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The Dilemma of Types: EGP vs. ESP

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ABSTRACT

First introduced to the country during the period of British colonialism, English still occupies a significant/privileged status within the Sri Lankan context due to diverse linguistic and socio-political factors. Despite the various language policies adopted by the Sri Lankan governments since the country's independence from the British Empire in 1948, the influence exerted by English in the fields of administration, education, and employment is still quite considerable. Owing to this close association of English with power and upward social mobility, there is a strong desire/compulsion among many Sri Lankans to learn English. Hence, such a scenario has created a great demand for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), and consequently there has emerged in Sri Lanka an expanding market which caters to the English language learning and teaching needs of the individuals. This market for English language learning and teaching is catered to by both private and public sectors at different levels. The focus of this paper then is on how the public sector universities seek to cater to this demand for teaching English. English Language Teaching Units (ELTU) established within individual universities have been assigned the role of improving the English language competency of the undergraduates. However, one issue encountered by the ELTUs is that they are expected to cater to students studying in different faculties and there is no common policy to determine the type of English to be taught. In fact, what is taught ranges from English for General Purposes (EGP) to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). For the purpose of this research, we selected the ELTU at University of Peradeniya and attempted to identify what form/ forms is/ are more appropriate in teaching ESL. Data was gathered using qualitative methods, and interviews along with open ended questionnaires were used in this regard.

Keywords: ESL, EAP, ESP

Introduction

English, since the onset of British colonialism, has enjoyed a privileged position within the Sri Lankan context. Despite Sri Lanka gaining Independence from the British Crown in 1948 and the national language policies adopted by the successive local governments, the influence exerted by English is still pervasive in many areas of socio-political and economic life.

It is the language used in Sri Lanka's supreme court, it has a strong presence in the media and advertising, it is making a comeback in the country's education system, and is the undisputed language of choice in the private business and commercial sectors. In other words its hegemonic grip on the country is still evident. (Mendis & Ramubukwella, 2012, p. 182).

Further, as Manique Gunasekera (2005) comments, in the 21st Century Sri Lanka, "access to English is akin to being born with a silver spoon in one's mouth. It is the language of upward mobility, and the privileged society are those whose home language is English...." (p. 13).

In fact, within Sri Lanka, it is still believed that education and employment will enable one to climb up the social ladder. However, English is deemed a necessary/compulsory tool or a qualification in acquiring education as well as in securing white-collar jobs.

Hence, in such a scenario, learning English has become a compulsive need. Given the demand or the need for learning English, teaching English too has reached a level of paramount importance. Indeed with the escalating demand for English, English-language-teaching has developed into a lucrative trade. Within the current neo-liberal capitalistic socio-political setting in Sri Lanka, there has emerged a multitude of service providers whose alleged purpose is to cater to such individuals seeking to learn English. For instance, one comes across a multitude of posters advertising English classes using colorful slogans in local newspapers, social and electronic media. These classes offer courses in “spoken English”, “written English”, “elocution”, IELTS and TOEFL to name a few. These English classes—among which are fairly established institutions such as the British Council, American College, ACBT, ICBT as well as numerous other tuition classes which have mushroomed across the country – offer various types of English courses which cater to different age and professional groups. Likewise, the demand for English created by the market is again catered to by the public sector institutions. English is taught at various levels starting from schools down to universities.

Especially in relation to universities, many of the degree programmes are conducted in the English medium and English is deemed to be a core graduate attribute. Hence, the English Language Teaching Units (ELTU) established within the universities are saddled with the task of teaching English as a Second Language to students of varying competencies. However, the across respective faculties of the universities with regard to the approach adopted in teaching English as a Second Language. In such a context, there are no set demarcations and as to whether one should teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). Hence, this research is an attempt to examine the problematics and politics involved in determining the form of English which should be taught to the undergraduates. For this purpose, we focus on the English Language Teaching programmes conducted by the ELTUs established at University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka and the specific focus is on the faculty of Management.

Methodology

The Sample

This research is conducted in order to critically examine the politics behind the discourse in choosing a form of English which should be taught at the Faculty of Management, University of Peradeniya. Hence, both primary and secondary data are used and they are analyzed on a qualitative means in order to grasp the discourse. The choice of the faculty here has been based on another interesting political strand. The Faculty of Management at University of Peradeniya considers itself to be an entity which runs a “professional degree program”. Thus, it can be inferred/ implied that the degree program produces “professional graduates” who are expected to befit the requirements of the job market. Although the assumption is that Management graduates have set and defined means of employment, it is not so once they enter the market. Unlike graduates of certain other Faculties such as the Faculty of Engineering, Medicine and Allied Health Sciences whose graduates have a relatively more defined career path, the status of the Management graduate within the job market is relatively undefined due to the paradox between the “realities” expositied by the market and the outcomes of the relevant degree programme.

In such a scenario, teaching a Second Language has to be handled with care because as previously discussed in the Introduction, English in Sri Lanka acts as a tool of empowerment, and by extension, employment. Due to such paradoxical circumstances, it becomes difficult to specify an exact type of English which should be taught to the students despite the claims stating that one should specifically teach English for Specific Purposes when it comes to “professional degree programs”. Unlike medical, engineering and allied health science graduates who have defined career roles, it is questionable as to whether a management graduate will have such a distinct role within the job market.

Thus, both primary and secondary sources are used and the data gathered are analyzed qualitatively. The sample consists of students and staff at the Faculty of Management. Focus group discussion, interviews and open ended questionnaires were distributed in order to gather data.

However, our intention in this research is to critically examine the composite discourse surrounding the ESL teaching scenario. Quantifiable data itself, we believe, does not suffice in providing a holistic picture of this complex situation. The notion of research is governed and at times plagued by lexemes such as reason, rationality, logic, scientific methods of inquiry and quantifiable data which ought to be analyzed qualitatively etc. Yet these methods of inquiry according to Holis (1994) “are still with us and still shape the assumptions which social scientists bring to their task. At the same time, however, it has run into serious trouble throughout the sciences and their philosophy” (p.5). Further, Brian Fay (1996) too points out that “social scientists have historically sought to claim the mantle of science and have modeled their studies on the natural sciences” and that “social science traditionally consisted in assessments of social science’s success in this regard, of the ways social science is like and unlike natural science” (p.1). Fay (1996) goes on to state that though this method has brought about impressive insights into the study of humans, it no longer possess the power to grip those who engage in social research. In fact, the outcome of studying a politically loaded act in a very structural means would certainly limit the play of meaning and attempt to bring neat and compact answers to intricate issues surrounding it. Accordingly, we believe that some new approach is required to suit the “current” intellectual and cultural patterns. This is why we have attempted to look at the composite discourse instead of relying on and limiting ourselves to one particular aspect of the issues in question.

Politics of Choice

As discussed above, the issue here is then a complex one. While the Faculty of Management (among a host of others) push for teaching ESP, the validity of such a push is questionable because that “push” itself is made based on a host of uninformed “politically” loaded factors. This lack of awareness is so wide spread that those who make such requests are unaware of what is EGP or ESP. For most of them, these are fancy labels which have an elevated status as opposed to teaching general English.

ESP?

ESP is commonly known as English for Specific Purposes. The history and the development of ESP has been frequently linked with the growth and development of global socio-economic and political trends. As Peter Strevens(1980), for instance, points out, “English for Special Purposes (ESP) is a powerful label. Very few teaching bore this title earlier than 1970 (though in retrospect the origins of ESP can be discerned in earlier pedagogical interest in the nature of “scientific English”) but it is now widely used and is rapidly increasing”(p. 458). ESP arose, and has continued to develop, in response to certain needs and requirements: the need of non-native speakers of the language to use it for some

clearly defined practical purpose. For example, this would mean teaching English for occupational purposes to migrants from the global South to the North.

Indeed, referring to the genre of ESP, Swales explains that ESP is “the area of inquiry and practice in the development of language programmes for people who need a language to meet a predictable range of communicative needs” (300). ESP has been identified as having “absolute” characteristics. As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1988), for example, explain:

“ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner; (2) ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves; and (3) ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities” (p. 4-5).

However, despite them being referred to as the “absolute” characteristics of ESP the basis for it being called as “absolute” remains questionable and unclear. Although attempts have been made by various academicians to provide definitions, those definitions remain mostly vague, and thus ESP lacks a uniform definition till date.

History and Development of ESP

The history and the development of ESP has been frequently linked with the growth and development of capitalism. English became the language of commerce and industry due to socio-political and historical circumstances tied up with colonialism, the world wars, the spread of American dominance after the Cold war and the neo-liberal globalization project again spearheaded by the Western states. Hence, it was power and hegemony which gave English its “superior” position and as more and more states adopted the neo-classical/ liberal model of economics and governance, English gained a more elevated status. To add to this, the process of nation building and decolonization in the “third world” states and the process of “democratization” in the East Asian states made people leave their “home” to various other destinations as migrants. To cite Revathy Krishnaswamy in this regard:

The rhetoric of migrancy, exile and diaspora in contemporary postcolonial discourse owes much of its credibility to the massive and uneven uprooting of the “Third world” peoples in recent decades, particularly after large scale decolonization in the 1960’s ...As the euphoria of independence and the great expectations of nationalism gave way to disillusionment and oppression, emigration increasingly became the supreme reward for citizens of impoverished ex-colonies (p. 131).

Moreover, migration took place due to the stress on employment and many people again from the global south migrated to the West in search of greener pastures. Hence, teaching English for Specific Purposes become an important lucrative academic venture. This neo-liberal political and economic model then dictated that English be taught at both these levels i.e at the level of the nation state and to these migrants so that they could engage in specific economic and political functions. Even to date, this phenomena is visible especially in States like India where a specific form of English is taught to people who work in Business Process Outsourcing ventures. A prime example is call centre workers in India who work for Multi National US based companies where they are taught a specific repertoire in order to perform their function. Thus, within such contexts, English is taught to fulfill a specific function and hence is made to fulfill a certain utilitarian requirement.

The Case of Sri Lanka

Caught in the currents of global socio-political changes, the case of Sri Lanka is not very different from the rest of the world. As Thiru Kandiah (2003) points out:

After all, alongside, particularly, the Eastern European countries, Sri Lanka happens to be one of the many off-Centre dominoes which are currently in the process of falling resoundingly and with monotonous regularity and inevitability to the hegemonic persuasions/pressures of the ELT industry and its allies. As such, its world of English language studies might be taken to represent in a microcosmic way significant aspects of the operations of the structural logic of the presently very powerful offensive. (p. 133)

Indeed, this situation referred to by Kandiah is very much reflected in the university context in relation to English Language teaching. Most of the courses taught at faculties which offer “professional” degrees demand for ESP without taking into account the functional “realities” behind it. This demand that ESP be taught does not always trickle down from the ESP practitioners but comes as a demand of academics who have little or no training in the field of language teaching. Its suitability in a context like Sri Lanka is hardly questioned and many do not question whether teaching ESP could fulfill the role English as a language plays within the Sri Lankan social context. Especially when it comes to university education, the sole aim of it cannot be reduced to creating graduates who will fit a particular market. The aim of a university should be wider in scope and it should not function in a way which will impede the creation of “rounded” individuals. Thus, this push towards implementing ESP within specific faculties (in this instance, the Faculty of Management) has to be examined critically and with long term impacts in mind. In carrying out this research, the majority of the respondents belonging to the academic staff of the Faculty of Management stressed the need in teaching ESP to students. This demand, however, is made without considering the theoretical and practical issues encountered in teaching ESP to the students in the Faculty of Management. As Flowerdew and Peacock state, for example

A curricular focus on providing students only with academic-linguistic skills for dealing with academic work in other disciplines, misses a crucial opportunity to help students to develop forms of linguistic, social and cultural criticisms that would be of much greater benefit to them for understanding and questioning how language works both within and outside educational institutions. (22)

Indeed, this mismatch is further heightened due to leaving out the ethnographic aspects of attempting to implement ESP courses within the university context. To quote Flowerdew and Peacock

The rationale for more ethnographic approaches as far as pedagogy is concerned, lies in the potential mismatch between the academic culture of the EAP provider and the background culture of the learner. Such mismatches may occur both where curricular with an ‘Anglo’ bias are employed in non-Anglo settings. (20)

Further, in his essay titled “Appropriate methodology and Social Context”, Holliday too “strongly argues against the imposition of alien pedagogical models in such non-Anglo EAP settings, in favour of greater sensitivity to the social context” (Holliday in Flowerdew and Peacock 20). It is important to remember that ESP developed as a result of specific socio-economic and political circumstances and it had a very specific function to play within such a setting. Accordingly, attempting to teach ESP in Sri Lankan universities by basing it on the same premises without changing the parameters of its operation are not effective owing to the contextual difference between Sri Lanka and the context in which ESP grew in. English is accorded a powerful and privileged position within the Sri Lankan context. Thiru

Kandiah (1984) in his article, “Kaduwa”: Power and the English Language Weapon in Sri Lanka”, for instance, talks about this phenomenon. According to him, English is called “Kadda”, meaning sword, and states that “as it is used by its most habitual users, the term often tends to carry somewhat of a sharp edge, and even perhaps, an overt hostility” (p. 36). Moreover, Ryhana Raheem (2004) states the following in relation to the tensions associated with the use of English within the Lankan setting.

[t]he scenario surrounding ELT in Sri Lanka, is in fact a complex one. These complexities arise not only from the shifts in attitude to and status of English, but also from developments in the field of education in this country. Thus, on the one hand we have an unprecedented enthusiasm for English in almost every corner in the island, banners and posters proclaim “Spoken English Classes”, the education system is being called upon to function in English. Yet, on the other hand, underlying this palpable surface demand for English is a talented mass of muted resentment and rejection- sometimes even hostile. (p. 30).

Due to various regional disparities in the distribution of resources in relation to English teaching in Sri Lanka, all the students do not have equal access to learning the language, and these are the students who enter the university after facing the competitive Advanced Level Examination. Resentment towards English is there within them due to the politics associated with the language. Teaching them ESP as opposed to EGP, therefore, will only tend to aggravate the problem as what they expect by learning English is to enable them to function in a “specific” social context mitigating, what Ulrich Beck(1992) refers to as, “the risks” of not learning English.

[i]n advanced modernity the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks. Accordingly, the problems and conflicts relating to distribution in a society of scarcity overlap with the problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of techno-scientifically produced risk (p. 19).

Thus, the state, the institutional state apparatuses, academia, the market and the powerful centers of society all create this “risk” of not learning English which implies what will happen to the individuals who have no formal training in English. These forces themselves then show that those who learn English will be able to mitigate the risks encountered when finding employment and gaining upward social mobility. However, the discourse surrounding these created risks and the solutions prescribed for them are so politically loaded and powerful that it is very difficult for people to see the politics behind them. Therefore, if this sensitive issue is not handled in a careful manner, the learner will undergo a set of different problems which might reinforce negative learning. Further, these risks do not merely affect the learners alone. They affect teaching English and the ESL practitioners. The various Faculties which also fail to see or merely overlook the politics behind these techno scientifically produced risks would demand that we teach ESP. If such demands are not catered to, the ESL teachers often get blamed for not teaching the students “English” in a productive manner which is useful to them. Even to comprehend the politics behind such impositions, especially in the “third world” contexts, a proper knowledge of English as a socio-political entity is a must, and academic centers like universities should not merely implement and cater to whims and fancies emanating from global capitalism. In such a scenario, the duty of the “third-world” ESL teacher should be to empower these students in such a manner which will enable them to “write and speak back” to the West and not create a set of individuals who will merely fulfill a utilitarian role dictated by the global economic order. Creating graduates with a “subject-specific English knowledge” will not do justice to both students and the context.

Conclusion

Teaching English then should be done with a wider social philosophy in mind. Even though various specialists and critics point out that an ESP course designed after a needs analysis will be successful, it is questionable as to how informed the informants will be. As mentioned earlier, the created risks are so powerful that ESP will come across as a solution to many of the issues. Nevertheless, as we discussed in this paper earlier, the socio-political implications of it are different because English within Sri Lanka has a much more wider social function to discharge. The class politics aside, the Constitution of Sri Lanka in its fourth chapter specifically states that English will be the link language of the state. Thus, it is believed that it will act as a bridge among the myriad groups living in Sri Lanka. Of course this is politically-loaded and class biased, but then, if this is what the law of the land states, teaching ES P again will not suffice.

Further, even though management is categorized as a “professional” degree, the job market in Sri Lanka does not always offer a specific category of jobs especially for management degree holders. Even those employers who do offer such jobs require the potential employees to have a good knowledge of English as opposed to subject specific English. Albeit what is being said about the growth and development in Sri Lanka, it still lacks a strong industrial base and a strong services sector to absorb all these graduates in. Hence, these graduates might have to make career switches and work in different fields. Thus, teaching ESP alone with a limited repertoire will not again be adequate. The same holds true in relation to other “science” based faculties as well.

Finally, as it transpires, the choice of types cannot be made on an ad-hoc basis. The decision to choose between ESP or EGP should be made by the educational institutes after taking into account the pragmatics, politics and the contextual implications of such a decision. It should be done with extreme care and we believe that students should be taught English in such a manner that they will be empowered to face the challenges they encounter within their wider social context.

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