

TAKING ENGLISH TO THE MASSES



Educated at Royal College, Colombo and then at the University of Cambridge and still later at the University of London, his career at a Geneva based development organisation has taken this unassuming gentleman through remote villages in Southern Europe to researching among grassroot communities in Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, his relationship with the field of education goes back to the days when he was teaching Sociology and later on heading the Sociology Department at the University of Peradeniya. Today, he is a Senior Advisor to President Mahinda Rajapaksa, and has been functioning in that capacity for nearly ten years since the days when the current President was the Minister of Fisheries. With the year 2009 being declared the Year of English and Information Technology, the Coordinator of the Presidential Task Force on English and IT, Sunimal Fernando speaks with Business Today about their mission to take English as a life skill to the remote corners of Sri Lanka.

By Thilini Kahandawaarachchi | Photography by Sanka Sammana

As a Senior Advisor to President Mahinda Rajapaksa, could you tell us about the development policy of the present government?

I will start by drawing a contrast between the two basic development strategies adopted by the two alternative regimes that have governed our country since independence. In terms of development policy and strategy in general, UNP led governments have sought to create wealth in the country by focusing very strongly on the urban corporate sector of the economy. They have been of the view that the benefits of such a strategy of growth will slowly trickle down to our villages where the majority of our people live. But this 'trickle down strategy' has never worked effectively in any developing country including our own.

SLFP led governments on the other hand have not been driven by an urban corporate bias. They have always favoured a rural centred development strategy; and this is particularly true of the Mahinda Rajapaksa government whose policies have been directed strongly though not exclusively, towards strengthening and empowering the rural sector of our economy. The urban corporate sector definitely has its place. But the socio-economic arrangements that have been put in place by SLFP led governments have never lost sight of the potential, the capacities, the

drive and the genius of the people who live in our villages, small towns and in the poorer quarters of our big cities. Therefore, as a necessary step towards the creation of a ‘rural centred knowledge society’ – ‘rural’ in the broad sense of the term – and towards building on this bedrock a ‘national knowledge economy’, on the very day he took his oath of office, President Mahinda Rajapaksa in his acceptance speech declared that he would take steps to disseminate English language skills across the country.

We Are Bringing In Another Kind Of English...It Is English For Employment, English For Reaching Out To The External World Of Knowledge And Learning. English As A Life Skill In The Same Way That We Learn To Ride A Motor-Cycle Or Drive A Car Or Use A Computer. It Is English For A Different Epoch Of Our Country's Future.

If you were to ask me if this policy brings in what was thrown out half a century ago, I would say certainly not. No regrets whatsoever. We are very proud of what we did in 1956, and we have been seeing the dividends of that right through the last 50 years. We are not by any means bringing back what we threw out about 50 years ago. Let me explain.

English at one level is a technology of communication. You need to realise that every technology, – and this includes English – is an ideological system as well. Be very clear on this – every technology, you name it, has an invisible ideological agenda which provides rules that almost unconsciously give shape and coherence to the way we relate through that technology to others and to the world. The ideology of a technology is often so insidious that a special effort and training is required to detect its presence. In our country English was a communication technology that was crafted by our westernised urban elites as an ideology that provided a gateway to the West, a statement of rejection of one’s cultural roots, a language therefore that should be spoken as an English person would speak it – with unblemished dictum, perfect grammar and technically perfect pronunciation, and to be used therefore as an instrument of social oppression.

What we threw out in 1956 was the ideology of English as the emblem of a privileged class and an instrument of social repression and not English as a useful tool of communication. Disempowering English as an ideology of social oppression went hand in hand with the socio-political legitimisation and empowerment of our own Sinhala and Tamil languages. We legitimised the right and emphasised the importance of understanding and interpreting all aspects of our material, social,

economic and political environment through the concepts and categories of our own languages, – the categories of our own culture and heritage, the categories of our own accumulated genius and wisdom. After all, language and culture are intimately connected. The resounding blow that was meted out to English as an ideology of oppression in 1956 was at the same time a noble act of intellectual liberation for the vast millions of people who from then on felt justified and empowered to understand and interpret their experiences in the concepts and categories of their own culture and heritage. Almost all the intellectual, technological, scientific, entrepreneurial and artistic creativity of the last 50 years has flowed out of this great act of liberation as it has come almost entirely from men and women of Sinhala and Tamil speaking homes. Innovation followed language liberation and the disempowerment of English. Imitation preceded it.

Therefore, it is not the English that we disempowered in 1956 that we are trying to bring back now. What we disempowered, or shall we say destroyed in 1956 was the ideology of English as an instrument of social oppression, English as the repudiation of our own cultural values, English as the prized possession of a privileged class. What we are bringing in now through the Presidential Initiative is “English as a life skill”. This beautiful phrase encapsulates His Excellency the President’s philosophy, and it was crafted by none other than the Secretary to the President, Mr Lalith Weeratunga, the force behind the Presidential Task Force. What we are doing now is bringing in English for its utility value and not for its social worth. It is a different kind of English that is being introduced. We disempowered one kind of English, one ideology of English, and we are bringing in another kind of English which has another kind of ideology. It is English for employment, English for reaching out to the external world of knowledge and learning. English as a life skill in the same way that we learn to ride a motor-cycle or drive a car or use a computer. It is English for the needs of another historical period, English for a different epoch of our country’s future.

If The Two Basic Building Blocks, English And IT, Were Put In Place In All The Nooks And Corners Of The Country Through A National Drive, We Could In A Matter Of Several Years Experience A Rural-Centred Quantum Leap In The Creation Of Wealth And Employment Across The Country.

How do you explain the fact that though half a century has passed since 1956, English is still seen as an instrument of social repression and not

accepted for its utility value?

First of all, we must recall the fact that the policy of dethroning the colonial and post-colonial ideology of English and concomitantly liberating the national languages was crafted through a political-intellectual process and discourse that spanned the forties and early fifties of the last century. It resulted from the meeting of minds of several great social and political thinkers of that period among whom are H Sri Nissanka, Wilmot A Perera, T B Ilangaratne, D M Rajapaksa, S W R D Bandaranaike, Philip Gunawardena, Prof F R Jayasuriya, P de S Kularatne, L H Mettananda and I M R A Iriyagolla to name a few. The next generation of SLFP leaders while mechanically following their stated policies, lost sight of the depth and nuances of the intellectual reasoning of those great thinkers. Progressively, conformity to form began replacing the comprehension of the substance of their thinking in quite a big way.

A second factor was that during a particular part of the intervening period, especially in the period between 1994 and 2005 a strange ideological aberration started creeping into the political discourse of SLFP led governments which seemed to be suggesting at times that modernisation and development required a repudiation of the language liberation of 1956 and a statement of near apology to the West for dethroning the ideological dominance of English in 1956. It is not incorrect to say that during this particular period the SLFP started drifting away from its historical and ideological moorings: drifting with confused minds towards nowhere in the name of modernisation and development till once again the party rediscovered its roots under President Mahinda Rajapaksa. They started analysing and creatively interpreting its distinct ideology and applying it to the realities and needs of a modernising, developing nation.

The third factor was that those responsible for translating the SLFP led governments' policies on English into action programmes intellectually lost sight of the relationship between ideology and technology. The old technology or teaching methods of English were designed to keep English as the exclusive preserve of the elite and to be thereby a tool of social oppression. Hence, the emphasis on perfect pronunciation, unblemished diction and perfect grammar. Also the design of English curriculum in such a way that no importance is given to the teaching of spoken English because the children of the elites learn to speak English at home and at school they only need to learn to read and write the language. Many examples can be cited of how curriculum and teaching methodology reinforced the old ideology and gave it legitimacy. Whereas the old, oppressive ideology of English was overthrown in 1956, the curriculum and teaching methods associated with that ideology remained largely intact with only some peripheral changes. This has

continued till now with the old elitist English Gurus continuing to control the English teaching enterprise in our country and leaving no stone unturned to ensure that by largely preserving the old curriculum and teaching methods. English remains locked within the preserve of the urban elites and the disempowerment of the ideology of English as a tool of social oppression in 1956 remains nullified for all practical purposes.

Year 2009 was declared the “Year of English and IT” and as the Coordinator of the Presidential Task Force on English and IT, could you tell us about its vision and how it came about?

His Excellency, in my view, went back to the ideological roots of 1956 and applied that ideology creatively to the needs of a modernising, developing nation. He wanted the disempowerment of English as a privilege of the elites to be completed and to see instead the empowerment of a new ideology of English as a life skill, a straight and simple tool of communication striped of its historical baggage, a skill for employment and a vehicle for reaching the outside world of knowledge. He wanted English transformed into a common property resource – a resource owned by all. One day when I asked him whether I am correct to conclude that he wants English which is today the property of a few to be nationalised so to say to be owned by all, he nodded his head in agreement.

One day His Excellency sent for me and asked me if I would take over this task and drive a national initiative to give expression to a pledge he made in the Mahinda Chintana to take English language skills across the country. Once he was sure I had really understood his vision, His Excellency asked Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga to appoint a Presidential Task Force on English as a Life Skill which I would coordinate.

Meanwhile the discourse on English and Development grew broader in content and moved towards His Excellency's vision of evolving a rural centred knowledge society as the bedrock on which a national knowledge society could grow and prosper, which was yet another idea contained in the Mahinda Chintana. English and IT were the two basic skills without which such a knowledge society would not be possible. It was even argued that if the two basic building blocks, English and IT, were put in place in all the nooks and corners of the country through a national drive, we could in a matter of several years experience a rural-centred quantum leap in the creation of wealth and employment across the country. Others added to the discourse that with the war on terrorism coming to an end, English and IT could also lead to the enhancement of interconnectivity in the different sectors of our society, which would result in a stronger integration of the different segments of our

society as we all prepare to move forward as Sri Lankans in unity into the future. Therefore, the earlier Task Force on English as a Life Skill was expanded into a broader Presidential Task Force on English and IT with Minister Dr Sarath Amunugama as its Chairman.

Where English Is Concerned We Don't Want Our People To Remain Ideologically Bogged Down In The Colonial Past. We Want Our People To Pick Up The Confidence To Ideologically Challenge The Sacred Cow Of Perfect Pronunciation And Unblemished Diction.

The approach to make English a life skill is largely inspired by the Indian model. Why did you choose the Indian model?

If I understand the President correctly as I should, the very idea of 'picking' a model from some other country and transplanting it in our country is totally unacceptable to his way of thinking. He has always told us that Sri Lanka must craft its own models to suit its own conditions and resolve issues that are rooted in our own reality which can be very different in content to the reality of some other country. Sri Lanka's models must come out of the wisdom and genius of our own people. India's experience in the field of education is very different from ours. India since independence has placed greater emphasis on tertiary education to the relative neglect of primary education, while Sri Lanka focussed principally on primary and secondary education to the relative neglect of the tertiary sector. So the output in terms of human resources is very different in quality and content in our two countries. We went to India not to choose a model but for several other reasons. The first and foremost reason is that India has emerged today as the world's centre of excellence for the teaching of English to non-English speaking people. Nowadays thousands of people come to India from the former Soviet Republics or CIS countries, from South East Asia, Latin America, East Europe, from Russia and China and so on to learn English and also to pick up the latest state-of-the-art English teaching methods that fit the needs of non English speaking countries. Within India, the centre of excellence for the teaching of English is the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) of Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh and that is where we sent our teachers for training. The Indian High Commission was very helpful in getting me the initial contacts and then getting 40 Indian Government scholarships for our teachers to be trained as Master Trainers in Hyderabad. It was former Indian High Commissioner Mrs Nirupama Rao who several years ago introduced me to the innovative English teaching methods that were being spawned out of Hyderabad

and helped me conclude that it was to EFLU that Sri Lanka should someday reach out for technical assistance. It was her successor Mr Alok Prasad the present High Commissioner and equally his former Deputy Mr Manickam who made our dream a reality by going all out to support the Presidential Initiative with all the assistance we required and more. EFLU is today the privileged partner of the Presidential Initiative on English.

The next important reason for going to India is that the ideology of English as a Life Skill has been the dominant ideology of English in India from the time of the British. In India English was never an instrument of social oppression or an exclusive emblem of upper class status as in Sri Lanka. In India English had only a utility value as a tool of communication. As this is the ideology of English that is being taken across the country by the Presidential Initiative, we realised that the teaching technology, course contents and teaching materials that support and strengthen such an ideology could best be found in India where this has long been the living ideology of English. That is why we sent our pioneer master trainers to India's Centre of Excellence in Hyderabad.

The third reason is that we wanted to link the English speaking enterprise of our country with the future rather than with the past. 20 years from now, in my estimation, the largest number of English speaking people in the world will be in India. English would then be an Indian language which also happens to be spoken in England. Like cricket which was once an English game and is now essentially a South Asian game that is also played in England. Indians speak English the Indian way; in 20 years from now, Indian English will be the dominant form of English in the world. The neutral Indian accent with which increasing numbers of Indians speak English today will be the dominant English accent. 30 years from now the majority English speakers of the world will be having jokes at the expense of the British accent and the British pronunciation of English words. We want India to be the privileged partner of our country's English speaking enterprise because we want our people to be in step with the changing world of English. Where English is concerned we don't want our people to remain ideologically bogged down in the colonial past. We want our people to reach out to the English speaking enterprise of young progressive India and to pick up from there the confidence to ideologically challenge the sacred cow of perfect pronunciation and unblemished diction that have been the scourge of the English speaking enterprise of our own country, rooted in the narrow self interest of the urban English speaking elites and the greed of the elocution industry.

It Is Not A Big Deal To Learn To Communicate In English If Only We Successfully Confront And Destroy The Psycho-Social Barriers And Attitudinal Positions That The Urban English Speaking Elites Of Our Country Have Erected

The approach that is followed is “English as a life skill”. English is a language, but like any other subject there are technical aspects that have to be grasped to effectively communicate in English. How do you propose to do this?

You are right. As I said before, English is both an ideology and a communication technology. The ideology and its related technology have to be seen as the two sides of the same coin. The ideology of English as a life skill must have its own specific communication technology just as much as the ideology of English as an instrument of social oppression has continued to have its own communication technology which we are committed to reject.

I am no technical specialist. I am not a language specialist, not an ELT (English Language Training) expert nor a curriculum specialist; and thank God for that because if I were one my head would have been full of irrelevant theories which I would have picked up from various intellectual dustbins and I would not be able to think out of the box, think on fresh lines and be innovative and practical.

In my view the technical parameters for communicating in English in the context of our country where either Sinhala or Tamil is our home language are the following. First and foremost, the learner should be taught the skill of speaking English and while this skill is being acquired, the teaching of reading and writing skills which include grammar and structure should remain on the back burner. Learn first to speak English with confidence. Reading and writing, grammar and structure will follow. Today in our schools we do the opposite.

The next principle is that the learner should be allowed to make mistakes in pronunciation and grammar when speaking, and the teaching strategy should be to quietly and gently guide the learner to progressively make less and less mistakes and to do so without disturbing the learner’s self confidence and belief in his / her own ability to speak the language. Today we do just the opposite.

Next we must build up the learner’s vocabulary and for that we must start with a carefully identified basic vocabulary.

Next we must encourage the learners to speak Sri Lankan English the Sri Lankan way and encourage a neutral accent as is the case in India for which we must purge our system of the Anglo-centric elocution culture which is perpetuating an approach to English speaking that is socio-psychologically most damaging for a Sinhala and

Tamil speaking country.

It is because we haven't followed these basic rules that children from our Sinhala and Tamil speaking homes find it much easier to learn to speak Japanese, Korean, Russian, Chinese, French and German than to learn to speak English.

By negating these basic ground rules we have allowed English to remain to this day the preserve of the English speaking elites – a ‘Kaduwa’ which the Presidential Initiative will try to transform into a plough-share of the future.

In the Indian model which we observed, with around 60 hours of training, a learner can reach the proficiency level of what is called ‘Survival English’, or just enough English to speak a few sentences though not continuously, but totally inadequate for employment. With another 50 hours or so of training a learner can reach the proficiency level of ‘Business English’ or ‘Basic English’ – a level of competence that qualifies for employment in an office, having the ability to speak Basic English, compose an e-mail, attend to letters, answer telephone calls, speak to visitors and so on. From here, a student can branch out to reach still higher levels of proficiency.

For example, ‘Executive Level English’ with capacity to write reports, conduct negotiations etc. in English will require roughly another 50 hours of learning; or language proficiency for employment in a Call Centre which requires advanced diction, accent neutralisation etc will require may be another 70 learning hours; while industry specific language training will require another 20 learning hours or so.

Therefore, it is not a big deal to learn to communicate in English if only we successfully confront and destroy the psycho-social barriers and attitudinal positions that the urban English speaking elites of our country have erected over the years to prevent the common man entering their exclusive domain. I am reminded of the huge earth bunds that the LTTE terrorists erected to thwart the entry of our Army into their so-called strongholds which the Army broke through successfully. The socio-psychological barriers that the English speaking elites have erected with the aid of their curriculum vultures and so-called ELT experts to prevent the spread of spoken English to our villages are also made of sand. Our strategy is to penetrate them and destroy them by crafting our own strategies with intellectual rigour and determination.

Today, Speaking Skills Are Neither Taught Nor Tested. This Is The Crux Of The Problem. It Explains Why The Average Child Leaves School Without Being Able To Speak In English.

The ideal English programme is largely a 160 hour programme. There are many such spoken English courses that claim to teach English in 100 hours or so, what's different about this programme?

First of all we don't have a model programme as such. We are not for adopting models from other countries, lock stock and barrel. I was only sharing with you the Indian experience for what it is worth. We will encourage our Master Trainers all of whom are from Sinhala or Tamil speaking homes to innovate and create their own models by interacting with our own Sinhala and Tamil speaking English learners and creatively respond to their needs. Still we are only at the beginning of the Presidential Initiative. Unlike India we have a long way to go. However, we have the advantage of a late-comer - we may sometimes be able to learn from India and leap-frog India at the same time. Who knows? It is too early to say.

As for the existing 100 hour courses we see advertised on bill boards and newspapers, a few are known to be quite good, some not so bad and some are just a disaster. Their quality varies. It is hard to generalise. One thing that seems common to them all is that judging by the quality of their human resource output, the level they reach at best is the 'Survival English Level' of the Indian model. This quality of output is not employable. Another observation is that they don't seem to have developed and employed effective strategies to overpower the socio-psychological barriers and attitudinal positions which in my view account for nine tenths of the English speaking problem in our country. We hope our Master Trainers on the other hand and through them our teachers will understand this reality and face up to it with their own innovative strategies and techniques for bringing about the much needed attitudinal change among their learners.

Over the years, we have introduced many language measures to improve English language skills among our students. However, these various initiatives have for the large part failed. Is there a real understanding of what has gone wrong and have you addressed those issues in this new strategy?

Let me add that I see 4 reasons why the Presidential Initiative may succeed while earlier initiatives - I agree with you - were failures, or colossal failures for that matter.

The first is that earlier initiatives were crafted on the erroneous premise that English is a ideologically neutral communication tool while ours is based on the premise that English is both an ideology and a tool of communication and both aspects need to be addressed if change is to occur.

The second is that earlier initiatives were top down affairs, crafted by 'know-all

intellectuals' and so-called ELT (English Language Training) experts from Colombo and abroad, and handed down to provincial officials and teachers for implementation in our schools. The Presidential Initiative by contrast is a bottom-up process where strategy, curriculum and action plan are crafted entirely by rural and small town master trainers and teachers and implemented by the planners themselves with the cooperation of provincial and zonal level officers, while the unsuccessful ELT experts and 'know-all intellectuals' who have failed to deliver in the past are simply asked to cooperate by not interfering and misguiding the national effort.

The third is that the earlier initiatives were culturally insensitive in that they sought by implication to weaken the national languages and thereby the national culture and heritage, thus inviting rejection by the national community. The present initiative is designed to accept the primacy of the national languages and English is projected as a culturally neutral life skill rather than as an alternative to Sinhala and Tamil.

The fourth is that the present initiative is backed by the political will and determination of the President while the earlier initiatives were crafted as ministry level administrative interventions.

What were the selection criteria to choose the 40 trainee teachers?

The English Unit of the Ministry of Education selected the 40 teachers. The opportunity was advertised in the newspapers, minimum qualifications were stipulated by the Ministry and applications were called from teachers, Regional English Resource Centre (RESC) managers, and provincial and regional English coordinators among others. All these were responsibilities of the Education Ministry. The Presidential Task Force played no part in the selection process. Finally, qualified candidates were interviewed by the Ministry and forty were selected on a provincial basis - 4 from each province other than the Western, Central and Southern province from each of which 6 candidates were selected. The part played by the Task Force was to obtain the scholarships from the Indian Government and to stipulate on a direction of His Excellency that the opportunity should be equitably shared by all the provinces. Thus, we now have EFLU trained master trainers in all the provinces.

Is this teacher-training programme a one-time training or will there be more batches going to Hyderabad for training?

Yes, the Indian High Commission has told us that once again this year there will hopefully be an award of 40 more scholarships for teachers to be trained as master trainers in Hyderabad. We are indeed very thankful to the English and Foreign

Languages University in Hyderabad as well as to the Indian Government for their continued support and cooperation. We also hope our proposal to the Indian Government which was accepted by them to establish a Centre of English Language Training (CELT) in Peradeniya as a part of bilateral cooperation in the field of education with technical assistance from EFLU, Hyderabad will be implemented in the course of this year. The infrastructure which was requested from us by the Indian side for this Centre has been constructed and for the present lies idle.

A Complete Paradigm Shift In The English Syllabus Has Been Mandated By The Cabinet. The Country's Education Authorities Now Have No Option But To Follow The Cabinet Directive And Respond To The Needs Of The Country.

What have the first batch of trained teachers done after returning?

On their return the Presidential Secretariat in cooperation with the Education Ministry brought them into a participatory process through which they were empowered to develop a strategy and programme for transferring their newly acquired spoken English training skills to the teacher base in the country. For this purpose they met together in several workshops that were designed and facilitated by one of Sri Lanka's most sought after specialists on Participatory Process Management Chamindra Weerackody, who offered his honorary services to the Presidential Initiative. Despite various institutional roadblocks and low grade obstacles that were thrown in the way of this process by the old establishment that had failed the country time and time again, Chamindra Weerackody stood his ground and motivated the master trainers to develop a new curriculum for the training of teachers in spoken English methods, produce new teaching materials and handouts and above all to generate a new spirit of determination to succeed where the old outdated gurus and Colombo based commissars of the country's English teaching enterprise had failed. They now have their own teaching manual, their own manual of supportive teaching handouts and their own action plan for the country prepared by them. All these were done in less than 3 months of their return from Hyderabad.

During the ceremonial launch of the Year of English and IT on February 13th, one of them in the company of Professor Abhai Maurya the Vice Chancellor of EFLU Hyderabad presented the teaching manual and the 2009 guide book with a work plan also prepared by them to His Excellency the President. Earlier at a one day seminar organised by the Presidential Task Force and the Ministry of Education, they had presented in detail the new spoken English curriculum and work plan to

the 117 provincial and zonal level officials who administer the teaching of English in the country and obtained their unstinted support for its implementation. By mid February, training programmes in the teaching of spoken English commenced in the provinces and we from the Presidential Secretariat have been visiting them personally.

Does this mean that there will be a syllabus change in English soon?

Yes, certainly because the present school curriculum remains tailor made for children who come from English speaking homes. Spoken English is not given any importance both in the school syllabus as well as in the examination system.

Children are taught to read and write English and the examinations – O Level and A Level included – test a student's reading and writing skills. Today, speaking skills are neither taught nor tested. This is the crux of the problem. It explains why with nearly 22,000 English teachers and with English classes from grade 3 upwards, the average child leaves school without being able to speak in English. The child is taught English in the way that we were taught Sanskrit, Pali, Latin and Greek – only to read and write and never to speak. The National education system and its so-called ELT specialists must hold themselves accountable to the people of our country for perpetuating this state of affairs at great social and economic cost to the nation.

But, now the government has acted. On 29th January this year the Cabinet decided to direct the relevant authorities to add a spoken English module to the present syllabus from grade 3 upwards in the immediate short run and to train the English teacher base through an accelerated programme as a matter of urgency to administer this new module. This goes in parallel with the development of appropriate teacher capacity to change the school curricula in the direction of practical spoken English. Hence, a complete paradigm shift in the English syllabus has been mandated by the Cabinet. The country's education authorities now have no option but to follow the Cabinet directive and respond to the needs of the country.

As you mentioned, there are a number of measures taken to improve the quality of English training in schools. What about private tutors? Are there any measures being taken to improve their quality?

Yes, we have as many as 3027 private tutors that teach English among other subjects. Large numbers of school drop-outs attend these tuition classes to acquire employable skills such as English. Therefore, private tutors play a very important role in the country's English teaching enterprise.

Now all that I said for the schools where English teaching is concerned applies in

equal measure to the tutors as well. The quality of their output to say the least is really poor. Spoken English has never been their forte. Hence, in collaboration with the BOI (Board of Investment) we brought 14 private state-of-the-art English teaching institutes from India to a 'Business Mela' where more than 400 of our tutors came and met them. We were hoping that some joint English teaching business ventures with Sri Lankan private tutors would grow out of the 'Mela' but we were very disappointed. Only one venture based on a franchise model materialised and even in their case progress has been frightfully slow. Basically the business models presented by the Indian institutes were clearly unacceptable to the Sri Lankan institutes with whom they negotiated. For a teaching technology transfer to our private tutoring sector I wouldn't try this type of initiative again.

We are now adopting a different strategy. The BOI has just about started discussing with EFLU Hyderabad the possibility of having EFLU develop for our tutors a 150 hour English curriculum with a strong focus on practical spoken English. BOI is interested to sponsor the production of such a course as well as of the supportive print and audio-visual teaching materials which they could sell to the tutors at a subsidised price. These teachers could be trained to administer the proposed course by a panel of Master Trainers also to be sponsored by BOI. Discussions with EFLU have only just started and there is still a long way to go. Meanwhile City and Guilds Institute London and the Dharmavahini Foundation headed by Bhikkhu Mettavihari are jointly producing a 200 module distance learning English course for TV. Both Rupavahini and ITN will start hosting the course hopefully in about 3 months time. 2 modules or learning episodes of 26 minutes each will be telecast and repeated each week and also hosted on the SLT server so that institutions among others can download the learning episodes and use them as state-of-the-art teaching tools for their students. This could be a stop gap measure for upgrading the teaching quality in these institutions till the more substantive BOI-EFLU programme takes shape and form.

In conclusion, what in a nutshell are the critical factors that could determine the success of this multi-faceted Presidential Initiative on English as a Life Skill?

Factor 1, a national level attitudinal change in respect of English pronunciation, diction and grammar and a national commitment to speak English the Sri Lankan way. Factor 2, readiness on the part of a new cadre of skilled rural centred English teachers to come forward and confidently take over the leadership of the country's English teaching enterprise. Factor 3, the efficiency and speed with which we are

able to train the 21,984 teachers and the 3027 private tutors in the teaching of spoken English and provide them with new teaching materials. Factor 4, self confidence, determination and a belief in oneself on the part of all those who are pioneering the paradigm shift of English ideology and teaching method. Finally, Factor 5, the continued support of His Excellency the President and the Presidential Secretariat for the ideological, institutional and methodological paradigm shift that is being made in the English teaching enterprise of our country.





