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Education in Sri Lanka: Pathways to second language acquisition with a focus on English

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Abstract

This conceptual article examines English as a Second Language (ESL) education in Sri Lanka, drawing from second language acquisition (SLA) theories and comparative perspectives from South Asia. Despite Sri Lanka's strong literacy tradition, many learners leave school without communicative competence in English, limiting access to higher education and global employment. The paper identifies systemic challenges—including exam-oriented pedagogy, limited teacher preparation, and rural–urban disparities—while also outlining evidence-based strategies such as communicative and task-based approaches, teacher professional development, technology integration, and fostering a national reading culture. Comparisons with India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan highlight both shared struggles and promising practices adaptable to the Sri Lankan context. Recommendations emphasize aligning curriculum with communicative goals, investing in sustainable teacher training, bridging the digital divide, and embedding English learning in authentic, meaningful contexts. The article positions English proficiency not only as a skill but also as a tool for empowerment and inclusivity in Sri Lanka's multilingual society.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; English as A Second Language; Second Language Acquisition; Communicative Language Teaching; Teacher Development; Digital Pedagogies

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka's education system, lauded for its high literacy rate exceeding 92 percent, reflects a long history shaped by cultural, religious, and colonial influences. English, introduced during British rule, remains an ambivalent yet indispensable element in the modern educational and socio-economic landscape. While it is a compulsory subject across schools, the gap between curricular intentions and learners' communicative outcomes persists. This article investigates pathways for enhancing English acquisition in Sri Lanka, situating the analysis within theoretical perspectives of SLA and comparative experiences of other South Asian countries.

2. Literature Review

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research offers a framework for examining English language learning challenges and opportunities. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) emphasizes the role of comprehensible input in developing proficiency, while Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) underscores social interaction and scaffolding in language learning. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have been widely promoted as effective approaches for fostering authentic language use (Ellis, 2017; Richards, 2006). However, in many Asian contexts, implementation is hindered by exam-driven systems, large class sizes, and teacher preparedness (Littlewood, 2014). In Sri Lanka, recent studies suggest that while curricular reforms highlight communicative skills, classroom practices remain largely grammar-focused (Paradine, 2024). Comparative research in South Asia (Rahman,

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2019; Coleman, 2010) highlights similar struggles in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, though targeted interventions in teacher training and early immersion have shown positive outcomes.

3. Policy and Curriculum Context in Sri Lanka

The Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education (NIE) guide English curriculum development in Sri Lanka. Recent syllabi, including the 2017 revisions, emphasize competency-based learning and communicative outcomes. The trilingual policy further situates English as a link language alongside Sinhala and Tamil. However, policy ambitions often face implementation challenges, particularly in aligning assessments, providing adequate teacher training, and addressing disparities between urban and rural schools (NIE, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2020).

4. Key Challenges in English Language Acquisition

Several persistent challenges hinder effective English acquisition in Sri Lanka:

- Urban–Rural Disparities: Access to resources, trained teachers, and exposure to English varies significantly across regions, exacerbated by a widening digital divide.
- Exam-Oriented Pedagogy: Classroom practices remain focused on grammar and rote learning, often neglecting communicative competence.
- Teacher Preparedness: Many teachers lack confidence in spoken English and modern methodologies, limiting their ability to implement CLT or TBLT effectively.
- Limited Exposure: Students often have few opportunities outside classrooms to engage with English, reducing motivation and practical application.
- Sociocultural Perceptions: English is sometimes perceived as an elitist language, which may discourage students from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds.

5. Comparative Perspectives: South Asia

Sri Lanka's challenges resonate with broader South Asian contexts, though comparative lessons offer valuable insights:

- India: Despite regional disparities, widespread English-medium schools and private tutoring have created strong pockets of proficiency. Public-sector challenges remain similar to Sri Lanka.
- Bangladesh: National programmers and donor-funded initiatives have strengthened early exposure and teacher training, yielding promising outcomes in rural areas.
- Pakistan: Policy–implementation gaps persist, though blended learning and professional development initiatives in some provinces show measurable improvement.

These comparisons underscore the importance of aligning curriculum reform with sustained teacher development and equitable resource distribution.

6. Strategies for Enhancing English Language Acquisition

To address the above challenges, Sri Lanka can consider the following strategies:

- Scaling Communicative and Task-Based Approaches: Integrating communicative tasks into exam frameworks can help balance fluency and accuracy goals.
- Continuous Teacher Professional Development: In-service training, mentoring, and peer observation can equip teachers with confidence and modern pedagogies.
- Leveraging Technology: Blended learning platforms, educational apps, and low-cost multimedia resources can expand exposure while addressing rural disparities.
- Promoting a Reading Culture: Libraries, reading clubs, and curriculum-linked graded readers can build vocabulary and comprehension beyond textbooks.
- Early Exposure: Introducing English through stories, games, and bilingual activities in early grades supports natural acquisition and motivation.

7. Discussion

Adopting these strategies requires careful consideration of contextual realities. For example, technology-enhanced learning is promising but must address connectivity and affordability issues in rural areas. Teacher training should be continuous and practical, with follow-up support to sustain classroom change. Aligning assessments with communicative competencies is crucial to discourage rote learning and encourage meaningful language use. Importantly, reforms must be inclusive, ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds view English as an accessible resource rather than an elite privilege.

8. Conclusion

English proficiency remains pivotal for Sri Lanka's participation in higher education, global employment, and cross-cultural communication. By learning from regional experiences and embedding evidence-based strategies within local contexts, Sri Lanka can transform English education into a tool of empowerment and inclusivity. Future policy should prioritize sustainable teacher training, equitable access to resources, and alignment of curricula with communicative goals. Further research should explore longitudinal outcomes of interventions, particularly in bridging urban–rural disparities.

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