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(Review Article)

Obstacles in second language acquisition: Linguistic, psychological, social, cultural, and pedagogical challenges with a focus on secondary ESL Education in Sri Lanka

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# Abstract

This review paper aims to discuss diverse issues faced by ESL learners in secondary education in Sri Lanka. Linguistic, psychological, social, and cultural factors as well as applicable practices which hinder the development of L2 are discussed in the framework of the investigation that is conducted in collaboration with the detachment of linguistics, psychology, education and applied linguistics. Such challenges are understood in the context of educational and sociocultural situations in Sri Lanka. In view of these analyses, it becomes clear that there is a great demand for specific instructional approaches, improved teacher education, and [2]es in the curriculum that will benefit learners. Using these truths, this paper discusses learner-centered strategies and elaborates on corrective measures for policymakers and educators to enhance the ESL effectiveness in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Second language acquisition; ESL education; Sri Lanka; Linguistic barriers; Psychological challenges; Cultural competence; Teacher training; Secondary education

# 1. Introduction

ESL has a strong standing in Sri Lanka where it is a primary means to learn English to gain educational and, in extension, social and economic opportunities. English: As the language of colonial masters English sustains its function as an intermediate language in the educational system, employment market as well as day to day international communication. However, ESL learner especially in the secondary level experience numerous barriers that affect there learning and writing skills.

SLA is a continuous and highly complex process which involves not only the encoding of new lexis and grammar, but also a learner's pragmatic, cultural, and more importantly interactional competence. The switch between Sinhala, Tamil and English used in Sri Lankan context makes this process even more daunting for the learners. They include; the disparity in resource allocation in rural and urban schools, attitude of society towards English and the centralized curriculum.

The present paper focuses on five types of barriers, namely linguistic, psychological, social, cultural, and pedagogical to learn ESL and the study centers on Secondary ESL Education in Sri Lanka. Each section looks at how these barriers operate locally, with each example pointing to systematic problems affecting teaching practices, curriculum, and language. In this way, the current research study seeks to offer recommendations for the enhancement of ESL teaching as well as for the enhancement of fair access to language education in Sri Lanka.

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# 2. Linguistic Challenges

# 2.1. Phonological Differences

There are many barriers which affect the learning ability of those Sri Lankan students such as phonological differences between English and their first languages such as Sinhala and Tamil. The major drawback for learning is that although English has a stress-timed rhythm while Sinhala and Tamil have syllable-timed rhythm hence pronunciation and intonation becomes challenging. For example, learners have challenges both in consonant clusters and in realizing the phonemes that is  $/\theta/$  (as in think) and  $/\delta/$  (as in this) which creates misunderstanding among them [25]. These problems make it evident that phonological practice must be done more selectively in the classroom.

#### 2.2. Lexical and Grammatical Differences

In particular, vocabulary acquisition is an issue that learners have to face when they enter the secondary school and meet academic reading. Again, syntactic patterns, including articles or auxiliary verbs, are omitted in native languages and are, therefore, frequently misused. For example, expressions such as "She is teacher" bear literal translations from the Sinhala or Tamil grammar structures [23]. It is possible to overcome these gaps by providing additional focused practice on lexical and grammar levels enlarging context-based vocabulary training as well as exercises which focus on the sentence level.

# 2.3. Syntax and Sentence Structure

Learners from Sri Lanka often experience some difficulties concerning the English syntax because of essential differences in the sentence construction. It is contrast to the English syntax which lies under the SVO order, Sinhala and Tamil also come under the SOV order most of the times. Through Isolation, there comes syntactic difference that results in misunderstandings and malformation of grammatically incorrect sentences in written as well as in spoken English. This barrier can only be addressed when teachers intensively teach patterns of sentences and their respective exercises [12].

# 2.4. Pragmatic Differences

The use of polite language and frequent references to idiomatic expressions is an area that is difficult for any Sri Lankan learner who is unaware of English-speaking cultures. For example, calling teachers by their first names may be perfectly acceptable in Sri Lanka, but it is considered rude. Situated in classroom teaching, it means that incorporating role play and realistic scenarios in the lesson can help learners develop improved pragmatic sensitivity [7].

# 3. Psychological Challenges

#### 3.1. Anxiety and Fear of Making Mistakes

In this survey, secondary student of Sri Lankan indeed experience language anxiety mostly during test or time that require speaking fluently in classroom. Most students' anxiety of failure can be attributed to violation of social norms and negative peers' judgments. According to a few studies, instructions that foster positive learning climates and low-pressure tasks can reduce such anxiety to allow learners to contribute effectively [28].

#### 3.2. Motivation and Persistence

Other motivational issues are that employment opportunities for graduates in rural region in Sri Lanka are scarce, and students do not get the opportunity to practice using real English. While the urban students may have seen the use of English in their future endeavors the rural learners see it as something theoretical and merely academic. Using context-bound objectives in the classroom might assist in maintaining the learners' engagement [8].

#### 3.3. Self-confidence and Self-esteem

Low self-esteem is especially so when the root of students is underprivileged whereby, they have a feeling of inability to learn English. Peer interaction and rewarding learning bends can lead to a positive improvement of class participation by learners [31].

# 3.4. Cognitive Load and Processing

One of the major problems which are faced by many students is the fact how cognitive loads required to master new language – English – and other subject in Sinhala or Tamil are. One psychological principle is that cognitive load is less when the hierarchical structure of tasks is broken down so that each step is explained in a clear manner [10].

# 4. Socio-Cultural Challenges in ESL Education in Sri Lanka

Culturally related factors have a major impact on the ESL learners in Sri Lankan context. Some of the explained inputs are: Students' language background; cultural beliefs about English; and the social-economic factors which may limit the accessibility to quality education. It is important to retaliate these issues for the improvement of ESL curriculum to fit the growing and diverse student population.

#### 4.1. Language Background and Multilingualism

Sri Lanka politically consists of different languages officially recognized as the languages of the nation including Sinhala, Tamil and English. Although English is seen as part of the process of colored people's social ladder and more so in the urban centers, otherwise the linguistic diversity poses a challenge to ESL learners in the rural and semi-urban areas. The medium of instruction used at home is either Sinhalese or Tamil and home language thus interferes with their first language while learning the second language, English [21].

Furthermore, access and exposures to the English language different from school may be limited in students found in rural areas than those found in urban areas. Thus, urban students are exposed to many routinized settings with using English both in media and while interacting with friends, as well as in various activities outside the classroom. It also results in unfair competition since most of the rural students only have to depend on formal school education to enhance their linguistic abilities though it may take them a long time to do so [20]. This issue of multilingual mode hence brings in a cultural aspect to the use of English medium separately from one region or community to another in Sri Lanka.

# 4.2. Cultural Attitudes towards English

English language is widely accepted in Sri Lanka and has generally been associated with both social and political power, particularly for the elite urban and middle-/upper-class Lankan society. Thus, it cannot be ruled out that in more rural and rather traditional conservative countries there will be some reluctance to use English because it is imported from the British colonialists and because it practiced the erosion of indigenous culture [13]. For example, first and second-generation learners from parents and communities that are particular about their Sinhalese or Tamil roots may consider the teaching and learning of English as sheer cultural erosion. This resistance can s in negative attitudes towards English learning, especially when it is considered and used a means of bringing about social classification rather than emancipation.

This on and of attitude towards English has impacts not only to the motivation of the students but also to the strategies used in ESL classes. Sometimes teachers encounter such students who either lack interest on learning English or even at times rebel against learning the language which will inhibit their learning. To address this, teachers have to introduce English as language which is useful within the context of students' practical needs as well as a language which reflects cultural aspects of English-speaking nations and, at the same time, appreciate the students' native languages and cultural background. As for one of the approaches to this issue, it refers to using literature belonging to the students' culture as well as the materials related to the ESL countries in question which makes the language acquisition less foreign and less unapproachable [1].

#### 4.3. Socio-Economic Disparities

Secondly, the socio–economic status of Sri Lanka makes the delivery of ESL education even more challenging. The learner from the low-income background has various challenges in his/her way to achieve quality language education. Some of the barriers are; restricted use of books, internet and out of class learning facilities. While the élite can spend their money on private tuition, international schools, and languages, there are thousands of students who attend public schools where the quality of ESL can be rather different [26].

Specifically, in rural areas, there is a disparity of trained ESL teacher and appropriate facilities to deliver good language teaching. For instance, where schools are located in the rural areas the institutions may not afford the technology and the teacher on the other end may not be accorded the chance to attend to professional development as is the case with the urban teachers. The above dynamics show that students in such communities still receive limited accesses to resources that make their education even more challenging [3].

Another concern is the overcrowding of classes particularly those offered in public schools where teachers finding it hard to attend to individual writing needs of students and as such, meeting all the laid down language learning ability requirements practically becomes hard. In such environment, the teacher and other students cannot see or attend to these students when they are struggling to understand concepts in English. In order to eradicate this problem, the government as well as the educational authorities need to address the problem of inequality in the distribution of resources, impart training to the teachers themselves and try to mobilize the necessary complicity in the community concerning the general improvement of ESL education in regions with poor provision.

# 4.4. Bridging Socio-Cultural Gaps in the Classroom

Bridging the socio-cultural gap in ESL education requires both sensitivity and innovation from educators. Teachers need to redress the said socio-cultural divide in provision of ESL education, some leeward as well as cautious approaches are called for. Teachers should facilitate a language and culture sensitive classroom environment that address the linguistic and cultural diversity of students and at the same time promoting English language learning. The first approach is culturally authoritative pedagogy in which the students' cultural concepts and ways of life are incorporated into learning [18]. For instance, the teachers can use examples from the learners' indigenous culture, his/her language and traditional beliefs to simplify the teaching and learning processes of ESL.

Also, for creating positive attitudes toward multilingualism in the classroom, changes in mentalities have to be made. By convincing students that their first languages are valuable, more than limitations when learning English is lessened [2]. Teachers may lessen students' prejudices in relation to the language by drawing their attention to the advantages of speaking English which also contributes to the development of students' cognitive skills as well as enhance other linguistic abilities.

A similar approach is needed to address other gaps that appeared in the process: The other essential component inaddressing these gaps is to ensure that teacher professional development addresses both instructional practice and cultural relevance. Teachers who undergo cultural analysis training will develop cultural awareness of their class, thus ability to tackle language anxiety, resistance, and motivation. In addition, general curricula in school must be developed in such a manner that respects students' first languages and cultures and English as means to future viability [14].

Therefore, the learners face socio cultural barriers while learning English as a second language in Sri Lanka based on language differences, cultural values and attitudes towards English and socio-economic disadvantages. These issues can only be solved by using an extensive set of measures, namely: raising awareness of English as a functional and culturally appropriate medium of communication; providing equal access to resources in different regions; and developing teachers' professional competence. This way it will provide a dynamism to the teaching learning needs of the fragmented student groups in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, as well as enable the learners to acquire such language pragmatic competencies essential for success in academic and workplace literacies [27].

# 5. Pedagogical Challenges

In more concrete terms the issues that the Sri Lankan secondary ESL context poses to teachers and teacher educators are professional development, curriculum, assessment, and technology and how these are best implemented. These aspects determine the quality of education and in the process help to fashion the learning environment of a school. Here, we will discuss teacher training and assessment Since, the broader pedagogical issues in the ESL context imply teacher training and abilities,

# 5.1. Teacher Training

Teacher training in Sri Lanka, especially teachers of ESL, has problems that hinder effective language instruction. Most teachers are prepared in the conventional models, which emphasize form and text instead of function and interaction or in interactive approaches that involve the learner [9]. Therefore, the identified MAR is an alarming gap between the teaching knowledge and pedagogy skills that trainers gain in the training programs and the updated demands acting on ESL learners.

Of the mentioned challenges, there is a perceived problem of a limited concentration on the teaching of practical skills in language teaching and learning in the training curriculum. Some teachers may have no information regarding certain, now popular approaches like TBLT or CBI, both of which are prominent tools in second language learning according to Ellis [5]. Additionally, the professional development availed to teachers for growth for example, — continuing professional development education is scarce, especially teachers in rural schools Posner, thus there is a disparity in the competencies of teachers from rural areas compare to the ones from urban areas. All these challenges point to the

fact that there is a real need for continuing and more enhanced professional development methods that involve teaching practices, and that are sensitivity to local contexts.

Also, the problem of scope still remains – special emphasis is placed not on reflection and teacher's initiative. Various sources indicate that when teachers are motivated to cast reflective practices, they end up enhancing their reasonable level to embrace and apply concept satisfactory with unique student needs [16]. This can be done through offering teachers' professional development or learning partners, classroom observation and feedback. With an environment that encourages both reflection and change, the teaching community in Sri Lanka will be equipped to handle the variety of issues which come with ESL education.

# 5.2. Assessment Methods

In Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, assessment has been largely paper-pen-based and greatly dominated by examination. But not only does this take a lot of time, it also hinders learners from showcasing their communicative fitness. For this reason, ESL learners are usually in a position to convert their academic knowledge into practical language use [22].

In this case there has been an increasing demand for formative assessment that takes into consideration assessment criteria other than language knowledge as well as oral fluency, listening and reasoning. In the assessment formative assessment, peer assessment as well as project assessment there is a better chance of getting a true and realistic picture of a student's performance. Such forms of assessments promote knowledge of language and even compel the learner to use the acquired knowledge to solve real-world problems [16].

Further, the Case and Self Check, use of online quizzes, simulation, as well as language learning application and games can provide timely feedback and personalized learning paths. Although, the integration of technology in Sri Lankan classroom education is still in its nascent stage due to infrastructure constraints there is increasing concern towards the use of ICT in language assessment. For example, use of mobile learning platforms to teach English outside the classrooms has been enriched in other South Asian countries, and such interventions may be scaled up in Sri Lanka [30].

Last but not the least it is important to correlate the evaluation techniques with the communicative requirements of the learners. There is little point in language assessment when it is treatment-focused, as indeed is the case with traditional forms of language instruction that call for memorizing grammar rules and/or vocabulary. It is only possible through intervention and coordination between the Ministry of Education, teachers, and testing organizations to revamp the national and classroom tests so as to apprise the educational standards needed for achievement of the learners in the future jobs.

#### 5.3. Integrating Technology into ESL Pedagogy

The application of technology in language classroom especially for ESL students has the prospects of changing how learners learn. Recent difficulties are using technology to learn languages including difficulty in accessing digital resources and Sri Lanka is gradually moving toward embracing the use of technology. The technology, communication tools, teaching aids, learning games and multimedia can be used by educators as means of providing more interesting lessons. These technologies enable the students to engage with language in different modes such a factor that enhance both para and affective processing [14].

For example, students can learn vocabulary through language exchange programs and via video conferencing and gain real life exposure as they speak with native speakers. Also, applications for learning languages and delivering translation services are effective in independent study because they allow learners practice without much interference. Consequently, the cases of owning mobile phones in Sri Lanka are high and as a result mobile assisted language learning opens opportunities for enhancing of the language especially for the rural and hard, cord areas.

However, to support integration of technology helps teachers achieve two decisive goals – to receive not only training in the use of technologies in their work but also being trained on how to help students use technologies in learning. Teacher training should therefore prepare teachers for using technology in their practice with understanding and knowledge that technology augments rather than replaces traditional modes of teaching and learning.

# 6. Conclusion

The factors that hinder ESL learning in Sri Lanka's secondary schools remain rather pervasive, beginning with linguistic and psychological factors besides social cultural and the practice of instruction presenting a palisade for the learner. Such barriers derive from multilingualism as the main language, and considering English as a prestige variety rather

than as a means of navigating through the communicative environment. This situation makes it even harder for learners to improve on their English proficiency as they attempt at speaking, reading, writing or listening. Linguistically there are difficulties arise due to the gap between the students first language, Second language and third language (Sinhala/Tamil to English). From the psychological aspect students' worries and demotivation are also characteristic and are reported to hamper learning of the second language [2]. In socially, students' perceived identity of English and the perception of English as a source of status makes the integration of English in the student's day-to-day language use complicated particularly in the rural setting whereby there is perceived language and cultural isolation [29].

Solving these issues is possible only if it will be carried out as systemic, complex program for teacher training, curriculum and assessment sensitive to diversity and recognizing the importance of flexible, communicative approach in classroom. Teacher training programs cannot afford to neglect the psychological-mode aspects to the teaching-learning process and, therefore, should include ways and means of minimizing classroom phobia and of enhancing the teachers 'contact culture awareness as far as the needs of students from different socio-cultural back grounds are concerned. In addition, curriculum reforms should address increased cultural relevant teaching resources that are relevant to languages which Sri Lankan students use. When a teacher incorporates the students cultural and linguistic identities into lessons, the students are likely to feel that English is for them and not to intimidating hence encouraging and promoting the learning of English [11].

However, the existing scholarly literature reveals a number of challenges to the actualization of such reforms. A number of them includes the fact that there exists a large gap between urban and rural schools in as much as resource allocation is concerned [19]. In addition, resistance to [2]e is probably one of the greatest inhibitors of the promotion of innovative teaching methods in educations institutions as students, teachers and other stakeholders view change, especially where it alters traditional teaching processes as unnecessary [4]. Further, the professional development of the teachers is not always continuing and where it is, these professional developments may be limited in rural areas and may not expose teachers to current research findings or training seminars [17].

With a word of caution, there are opportunities for improved partnerships with another age group to enhance and improve on the above-mentioned challenges and limitations. It is therefore important for the ministries together with other institutions and even international organizations to help close the resource gaps between rural and urban schools to promote quality ESL education for all children. PPP can help secure financing for the professional development of teachers and acquisition of materials non-governmental organizations on the other part can help in design of culturally sensitive content in learning and teaching. Through the development of such partnerships, Sri Lanka can improve general quality of ESL education and guarantee every child or learner regardless of his or her background or geographical location an equal chance to access learning facilities that offer ESL educations.

In the future, much more emphasis should be made in the development of culturally responsive, student-centered ESL programs. Such programs should go beyond mere acknowledgement of the language and build up the students into responsible English-speaking talents suitable for academic, professional, or even social interactions. By focusing on the linguistic, psychological, and socio-cultural factors affecting the ESL learning process such programs are beneficial in enhancing the student 's self-efficacy in English in classroom learning as well as in real life situation. Hence, eradicating these challenges through teamwork and compliance with the international best practice, Sri Lanka has the potential to establish workable, fair ESL education system for all student across the country. It will not only enhance the language fluency of students in particular but serve the interest of the society by reducing language divide, and by extension fostering unity and cohesion among those who will be privileged to benefit from the opportunities that the developed societies offer [24].

There is a lot of work still to be done to continue moving along this path for education and to make the necessary [2]es and reforms our students need in order for our educational system to meet the needs of today's diverse student population in this country. Sri Lanka can make good progress in facilitating ESL learner's success in the context of increasing globalization by embracing pro-ELF, culturally appropriate, as well as sound pedagogical practices in education [30].

# **Compliance with ethical standards**

#### Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

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