monasteries assuming a central role as hubs of learning. Within this context, the education system was closely intertwined with religious institutions, particularly Buddhist monasteries. The responsibility of imparting knowledge was entrusted to the Buddhist monks, who played a significant role as educators. While the nobility had access to literary activities, the primary focus of education remained centered around monasteries.

A noteworthy transformation occurred with the gradual emergence of Pirivena education throughout Sri Lanka.

This marked a turning point in the history of Sri Lankan education. Notable monastic centers like the Maha Vihara during the time of Devanampiya Tissa and the Abhayagiriya under Vattagamini-Abhaya's rule further enriched the education landscape. The establishment of Pirivenas heralded a new era, enabling lay children to receive education within temple premises. This represented a notable shift from exclusively monastic education to a more inclusive approach that catered to a wider segment of society.

The core curriculum of this period encompassed subjects such as the Sinhala language, and over time, included languages like Pali and Sanskrit. The educational methodology predominantly relied on rote learning, with students being taught how to read, write, and engage in religious practices. Additionally, the Vimativinodani Vinayatika highlights the role of Pirivenas as dwelling places for monks who pursued studies at these institutions. This educational system, while largely centered around

religious teachings, provided a foundation for the privileged few within society, laying the groundwork for future developments.

In India, the pre-colonial education landscape was marked by a diversity of systems. For instance, during this period the education was imparted at homes, in temples, pathshalas, tols, chatuspadis, including the gurukul tradition, which emphasized oral transmission of knowledge and the Vedas. Sanskrit served as a medium of instruction and facilitated the dissemination of religious and philosophical teachings. These pre-colonial educational systems laid the foundation for future developments, influencing the linguistic and educational policies of the colonial and post-colonial eras.

Colonial Period

The colonial period brought significant shifts in language policies and education systems in both Sri Lanka and India, driven by the British colonial administration's policies.

The British colonial rulers exerted their influence by introducing language policies that aimed to promote English as a medium of instruction. In Sri Lanka, the Colebrook report of 1832 emphasized the privileged status of English, setting the stage for its adoption in education. This is very much evident from the statement, “The first official pronouncement relating to language policy in Sri Lanka is to be found in the Colebrook Report on the Administration of the government of Ceylon (1832), which made explicit the privileged position of English in the country.” (Colebrook Report, 1833, as cited in Coperehewa, S.,2009) This approach aimed to create an education system where English served as a prominent language of instruction while allowing for the inclusion of local languages. This policy aimed at producing an educated elite fluent in English, serving as intermediaries between the colonial rulers and the local population.

Similarly, in India, the British administration advocated for the use of vernacular languages in primary education,

while promoting English for higher education. This strategy aligned with the broader colonial policy of “westernization”, emphasizing the spread of western knowledge, ideals, and cultural practices among the Indian populace, is quite evident when Richey (1922) says, “while it recommended that vernacular languages be the medium of instruction in primary schools, it promoted the use of English at higher levels of education. It also laid emphasis on “Westernization” and imparting western knowledge, ideals, and cultural practices to the Indian natives”.

Another important milestone in the Language policy decision making concerning India is evident in the following statement, "I argue in particular that the transformation in colonial language policy in the 1830s from using Persian to using regional vernacular languages in provincial administration was grounded in an ideology of efficient, just and legitimate rule" (Mir,F.,2006) If the above discussed factors are carefully analyzed

I see a similarity in between India and Sri Lanka about language policy in education particularly at the earliest stage of its implementation. The long-term effect of this kind of an attempt by the colonial rulers is well established when one reads the following statement. “The influence and dominance of English are quite evident in the realms of popular culture, media, science and technology, and commerce, to name a few. In this context, India is considered to have an English advantage over countries such as Japan, China, and even parts of Europe, as it has 125 million speakers of the English language as a first, second, or third language. (Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy, 2006; Times New York, 2010

The early stages of implementation of the language policy by the colonial masters should be looked at carefully because the main intention of the colonial rulers was to promote their language, and especially the British administrators had the idea of promoting the English language in their policy of language in education.

This is quite evident in the following statement: "The dominance of English as the language of governance was a common feature of this period, but at the same time, there were continuing efforts to study and promote vernaculars". (Coperahewa, S., 2011) This was further evident when the following statement was analyzed.

"Instruction in the English language should be promoted and encouraged as much as possible when the people would be enabled to come more directly to the evidence of Christianity than they are through the tardy and scanty medium of translation. (Gooneratne, 1968;5-6, cited in Coparahewa, S., 2011)

Careful analysis of the language policy in education in India during the colonial context, similarities in the implementation of that language policy could be observed both in India and Sri Lanka. For instance, " By the 1830s, the Indian middle classes were becoming very demanding. They realized that English was the language required for a secure future in a government job, so why was English not

taught in secondary schools? Private schools offering this service were already doing good business, particularly in Calcutta. The state was set for the first ‘big moment’ in the imperial history of English language teaching (Howart, A.P.R., cited in Vijayalakshmi, M., & Babu, M.S.,2014)

When the above statements about Sri Lanka and India are analyzed carefully, it can be noticed that both Indians and Sri Lankans who were bourgeois elites had given the priority to learn English because both countries were under British domination, and the language of administration in both countries was English. The British rulers had targeted the people in higher strata, both caste wise and class-wise, to produce mediators who could support them in their administrative work. In both contexts, opportunities had been given for students from higher classes to study in British universities, and most of the people in these two countries had turned to Christianity. Through this kind of language policy change, they tried their level best to make the people embrace their religious and cultural values.

The echoes of colonial language policies had a lasting impact, as English gradually became entrenched in various domains, including popular culture, media, science, technology, and commerce. In both Sri Lanka and India, the dominance of English persisted even as efforts were made to promote vernacular languages alongside it.

Post-colonial context

When the language education policies in India and Sri Lanka are analyzed with the post-colonial scenario, certain similarities and differences can be observed. In the post-colonial era, both Sri Lanka and India grappled with the legacy of colonial language policies and sought to define their linguistic identities. In identifying these similarities and differences, the acts passed in the respective parliaments are cited here and discussed. Even after gaining independence in 1948, Sri Lanka as a nation continued with English as the official language until 1956, and it was evident that for eight, post - imperial years,

the language policy was no different to, what it had been under British, making the country linguistically still a colony even though geo-politically it was a nation state. Sri Lanka's language policy journey was marked by complexities, epitomized by the controversial 'Sinhala Only' Act No. 33 of 1956. This Act elevated Sinhala to the status of the sole official language, leading to tensions and marginalization of the Tamil-speaking minority of

Ceylon, with the exclusion of Tamil.

"This hegemonic language policy made the knowledge of Sinhala a pre-condition to entering the public service and obtaining a promotion, thus ostracizing the Tamil ethnic and linguistic minorities and undermining its economic success".

This Sinhala-only Act was one of the initial steps taken by the new government in realizing one of the main campaign promises. The passing of this bill was violently opposed by the Tamil-speaking minority in Ceylon, and the passage

of this bill was followed by rioting. This bill was not only opposed by minorities but also by far-sighted Sri Lankan legislators in the calibre of Dr. Kolvin R.deSilva. Thus, we know about the famous statement made by Dr. Kolvin R. de Silva.

One language, two nationalities,

Two languages, one nationality,

In this context, the Tamil Federal Party, led by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, demanded that Ceylon be made a federal state. To conciliate the Tamil, the then Prime Minister Hon. S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake prepared a pact with Chelvanayakam, allowing for the official use of Tamil in Tamil-speaking provinces, in April 1958. Thus, in August 1958, the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act. Was passed providing for the use of Tamil for certain administrative purposes and as a medium of instruction in secondary and higher education. However, under pressure from certain extremists, the then Prime Minister nullified this Act. In a later development, it could be noticed that

Sinhala and Tamil are the national languages of Sri Lanka according to Chapter 4 of the constitution, and this was amended in 1978 to give Tamil the status of an official language that was denied nine years earlier, and English was declared the link language. Chapter 4 of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka states.

1. The official language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala.
2. Tamil shall also be an official Language.
3. English shall be the link language.
4. Parliament, by law, provides for the implementation of the provisions of this chapter (2)

But when we compare and contrast the above scenario in Sri Lanka with that of India, it is quite evident that India had enacted its language policies, giving all its people the due recognition and consideration. For instance, in the case of India, the government agreed to continue

the use of English with Hindi for official purposes. Hindi and English are the official languages of India, according to Article 343(1) of the Indian Constitution. Furthermore, it declared that by 2022, a total of 22 languages will be recognized as official.

In the Indian Language Policy Framework, no language has been declared a national language. Instead, India has official languages. The two main official languages are Hindi and English.

One of the recent developments in the Indian Language Policy decision can be observed in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2019. According to this policy statement, the study of Hindi is compulsory. The decision had to be revoked due to the resentment from the non-Hindi-speaking states. Due to this opposition, India adopted a very convenient policy implementation for all the states. Based on the three-language policy accordingly NEP 2020 was adopted, and it states that learning three languages will be the choice of states, regions, and students themselves

as long as at least two of the three languages are native to India. The Framework of the New Education Policy is to guide the development of education in the country. It aims to make India a global knowledge superpower, enduring equity, access, and inclusion. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 does emphasize the use of mother tongue, local, or regional languages as the medium of instruction, particularly in the early stages of education. (National Education Policy of India)

The above comparative analysis highlights both shared trends and divergent paths in the language policies of Sri Lanka and India. Both nations experienced the imprint of colonial language policies, with English assuming prominence as a medium of instruction. However, Sri Lanka's post-colonial language policies took a more contentious route, leading to challenges related to linguistic identity and minority rights. In contrast, India's approach aimed at accommodating linguistic diversity, reflecting a commitment to cultural pluralism.

All in all, this discussion illuminates the intricate interplay between historical trajectories, political decisions, and socio-cultural factors in shaping language policies in education in Sri Lanka and India. The pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods witnessed dynamic shifts, contributing to the educational and linguistic identities of these nations. While acknowledging commonalities, this study underscores the unique contexts that influenced the evolution of language policies, emphasizing the critical role of these policies in shaping educational systems and linguistic landscapes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research offers a thorough examination of language policies in education within Sri Lanka and India, contextualized by their historical trajectories, colonial legacies, and contemporary frameworks. Thematic analysis reveals both convergences - such as shared colonial influences and bilingual challenges - and divergences, particularly in policy implementation and

societal reception. India's inclusive multilingual framework contrasts with Sri Lanka's more centralized and contested policy environment. Despite these differences, both countries illustrate how language policies are deeply intertwined with identity, equity, and access to education. Future policy decisions must account for these complexities to foster more inclusive and effective educational system.

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