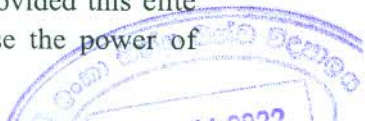


“The Fault, is not in Our Stars”: Implications of the Notion of ‘Culture’ in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The practice of throwing native culture(s) into oblivion through/ in designing and teaching English syllabi in Sri Lankan schools is undeniable and the failure to incorporate the local culture(s) into the English education in the country is apparent through a number of text books. Integrating such “dismissed” identities of the local culture(s) with the local syllabi has always been rendered a failure since the syllabus designer always attempts (and has always attempted) to maintain the hegemonic power bestowed upon *the* language by treating local culture(s) as of unbecoming nature. This has been (and is being) done while embracing the culture(s) of British/ American as quintessential. The syllabus designer engages themselves in an endeavor to intimidate and by extension, stigmatize the marginalized linguistic groups through the introduction of an alien culture(s) through English. It goes without question that the privileged elite minority continues to further marginalize such groups. Nevertheless, this problem still remains unanswered. In such a postcolonial context, the self-assumed role as the custodians and the gatekeepers of *the* language have provided this elite minority with ample opportunities to (ab)use the power of



English. This paper discusses the dichotomy between these two groups where one makes unilateral decisions while the other is forced to go along with it.

Introduction: Language and Culture

The advent of language is what made us humans. Without language, we could never have embarked on our ascent to unparalleled power over all other animals, and by extension, nature itself. The role(s) played by Culture(s) in shaping languages to what they are today should be praiseworthy. Culture and language are inextricable. When teaching a particular language, the language teacher must heed his/her attention on the culture of the learner. Yet, the syllabus designers forget the fact that language and culture are inseparable and one cannot exist independent of the other. According to Saussure, the close interaction between language and culture is essential for the wellbeing of a nation. "The culture of a nation exerts an influence on its language, and the language, on the other hand, is largely responsible for the nation".¹ (Saussure, 1951,p 20)

Chomsky and Power Struggle

Chomsky's doctrine of innatism is a mere endeavor to widen the gap between 'them' and 'us.' By telling that the mind is not a 'blank state' by birth, he manifests that the mind is born with ideas that belong to a particular culture. This in a way is a reminder to the speakers of second language that the native speakers and themselves can never be on a par with each other. One of the reasons for this might be, as Jennifer Jenkins extracts from Dornyei (2006)

"English is rapidly losing its national culture base and is becoming associated with a global culture"² (Jenkins, 2007, P.191)

What is conspicuous here is the power struggle of the Anglosphere to dominate their power over the others through manifesting that their version of English is superior to that of the rest of the world. Hence, it is merely an attempt to hold the authority further more.

In comparison to Chomsky's ideology, emergentists' theory of 'bootstrap their learning by attending to frequently occurring form-meaning-use constructions of the language'³ is more unbiased and realistic.

Intercultural Education: A Boon or a Bane?

Intercultural education (IC) in Sri Lanka is at its grassroots level and it should be developed since it can ameliorate the plight of second language learning in Sri Lanka. Intercultural education has been encouraged in Europe and The United States whereas in Sri Lanka it has been discriminated. The lack of cross cultural understanding in Sri Lanka has resulted in discriminating minor languages within the country, assuming that one language is superior to others. Even in Sri Lankan text books, representation of minor ethnic groups, their culture and their traditions are comparatively lesser. How can a biased text book be applicable to a local student of a minor ethnicity, if their problems, facets and culture are not properly addressed in the book?

"it deals with the cultural identity of language learners, cultural stereotypes and the dialectic of Self and Other. It considers its goals as promoting

tolerance, empathy, personal transformation and cross-cultural understanding.”⁴ (Kramersch, 2011, p307)

On the contrary, it is obvious that rather than focusing on intercultural dimensions of the locals, the text books focus more on cultures which are not familiar to the local learner.

Passe’s Dogma

According to Passe, the teacher of English in Sri Lanka during 1950s had to balance between Sri Lankan variety of English and ‘standard’ English. They had to preserve Sri Lankan English in the classroom without deviating from the ‘standard’ English. This is more felicitous to the local learner than the current manner of teaching English where the local culture has been entirely neglected from the syllabus.

“The problem that faces the teacher of English in Ceylon is how to keep the local form of English as near to standard as possible without altogether depriving it of the warmth, color and liveliness which some of the literal translations from the local languages contribute, especially to the colloquial idiom”⁵ (Passe, 1951, P07)

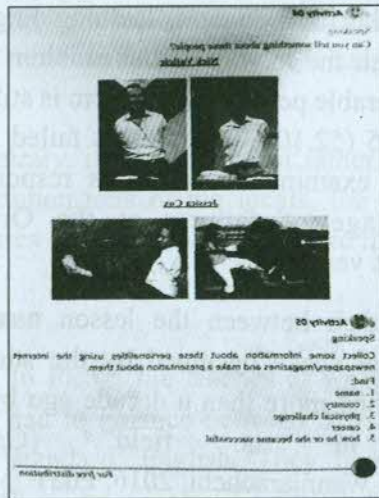
Even though the culture and language are inseparable, in Sri Lanka these two are treated as separate entities. The widening schism between the local learner and the materials used in local textbooks of English, ensues in a critical issue; an incompetent local learner. Most of the syllabus designers hesitate to make the local culture a part of the syllabus. Rather than using the local culture to expedite learner’s process of language learning, examples from foreign cultures which are alien to the local learner are utilized in the syllabus.

Particularly, to the rural student, learning English is still a struggle. Although the history of the problem can be traced back to a considerable period, the problem is still unanswered. In 2016, 148 835 (52.10%) of students failed English at the Ordinary Level examination which is responsible for the highest percentage of failures at the Ordinary Level Examination that year.

“The mismatch between the lesson material and socio-cultural space occupied by the students has been identified more than a decade ago by eminent scholars in the field”.⁶ (Gajasinghe, Gunarathne, Wanniarachchi, 2016, P03)

Text Books: An Attempt to intimidate the National Bourgeoisie?

Much of the materials in the text book are irrelevant and alien to the local/ rural learner. For instance there is a lesson on Jessica Cox and Nick Vujicic in the grade 10 English text book. It is obvious that the lesson is aimed at the elite students who have adequate resources to surf internet. Yet, most of the schools in Sri Lanka do not even have a library at the school to collect information. In such a plight where unequal resource allocation is at its zenith, it is highly inappropriate to use foreign examples in local methodology to teach English. In fact, using foreign examples will result in an unnecessary hostile atmosphere in the classroom.



Arjuna Parakrama's idea on local text books is apt to describe the manner in which the syllabus caters to a specific class while discriminating the other classes.

“However, even more debilitating than this is the nature and content of the teaching texts and the ideology implicit in their dissemination in Sri Lanka. English teaching in Sri Lanka as well as language planning in the country has, by and large, chose to ignore the socio-political relations that obtain in the island. English teaching, particularly at the secondary school level, has worked implicitly on the model that all students, irrespective of class, ethnicity, location and home background, are equally comfortable and at home with/in the English language.”⁷ (Parakrama,2010,p.86)

Designing a syllabus, generalizing all the students in the country as competent as the students in urban centers has led to this plight. As it is mentioned in H. Ratwatte's article, “Kandaiah(1984,1999) has documented the existence of two

speech communities in Sri Lanka- the Anglophone ‘elite’(Fernando 1977) to whom English was a resource, and the national bourgeoisie(Samarakkody 2001) who considered English as a problem or barrier.⁸ (Ratwatte, 2011/2012, p05)

The school text books cater to the former while discriminating the latter. The syllabus designers have made English a barrier to the bourgeoisie by amalgamating teaching English with foreign cultures that the L2 learners are not familiar with. On the contrary, for most of the ‘elite’ speakers of English in Sri Lanka, the syllabus is nothing but a blague since the textbook does not teach them anything new. It is evident that the local textbook is an attempt to cosset the Western ideologies remembering the neo colonial nostalgia while putting the local L2 learner at stake.

This is further evinced in the university system. Given below is a guide to a listening test of a leading university in Sri Lanka in 2017. Though the faculty related to the listening test majorly consists of students from rural areas of the country, the test aims at the undergraduates from the urbanized areas whose exposure to western cultures is higher than that of the rural student. In the test, the students have to listen to recordings either by foreigners with British accents or locals with wannabe British accents.

7. Audio 07

ACTIVITY 7 - I AM REALLY HUNGRY

What did they finally order? Listen to the orders placed by Alice, Mike and Ben and select the correct order made by each person.

Alice

- a) pizza(M), olive, salami and mushroom, green salad,
- b) pizza(L), olive, salami, green salad,
- c) pizza(L), olive, salami and mushroom, green salad.

Mike

- a) pizza(S), tomato and olive, Greek salad, artichoke heart
- b) pizza(L), tomato and olive, Green salad, artichoke heart
- c) pizza(M), tomato and olive, Greek salad, artichoke heart

Ben

- a) Fried chicken and chips, Green salad
- b) Fried chicken and chips, Greek salad
- c) Fried chicken, Greek salad

01. A part of the listening test

Most of the students in the classroom did not answer the questions, since they could not acclimatize to the accent of the speaker of the recording. Yet, most of the undergraduates from the urban centers did not find the questions difficult to answer. Under the sections 1-3, the gravity of learning foreign accents of 'those' was accentuated. The word 'those' is referred to the English accents of the anglosphere not the accents/ varieties of the other English speaking countries like Sri Lanka, India, etc. on the other hand, the test was full of foreign words that the reader is unfamiliar with.

EN 200 GUIDE TO LISTENING

- Before each section, the candidate will be given 30 - 45 seconds to look through questions. This time is used to study the questions and predict what one might hear.
- Practice for tests and MCQ: arrange options in the order they are mentioned, don't focus on which the correct answer is.
- Spelling matters. Wrong spelling will result in the answer being marked wrong.
- Listen carefully, as there are several ways of helping someone spell a word without simply spelling it out. If you need to write something that is not a name (eg: registration number of a car), you may hear a combination of numbers and letters. Practice saying the letters of the alphabet. Spell words for a friend to write down.

Sections 1-3

- Conversations between two or three people. Dialogues. The voices of these speakers are made different on intention, for ease of recognition. Answers will come from BOTH voices.
- To get themselves accustomed to foreign accents, students may listen to non-commercial national radio stations of those countries. Talk shows or current affairs programmes on these stations sound natural.
- Different language is used for different functions.
- Some (or most) questions will offer "distractors" or false potential answers to trick the listener. To practice concentration, one can try to write down each possible answer and cross them out depending on what the speaker says.
- The order of questions follow the same order as the script. The answer to question 1 will always be heard after the answer to question 1. UNLESS it is a matching or multiple choice question.
- Underline keywords. Keep in mind that speakers won't always use the same words in the question. Some use synonyms to the keywords in the question, while some paraphrase.
- Pay close attention to NEGATIVES in answers/questions.

02. Instructions for the lecturer/instructor to conduct the exam

There were words such as salami, green salad and artichoke heart. Most of the students heard these words for the first time in their lives. This was nothing but a test paper to intimidate the national bourgeoisie. They could have conducted the same test using Sri Lankan words which are not alien to the learner. It is highly questionable why the syllabus designers in Sri Lanka are in the dire need of advocating and promoting foreign ideologies, customs, accents, names, traditions, etc. in the local syllabi.

Conclusion

It's conspicuous that the English text books designed by the local authority for the L2 students in the country are a mere attempt to widen the gap between the native/ native-like speaker of English and the learners of English as a Second Language. It will always be used in order to perpetuate the hegemonic values that are discriminatory in nature. The dire need of the syllabus designer to suppress the already suppressed is obvious when the material used in the book is scrutinized.

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