

**CRITIQUING THE “RATIONALE” OF “AGGRANDIZING” ENGLISH IN THE
CONTEMPORARY ESL CLASSROOM IN SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITIES**

**(A CRITICAL STUDY OF TEACHING MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA)**

**KASUN GAJASINGHE,
INDRAJEE DE ZOYSA,**

UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA, SRI LANKA.

Abstract

This paper argues that there is a clear change of attitudes towards learning the English language within the University student community. Although, during the crucial initiation process the vilification of English still transpires and attending English classes is discouraged, immediately after this period students have shown more positive intent to learn the language particularly due to its utilitarian value in achieving career goals. Yet, the recent positive change of attitudes towards the English language is not being harnessed by the teachers of the ELTU¹ in order to facilitate the students to improve their proficiency in English. Instead, the teacher seems to be in a vain struggle to protect her/his status by strategically reinforcing the notion that English is “naturally” difficult and “elitist”. The fact that much of the material used for general English teaching in the university is inappropriate, unappealing and intellectually debilitating, inadvertently demonstrates that the teachers are being complicit with the by gone notion that English is not for everyone.

Keywords: *University context, attitudes, harm, aggrandize, ESL classroom*

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This paper argues that there is a clear change of attitudes towards learning the English language within the University student community. Yet, the recent positive change of attitudes towards the English language is not being harnessed by the teachers of the ELTU (English Language Teaching Unit) in order to facilitate the students to improve their proficiency in English. Instead, the teacher seems to be in a vain struggle to protect her/his status by strategically reinforcing the notion that English is “naturally” difficult and “elitist”. The fact that much of the material used for General English teaching in the university is inappropriate, unappealing and intellectually debilitating, inadvertently demonstrates that the teachers are being complicit with the by gone notion that English is not for everyone. Unfortunately, they still resort to teaching grammar out of context, which disillusion the students, without approaching the class from a communicative language approach. Thus, it is our attempt in this paper to identify and analyze such problems and issues and propose means to rectify them in order to make teaching and learning English a more fruitful endeavor to both parties within the university context. Evidence and supporting arguments for this paper are gathered from successive surveys of students’ and teachers’ attitudes towards leaning English and range of material used in the University context.

The conceptualization of the English language as *Kaduwa* (sword), a symbol of power and discrimination seems to be gradually changing within the Sri Lankan university context, at least. In the essay titled “*Kaduwa*”: *Power and the English language weapon in Sri Lanka*, published in 1984 ThiruKandiah writes:

About a decade or so ago, the vocabulary of colloquial Sinhala acquired a new term of reference for the English language, namely *Kaduwa* familiar Sinhala word which meant, until then, simply “sword”. No one knows for certain when or where this use of the word originated. It is widely believed, however, that it did so in the speech of

some hapless children in rural or semi urban Government schools, as their response to their traumatically frustrating experiences in the well-nigh useless English classes they were obliged to attend, and that from there it spread to the Universities and, though less comprehensively, to the whole society in general (Fernando et al 36).

As mentioned above one of the impediments to learn English is the cultural baggage it carries in the post-colonial Sri Lankan context. Although the term *Kaduwa* is still being used in university discourse it can be understood that the term does not necessarily connote the power and the oppressive nature of the English language as it used to be even though it is still being protected by the urban elite. Today the term has been included to the jargon of the university subculture and is used almost by everyone as an interchangeable word with "*ingrasi*" (English). Instead of the word *kaduwa* currently the university students use the term *kadda* which is a derivation of the term *kaduwa*, yet it does not seem to carry the connotations formerly associated with the term "kaduwa". This can be the result of many positive changes that took place during the past 5 or 6 years in Sri Lanka.

Some initiatives (superficial and ad hoc, yet of some value) taken by the Sri Lankan government during the past five/six years have positively contributed to highlight the importance of English in the contemporary society. They encourage the students and create new avenues for the learners of English. The establishment of the National Institute of Language Education and Training (NILET) by the Act No. 26 of 2000, the establishment of The Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration, the enactment of the "English as a Life Skill" program in 2009 by the Presidential Task Force on English and ICT and the declaration of the period between 2012 and 2021 as the "decade of trilingualism" are such initiatives taken to promote English teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. Similarly, the Higher Education for the Twenty First Century (HETC) which is a World Bank funded project has pumped so much money to the University system to facilitate teaching English. And through the University Test of English Language (UTEL) the government has acknowledged and reinforced the value of the English language for the Graduate Profile of the 21st Century degree holders. However, money allocated to teach English can be considered a waste of public wealth, to a point as the issues related to syllabus designing are not addressed systematically.

Although, during the crucial initiation process the vilification of English still transpires and attending English classes is discouraged, immediately after this period students have shown more positive intent to learn the language particularly due to its utilitarian value in achieving career goals. In other words, except for the students who are from the upper classes English is a resource to have access to better occupations, a

prerequisite for promotions and a necessary wagon for upward social mobility. This desire to learn English, particularly to speak English, is demonstrated in many instances. In 2014 the Arts Faculty Student Welfare Center started an alternative English language program for the relatively weaker students in the University of Peradeniya. As this was an experimental course only 25 students were selected from the 2011/2012 batch. Initially the objective was to teach the students for two semesters. Due to high resistance of the coordinator of the Arts Faculty the Student Welfare Centre had to suspend the course after a few weeks of its inception. One of the charges leveled against it was that the Student Welfare Center was encroaching the purview of the ELTU/Faculty of Arts. Subsequently, the student union of the faculty of Arts in 2015 started a language circle to create a space to use Tamil, English and Sinhala. This project, as a matter of fact is an attempt to learn English in the guise of learning/using three languages – a diplomatic way of facing the former groundless accusation of the ELTU/Arts.

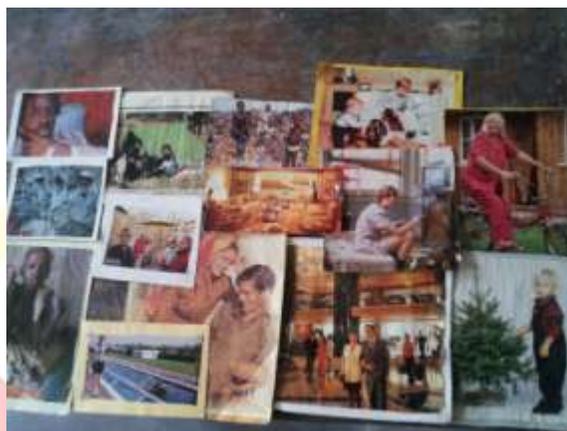
In an informal interview the Dean of the Faculty of Science said: “These students are unable to speak in English. Only a few students are capable of communicating an idea coherently.” Let us examine the reasons which have nourished this “culture of silence”.

The first evil haunting the Science Faculty students is the irrational tradition of grouping students based on their subject combination and not based on their competency. In these classes Students between UTEL² band 4 and 7 are grouped together in 100 level and 200 level classes. Teaching students in mixed competency groups increases the fear, perturbation and apprehension of the students when speaking English. Although, the teachers claim that they focus on the relatively weaker students (which is not practical as it is unfair by the better students) after the first few weeks much of the material and the teaching methodology (hardly used) is geared to appease the few who are relatively competent in English (as the weaker ones will never complain) and the standards on which the learner competency is ultimately assessed also discriminate against the relatively weaker students who form the majority. Also, what is apparent is that material is designed without closely paying attention to the social significance of the English language (power dynamics, values etc.) in the Sri Lankan socio-political milieu. In the ELTU/ Faculty of Science of the University of Peradeniya, there are 5 teachers who have not even studied English as a subject for their graduate studies including the coordinator of the ELTU. The coordinator³ of the ELTU has a BSC special in Botany and an MPhil in Molecular Biology. In fact, the irony is that some of the teachers who are teaching English to the University students are not willing to pursue higher studies in English to acquire necessary skills to

maintain the quality of their work. This is provender to nourish the general opinion that the ELTU lacks credibility within the university system. The lapses in teaching material and unappealing subject matter are then a result of the lack of knowledge of the teachers who are de facto the syllabus designers. Accordingly, it can be posited that aggrandizing the English language is a vain struggle to maintain the credibility of the teachers.

The material which is used articulates that the students have been straitjacketed for the convenience of the teachers and the university administration. Therefore, the Dean's complaint that a larger number of the students find it difficult to communicate basic ideas in English is a result of a "conspiracy" between the teachers and the university administration. First, the subject-bucket system does not allow the ELTU to group students based on their competency in English. Secondly, as mentioned above, the instructors are teaching grammar separately without integrating grammar and different skills. Although the attempt should be to integrate grammar into different skills and to use a range of themes to design material, what is being practiced is teaching grammar in isolation (more often than not the students are instructed to fill in the blanks using the appropriate word) or employing the grammar translation method. Interestingly, the English teachers who come from upper class backgrounds did not learn English in the "method" followed by them to teach English. What predominates even in exams and assessment is the testing of grammatical knowledge. Consequently, a secretarial aspect of language is reinforced rather than innovative and imaginative production of thoughts. Giving the students descriptive and analytical grammar oriented material is non-other than utilizing a red herring to cover the frailties of the system. Although the demand for spoken English is articulated through the blossoming franchise of selling spoken English in private tuition classes in the neighborhood of the university the ELTU has not been able to provide a substantial solution to help students to actualize this requirement.

Similarly, much of the ESL material currently used in the ESL classes in the Science Faculty of the University of Peradeniya is underpinning white supremacy and the superiority of the teacher. Let us look at some randomly selected pictures used in the ESL classroom for picture description and storytelling:



The above picture displays a collection of pictures used by the Science Faculty ELTU (University of Peradeniya). Obviously these pictures are not value neutral. While African and Asian countries are portrayed as poor and demeaning the pictures reflect the luxurious lifestyle lead by Europeans. Similarly, the pictures when taken individually do not allow a counter-intuitive criticism. Furthermore, the above pictures reinforce that the language spoken by white men and women is sophisticated and complex and therefore difficult to learn.

The following passages are stories fabricated on the given pictures by a first year student who has a fair knowledge in English:

Picture 1:



It was a rainy day in Katunayake. The runway of the airport has been closed for hours because of the rain. The captain of the flight CX871, Brain Johnson is worried. Now he has to do a takeoff in a wet conditions. After few more hours and a reasonable amount of coffee, first officer Chang came with the charts and said that they're clear for takeoff. "Atlast" said

the captain. He hated rainy days. He had experience than many in the company but still he had that irrational hatred towards rain. After they began to accelerate along the slippery runaway. Brian heard the usual prayers of his co-pilot. "Will you please shut your face; Brain baked at the co-pilot. Finally, they were in the air. Few minutes into the journey, they heard an explosion and a huge fireball emerged from one of the engines in the port side. The control was lost and the altitude dropped. Brian could hear the panic around him but could do nothing. "It's all over. Great, now I have to die in a rainy day. Perfect", thought Brian as the plane crashed to the Indian ocean.

Picture 2



The Fabricated story:

It was a protest against the use of meat and animal products. The streets of Kandy was flooded with protestors most of them were Buddhist monks. The protest was organized by a monk commonly known as "Ape LokuHamuduruwo". This Lou Hmuduro saw a familiar face in the crowd that watched the protest from the side of the road. The person was Amithathero. A young priest from Gampaha. The LokuHamuduruwo went to the young priest and asked him to join the protest. The young priest had a puzzled face. "Well, it is known that us priests can live on meat. It was confirmed by scientists". "Traitor!" said LokuHamuduruwo and started attacking the young priest. Soon, police arrived and settled the situation but many onlookers now had a question in their minds. Is it okay to eat meat or is it not?

When we compare the above stories it is clear that the second story is better in quality than the first story. The student in fabricating the first story is trying to locate it in Sri Lanka (Katunayeke Air Port). Also the story displays the confusion that the student is facing when trying to reconcile the distant and the foreign with the familiar and the intimate. Here the matter of the fact is not whether a student is able to fabricate a story on any given picture, but the quality of the work and consequently what values are embedded in such exercises. In relation to the second picture, the student's familiarity with it and the context enables him to fabricate a very dramatic and creative story. Unarguably, the second story is more appealing and coherent than the first. However, it seems that the teachers prefer to use foreign and/or out of context pictures in such activities to acknowledge the superiority of the language and maintain the credibility of the course.

Another strategy of magnifying the complexity of the English language is done by using jargonized material for reading passages and test papers. Usually such material is taken from scientific texts. Using scientific jargon has the added advantage of further confusing the bewildered student at the examination. The following is an extract taken from the fourth question of the End of Semester Examination of the ESL 203 paper (2014/2015):

Question No: 4) Rewrite the following sentences without changing their meaning. Begin each new sentence with the word/phrase given below the original one.

- i. According to cosmologists, Dark Matter provides the scaffolding to support the galaxies we see.
- ii. Although Philae Lander didn't make a clean landing on the comet 67p after its 310 million-mile journey from earth in its mother ship Rosetta, in November this year, the European Space Agency scientists are highly elated as this is the first controlled landing on a comet, in history.
- iii. Unless diuretics are taken as prescribed by a physician, they could cause excessive loss of water and electrolytes.

The technical words used in the above questions have the potentiality to perpetuate the fear of the hoax that English is "naturally" a difficult language. These ideas and concepts expressed in the above sentences are perhaps alien to the students of humanities and social sciences. Mainly they would not be able to understand the jargonized language in the questions. Thus, in this case the above questions serve the function of aggrandizing the English language and consequently discouraging learners from aspiring to learn English.

Finally, it can be claimed that much of the material used in the ESL classroom demonstrate the teachers' remarkable absence of accountability and ignorance of teaching English as a second language. That is why teaching English is not done in a framework that

accommodates the needs of the students, but with the motive of making the teacher's work easy and to reinforce the power of the teacher. Intellectually incapacitating material used make leaning English a technical or mechanical endeavour for many students especially who come from rural and urban underprivileged backgrounds . The fact that the teachers are not using the work of imminent scholars in the field, to think through the traditional/structural modes of teaching English is the main reason for the degeneration of the English Language Teaching Unit of the University of Peradeniya. In fact, the responsibility of the English teacher in the university is to guide the ESL learners methodically to improve their writing, reading, listening and speaking skills. Thus considering the above facts it can be argued that wittingly or unwittingly the English language is aggrandized not only because of the neocolonial mentality of the teachers but also as a means of hiding their incompetence, absence of required theoretical knowledge and lack of teaching skills.

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