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Key Issues and Challenges of English Lesson Materials: An Analysis of the G.C.E. Ordinary Level English Textbook

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Abstract

When examining the English Language Teaching (ELT) materials available in Sri Lanka, it could be said that most of them are alien and takes center-stage. As a result, in the process of language acquisition, students' own experience, contexts and lifestyles are devalued through under emphasis and trivialization; hence the sense of linguistic and cultural insecurity that the average student faces when confronted with English being reinforced. This study looks at the issues and challenges faced by teachers and learners when it comes to the use of Sri Lankan English in the local classroom context. This study employs the qualitative data analysis method and a textual analysis of the Grade 11 English textbook of both old and new syllabi is done to examine the core language issues found in teaching material in a classroom context where English is taught/ learnt as a second language. The objective of this study is to examine the appropriateness or mismatch of the teaching materials to the classroom context. According to the findings, the materials that are discussed in this study consist of several components outside the range of experience and comprehension of the second language learners. These textbooks are not culturally appropriate, as they impose the culture of the western/inner circle countries in which they reflect the colonial views and attitudes. Hence, the study proposes that the English textbook designed for the Ordinary Level students should be designed in a way that would facilitate their second language learning process, and it looks at the extent to which that objective/ requirement is fulfilled through the selected textbooks.

Keywords: Appropriateness of ELT materials, Challenges of English lesson, Grade 11 English textbook, Textual analysis.

Introduction

Researchers have discussed the broader concept of World Englishes in the classroom and studies have been done on Sri Lankan English, English education in Sri Lanka, attitudes towards it, targets and standards etc. as well. English in Sri Lanka has developed its own unique variant called “Sri Lankan English” (SLE). As H.A. Passé defines, “there has grown up in Ceylon a form of English with a distinct flavor of its own in regard to pronunciation and intonation, and in the case of most people, idiom, grammar, and vocabulary as well. The explanation of this form of English would include the investigation (i) of the social and educational background of those who first taught English to the Ceylonese; (ii) of the extent to which the sounds of Sinhalese and Tamil have influenced the pronunciation of Ceylon English; (iii) of the prevalence of translation errors, i.e. idioms and grammatical usages imported from Sinhalese and Tamil into Ceylon English; (iv) of the extent to which words from the indigenous languages, and from Indian languages and Portuguese and Dutch, are commonly used in this form of English” (Passé, 2010, p.13). Suresh Canagarajah, in his article *The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued*, explores the possibility of using World Englishes in the classroom context, while also referring to the still existent inhibitions against it. Here, Canagarajah comments on the Metropolitan Englishes and World Englishes and how their uses differently approach negotiation within the classroom. The users of Metropolitan Englishes are reluctant to negotiate, but those who use World Englishes in classroom are always engaging in language games. Canagarajah’s writing is

relevant to the topic that is discussed in this study, because he mentions how “WE is not tolerated in academic writing” or how “WE varieties are not given the same treatment because they come from multilingual speech communities” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 603). At the same time, he brings in examples to show how successful or practical it is to accommodate local Englishes in academic writing, or in general, in a classroom context (Tomlinson, 1998; Zacarian, 2011).

In the book *Transforming Schools for English Learners: a Comprehensive Framework for School Leaders*, Debbie Zacarian defines challenges that schools face when teaching English in a variety of contexts. The author provides recommendations for creating effective and inclusive schools that can successfully educate and engage students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Also, she provides suggestions to policymakers to create effective policies and to build an environment where an English language learner program can flourish.

When reviewing the scholarly sources that provide an overview to the selected topic, the article “Naduth Unge Baduth Unge” written by Arjuna Parakrama can be viewed as the only study that engages in “a symptomatic reading of the year 11 text” which was published in 1986 under the title “English every day” (Parakrama, 2010, p.86). Arjuna Parakrama has particularly selected the Year 11 text as it “represent[s] the culmination of 8 years of English teaching in the nation’s schools, since the Ordinary Level marks the end of compulsory English within the system.

English Language may justly be described as the single most important examination at the Ordinary Level L, since it remains a pre-requisite for most private sector employment, as well as providing an entry requirement for admission to the Law Faculty and Law College and other professional courses” (Parakrama, 2010, p.86). Moreover, in this article, he examines the English Language teaching and learning situation in the Sri Lankan context, the politics that operate within it and the attitudes of language users towards the teaching/learning processes. In fact, this study is greatly impacted by Arjuna Parakrama’s reading of the Grade 11 text which was published in 1986. The recent publications of the same textbook have been selected with the intention of examining whether the situation has changed over time, or it still remains the same. Parakrama engages in a critical analysis of the lessons or the components in that text to justify his argument that the teaching materials are not relevant to the context in which English is being taught and also shows how such lessons could further hinder the learners’ ability to acquire the English language. As he argues, textbooks are designed to facilitate the urban elite community, therefore those are insensible to the others who belong to remote and underdeveloped community. Moreover, the author explores how a fake added value is given to English, thus devaluing and ignoring the authentic Lankan experience.

Taking the aforementioned literature into consideration, this study looks at the issues and challenges faced by teachers and learners when it comes to the use of Sri Lankan English in the local classroom context. A textual analysis of the G.C.E. Ordinary Level English textbook of both old and new syllabi is done

to examine to what extent the lesson materials facilitate the language learning process of the users who learn English as a second language.

The reason for specifically choosing the Grade 11 English textbook is because G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination is deemed one of the key examinations that a Sri Lankan student has to face to fulfill the requirement of obtaining the minimal academic qualification.

Materials and Methods

A textual analysis of the Grade 11 English textbook of both old and new syllabi is done to examine the core language issues found in teaching material in a classroom context where English is taught/ learnt as a second language. The study takes a closer look at the contents of the selected textbooks (i.e., chapters, lessons, exercises etc.) to discuss their appropriateness and relevance.

Results and Discussion

Grade 11 textbook – old syllabus

This textbook has been prepared and distributed by the Ministry of Education and published by the Educational Publications Department. It has been written by a panel of ten writers. In “A Word to the Teacher” it is written that “teachers are required to build appropriate learning situations within the students’ experiences to facilitate the internalization of language. Teachers should also realize that a language syllabus cannot be taught in watertight compartments from one year to the next; what a new text can do and does is to supply a different context to provide for novelty and innovation” (*English Pupil’s Book*, 2007, p. vii). The textbook claims that

“the texts are mostly ‘home grown’, drawing on the wealth of traditions, folklore and even the literature of the country” and it states that “this should certainly enable the students to feel at home and exercise their imagination in a foreign language-learning situation” (English Pupil’s Book – Grade 11, 2007, p. viii). The textbook comprises eight lessons and it is to be examined whether the lesson materials included in this selected publication of the Grade 11 textbook fulfill the aforementioned mission of the writers, as it seems that the activities and components included in the text do not match the contextual realities and experiences that are familiar to the students.

The first unit titled “Relationships” begins with a reading passage on family bonds, and there is a reading that follows it, which is an extract from the novel *The Mill on the Floss* by Mary Ann Evans. To discuss friendship, the lesson incorporates an extract from William Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*, to discuss a father-daughter relationship, a passage on Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* is used and finally, to present companionship, a story written by Pablo Neruda is used. When looking at these materials, Pablo Neruda’s writing is the only piece of writing that seems contextually relevant. It could be said that this mix of materials is not quite appropriate as it is done with the presumption that every Sri Lankan student will have the same kind of access to the given contexts. Instead of achieving its objective of educating the students on the importance of bonds and relationships, which is in fact a very sensitive topic that should be carefully covered, this entire lesson confuses the whole idea of relationships, drawing examples from different Eastern and Western contexts.

In the second unit which is on “Culture” a sufficient amount of “culturally relevant” reading materials are provided; yet it also comprises reading passages on Queen Victoria, Cleopatra and also an activity where students are expected to match the pictures of the statue of Zeus in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia in Greece, the Great Wall of China and the Big Ben with the appropriate descriptions. Even though the lesson unit is on culture, it does not really explore the cultural dimensions in the Sri Lankan context whereas it should have done so. Moreover, the lesson seems to be racist as it does not present information on an equal basis. The minority cultures are treated with less attention as more attention is paid to the Sinhalese culture. The lesson slightly focuses on the Hindu culture, yet there is a lack of information on the Christian and Islamic cultures. Cultural *differences* are highlighted through the characters in conversations [emphasis added]. The first role play in the lesson is a discussion that takes place between Kamal, Nizar, Geetha and Stephanie about the cultural festival that they are planning to organize at school. There too, Kamal, who represents the Sinhalese majority, is the person who has “a broad idea about culture” (English Pupil’s Book – Grade 11, 2007, p.32). He is further credited by Nizar as follows. “I think Kamal will be able to clear our doubts in this field as he helped his sister with her project on cultural studies” (English Pupil’s Book – Grade 11, 2007, p.32). In a context where the necessity of including the variety of Sri Lankan English in the local textbooks is felt, the given ideologies worsen the situation by highlighting the cultural and racial differences by prioritizing and promoting the ideologies of the majority.

In the unit titled “Health and Safety”, there is a role play between the two students Subash and Vajira, which is again very superficial and distant from the Sri Lankan reality. An extract from the dialogue is given below:

Subash: Hello, Vajira. What a surprise!
Come in.
Vajira: Thank you Subash.
Subash: Sit down. Can I prepare you
something to eat? Some
sandwiches?
Vajira: Er..no, nothing to eat. Thanks.
I had milk rice for breakfast.
I’m not hungry.
Subash: Then would you have
something to drink? Orange
juice? A cup of tea?
Vajira: Yes, perhaps an orange juice
with some ice please. I’m
quite thirsty.
(English Pupil’s Book –
Grade 11, 2007, p.66)

As it is seen, this scenario devalues authentic Lankan experience and calls for excessive formality which is not actually present in the absolutely ordinary day-to-day conversations that take place between people. It does not consist of any Sri Lankan thoughts or ideology that represents the variety Sri Lankan English. There is a similar conversation in the fourth lesson unit “The Changing World”, where a group of students engage in a discussion at a Provincial Level English Day competition. Given below is one such evidence in literature to validate that the lessons are not designed in accordance with the linguistic realities in the Sri Lankan context:

Abdul and Sandra: Good morning, nice
to see you this year
too.
Upul and Uma: Good morning, nice
to see you too.
Abdul: I heard that the
competitions would
start at eleven.
Sandra: At 11 o’clock!
Really. That’s too
late, isn’t it?
(English Pupil’s
Book – Grade 11,
2007, p.87)

Here, the excessively formal language that is used by the characters is obviously not a characteristic of a typical Lankan conversation. The use of the question tag “Isn’t it” also suggests that the textbook relies upon the so called standard or the Western variety of English, or if specifically taken, the formal or the written variety, which is hardly used by the English language users in the Sri Lankan context. According to Canagarajah (2006), “a classroom based on “standard” English and formal instruction limits the linguistic acquisition, creativity, and production among students. Classes based on monolingual pedagogies disable students in contexts of linguistic pluralism” (Canagarajah, 2006, p.592). This is the exact situation one could clearly see when it comes the absence of SLE in the Sri Lankan English teaching practices and ELT materials.

In lesson unit six, there is a reading passage on “Satellite Communication”. This lesson is quite similar to what Arjuna Parakrama also highlights in his study of the Grade 11 text. Unit six of the English textbook that he has looked at also contains a lesson of similar nature, which

is about computers. As Parakrama states, “it can be safely said that less than 5% of the students sitting the OL would have ever seen a computer, much less used one at the time of taking this class. This entire lesson would be a nightmare for someone who is unfamiliar with computers and computer technology” (Parakrama, 2010, p.90). In a similar way, this lesson on “Satellite Communication” makes matters worse. According to Parakrama, “(a) the contexts and the situations described in the text were oriented towards the elite and were insensitive to the needs and experience of rural and underclass students (b) the focus and methods of teaching, including exercises etc., gave a clear message to the rural/underclass student that the English language was not for him/her” (Parakrama, 2010, p.92). It could be said that these lessons expect a certain kind of intelligibility from students who learn English as a compulsory subject in Grade 11. Yamuna Kachru and Larry E. Smith claim that “although one’s English proficiency is correlated with his/her ability to understand another person’s communicating in English, cross-cultural competence is more important for understanding than grammatical competence” (Kachru and Smith, 2008, p. 68-69). Yet the issue in the Sri Lankan context is that the students do not share the same level of exposure with each other, depending on their socio-economic status and regional disparities. It can be said that the English teaching/learning in Sri Lanka has been a colossal and costly failure as it does not show any interest in adopting a homegrown variety of English that would facilitate the students’ understanding and learning of English. Instead of initiating such a process, it holds onto the archaic standards and teaching methods that need major revisions.

Grade 11 textbook – new syllabus

This has been written by a panel of five writers. In the section where the board of writers and board of editors write “A Word to the Teacher”, it is mentioned that “the textbook is designed to help the students to learn and use language in different situations locally and internationally” and the writers “hope” that they will be able “to make a difference in the lives of [the] students who are keen and enthusiastic to learn English” (English Pupil’s Book – Grade 11, 2015, p. vi). Yet it is to be explored to what extent this aim is fulfilled through this textbook and to what extent the English language learning process of the students in the Sri Lankan classroom context is facilitated by the content in the book.

The textbook comprises ten lesson units. Lesson one, titled “Our Responsibilities” begin with a role play where “Vikum and Chamindu meet each other in the bus on their way to school”. The hypothetical dialogue that takes place between the two students seems to lack authenticity of the Sri Lankan experience. The two speakers Vikum and Chamindu are extremely polite to each other. For example, Vikum wants to offer his seat to Chamindu as the bus is crowded, which is a situation that would never take place in Sri Lanka, as in a crowded bus, seats are usually offered either to the disabled, old people, pregnant women or to men/women carrying small kids. However, the dialogue concludes with Vikum offering his seat to a pregnant mother. It can be said that the scenario which is used in the very first lesson of the book places on English an illegitimate added value that lies outside the realm of language use having devalued the authentic Lankan experience.

The second lesson titled “Facing Challenges” begins with a speaking activity where students have to match phrases such as water rafting, fall with gravity, pole vaulting, parachuting, inflatable raft, skydiving, exiting etc. with the appropriate pictures. And the reading and writing activities that follow also ask the students to discuss and write about some “challenging activities/sports” that are not quite familiar to them. It could be said that such exercises distance the authentic Lankan experience from the rural non-elite students and favour the world view and values of the urban upwardly mobile upper/middle class.

The third lesson is about “Great Lanka”, which again ironically distances the Lankan reality from the students. The unit starts with a conversation that takes place between Kishan and his friends who meet at Kishan’s house to prepare a booklet on Sri Lanka for a class assignment. It is ironic that these students have to talk and find about their country just for the sake of doing “a class assignment”. Moreover, the conversation begins with Suresh and Kishan talking about a cricket match where “England has scored 23 for 01” (English Pupil’s Book – Grade 11, 2015, p.25). This shows how vague these examples are and how irrelevant they are to the actual context which the students are familiar with. In the same lesson unit, there is a brief description on Sigiriya which is presented with a picture in which the students can see a group of tourists riding on an elephant. A greater part of the description is about these tourists: “...There is a group of tourists riding on an elephant. The mahout who is on the elephant has a goad in his hand. The tourists seem to be enjoying the natural beauty of the surroundings...” (English Pupil’s Book – Grade 11, 2015,

p.31). This description does not really educate students on Sigiriya, as nothing important or exceptional about the place is written there.

In lesson six which is titled “A Moment of Fun” there is a role play in which students talk about their annual inter-house drama competition. The four dramas that will be performed are “The Caucasian Chalk Circle”, “The Christmas Carol”, “The Merchant of Venice” and “Everyman”. As Arjuna Parakrama in his study comments, “the difficulty of learning an alien language is made twice as difficult through this alien and alienating material” (Parakrama, 2010, p.88). The given plays are from the West and the ordinary rural students will not be able to fully comprehend such lessons as they are expected to think of a reality which is far away from their reality. Teachers will have to educate their students on these examples before continuing the lesson, yet it is highly doubtful if such practice is being carried out in the local English classrooms.

The rest of the lesson units also contain materials that are completely out of touch with Sri Lankan realities. For example, in lesson 07 there is a passage on “the last wishes of Alexander the Great”, in lesson 09, passages on “Crop Circles” and “Bermuda Triangle” that address the realities that are out of reach of ordinary Sri Lankan students. Hence, as Arjuna Parakrama states, “learning English not here learning a language that is legitimately Sri Lankan – in the technical vocabulary, an institutionalized variety – but learning a way of life that is at once classist and (neo) colonial in character, as well as discriminatory and alienating to those who do not have the “right background”” (Parakrama, 2010, p.92). The students have to have a particular kind of

intelligibility to learn from the given materials, and that intelligibility would not be something shared in common or in the same percentage by every student, which proves the argument brought forth by Parakrama (2010), that “to a student who already finds the language difficult there are more debilitating factors that hinder and psychologically affect his/her progress” (Parakrama, 2010, p.92).

Conclusions, Recommendations and Suggestions

Conclusions and Recommendations

Considering the absence or the “disuse” of Sri Lankan English in the selected English textbooks, it could be said that these textbooks are not culturally appropriate, as they impose the culture of the western/inner circle countries in which they reflect the colonial views and attitudes. Due to the reason that materials that are discussed in this study consist of several components outside the students’ range of experience and comprehension, the students’ acquisition of English as a second language (or sometimes a foreign language) will be made a difficult, impractical and unachievable task. Hence, as the need for a more localized variety of English is greatly felt, it is to be questioned why no attempt has been made to Lankanize the ELT material or at least to provide sufficient examples from the Sri Lankan context. This practice of distancing the reality from local students continues to take place, perhaps because ready-made materials are available in foreign-published texts, and this makes the task of lazy, unmotivated material-makers easy.

As given in Cecil Nelson’s *Intelligibility in World Englishes*, “As the status of English as

a world language changes, and as the number of users of English grows, it is important to move beyond the traditional limits of language pedagogy and the assumption that all learners of English desire to speak one variety of English” (Nelson, 2011, p.82). The OL English textbooks are designed for the urban upper middle-class community and are insensible to the others who belong to remote and underdeveloped community; therefore, regional disparity and racism is visible throughout the textbooks. Further, the focus and the methodology of teaching, including exercises and activities are targeted towards an urban upper-middle class/middle class community and they exclude the rural and underclass students, for these activities are not constructed based on the social context of the students.

Suggestions

To remedy the problem, materials with a familiar and culturally accustomed background would help and be more effective in teaching the English language to a second language learner. As a result of the drawbacks that are clearly visible in the current English textbooks the outcome is a total failure as the students will learn the language technically just to pass an exam and not really with an honest intention of learning the language. It could be finally said that language is not entirely a linguistic entity. But it reflects a whole lot of a living society. Therefore, the ELT materials, that are designed to fulfill the objective of facilitating the non-native learners’ acquisition of English, need to focus on aspects such as culture, race, ethnicity, social classes, and regional disparity, when teaching and learning English as a second

language. If such measures are taken, it would benefit all students in an equal manner without making the process of language acquisition a difficult or unachievable task for some.

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