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The Present Socio-Economic-Political Climate in Postcolonial Sri Lanka & the Myth of English as a means of Access to Social Equality

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Abstract

This study investigates the myth of the English language as a means of access to equality in the post-colonial era in the present socio-economic-political climate in Sri Lanka. This is a literature-oriented research study based on the current state of the English language and the role of English language education, in facilitating the process of poverty reduction and the promotion of equality in Sri Lanka. The researcher attempts to clarify the opinions, biases, presuppositions and interpretations of the existing socio-economic and political culture in relation to English as a language of opportunities and equality. The analysis of the data reveals the dominant power of English as a global language, and the inequality in relation to access and allocation of public resources in diverse communities. Furthermore, it exposes recent proposals and the accountability of the government for the elimination of poverty and the myth about the English language as a panacea. The majority of Sri Lankans hold the view that English, as a universal language is vital not only for lucrative local or foreign employment opportunities, but also for equal social standing. The data reveal that while the affluent parents clamour for international or foreign schooling to secure better prospects for their children, the government faces increasing pressures to fulfil the demands of the majority of low-income parents whose children attend to the state school system. It seems that access to equal opportunities, to learn English, has created a massive social gap between the elite and low-income communities. Thus the existing government has made an attempt to re-establish English as the medium of instruction and a compulsory subject in state schools. However, a conclusion could be drawn that the common use of English, the initiation of the language policy in education and the expectations of the masses could all be at odds. Thus this myth of English as a language of opportunities needs to be urgently addressed if the expected socio-economic-political and national goals of elimination of poverty and promotion of equality are to be achieved in Sri Lanka.

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalised world, English has become the unrivalled lingua franca. Sri Lanka is in the process of implementing the 1997 educational reforms aimed at developing the quality of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from primary to tertiary levels. These reforms, encompassing all levels of education, have been necessitated because of the impact of the process of globalisation and its concomitant effects. TESL for every child, irrespective of socio-economical and geographical background, has been a state policy since the 1950s. It has been reinforced since the 1990s in an effort to contribute to peace in the devastating ethnic conflict and to rebuild economic and

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social development (De Mel, 2003). In the present socio-economic-political culture it is believed that enhancing the quality of English may facilitate the process of poverty reduction, promote social equality and establish the much desired ethnic harmony for a country devastated not only by its war of terror but also by the scattered debris of Tsunami. However, in reality it is a myth. Hence, this paper presents this myth of English as an access to social equality in the present socio-economic-political climate in post-colonial Sri Lanka.

Language and Culture in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is unique in its linguistic heterogeneity having eight languages spread throughout this multilingual, multiracial and multi-religion country. It has diverse ethnic composition which consists of 73.8% Sinhalese, 4.6% Indian Tamils, 3.9% Sri Lankan Tamils, 7.2% Sri Lankan Moors, 0.5%, others and 10%, unspecified in a population of 20,064,776 million in South Asia. About 362,000 both Tamils and non-Tamils are displaced due to Tamil conflict and about 555,000 resulting from 26th December, 2004 Tsunami devastation in Sri Lanka (World Fact Book, 2005). During the course of history, four language families have developed: Indo-European, Tibeto-Chinese, Austric and Dravidian represented by different ethnic groups.

Currently, Sinhala and Tamil are the main languages spoken. English remains the second language. English is commonly used in government and is spoken competently by about 10% of the population (World Fact Book, 2005). The plural character of Sri Lankan society is well recognized. The political organization comprises broadly of these three principal language areas each dominated by a different language enjoying full or partial recognition in the public and private spheres of communication within its geographical areas. This exemplifies a degree of tolerance of linguistic and cultural variation in Sri Lanka's history. Spolsky (1978) states,

There is a shared core of experience despite several varying socio-cultural characteristics such as caste, religion, occupation and mother tongue cutting across nearly 29 districts. Such segmented identities find expression in diverse combinations through linguistic stratification such as diglossic complementation, code switching and bilingualism in everyday life (p.103).

However, this situation has changed in the last two decades as Sri Lanka was engulfed in a bitter civil war between the Sinhalese majority and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE), a separatist insurgency representing the Tamil minority. Although many governments have engaged in re-establishing peace and harmony despite the crippled socio-economy, a lasting peace agreement remains elusive. In addition, to this man made disaster Sri Lanka now faces another monumental challenge in the aftermath of the catastrophic December 2004 Tsunami, which claimed tens of thousands of lives. UNICEF (2005) records that the property damage was extensive, and hundreds of thousands of people have fallen into poverty after losing shelter and employment. In this devastated context, the President and Secretary of education (2003) declares that the state is committed to regain the lost opportunities for all and offer them linguistic, religious and cultural liberty. At present, the language context is trilingual with the introduction of Sinhala, Tamil and English languages from primary school age six, with a view to building ethnic harmony by the two major ethnic groups learning the language of the other, while English remains the link language for all (De Mel, 2003).

Thus, the missionaries were keen to set up rural schools through local vernaculars, in opposition to the 'advanced' tradition of education; whereas the rulers' stress for education was aimed at attracting 'respectable' members of Ceylonese society for manning the administration in the English medium. Warnasuriya (1969) claims the vernacular schools were meant for the

poor and humble sections of the community and provided a narrow literacy program just sufficient to serve the needs of the class concerned (p.814).

On the contrary, English education in the Christian schools had become the passport to office and material prosperity. Fernando (1977) claims,

Since the primary motivating factor when mastering English was for social mobility, and English became a passport for better education, government or commercial employment and money (p.343).

It appears that the power of the English language has laid a strong foundation for socio-economic segregation right from the early history. For instance, one of the Sri Lankan educationists, Raheem (2002) claims,

From the very beginning, English was identified with access to power and socio-economic prestige for, as in other colonial holdings; one major reason for establishing English education in Sri Lanka was to ensure the continuity of imperial administration (p.3).

Similarly, a former Minister of Education, Kannangara (1947) observes that one of the main purposes of the education policy was to introduce foreign ideals for the rulers, for their personal goals and establishments, and to use the machinery of the schools to win as many converts as possible to alien faith irrespective of the native languages and the religions of the indigenous Ceylonese (cited in NIE, 2002). Fernando (1977) also claims, those who learnt English were able to achieve significant status and this social elite class was economically and culturally divorced from the vast majority of Sri Lankans. This had made a massive social segregation of rich and poor that is much evident in the present Sri Lanka. For instance, Gunawardena (2002) claims,

The society was also divided into English educated classes and the rest of the country that spoke its mother tongue was the strongest factor that prevented the early unification of then Ceylonese (p.2).

As evident from the above, British policies have made a significant impact not only on the concept of education and role of language in education but also on the socio-political and cultural segmentation of the plural societies of Sri Lanka. English held a position of pre-eminence in the educational and administrative set up of the country and the languages of the people, Sinhalese and Tamil, occupied an insignificant place. This has created different economic strata, making English a necessary qualification for upward social mobility (De Silva, 1990; Udagama, 1999). It has continued to be the case in contemporary Sri Lanka (Fernando, 1977; Dharmadasa, 1992). Similarly, Perusinghe (1969) claims of two distinct systems of education during the colonial era; one for the privileged meant for prestigious positions and another for the poor masses.

Phillipson (1992) describes the British colonial policy on English education as follows,

Throughout the Indian subcontinent English became the sole medium of education, administration, trade and commerce, in short, of all formal domains of a society's functioning. Proficiency in English became the gateway to all social and material benefits (p.111).

However, Crystal (1997) reports that in a population of 20 million, about 10,000 people only use English as their first language in professional, social and domestic affairs in Sri Lanka. For communication purposes about 1,850,000 use English, as the second language and the majority do not use English except for a few words. Jayasuriya (1969) reveals that only 7% of the population was literate in English. Moreover, many local and foreign educationists believed that English Language Teaching (ELT) has been a failure irrespective of changing pedagogies and methodologies that have not been successful in improving English proficiency among English as the Second Language (ESL) students for decades (De Souza, 1969; Goonathilleke, 1983; Hanson-Smith, 1984; Karunaratne, 1983; Canagarajah, 1993; Murdoch, 1994; Hayes, 2000). On such observations several education reforms have recommended to re-establish ESL from primary to tertiary levels. However, many significant differences in education and society were noted since the colonial era and up to date this confusion has reigned. As a result, the society at large has been treated differently although promoting equality; reducing poverty and education for all are key state policies in Sri Lanka.

Beyond English

Since independence in 1948, the post-colonial politicians have made further changes to the British education system seeking to create equal education and status for all levels of society. The state reviewed the educational reform as a 'White Paper' adopting the British practice in the Education (Amendment) Act No.5 of 1951 and it was felt that the native languages needed to be restored to their rightful place.

By 1956, due to political reasons and with the rising tide of 'Nationalism', the language policies were changed by the 'Sinhala Only Act-Swabasha Concept' (Jayasuriya, 1969). Tamil was given official status as the national language and English deemed the link language. As Riddens (1982a) states language policy is a form of disciplinary power. Its success depends on part upon the ability of the state to structure into the institutions of society by the differentiation of individuals into insiders and outsiders. To a larger degree, this occurs through the close association between language and nationalism. By making a language a mechanism for the expression of nationalism, the state can manipulate feelings of security and belonging. As Riddens (1982a) claims in Asia, the state uses language policy to discipline and control its workers by establishing language-based limitations on education, employment and political participation. Language policy is a powerful tool for exclusion and it is in many states is fundamental to exploitation. On the contrary, Williams (1986) states,

The dominant paradigm in language policy research (the neoclassical approach) persists in seeing language planning as the benevolent arm of the state serving national interests (cited in Tomlinson, 1991, pp.201-208).

This is one sense in which language policy in Sri Lanka is inherently paradoxical. By 1980s, English language remained, however an important key in the state schools in city and urban areas. The ethnic minorities long associated with European-style education still formed a large percentage of the English-speaking

elite. For instance, almost 80% of the Burghers knew English, while among the Sinhalese the English-speakers comprised only 12% (Jayasuriya, 1969). This raises the question of equal opportunities and the causes for social segregation. This situation became worse due to the calibre of staff recruited to teach English and the training supplied. It continued to be sub-standard and contributed to different performance levels island-wide. For instance, Jauasuriya (1969) claims,

Of about 138,000 students who had sat for the General Certificate of Education O/L Examination in 1965, only about 48,000 had been offered English and that of them only 5130 were successful (p.69).

In addition, De Souza (1978) laments that only one in thirty passed the G.C.E O/L English examination. He comments,

I'm afraid that the entire teaching programs of English in Sri Lanka, including the teaching program, at our university are a frightful waste (p.34).

Moreover, some remote and difficult areas still do not have sufficient English teachers while city schools are over staffed. Raheem (2002) also claims,

In spite of this glaring shortage of teachers and lack of facilities for the teaching of English, the education authorities spoke glibly of 'compulsory English for all' and of 'equality of educational opportunity' throughout the length and breadth of the country (P.5).

However, four decades later, the situation seems problematic. For instance, Abeysinghe (2004) states,

In 2003, out of 320,000 candidates who appeared in five subjects or more in G.C.E O/ L examination, 183,000 failed to qualify for Advanced Level (A/L) education. Only 13,000 out of 213,000 G.C.E A/L candidates entered the local universities and there are school dropouts before the G.C.E (O/L) examination (p.6).

This again raises the question of equal opportunities offered in the name of success in education in general and the myth of English as a language of opportunities. Although there has been some improvement in fulfilling the educational goals recently, the senior economist of World Bank, Hathurupana, (2005) also reports,

Sri Lanka needs to maintain strong growth, ensure female students better educational levels, improve health and nutrition, expand infrastructure and pay close attention to districts currently under-served. The challenge now is to ensure high quality of primary education, with special emphasis on educationally disadvantaged areas, through strategic policy development and efficient investment in human resources (p.3).

This report emphasises the quality improvement of education, equal gender opportunities and the need to pay urgent attention to much disadvantage and devastated areas ignored for decades.

This indicates how English has become a language of power with rapid urbanization and globalisation in the present socio-economic and political climate. (Please see Appendix 1: Language Distribution in Sri Lanka).

A New Era

Sri Lanka's association with the English Language and the sociology of the use of English is closely linked to the British colonial rule during 1796-1948. Since 1796, the foundations of the Sri Lankan education system were laid: English, Anglo-Vernacular and Vernacular schools (Ruberu, Warnasuriya, Wijethunge, 1969). However, the colonial education policy for over one and half centuries went through many phases, depending on the political expediency of the time. The British brought with them notions of cultural supremacy as evidenced in the following quote:

Ours is the language of the arts and sciences, of trade and commerce, of civilisation and religious liberty.... It is storehouse of a varied knowledge, which brings a nation within the place of civilisation and Christianity... Already it is the language of the Bible...So prevalent is this language already become, as betoken that it may soon become the language of international communication for the world (Reads, 1849, p.48, cited in Bailey, 1991, p.116).

With this long history of colonial and contemporary promotion and production of English, it is not surprising that English is seen as by some as a 'marvellous tongue' although it should also be seen as a 'cultural constructs of colonialism' as Pennycook claims (1998). Tollefson (1991) states the hegemony of English or of other languages is not merely tolerated by the developing world. It is considered a legitimate model for society. He further claims,

In many newly independent states, a tiny English speaking elite controls state policy-making organs while the masses remain excluded. Language policy is a function of the state; language groups, which are excluded from the institutions of state power, are likely to see which policy as a threat (p.201).

In Sri Lanka, since colonisation a small English speaking elite governed language policies. English became the language of the state in 1802 and by about 1870 an education in English became the privilege of a small elite class of Ceylonese (Dissanayake, 2002). English soon became the dominant language used for administrative purposes in courts and all areas of business and trade. However, the British administrators could not resolve many basic issues of education: the content, the spread and the medium. Initially, they changed the content of education from 'Traditional' to the 'Western' knowledge but this represented little more than a continuation of the earlier system. Only the privileged Sri Lankans were able to afford this English medium in 'Superior Schools' (Jayasuriya, 1969). Also there had been religious motives behind such school establishments. For instance, Kodagoda (1997) claims,

The original intention was closely connected with the spread of Christianity as a policy. Such superior schools were to serve the purpose of providing well-qualified candidates for all the officers of the government, recruited from native families (P.2).

Creating Scenes

In such a context, a massive student population and other people desperate to master English language believe that they could improve their social and economic standards. However, the majority of them are unable to accomplish such goals on state and private funding. This also brings into the question the issue of the distribution of the vast resources devoted to English language teaching and learning. Tollefson (1991) claims that though states may fund language programs and proclaim the importance of language learning, they simultaneously create conditions that make it virtually impossible for some citizens to acquire the language competence they need. In Sri Lanka, this occurs as only the elite groups hold power and enjoy economic and political advantages based upon their exclusive language proficiency. Tollefson (1991) further states,

In Iran, China and Asia English has been associated with 'modernization' programs, which depend on 'Westernised' elite. In such modernizing countries ESL professionals are agents of modernization bringing methods and materials that claim to empower citizens but in fact help to sustain the existing power relationships (p.202).

It appears that although the state is making an effort to re-establish the standards of English it may continue to sustain power relationships and will not assure equality and reduction of poverty or restore prosperity to the powerless majority. This is a crucial issue in the present socio-economic and political climate with the rapidly growing myth of English as the power of access and equality in Sri Lanka.

English and Ideology

Sri Lanka is endowed with a highly valuable human resource in South Asia. It boasts about the highest literacy, numeracy and primary education enrolment, female literacy, low levels of maternal and infant mortality and high life expectancy (World Fact Book, 2005), which is in par with developed nations in the world. However, to its surprise Sri Lanka also records the highest suicide rate. This is paradoxical.

It indicates the frustration, demoralisation, and loss of opportunities, inequality and poverty of this highly literate community. In such a socio-economic and political climate, ideologically, English is strongly believed to be a passport to office and material prosperity. However, in reality, the society is divided into an English educated elite class and the rest of the country who speak their mother tongue. This is the strongest factor that prevented the early unification of Sri Lankans. It shows that education as well as language policies often offer opportunities to some while denying them for the masses. In addition, with regard to the state's role in education, although the state monopolises education at the level of policy, a parallel system of private schools called 'International Schools' (English medium) have sprung up to meet the socio-economic and political demands today. This has become a threat to the free education policy. Dissanayake (2002) claims,

International schools in which the medium of instruction is English and the efforts to reintroduce English as the medium of instruction in public schools have certainly undermined Kanangra's vision of democratisation of education in Sri Lanka (P.3).

These mushrooming private owned market-oriented schools in every urban and semi-urban area widen the gap between rich and poor in the same community. This situation gets much intensified as one quarter of the state schools in rural areas had no English teachers or they were inexperienced. Although English is taught from Grade One, over 75% of university candidates entered universities with no measurable knowledge of English. The education reforms in 1981 and 1997 confirm that English language teaching and proficiency standards had deteriorated all over the state school system. Udagama (1999) states that a major reason for such deterioration of standards, inequality in distribution of resources and power is politicisation in Sri Lanka. He claims,

Education in Sri Lanka is very much a political act and sometimes a party political act. Consensus on education reforms introduced by any government in power seems virtually impossible to achieve by a society that is highly politicised (p.5).

Presently, this is where Sri Lanka stands after four decades of policy making and reforms in education to establish quality of English, with the intention of promotion of equality and reduction of poverty of rural masses. It is time to reconsider whether we have achieved this myth of English, as the power of access, with the number of political and policy decisions implemented since gaining independence for 56 years.

Here Today, gone Tomorrow

As with a number of nations throughout the world educational and language policy and reforms in Sri Lanka too, have profoundly changed the present socio-economic and political climate. As McGuire (2003) states the (joint) governmental reforms continue and will focus on deregulation, global competitiveness, income generation and, to no-one's surprise, advice from donor nations. However, the Secretary of Education (2003) confesses,

So, we wait for reforms to impact, but no real picture has emerged, despite careful talk of improving monitoring, it is not rooted yet. Inevitably, it is difficult to implement as the budgets are still insufficient, class sizes remain too big to be manageable, rural schools suffer in comparison to urban ones (p.9).

This confirms the massive disparities in the rural and urban sector. Irrespective of such inequalities and the inadequacy of human, material and financial resources, English is proposed to be the medium of instruction in state schools. This has become the most controversial reform of all. The mass-elite gap between the English educated-Western oriented elites and the vernacular educated mostly rural masses poses major problems for policy makers and planners in Sri Lanka. As Ranaweera (1995) claims some of the major challenges are: inter-regional disparities, inter-racial harmony, lack of curriculum relevance, lack of accountability, effective monitoring. The failure to have a national consensus and continuity in policies creates disorder in the system and lack of proper coordination both within and outside the system.

In such a context, English language alone cannot resolve the socio-economic and political issues in Sri Lanka. It is much more complicated than one

would assume. Although Sri Lankan national policy ostensibly provides equal opportunity for education, in fact the limitations on the number of children admitted to secondary school and university favours middle and upper classes families who can spend more money on books, private tutoring and other methods of encouraging studies. It furthers inequality in the name of equality and success and contributes to mass acceptance of the privilege of the few. In this sense Tollefson (1991) believes, "That equal opportunity exists is fundamentally ideological" (p.15).

This resembles the reality, as the language policy is often exploitative and politicised. Thus English language has failed to bring equality, reduction of poverty or much needed ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka.

In Reality

Presently, public education is seen as inefficient, bureaucratic and wasteful while private education is less wasteful, more efficient and cost-effective. There is considerable pressure to move towards marketized solutions (Nanayakkara, 2004). Marketization seems to provide solutions to educational and larger social problems. As a result, the demand for English and for qualified and competent professionals has greatly increased with the blooming of popular international and private schools. Moreover, the situation has become aggravated with private entrepreneurs entering the field of education. As Banadara (2002) confirms many talented teachers moved to market their skills for more affluent students who pay exorbitant fees in private and international schools. Thus, English teachers gained the highest demand in the private sector. In addition, the most alarming event to be noted is that presently, private tuition has become a most profitable industry and hundreds of small schools close down annually due to lack of students and qualified teachers in the state sector.

The Central Bank (2004) states, in 2003/04, the number of students attending tuition classes has increased from 35% to 50% over the period and accordingly half of the population is already paying for education.

Education mismatches with the demand in the labour market, is also indicated by the labour force data of this survey. This confirms the unequal distribution of resources and inequality in education. It seems the myth of English massively contributes to social segregation rather than improving quality of life of the economically disadvantaged poor masses in the present socio-economic and political climate in Sri Lanka.

This context further raises the question of how many could afford to achieve their goals in such a marketized orientation. It further widens the social gap between the rich and poor. The Central Bank (2004) further states that upper and middle class people are becoming richer while the poor are staying poorer and the disparities in socio-economic indicators and conditions among urban, rural and estate sectors remain unchanged and income distribution has not improved. The unemployment rate among females is more than double than among males, while unemployment is higher among educated young people. This is truly alarming. These are some of the truths that the country has to face in its present phase of globalised economic development in a present war climate. However, in reality Sri Lankans have not achieved social equality, political ideologies and ethnic stability. At present, it seems to be 'Mission Impossible'.

Dominance of English

To make this situation worse presently, English language competence is the most essential factor for employment in the private sector. Even progress in the state sector too is not possible without English although the state schools are unable to meet this socio-economic demand. Raheem and Gunasekara (2002) on 'English and employment in the private and the public sector in Sri Lanka' state,

87% of employees in Colombo, 89% in Kandy and 85% in Matara believed that English should be a requirement for employment (P.4).

This re-establishes the dominance of English in the present socio-economic and political climate. The dominance refers to the capacity to expand one's range of choices. As Tollefson (1991) reveals,

In general economic disadvantage is associated with constrained linguistic choices, indeed, around the world many peasants and urban poor may have no alternatives available to them to resolve their language problems. Those who enjoy a wider range of alternatives dominate (p.14).

Similarly, this dominance of language power has not brought the desired goals rather it has created many uncertainties among Sri Lankans. For instance, it is a common feature that the thirst for English is so acute that private English classes and tutorials are being held in small and massive scales all over the country. However, quality versus quantity is an on going debate of such marketized private institutions. In the present context, while the affluent prefer overseas education for their children for exorbitant prices irrespective of the free education they are offered, others prefer English medium private or international schools. However, these schools are beyond the reach of middle and lower class families. The entry to national universities is also a nightmare for many Sri Lankan students due to the high competition and lack of resources in the country. The annual drop-out rate of school population is yet to be discovered. This reflects on the high suicide rate in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, these increased numbers of private and international schools as they are well established with better professionals, resources and well-structured education management common to many parts of the world threaten the national school system. Thus, it clearly indicates that the present trend is more towards privatisation of education although the funding on state schools is enormous. If so, fulfilling the goals of national education with the vision of reduction of poverty and promotion of equality is a Herculean task amidst the on-going war of terror and debris of Tsunami in Sri Lanka. All these factors contribute not only to youth uprising but also the high suicide rate recorded in Sri Lanka.

In addition, several attempts for peace talks between the state and Liberation Tamil Tigers of Ealam (LTTE), through international peacemakers have failed in resolving the ethnic issues, although English is believed to be the link language of Sinhalese and Tamils. One of the demands of the LTTE group is to have equal language opportunities and resources for the Tamil community. Thus, to re-establish peace, their language demands also need to be re-considered. They demand equal opportunities for Tamils particularly in the North and the East in the present socio-political climate. The Chairman of the Official Languages Department (2004) claims,

Until the language rights of Tamil people enshrined in the statute are implemented in true spirit, no satisfactory solution to the conflict between the two communities can be found (p.6).

This indicates that English is a myth of social equality and reduction of poverty in Sri Lanka. It is alarming to note that English is only associated with social elitism although a staggering amount of international monetary assistance is provided to improve the quality of English and reduce poverty. For instance, the Sri Lanka Development Policy Review (2004) reports, that despite sustained economic growth averaging 4-5% over the past two decades, poverty reduction has been slow while inequality has risen. This reflects the market-oriented policies, unfinished reform agendas and the declining quality of human capital due to the falling quality of education. It seems that although successive governments have invested substantially on English education, through the tax payers money and massive foreign bank loans, fundamental problems of social equality and poverty are still in existence despite major reforms with different political ideologies.

Social Theory

English language education in Sri Lanka has become increasingly ideological with the spread of English for specific purposes, curricula and methods that view English as a practical skill and a tool for education and employment. It is one arena for struggle, as social groups seek to exercise power through their control of language and also a prize in this struggle with dominant groups gaining control over English language.

According to Tollefson (1991) and many social theorists such as Foucault (1970-80), Jurgen Habermas (1973-1988) and Giddens (1971-1990), education and language are closely associated with economic class in any society. In Sri Lanka, English is one strong criterion for determining which people will complete different levels of education, thus creating economic divisions in the society. Its modern hierarchical division of labour requires a small number of technicians and managers and a large pool of unskilled and semiskilled workers. The state schools mostly serve as gatekeepers for the labour force, determining which individuals and groups will have which specific employment. However, most of the white-collar employment is gained by the English educated elites and it often helps to sustain existing power relationships of a certain social class. It is at the centre of the ideology of English language education. For instance, from the Department for International Development and World Bank, Hayes (2002) quotes,

Although education in Sri Lanka has the potential to reduce conflict and build social harmony, its current instructional structure reinforces ethnic and language differences (p.69).

These are matters to be considered by national policy makers and the teaching force of English.

A New Thinking

In the present socio-economic and political climate it is time to think anew. Nanayakkara (2004) reveals an alarming record of the unemployment rate by level of education and districts in 1997: Hambanthota as the highest (27.9) Matara (17.7) and Galle (16.2) {Please see Appendix 2}. It indicates unequal distribution of power, resources and employment opportunities for rural masses in Sri Lanka. It is alarming the unemployment rate is recorded 7.8% and the public debt is 104.3% of GDP by 2004 (World Fact Book, 2005). These may lead to another

youth uprising as in the 1970s as it clearly indicates the provisions of the free education for the factory production of students has been a misguided, as the majority of youth are unable to gain successful employment, irrespective of their English language competence gained in state schools.

With the sufferings of such generations it is an urgent requirement that the state policies should be freed from party politics. The education stakeholders also need to make open debates with the public in remedying the present mismatches and disparities. A national consensus regarding language policies on education need re-addressing to enhance social equality. In order to promote student welfare and the socio-economic demands of the country what we need is a new thinking and a holistic approach with a shared vision. In this respect the role of English in Sri Lanka also should be redefined. This draws the attention to the claims of Pennycook (2004),

English merely, a 'language of international communication' (rather than a language embedded in processes of globalisation) that English hold out promise of social and economic development to all who those learn it (rather than a language tied to very particular class positions and possibilities of development) and that English is language of equal opportunity (rather than a language creates barriers as much as it presents possibilities) (cited in Literacy Learning, 2004, p.26).

However, given the continuing myth about English, the time is ripe to reflect afresh in the present socio-economic and political climate. It is surprising that nobody questions what roles the language policies play in the function of the state or about the relationships between language policies, social organization and political power in Sri Lanka. One would argue that with the rapid development of globalisation everybody should master English. They would argue what is globalisation till the cows come home. In the enormous amount of literature regarding the complexities of globalisation there is considerable debate about with reference to authors such as Appadurai, 1996, Hardt and Negri, 2000 and Mignolo, 2000 debates how English colludes with multiple domains of globalisation. In the world languages, presently, Latin and Sanskrit remain as dead languages among many others. Once they were the world's popular languages. Similarly, the mastery of English as an international language (a language industry) and the language of development of opportunities could be a myth. English may not be the key to escape for Sri Lanka being a third world country.

For many decades the billions of national and foreign funding spent in promoting English education should have changed the existing socio-economic disparities, if English is the key to success and a better life for the under privileged masses in this developing country.

Concluding Remarks

At the core of this English language industry there are many other interested parties such as: linguists, educationists, policy makers, authorities of private and international colleges, publishers, foreign funding agents and politicians who play trumpets and bugles. Even if one dreams of 20 million Sri Lankans with high competence in this 'marvellous tongue', it is time to reconsider: Will it be possible to promote social equality and access, reduction of poverty and establish peace and harmony in the present socio-cultural and political (supposedly post-war) climate of Sri Lanka? However, the facts are often repeated: politicisation,

language policies, and dearth of English professionals, inadequacies of English teacher qualifications and confidence; inappropriate training, unemployed graduates, unemployable graduates, lack of resources and the demand in private sector employment. This list goes on and it has led to utter chaos. These facts are continuing to be exacerbated by the myth of English as a means of access to social equality and reduction of poverty.

As Pennycook (2004) states, Sri Lanka needs to reinvent English, to demythologise it. Until there is more 'how to think' than 'what to think', in this presents war climate the myth of English will remain. There needs to be a modernised system to envision equality and poverty reduction and regain the lost opportunities to the masses, rather than holding to the myth of English as the key to escape from grinding poverty and a resolution for this war torn country, Sri Lanka.

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Table A1 - EDUCATION – SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY

YEAR			1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003*
•	Total No. of functioning School	..	10,722	10,694	10,615	10,552	10,508	10,475
	Government Schools		10,088	10,057	9,976	9,891	9,829	9,790
	Private Schools		79	77	78	78	80	85
	Pirivenas		585	560	561	583	599	600
•	Total No. of Pupils	..	4,279,315	4,277,064	4,340,447	4,337,314	4,179,217	4,097,336
	Government Schools		4,136,029	4,134,082	4,193,908	4,187,146	4,027,075	3,941,685
	Private Schools		91,370	93,325	95,383	97,262	97,174	101,047
	Pirivenas		51,916	49,657	51,156	52,906	54,968	54,604
•	Total No. of Teachers	..	194,808	194,589	194,718	188,410	186,407	184,920
	Government Schools		186,484	186,184	186,097	185,485	185,999	185,036**
	Private Schools		3,990	4,154	4,332	4,343	4,369	4,895
	Pirivenas		4,334	4,251	4,289	4,582	4,839	4,989
•	New Admissions in Govt. School	..	345,531	340,941	332,892	330,316	325,763	315,606
•	No. of Universities	..	12	13	13	13	13	13
	No. of Universities Students	..	38,594	41,584	48,296	48,061	48,667	-
	No. of Universities Teachers	..	3,050	3,228	3,241	3,268	3,225	-

* Provisional

** This includes 2331 volunteer teachers and teachers paid by other than government.

Source: (i) Ministry of Human Resources Development, Education and Cultural Affairs
(ii) University Grants Commission
(iii) Department of Census and Statistics