CHAPTER 3
Language Policy and Practices

3.1. Introduction

The first part of this chapter deals with the constitutional treatment of languages of Sri Lanka. The second part discusses some popular notions in relation to English, graduates and employment. Within the first part, the ways in which State bodies that have authority in relation to languages issue recommendations to government institutions as per the Constitution is discussed. Therein, the practicality of such recommendations against the social realities is critiqued. The ways in which the universities as autonomous bodies with differing language practices make use of the provisions endorsed by the framework of the Constitution are also examined. Subsequently, the University Act which comes under the purview of the Constitution is examined with its enactments in terms of its hierarchical distribution of power. Therein, the areas where the seemingly top-down power flow becomes a bottom-up in practice are highlighted.

The second part of this chapter is on the notions of English, graduates and employment. It examines the paradigm shift that took place in the country's economy after independence. It discusses the influence of the changes in economic policies on the private and public sectors and examines their impact on education with special focus on English language education. It points out that the changes in the economy compel changes in education. The changes in the economic domain do not keep pace with those in the domain of education thus creating an ever-widening chasm between the demands of the society and the supply of the education output. And as it is central to this investigation, English language education is placed in the centre of the quandary to examine the pressure set upon one segment of the education output, i.e. graduates in terms of English language proficiency demanded by the employment sector.
3.2. Method

In order to find out the language policy of the country and its implementations in various domains, a number of devices have been employed. Official documents such as the Constitution of Sri Lanka, reports of the Official languages Commission, proposals of the National Education Commission, Hansard parliamentary records, the University Act, University Education Reforms, manuals issued by the University Grants Commission and University Handbooks have been consulted. This study intended to find out the general criteria of implementation of language policies in the universities. As a means to accomplish the task, officials at the top levels of university administration were interviewed: Among them were the Minister of Higher Education, the Chairman of the UGC, Vice Chancellors and Deans of Faculties and Registrars of universities. In order to know the general notions of English and their relevance to university education, four academics who belonged to various other subject disciplines such as Sociology, Computer Science, Economics and Political Science in a number of Sri Lankan universities were interviewed.

3.3. Language in various domains

Language could be seen as serving numerous functions in a society. Especially in a multilingual set up, its functions expand to accommodate needs of diverse groups with varying motives behind its use. The functions of a language could be grouped into three main categories: (a) language as an instrument of culture, (b) language as a political instrument and (c) language as an instrument of knowledge. The understanding of these aspects of language as discrete entities is, as we feel it, pivotal to the understanding of the interplay among them in a given society.
When language is considered as an instrument of culture it is mainly for communicative purposes. They entail varied relationships in diverse domains: personal, communal, religious, etc. When language serves as a cultural instrument, it is beyond the control of the government or state. Community or society is in charge of it. In many Asian societies, religious activities are conducted in languages that are not used for general communication: Pali in Buddhist rituals, Urdu in Islamic religious activities, to name a few.

Language serves as a political instrument. The political will of a country can use language as a weapon to manipulate a community. Such motives can both circumscribe and extend the function of language by means of constitutional bargain. Rejection or acceptance of a language at the state level depends on the political will of a country.

Language has been of prime importance in education throughout the history of mankind. As Asians we have great oral traditions with verbal transmission of knowledge. Even the religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism that are deeply rooted in Asian societies first came through oral traditions. They were documented later and the written texts came into being. The informal, formal and non formal education an individual receives through his/her lifetime could be by both written and oral forms of language. It is traditionally recognized that language has a dual aspect: (a) as epistemology, means of knowledge related to cognition and (b) as ontology, object of knowledge related to reality. Despite numerous revolutions in the realm of knowledge and dissemination of it, till today language remains the main vehicle for dissemination of knowledge and information in the domain of education.

3.3.1. Language in the socio-political domain

We discuss the socio-political scenario of language issues with special reference to Sri Lanka as such a discussion is central to our study. Language in a socio-political context gains another dimension to it as it represents ethnic identity, for the culture
of a particular group is embedded in language. In a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual setting, language has unusual salience in asserting and representing group interests (Dharmadasa, 1996). Therefore, language policy in such a society, if it has to sustain harmony, should be planned and implemented carefully with an all-inclusive flavour in it. In the case of Sri Lanka, language issue has been considered as the key factor for nearly thirty years’ ethnic conflict in the island. It has been an issue much debated and discussed by scholars of diverse disciplines.

From 1815, till 1956, English was the official language of Sri Lanka. “Until the vernaculars were adopted for administrative functions in Sri Lanka, (as in India and other post colonial societies), the large majority of the people had to depend on those competent in the former colonial language for the exercise even of some basic functions of citizenship” (Dharmadasa, 1996). There was no place for either of the vernaculars viz. Sinhala or Tamil to enjoy as a language of status in the administration at the time. English was the language of administration and of business, the language of education in the good urban schools and the language of higher education (Goonatilleke, 1981, p.63). With the struggle for independence, Sri Lanka, like many other South Asian countries, was awakened by a national awareness which was to be manifested mainly through language. This resulted in adopting the Swabhasha Policy, which made Sinhala, the mother tongue of the majority as the national language as opposed to English which was the then language of administration. Nonetheless, this created unhappiness amongst the minority groups whose mother tongue was Tamil. A somewhat similar situation prevailed in India at the time where “people in the South who took enthusiastically to the study of Hindi after Independence reacted strongly by opposing Hindi as a national link language” (Sareen, 1988). Such a diachronic-synchronic situation prevalent in any country has created language problems.

If one examines the Hansard reports of Parliamentary sessions in Sri Lanka before and after independence very closely, one can observe that there have been overwhelming arguments on the two main languages and their official positions. Notwithstanding these arguments, the “Sinhala only” policy was legislated in 1956,
which, as mentioned before, led to the ethnic crisis in the country. However, as opposed to the picture that has been portrayed in the present, it was not an action taken and supported by all the Sinhala leaders at the time. In fact, it was some of the mainstream Sinhala political leaders, especially Marxists who went against such a policy, though it has been hardly documented or referred to now in regard to the language crisis in the country. "The first move to make Sinhalese\(^1\) and Tamil the official languages of the country came from a steadfast statesman, Mr. G.K.W.Perera, Matara's State Council Member", a Sinhalese in 1932 "which lapsed and no debate took place" (Thevarajan, 1998, p.26). Later, after independence, in 1956, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, a leading Sinhala politician, cautioned the Government that disunity would leave the nation prey for exploitation:

Parity, Mr. Speaker, we believe is the road to the freedom of our nation and the unity of its components. Otherwise two torn little bleeding States may yet arise of one little State, which has compelled a large section of itself to treason, ready for the imperialists to mop up that which imperialism only recently disgorged\(^2\).

In 1958, the leader of the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP), Dr. N.M. Perera issued a statement:

We re-iterate that the only solution for the language problem is one that will give proper official status to the Tamil language. This alone will ensure the unity of this country....\(^3\)

All communist Party and LSSP members in parliament condemned the Sinhala only bill and voted against it. Colvin R. de Silva asked the government if it wanted a single nation or two nations, one Ceylon or two countries (Vaitheespara, 2007, p. v).

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\(^1\) The terms Sinhala and Sinhalese refer to the language and they are used interchangeably. A person who speaks Sinhala language is called a Sinhalese.


As a result of such debates that continued amongst the parliament members as well as people of various domains that necessitated action, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was made elevating the status of the Tamil language, and at the same time making English the link language. The excerpt of the Constitution which documented the amended language policy is given below (for a more detailed version, see Appendix A):

Figure 3.1: Excerpt of the Constitution of Sri Lanka

CHAPTER IV

LANGUAGE

Official Language

18. (1) The Official Language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala.

(2) Tamil shall also be an official language.

(3) English shall be the link language.

National Languages

19. The National Languages of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala and Tamil.¹

We can see the development of language issues in the independent Sri Lanka which gained freedom from the colonial rule has faced yet another twist: After dethroning English, as was expected, the vernaculars did not flourish separately nor did they do so together. Also, they did not attain harmony together. Instead, in the battle ground between the Sinhala and Tamil languages, it was the dethroned English that was hibernating till 1971² to come out in full force. Again in 1982/3³ and 1989⁴ it

¹ The Constitution of Sri Lanka
² In 1971 Sri Lanka experienced the first major youth insurgency (by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna - JVP) known as the Che Guevara Movement
³ In 1982/3, the eruption of the LTTE problem
⁴ In 1989 the second youth insurgency (JVP)
came out to be indispensable after 1990s with the results of changed economic policies.

As Fishman (1968b) recognizes and Dharmadasa (1996) quotes there are three basic types of societies characterized by features related to language issues:

A. "Amodel" countries, i.e. those lacking a viable tradition at the national level and which will willingly adopt an international language for all purposes

B. "Unimodel" countries, i.e. those which have a great national tradition and which are torn between the desire to respect this particular authenticity on the one hand (namely, by maintaining a native language as the national language) and to comply with the demands of modern times on the other (by recognizing an international language as the official language).

C. "Multimodel" countries, i.e. those in which several great traditions are discernible (namely through the retention of numerous indigenous languages) alongside the international language being used as a lingua franca.

Sri Lanka would fit into either one of categories B or C as would most countries in the South Asian region as the country has both Sinhala and Tamil as National as well as Official languages and English the Link language.

3.3.2. Language in the educo-economic domain

Language in the domain of economy of a country has preceded its importance in other domains in the modern world. This is because the need of a language to function in a country's economy has decided the role and function of language in other two domains discussed previously namely socio-political and education. This by no means suggests that language as a symbol of group identity or the importance of language as a medium of instruction at various levels of education has lost its significance. While all such issues exist in the contexts such as ethnicity, nationality,

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1 Sri Lanka opened its economy in 1977 and the impacts of it manifested in the changing demands of the society upon the educated youth.
patriotism, etc in group identity and in the contexts of educational psychology and human rights in education, the significance of the role of the language in the aforementioned domains has been challenged by forcing it to find new dimensions to cater to new group identities and new knowledge.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the vernaculars so far have failed to face the above challenges. If we adopt the aspects put forward by Dubin and Olshtain (1987) in relation to language, we see language in terms of its roles in (a) education, (b) the employment sector (i.e. labour market) and in (c) the process of modernization.

The definition of modernization according to Encyclopedia Britannica is

the transformation of a society from a rural and agrarian condition to a secular, urban, and industrial one. It is closely linked with industrialization. As societies modernize, the individual becomes increasingly important, gradually replacing the family, community, or occupational group as the basic unit of society. Division of labour, characteristic of industrialization is also applied to institutions, which become more highly specialized. Instead of being governed by tradition or custom, society comes to be governed according to abstract principles formulated for that purpose.

In the Sri Lankan context, the transformation of the society from being agrarian to an industrial one was instigated with the introduction of the open economy. Therein, English has been recognized as playing a crucial role, challenging the country’s education to find new measures to make its output compatible with the requirements of the economic sector. We discuss this in great detail as part of the notions of English in the society.

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1 http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/387301/modernization, retrieved on 31.05.2009
3.4. English as a link language then and now

It was the then Executive President, late Mr. J.R. Jayawardhana’s intention to make English the link to bridge the gap between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. According to Prof. Suraweera, Chairman, National Education Commission (NEC), the meaning of English as a link language has taken a twist over the course of time:

In 1978, the meaning of the link language was to link two communities, according to J.R. Jayawardhana government. At the time the intention was to link two ethnic groups. Now in 2008 we have Sinhala taught in Tamil schools and Tamil taught in Sinhala schools. Now the question ‘what is the use of English as the link language?’ arises. It is the link language to link with the world. Now even Japanese, Chinese are also becoming popular....For social and national unity we want English. English helps in having a link with the world.¹

Even though the constitution has not changed over time in relation to language policy, other practices in the society have changed the original constitutional meaning of the link language. Therefore, English as the link language in the context of emerging needs of Sri Lanka is the call of the hour.

As discussed, language has different functions. In a multilingual set up, these functions are determined by the purpose/s for which language is used. The political function of a language can extend the function of a language beyond its cultural function. For instance, the function of Sinhala as the language of the majority in Sri Lanka was extended by the constitutional recognition given to as the only official language in 1956. In 1987, the same recognition was extended to the Tamil language. Language as a knowledge instrument is determined by its place in education. This is partly linked to the political function of language that determines the use of languages in education.

¹ Personal interview held on 08.06.2008 at the National Education Commission, Colombo.
In its basic sense, the constitutional treatment of English as the link language has implications of its function as a cultural instrument only. However, with the course of time, as societies revolutionize, the need arises to interpret meanings of language as per the demands of the times, relegating the detrimental meanings of language that may emerge through the initial establishments as bestowed by the political will. We contend that, in the Sri Lankan context, the constitutional treatment of English as the link language has not been adequately interpreted in order to accommodate its potential functions as an independent entity as well as in the context of vernaculars to suit the contemporary purposes.

We would also like to argue that English as the link language has already taken a different twist that it binds an individual not only with the outside world but also with his/her profession. This link, made successfully, would pacify a person with the understanding that he can be confident in dealing with his work as well as the outside world. This argument we validate in the Chapter on Students' Perceptions on English language.

3.5. Government bodies that influence language issues in Education

3.5.1. National Education Commission (NEC)

National Education Commission is a government body of authority on Education. It was established by the Act No. 19 of 1991 of Parliament, Sri Lanka to advise H.E. the President on all aspect of Educational Policy matters. It has a vision of “a Comprehensive National Policy Framework for a sound Education for All, ensuring fairness and adaptability, to face challenges and for maintaining Sri Lankan identity”. Its mission is to “deliberate on National Education Policy and make recommendations ensuring continuity in all segments of the education system in the context of changing needs of Sri Lanka” according to the same source. The National Education Policy was formulated on a consideration of the

recommendations and advice made to the President by the National Education Commission.

The functions of the commission are to

a) make recommendations to the President on educational policy in all its aspects, with a view to ensuring continuity in educational policy and enabling the education system to respond to changing needs in society, including an immediate review of educational policy and plan or plans and the making of recommendations to the President, on a comprehensive National Education Policy.

b) review and analyze periodically, the National Education Policy and Plan or plans in operation and where necessary, to recommend to the President, changes in such policy plan or plans.

c) advise the President on any other matter relating to education which may be referred to it by the President, for its advise.

The NEC recognizes the importance of English in the education as it identifies English as a critical factor in graduate unemployment, as the main language of information and communication technology and as a gateway to a vast knowledge (NEC Proposals, 2003). The NEC recommendations for the promotion of English Education has been focused on primary, junior secondary, G.C.E (O/L), General English in Grades 12 – 13 (G.C.E.A/L), Teacher Education and Teacher Supply for which a number of proposals have been put forward (see for more, Proposals for National Policy Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka, Dec. 2003).

English has emerged as the most decisive language that influences the domains of education, socio-political and economic under the rubric of Sri Lankan multilingual society, notwithstanding Sinhala and Tamil are its main languages. It is therefore worth discussing the State-level practices and perceptions in relation to the language issues in the country.
3.5.2. The Official Language Commission (OLC)

The Official Language Commission has the powers to execute the language policy recommendations to the government sector institutions. It was established by the Act No.18 of 1991. Under the objectives of the OLC set out in Section 6 of the Act, the OLC is entitled to recommend principles of policy relating to the use of official language, and to monitor and supervise compliance with the provisions contained in Chapter IV of the Constitution (Memorandum of Recommendations, OLC, 2005).

In its second chapter of the MOR, the OLC observes the present situation – Application of the Law with regard to English, the link language:

3.19 Link Language

At present training in English (the Link Language) is not much relevant to the day to day affairs of administration. The generation of public servants who were educated in the English medium is no longer in service. Therefore the function of English as the Link Language as was originally conceived has also declined in importance. The present day public servants are persons who have been educated in either Sinhala or the Tamil medium. Therefore, the promotion of programs to train them in the Second Official Language gains more importance.

3.6. English and employment

In a multilingual society like Sri Lanka, the policy makers and implementers in relation to language issues need to aspire high while being pragmatic. The policies should apply to the country as a whole with special references to linguistic features of communities. At the same time, policies need to aim at creating understanding among the different linguistic groups in the multilingual context. The Official

1 Appendix B
2 Appendix B
Languages Commission that gives recommendations to governmental institutions concerning language issues seems to accept that "training in English is not much relevant to the day to day affairs of administration" and that English as a link language has lost its intended functional meaning. It gives more importance to training of government servants in the second official language, i.e. Tamil to the Sinhala educated and Sinhala to the Tamil educated. Thus it seems that not only English is failing to be the link to bind ethnic groups in various domains as was intended earlier, it is also losing grounds as a binding factor in the government sector. Instead, the second official language seems to be gaining more importance in the domain. But in reality, this is only a partial truth.

In the government sector there are schemes for promotions, salary increments, etc if one passes some required level of proficiency in the second official language. The Department of Official Languages conducts classes for government servants in the two official Languages. Thus the observation OLC has made initially for the "promotion of programs to train them in the Second Official Language gains more importance" has been adhered to.

In addition to taught and research programmes, community service is another endeavour the Sri Lankan universities have prioritized in their stipulated agendas. They recognize teaching English to public servants as one major area of community service. According to Silva (2008),

In 1984, the Department of English initiated an Extension Course in English during the weekends to cater to the nation's growing demands for English Language Teaching for students outside the university system. These courses which were fee-levying courses have evolved and, at present, courses such as the Certificate in English for Careers, Diploma in Advanced English for Administration and Academic Purposes, English for Law are conducted for over 3800 students each year1.

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1 http://v08.cgpublisher.com/proposals/154/index.html, retrieved on 31.05.2009
It is known that most of the students who enroll in the above programmes belong to public sector organizations. For instance, the participants of the study conducted by Samarakkody (2001) on motivational orientation to learn English were employees mainly from the "public sector" who have completed the final year of the Diploma in Advanced English for Administration and Academic Purposes offered by the Extension Courses in English of the University of Colombo. The personal experience we have in teaching English in the "Certificate Course of English for Public Servants" in the Sabrangamuwa University where the course was only for the public servants showed us the competition among them to get enrolled in the programme. "English for Careers" programmes in the University of Colombo have learners from public service. “The large numbers that register for English courses offered by many of the ELT institutes in the country is indeed proof of the increasing clamour to learn English” (Samarakkody, 2001:37). The large numbers include nurses, teachers, clerks of various governmental departments, directors, police and army officers, etc. Such data and first hand experience support the view that the need for English among public servants is greater than what has been identified as “not much relevant” by the OLC. Considering the significance of the fact that these courses are fee-levying, it clearly manifests the intensity of the public servants’ need to learn English. This evidences that even if, as the OLC observes, “the day to day administration does not require English”, the public servants have a great desire to learn English.

The common understanding is that the State should provide employment to all the unemployed graduates in the government sector organizations. This has been rooted in the public consciousnesses in such a way that it has become one of the most prioritized “election promises” to capture the minds (and thereby votes) of people over the years. This, in turn, shows that the government has taken the responsibility unconditionally (which should be the case anyways). Here unconditionally means irrespective of graduates having English language competence and vocational skills required for the recruitment. Most of the Arts graduates who study in the mother tongue have to wait for the government to take them in, while the graduates of the other subject areas such as Science, Commerce,
Law, etc. who study in the medium of English are able to procure employment in the private sector with comparatively less trouble. This is because their core subjects are more or less geared towards a profession, which gives them a vocation specific knowledge in addition to the English medium instruction. For instance, an undergraduate studying Accountancy for his degree will have both knowledge, and vocational and English language skills developed during his university career to become an Accountant whereas a student who specializes in Demography may have the knowledge of the subject matter only.

There is no guarantee that graduates who are absorbed into the public sector will have the chance to become ‘executives’ or ‘higher grade public officers’ all at once, as the criteria for getting into such grades may depend on seniority and other parameters such as higher (than BA) level of academic qualifications, etc. According to the observation made by the OLC, only the officers of higher ranks in the public sector will be expected to be trained in the English language (See Appendix B for OLC observations). Also, government initiated training programmes in English target employees in certain sectors like Foreign Affairs, Emigration and Immigration, Customs, etc as per the observations of the OLC (and for those who work in other areas training in English is not relevant). A study carried out on an English course conducted in the late 1980s for public servants working in the National Institute of Education (NIE) showed that “The academic staff of the NIE do not seem to need much English in their daily environment” (Gunaratne, 1991, p.155). That was the scenario that prevailed in the government sector in the last decades of the 20th century. Nearly after 20 years, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a university teacher of English language comments, “Before 1950s English was the language of administration but now we can get our work done through Sinhala” (2007). Therefore, the observation of the OLC that training in English for public servants is not of much relevance seems to stand valid.

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1 Personal interview held in the Sabaragamuwa University on 26.06.2007

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We saw in the previous section that there was a great demand for English among public servants. The two perceptions we have derived so far from the above discussions seem to counter each other paving way for a paradox:

1. Public servants do not require English in carrying out their day-to-day professional duties

2. Yet, there is a great desire to learn English among public servants.

Given the fact that proficiency in English is not a prerequisite for the recruitment as a public servant, the need to learn English among the public servants is not central to securing positions in the public employment sector. The need is "emerged" over the course of time while in service. In addition, it develops independent of the requirements of the day-to-day professional responsibilities. The conclusion that can be arrived at from such derivations is that the need to learn English among the public servants stem from their need for upward social mobility. This may be through career advancement or by belonging to a group that uses English and that is socially "more recognized" than the group they already belong to.

Amidst this obvious paradox one can see that those who are not competent in English seeking job opportunities in the government sector. (There may be a propensity that those who seek employment in the public sector not developing an interest to learn English as well.) As a result of the consolidation of the above point no.1, graduates who do not have English language competence may seek employment in the government sector as they find it a safe zone.

However, the OLC in the chapter 3, in relation to link language states only about the public service and not about the more available private sector employments that is different at all levels: from the recruitment level to promotions. Private sector recruitment is mainly on the basis of employment-specific skills and communication skills in English whereas in the public sector the recruitment may be by a written examination or by an interview (conducted in either Sinhala or
Tamil in most cases); promotions in the private sector are based on performance and are more regular and certain. In the public sector they are on seniority basis or another written examination and are less regular and uncertain.

So far the discussion has been on the need of English in employment. As the main focus of this study is undergraduate English language teaching in Sri Lanka, presently we focus on the universities in the country and the role and function of English in universities.

3.7. Legislation of universities

The following excerpt describes the establishment of universities of Sri Lanka:

The legal basis for the functioning of the present University is provided by the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 as amended by the Universities (Amendment) Act No.7 of 1985. It elevated the Campuses back again to the status of Universities, each under a Vice-Chancellor. Consequently the Colombo Campus was re-named the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. The Act also provided for a University Grants Commission (UGC) on the lines of the University Grants Committee of Great Britain but endowed with much wider powers and responsibilities. The UGC was made responsible for the planning and coordination of university education in accordance with national policy, for apportionment of funds voted by Parliament for the provision of university education by Higher Educational Institutions, for the control of these funds; the maintenance of academic standards; the regulation of the; administration of the Universities and for the admission of students to the Universities. Subject to these supervisory and controlling powers of the UGC the universities were to enjoy a greater measure of autonomy in academic activities.1

1 http://www.cmb.ac.lk/about/legislat.htm, retrieved on 27.11.2008
The power structure of the university administration flows as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 3.2: The power structure of the university administration

Constitution

University Act

University Grants Commission (UGC)

Council

Senate

The Campus Board or Boards if any

The Faculty Board or Faculty Boards if any

Such other bodies as may be prescribed by Ordinance to be such Authorities.

Source: Derived from the University Act

As the flow chart shows, the University Act governs the university administration as per the Constitution. The UGC is the chief dispenser of what is stated in the University Act. Decisions, rules and regulations in relation to university administration one would expect to flow as shown in the chart above. Therefore, at a glance one may be disillusioned that the Minister of Higher education and the UGC decide all university functioning and that all decision making is a top-down process. Yet in relation to language issues, a close look at the practice would speak perhaps the opposite.
3.8. English in universities (practice at the institutional level)

The history of language/s issues in Sri Lankan universities runs back to the colonial period. When the first University College was started in 1857 as the Ceylon Medical College, the medium of instruction was only English. It was an affiliated body to the University of London which required all correspondence in English. During this period as Sri Lanka was under the British (from 1815), English was the language of administration in the country. Then it has been ‘dethroned’ as Gunasekara (2005) puts it, in 1956 by the Parliamentary Act of “Swabhasha Policy” and was considered as an International language. Then in 1987, with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, English was made the link language.

As far as the English language education in the universities is concerned, there are two major ways through which undergraduates are exposed to English: (a) through the medium of instruction of the main subjects, if it is English and (b) by the programmes conducted by the English Language Teaching Units/Centres (ELTUs/ELTCs). If there is a study on the current English language teaching in the university system, therefore, it is imperative to examine,

1. what influences or decides the medium of instruction in universities.

2. the existing English language teaching programmes that are conducted by the ELTUs/ELTCs.

Herein the other related aspects that invite scrutiny as regards English language teaching in the Sri Lankan universities are the influence of the status of English language courses (courses being credited or non-credited) and the bearing/influence of the medium of instruction upon the current English language programmes conducted by the ELTUs/ELTCs. This chapter on language policy issues examines the aforementioned first point i.e. the factors that influence the medium of instruction in universities. The second point is discussed in great detail in the chapters 4 and 5.
Medium of instruction in universities

English has been taught over half a century as a second language at the national level in Sri Lanka. Universities as higher education institutes have been doing the same as part of the national education system. Yet, they are autonomous bodies to decide upon the scope and the mode to teach, as compared to the school system: the latter is answerable of its teaching to the Ministry of Education, National Institute of Education, Provincial and Zonal Education Offices and various other administrative bodies in the hierarchy. This study examined the kind of autonomy universities enjoy under the policy framework in selecting the medium of instruction as well as teaching English to undergraduates.

According to the University Act, the Minister of Higher Education has the power to decide on the medium of instruction in the university establishment in the country:

The Minister may from time to time issue to the Commission such general written directions as he may deem necessary in pursuance of national policy in matters such as finance, university places and medium of instruction, [italics added] to enable him to discharge effectively, his responsibility for university education and the administration of this Act. Every such direction shall as soon as possible be tabled in Parliament. (University Act, Part iii, Powers of Minister)

To quote the Chairman, UGC:

Though the Ministry of Higher Education and the UGC make decisions, still universities are autonomous bodies and they can take their own decisions. It is up to the Faculty to decide on the medium of instruction. Minister is not going to implement what is given in the Act. Neither Minister nor the UGC can impose any rule. Our objective is to improve English as a second language. Working knowledge of English is required. UGC does not involve
in academic affairs such as which medium to use etc that come at the
language policy level1.

This evidences that the apex body of the entire university system, the UGC, has
given freedom to the universities in selecting a particular language policy/practice.
So, one can observe a deviation from the statement in the University Act: that in
terms of language practice in universities, there is no strict implementation of the
Act and that neither the Minister nor the UGC interfere with decisions the
universities make in terms of medium of instruction.

To quote the Vice Chancellor of the University of Colombo:

At the academic level there is no language policy as such. We adopt
whatever is the government language policy. We try to promote English as it
is an international language and as our students benefit from that. Also, it
goes along with government policy. In administration also we use English.
We have been using it and we will continue to do so for the benefit of the
institute. All Faculty Board, Senate, Council meetings have been conducted
in English and that has been the case in the University of Colombo
throughout. And this has been the practice since its existence. And there are
no special efforts taken to maintain this2.

The statement by the Vice Chancellor, University of Colombo reveals two main
points: one that the university makes use of the provision given in the constitution
to use any medium for higher education; two, at the same time, it has been
following a tradition which complies with the current demands set upon graduates
by promoting English. And this is relevant to both academic and administrative
spheres.

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1 Personal interview held on 14.07.2008 at the UGC, Colombo
2 Personal interview held on 14.07.2008 at College House, The University of Colombo
The Vice Chancellor of the University of Jaffna also shares similar views:

At the academic level, it is not a policy, but a vision to equip qualified graduates with a real understanding of the present day context. University takes a clear understanding that English must be given a place. And in the administration more or less we use English for two reasons on practical level, one to communicate with the UGC and two, it is simply the continuation of a tradition. At the Faculty meetings, academics can use their own mother tongue but minutes and all official records are maintained in English. When considering the present day context, for national and international participation we need English. I don’t think it is a written down policy. It is the convention.

In addition, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Jaffna seems to view that for national participation (not only for international participation) English is needed. Being old and well established universities, both Colombo and Jaffna seem to give priority to tradition in relation to language practice.

According to the Deputy Registrar Publications, University of Colombo, the Department of Official Languages issues circulars endorsing government policies on education and language practices. Institutions such as UGC and universities adopt them accordingly. There are 890 circulars and no circular states any rule vis-à-vis the adoption of a particular language. The constitution of the country states clearly that there cannot be any discrimination against the two official languages in the country. Universities have the autonomy to make an academic decision on the medium of instruction.

The Dean, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo further proves the aforementioned language practice in the university at the academic level:

1 Personal interview held on 15.07.2008 at the UGC, Colombo
2 Personal interview held on 15.06.2007 at the College House, University of Colombo
For academic purposes, according to our new Handbook, now we use English. All the lectures of the course unit and examinations are done in English. Some years back we were supposed to teach in Sinhala, from the first year to the final year.

But now, at examinations students can request for a Sinhala translation of the question paper. In the first year, whenever necessary, assistance is provided in the Sinhala medium. This depends on the demand. Lecturers have discussions in Sinhala only for the first year students. But even for them, lab work is always in English.

The language of the administration is also English. All the letters pertaining to academic affairs are written in English. All the meetings including Faculty Board, Committees, Heads all are conducted in English. In the administration, it is a practice only. But for academic purposes, it is written in the Handbook. There is no effort specially taken. We have the tradition in the University of Colombo. We started in English and we had to convert into Sinhala in the 1980s but again came back to English1.

This throws light in to the fact that the medium of instruction has now become a stated rule in the Faculty of Science that it has been documented in the Faculty Handbook.

The views of the Dean of the Faculty of Management, University of Colombo seems to be more revealing:

We use English for both academic and administrative affairs within the Faculty. We had been using all 3 languages earlier. Three-four years ago we started English medium instruction. Only for the first years we have Sinhala and Tamil medium and it is only a kind of briefing and not a complete lecture. It is a policy. Faculty Board took a decision. It did not come from the top but thinking of the need of the job market we took the decision.

1 Personal interview on 02.07.2008 at the Faculty of Science, The University of Colombo
Students studying in Sinhala and Tamil media face a lot of problems in finding jobs. So, we can say this is partly initiated by the Faculty, thinking of the societal needs to match with the corporate sector demands. Now there is no great difficulty for our students to find jobs.

Thus in the contemporary context, it is the demand of the societal needs that trigger a Faculty to initiate changes, first, in the lower stratum of the university administration and then gradually, through the Faculty Board decisions such changes pave way for the establishment of an institutional standard practice or a tradition.

The only Faculty of the University of Colombo which does not have English medium instruction at present is the Faculty of Arts. The Dean sharing his views on the language issue states:

For academic Affairs the Faculty and University Council made a decision to switch over to English medium instruction gradually. We already have bilingualism in certain departments and the Department of Economics have all three media: Sinhala, Tamil and English. In some Departments English medium instruction is available now. But as some courses are only in Sinhala, Tamil students are at a disadvantage.

Administrative affairs are mostly in English. At lower levels, because of the language problem, correspondence is in Sinhala. No Tamil translations are available. But as a policy, all the notices are in all three languages.

Switching over to English medium is a policy. And in it we have incremental use of English medium instruction. And we have made a decision to start projects. Now for instance there is the World Bank project QEF – Quality

\[1\] Personal interview on 30.06.2008 at the Faculty of Management, University of Colombo
Enhancement Fund through which we hope to make text books for our students to use when English medium instruction is introduced.

The situation in the regional universities such as the Sabaragamuwa University is different from the above, yet confirms that universities make their own decisions in relation to language issues according to the resources available and convenience. To quote a senior member of the Faculty of Management:

We have a language policy in the university. But it is more or less a policy at a theoretical level only, for we find in Faculty meetings and others most of the time Sinhala is the medium though ideally teaching, evaluation, meetings, etc all should happen in English. The reason is we find teachers are unable to express their views in English clearly. This is the major barrier. But minutes (official records/reports/memos) are kept in English. The written part is happening in English as per the policy, but the spoken part is not all that clear, for both languages are used.

Such a process is possible as there is a provision of the Constitution in terms of language and medium of instruction that states the following:

MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

21. (1) A person shall be entitled to be educated through the medium of either of the National Languages:

Provided that the provision of this paragraph shall not apply to an institution of higher education where the medium of instruction is language other than a National Language.

Therefore, of the three major languages that are in use in the country namely, Sinhala, Tamil and English, any one could be the medium of instruction in the higher education sector. Herein, one needs to note that there is no condition

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1 Personal interview on 03.07.2008 at the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo
2 Personal interview held on 26.06.2007 at the Dept. of ELT, University of Sabaragamuwa
3 Appendix A – Chapter IV, The Constitution of Sri Lanka
mentioned in this provision, under which the selection of the medium should be carried out, thus giving optimum freedom for the higher education institute to decide upon the medium of instruction.

All in all, having autonomy to select the medium of instruction, the universities of Sri Lanka seem to be, on the one hand, enjoying the provision of the Constitution, and on the other, revoking part of it by making English the medium of instruction in some Faculties and not either of the National languages (or any other language). Hence it is not only “political authority alone that dictates linguistic practice, but it does reflect how people, individuals, groups, respond to social realities through linguistic re-negotiation.” (Raheem, 2006, p.25) Herein, the traditional language practice of the university (despite changes in the State language policy) and the needs of the society as felt by the university seem to have a direct bearing upon language practices in universities.

Thus, universities in Sri Lanka, with a vast autonomy to implement language policy within the domain that has 3 major languages co-existing, have been adopting language practices in relation to medium of instruction depending on 3 major aspects:

1. The tradition a university has been following over the years
2. Need of the modern society
3. Resources available

*The tradition Universities have been following over the years.*

All the universities with Medical, Dental, Veterinary, Engineering, Law, Management, Science, Physical Science, Applied Sciences, etc Faculties have English medium instruction despite whether they have been established recently or some decades back. For instance, no Medical or Engineering Faculty in any university functions in any medium other than English in teaching. This is both in keeping with the tradition as well as the need of the society. Therefore, the dilemma
of selecting medium of instruction is valid only to a limited number of Faculties which have either Sinhala or Tamil as the medium of instruction. These are basically the Faculties of Arts.¹

Even in the administration, one can find that the universities in Sri Lanka are confined to tradition by and large. All the Board meetings are conducted in English but Faculty meetings are conducted either in English or in the mother tongue depending on the ability of the academic staff to use English. Even in the cases where mother tongue is used for discussions, the written outcome seems to be always in English in compliance with the tradition.

The need of the present society

There is a much felt need for English from the society which manifests in the form of demand set upon graduates. (This will be discussed in detail in the section on graduates and un/employment.) In keeping with such demands, universities as academic bodies with their different visions and missions try to enhance English language proficiency of their undergraduates using English as the medium of instruction as well as their general English language programmes. Also, Faculties individually try to entrench their courses through the aforementioned means with various measures taken at the Faculty level. For instance, the Faculty of Management and Finance in the University of Colombo has in-built programmes to improve English language proficiency of its undergraduates in addition to the courses conducted by the ELTU. To quote the Dean, Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo:

We have an inbuilt English Unit. We teach three additional English courses: Functional English (first semester), Communication and Presentation and Business Communication (third semester), and these are in addition to the ELTU courses².

¹ As a general term 'Faculty of Arts' is used here, but in some universities this is named as Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, etc, yet the courses offered are more or less similar in nature.
² Personal interview held on 30.06.2008 at the Faculty of Management, University of Colombo
The resources available

One major problem universities face in relation to medium of instruction being English is the lack of staff who can teach in English. This is a pertinent problem in the Faculties of Arts that have been using mother tongue instruction so far and which are planning to introduce English medium instruction. To quote the Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo:

The Faculty has organized series of classes for academics of other disciplines (those who have English language problems). And the Dept of English conducts classes. They start with large numbers but now it is very low. QEF\(^1\) also has funds to train staff to improve English. Once we have the policy implemented to have everything in English, other lecturers will feel the need and come for classes. As of now, we cannot impose it on them\(^2\).

Thus, the problem has been identified and remedial measures have been taken at the Faculty level. Yet, as some lecturers find it not mandatory, the optimum utilization of the measures seems to be not taking place.

The Faculties which have English medium instruction also have problems related to the human resources. A number of measures have been taken in order to overcome the predicaments. According to the Dean, Faculty of Management, University of Colombo,

when we recruit staff, we pay attention to English proficiency. Now it is a must that they are able to teach in English. Assistant lecturers follow courses in English. Also, lecturers who are not very good in English are assigned for teaching in statistical courses and not for teaching theoretical components.\(^3\)

However, Faculty of Science seems to be free from such issues. As the Dean, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo states, “Most of our lecturers have

\(^1\) QEF = Quality Enhancement Fund
\(^2\) Personal interview held on 03.07.2008 at the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo
\(^3\) Personal interview held on 30.06.2008 at the Faculty of Management, University of Colombo
knowledge of English. So we do not have that problem. They all have done their PhDs in English medium. So this question is not relevant to the Faculty of Science".1

Most of the regional universities face the problem of dearth of teachers who can teach in English. The reason is that such universities are located far from the main cities. “Academics are unwilling to go to regional universities?” and prefer to teach in universities that are located in the urban areas where more facilities are available. The distance factor stands as a problem for getting down visiting lecturers and other resources from Colombo. (Corporate Plan 2006-2010, 2006, p.11).

3.9. English, graduates and employment

In this section the paradigm shift in the economic policies in the country and the ways in which it has been manifested in the society is discussed. The society is here considered as an economic entity that changed the demands of the employment sector and that pressurized the education output in question that is, graduates.

3.9.1. Economy and education

Political parties are distinctive in terms of differences in policies that affect a country's crucial domains such as economy, international relations, education, etc which are interactive and which influence each other. For instance, with the change of the political parties in power, a country may give priority to foreign investments as opposed to local investments. This may give rise to changes in discourses in domains such as education by virtue of the demands made upon the academic output, i.e. students. If we further elaborate on the same example, foreign investment may mean more participation of the private sector in the country’s economy. Sri Lanka opened up its economy in 1977. Towards the last decade of the

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1 Personal interview held on 02.07.2008 at the Faculty of Science, University of Colombo
2 Views held by a staff member of the Computer Unit, Sabaragamuwa University (interviewed on 28.04.2008 in New Delhi)
century, it has let both local and foreign private sector affiliations flood into the country's economy in various forms. To bring forth a few examples, the government that was in office in Sri Lanka in the 1990s encouraged foreign investment, thus involved more private sector in the economy that resulted in privatization of some governmental organizations. A well known Economist, a professor in Economics, Indraratne observes the country's future in terms of its Economic policies: “the expansion of the private sector in business and industry along with the expanding world economy...coupled with...the increased privatization and peoplisation of the public sector undertakings” (1995, p.15) as a trend inevitable.

This proved to be more than true. The Sri Lanka Telecommunication Board had a considerable percentage of its shares given to the private sector while the government had the hold only on the rest:

Since privatization of SLT in 1997, Japan's NTT took over a 35 percent stake and management...NTT now owns 35.2 percent, the government 49.5 percent and the public 15.3 percent of SLT after a stock market flotation. NTT is now planning to sell out to Malaysia's UT groups.¹

The (now) Sri Lankan Airlines had a contract in 1998 with the Emirates Airlines which vested its administration power over the then Air Lanka. The news on BBC, “Sri Lankan government defends privatization of Air Lanka” states:

The Sri Lankan government has begun an advertising campaign in an attempt to overcome opposition to the sale of its forty per cent stake in the national airline, Air Lanka, to the Dubai-based Emirates airline (BBC News, 1988)².

Also, the adaptation from the research, “Assessing Privatization in Sri Lanka: Distribution and Governance” conducted by Malathy Knight-John and P.P.A Wasantha Athukorala shows the mode of the privatization of some of the companies as shown below.

Table 3.1: Mode of privatization of some companies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Privatization Modality (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lankan Air Lines (SLAL)</td>
<td>• 51 (retained by government)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 40 (on tender to strategic investor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 9 (ESOP)¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Management control to strategic investor for 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT)</td>
<td>• 61.5 (retained by government)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 35 (on tender to strategic investor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 3.5 (ESOP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Management control to strategic investor for 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Development Bank (NDB)</td>
<td>• 26.3 (retained by government)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 20.9 (sale of majority shareholding on an all-or-nothing basis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 34.4 (public share issue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 8.4 (international placement and on CSE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 10 (ESOP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: COPED, CSE, and PERC data.²

As the above data show, in most cases, more (or considerable percentage) of the shares have been owned mainly by foreign investors¹ than the government. This

¹ Employee Share Ownership Plan
has been one mode through which international standards filter in to the trade and commerce in Sri Lanka in varying degrees that necessitate employees possessing or working towards possessing the same. Therein, a call for a common language for wider communication is an essential requisite. It has been fulfilled by English, creating an ever increasing demand for it amongst the employment seekers in the society.

Moreover, the mushrooming of the international schools in the country is another manifestation of private sector involvement in the island's educo-economy. Therein, teachers who are not only well versed with their subject knowledge, but also with a competence to teach that subject in English are also essential.

There are more private sector banks (which may not necessarily have a foreign investor) than public sector banks in Sri Lanka, which are equally reputed (Table 3.2). These demand English language proficiency as an essential prerequisite along with professional skills as they too have international standards as their norms.

Table 3.2: Public and private sector banks in Sri Lanka

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public sector banks</th>
<th>Private sector banks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People's bank</td>
<td>Sampath bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank of Ceylon</td>
<td>Seylan Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Savings Bank</td>
<td>Hatton National Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanasa Development Bank</td>
<td>Commercial Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HSBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wardhana Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Charted Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DFCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nation's Trust bank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The strategic investor of the Sri Lankan Airlines was the Emirate Company and Sri Lanka Telecom's shares were taken over by a Japanese company (refer to the previous page). And NDB's public shares were sold to the private investor (COPED, CSE, and PERC data).
The following excerpt (Figure 3.3) shows the details of the privatization of a leading governmental organization, Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation.

**Figure 3.3: Excerpt with details of the privatization of the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation**

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**JS-Net News No.652 June 14, 2002**

**Privatisation of Insurance Corp begins**

**Japanese**


Privatisation of Insurance Corp begins

The Public Enterprises Reform Commission of Sri Lanka (PERC) has now commenced the process of privatising the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation Limited (SLIC), the leading insurer in the country and one of the wealthiest state-owned commercial organisations, SLIC said on Friday.

The process began with the appointment of a team of both international and Sri Lankan advisors led by Pricewaterhouse Coopers to advice on the sales process. This team has already begun working with SLIC and PERC, SLIC Chairman Chrisantha Perera said. SLIC currently holds around 40 per cent of the market share in the Sri Lankan insurance industry and offers a broad range of life and general insurance products.

Perera said in a news release that the data collecting process from the SLIC management by the advisors "is now reaching its final stages and the express of interest advertisements are scheduled to be placed around the mid of July." "Strong interest in SLIC from both domestic and international investors is anticipated," [italics added] the news release said.

SLIC said that the privatisation experience in other countries had seen new owners able to bring the expertise, skill and resources to enable formerly state-owned enterprises to expand and develop their businesses and provide improved services to customers.

"PERC through the Steering Committee appointed to oversee the privatisation process, together with the advisors expect to commence preliminary contacts with potential investors shortly with plans for a transparent and fully competitive sales process to be completed by the end of year 2002," Perera said in the news release.

Pricewaterhouse Coopers who have been named the leading advisor to the government on the sales process is one of the world's largest professional services organisations drawing the knowledge and skills of 160,000 people in 150 countries worldwide. It is a leading advisor in privatisation strategies and transaction execution in the region and globally.¹

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The above excerpt evidences the degree of the international influence of the running of the governmental organizations in the face of privatization.

The extract given below (Figure 3.4) is taken from a national newspaper. It is one of many examples of the international private sector's involvement in the Sri Lankan economy.

**Figure 3.4: Extract that evidences foreign affiliations in the Sri Lankan economy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indian company to invest Rs. 3,250 million on manufacturing project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An Indian company has agreed to invest Rs. 3,250 million on PVC raw materials for plastic products in Sri Lanka; chlorine which is used to purify water and to produce caustic soda and sulfuric acid and to start a thermal power station.¹</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed above, the private sector involvement in the country's economy has been increasing over the years with the open economic policies, encouraging foreign companies investing in the country as a part of such policy implementation. With a shrinking public sector, there are more employment opportunities in the private sector. Through such private sector commercial affiliations, international standards filter into the country, influencing the domains of general education, higher education, etc. requiring their output meet new challenges. English language proficiency is one of the basic prerequisites for private sector employment in present Sri Lanka.

State languages so far have been unsuccessful in catering to the demands of the employment sector and in the process of modernization in the country, pressurizing on their role in the education. English with its enormous capacity to expand and

accommodate in terms of its lexicon, syntax and phonology has never lost its power from the colonial period. Where education is concerned, the medium of education more than the quality of education has become more powerful in the employment sector, in the present Sri Lanka. Where education has failed to cater to the needs of the employment sector and the process of modernization, as is the case, lack of English knowledge has been seen as one of the root causes.

This, as we view it, in the context of Sri Lanka, is mainly owing to the gap between the changes of economic policy and those of education policy which incorporates provisions of language policy in it. The open economic policies of the country changed vastly over the years paving way to the changes in the societal needs. The changes in education and language policy attempt to cater to the changed societal needs but are unable to keep pace with the changes in the economy.

3.9.2. Graduates and un/employment

From the early seventies, graduate unemployment has been a recurring problem in Sri Lanka. It was the causative factor for the first youth insurgency in 1971. Till date it remains one of the major setbacks in the island: Around seventeen thousand graduates went on hunger strikes demanding suitable employment opportunities by the year 2000; by 2004, it escalated to 40,000. The majority of them were Arts graduates. One of the popular ‘election promises’ made by the political parties that were contesting for the then election was to solve the graduate unemployment problem. If there were job opportunities with an ever-expanding private sector and when there were graduates who sought employment, it may seem that one dovetailed the other. Though ideally it should have been thus, practically it was not so: Occupations required specific skills and graduates did not have them. As stated before, the major criticism against these graduates was that they were not employable due to their lack of skills required for modern world jobs, so that no private sector employments were open to them.
The Minister of Higher education views the present Sri Lankan graduates as follows:

In my own view, present day graduate is of poor quality. Communicative skills are also very poor. They lack proficiency in English. Even a Sinhala medium educated graduate also cannot communicate properly. 42,000 graduates who are employed in the private sector today are unable to apply what they learnt to the real life situations, and to meet the demands made upon them. But there are exceptions. So, there are two categories. And larger one is the poor quality graduates. The problem lies within certain inherent weaknesses in the system.¹

A few informal discussions with private sector managerial staff proved that graduates, especially the Arts graduates lack skills in communicating in English, computer application, analytical thinking, etc. The article “Universities in turmoil with clashes and staff shortages” by Chathuri Dissanayake and Isuri Kaviratne states,

Currently there are close to 20,000 unemployed local graduates in the country, according to the unemployed graduates union president Sujith Kuruwita. Mr. Kuruwita said there should be an effective change in the entire system to reduce unemployment in the country (The Sunday Times Online).²

The allegations against the graduates as Indraratne aptly puts it are that the majority of the graduates do not have general common sense abilities and perspectives: “they do not have the breadth of vision and grasp beyond the confines of their own narrow disciplines; they lack proficiency of English, language of business and industry” (1995, p.6). This has been the case for decades. Still the output of the Sri

¹ Personal interview held at the Ministry of Higher Education, Ward Place, Colombo 7, on 24.06.2008.
² http://sundaytimes.lk/070708/News/nws18.html retrieved on 03.08.2008
Lankan universities remains the same in terms of its non-absorptive quality into the socio-economic conditions of the country.

English has emerged as one of the key causative factors for the graduates today for not being able to meet the needs of the employment sector. The National Education Commission, on the importance of English and the relationship between graduate unemployment problem and English in the context of the expansion of the private sector observes in its proposal that “English has emerged as a critical factor in graduate unemployment, particularly in the context of a shrinking public sector and an expanding private sector” (2003, p.176) Also it states that “the education system does not produce young people with basic mathematics, IT and scientific skills and competencies required by the world of work” (2003, p.161).

However, different perceptions exist among university academia vis-a-vis the graduate unemployment problem. One among them is that the private sector does not want graduates to enter into their employment spheres. According to a senior lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, the requirements of the private sector upon employment seekers are as follows:

Private sector does not want degree holders, instead they look for youth with personality, English language competence, computer literacy, ability to do any work without hesitation (even while wearing a tie one should not be hesitant to lift a carton to help a customer), and those who do not know about Marxism.\(^1\)

The first part of the quotation implies the areas graduates lack skills while the second part reveals the kind of impression that has been bestowed upon graduate employment seekers of Sri Lanka today: Graduates are (supposedly) aware of what Marxism is, no matter which subject stream they followed. What is embedded in this assumption is that if they knew Marxism, they would argue and fight for rights rather than serving the institution. This impression is prevalent because graduates

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\(^1\) Personal interview held on 28.04.2008
and undergraduates actively took part in the youth upheaval famously known as 'JVP Movement' that drove the country into turmoil first in 1971 and then again in the late 1980s. It had Marxism as the ideology and over the years with different twists and turns of its implementation in the Movement, the general public may have come to the conclusion that it was Marxism that caused the chaos in the country and not the adaptation of it in the Movement.

Throughout those nightmare years schools were closed for prolonged periods and young people were killed or indiscriminately taken into custody... and it was tragically ironic that policies meant to develop young people turned those young people into taking on a suicidal militant uprising. (Raheem, 2004, p.31)

The "tragically ironic policies" were the Swabhasha Policy and free education which were implemented in the country to empower the rural youth made them realize that the kind of education they received was not suitable for the demands of the society. A society which was fast changing rejected them on the basis of the education they were supposedly 'empowered' with: It was an education in the mother tongue along with a 'bookish' knowledge. The conflict was between the economic policy and the education policy which were drifting apart: in 1977, the open economy was introduced to the country while the education was in the State languages. Before that it was a close economy with main focus on agriculture which was the main living of the majority of the people. During the 1960s till about late 1970s, the economic policy was aimed at developing the agrarian society along with local products. The country's economic policy which was bent towards the 'local' seemed to have matched to a certain extent the education policy that functioned under the Swabhasha Policy.

However, with the introduction of the open economy, the country over the years has changed enormously in terms of its economic norms and values. Referring to a previous point, the society was an agrarian society with tea, coconut and rubber as main export items before and during the 70s, and till about the next decade.
President Ranasinghe Premadasa who was in power in the 80s, introduced the garment industry and it replaced the earlier main exports. By the 90s, Sri Lanka's main export item has become ready-made garments and not tea, rubber or coconut. And today, Sri Lanka is one of the main apparel exporters in the world. Thus, in terms of its export items, the country experienced a major shift in its economy from being agriculture-based to manufacture-based. Nonetheless the country's economy did not remain being manufacture-based: It was to experience another shift when Sri Lanka's foreign income exceeded its local earnings. The foreign income was mainly through the export of skilled personnel. The Dean, Faculty of Management, University of Colombo, captures the country's current economic production scenario as follows:

Sri Lanka needs to have a service-based economy. We have to provide services to other countries. We are not a manufacturing country. We need to give faster services to other countries. We may need to export people with skills. For front office services we need people with language skills. We can aim a country like India from which we get most tourists now. Sri Lanka can be a financial hub for the region, just like Hong Kong or London in their respective regions. We as a Faculty can influence the economic policy of the country. According to the new findings 56% of the economy is by services and the rest 44% is by both Agriculture and Manufacturing.¹

Dean, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo, too stressing the fact that what Sri Lanka needs to produce today are skilled personnel states:

We do not have good industries. Our industries are service oriented. For instance if you take a factory, you need scientists, technical people, etc. If they have the technical knowledge, they can perform their duties.²

The open economy invited foreign products and foreign investments into the country which demanded local entrepreneurs to compete with the international

¹ Personal interview held on 30.06.2008 at the Faculty of Management, University of Colombo
² Personal interview held on 02.07.2008 at the Faculty of Science, University of Colombo
standards which was a difficult task. Gradually the local products were more or less ‘rejected’ giving way to the ‘imported’. Thus the small scale local businesses gradually diminished while large scale businesses such as garment factories with international affiliations started to flourish. Further changes in the economic policies allowed private sector involvement in the government institutions as discussed above.

While such changes were taking place in the country’s economy, education was not static and stuck to former policies. Subsequently, before and especially with the turn of the century, a number of changes took place in the education spheres as well, in view of making the next generation ready to take up the challenges of the country: The inclusion of “Practical and Technical Skills” in the curriculum which has been seen as a positive change, particularly in the potential it offers for the development of aptitudes and preparation for the world of work (National Education Commission, 2003, p.41), incremental use of English medium instruction in the school education system, the introduction of English vocabulary to students from grade 1, more consistent and compulsory General English syllabus for the G.C.E. (A/L) students are some of the measures taken in this respect in the school education sphere. In the higher education, the establishment of new universities with new visions and missions to cater to the changing needs of the society is one major remedial measure: Herein, one can observe that some regional universities have been established with different visions and missions from those of older universities specifically targeting to cater to the modern world. For instance, the Sabaragamuwa University which was established in 1995, has its vision statement as, “To be an internationally acclaimed centre of excellence in higher learning and research producing dynamic managers, [italics added] leaders and nation builders to guide the destiny of Sri Lanka”. Its mission is “to search for and disseminate knowledge, promote learning, research and training to produce men and women proficient in their respective disciplines possessing practical skills [italics added] and positive attitudes enabling to contribute towards sustainable development of the
country.”¹ In compliance with the above, the Sabaragamuwa University has English as the medium of instruction for all the subject streams with new programmes which were not available hitherto in older universities. For instance, it has the only Faculty of Surveying Sciences in the country; the Faculty of Applied Sciences introduced courses such as Food Sciences and Technology as a major subject for the degree. Meanwhile, some older universities introduced new courses such as Mass Communication, Journalism, International Relations, etc taking into account the current trends in the society. So, it is not that changes have not been tried out and carried out in the education and higher education spheres over the years. It is because the experiments with the young population of the country and with their education should be done with caution that the changes in the education realm have not been keeping pace with those of the economic domain. Also is the inherent dichotomy between the two domains, that is, to reap the harvest of the education, a country has to wait for decades whereas economic successes/failures may be possible almost immediately.

However, a potential argument may claim that such a rift reflects in relation to university education due to the inability or and the reluctance of the older universities to update their curriculum in terms of presentation of old subjects and introducing of new subjects that are relevant for the modern world.

Therefore, it is quite justifiable to state that the main failure of the education system lies within the gulf between the degree of the changes taking place in the economic and education domains. To minimize the indictments stem from such a scenario, the changes should be parallel and compatible in ideologies as well as in speed and practice: so that, one would not run ahead of the other. But the prevalent situation is such that the paradigm shift of the country's economy has been swift and ostensibly profitable while that of the education has been slow and to be observed with caution. It is this chasm which is ever widening that causes quandary in the education output and in the society at large.

¹ Corporate Plan 2006-2010, 2006:19
Nevertheless, there are different views pertaining to the relationship between economic policies and the kind of education available for the undergraduates. According to a senior lecturer in Economics, Dept of Social Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka, there are no employment opportunities in the private sector even if all the graduates were able to communicate in English. He further explains the situation as a ‘problem of deficiency’ in demand over supply and the solution is to expand the economy of the country.\(^1\) As the National Education Commission views it, “The economy is unable to expand into new demanding areas due to lack of scientific/technical expertise among the available workforce” (2003, p.161).

While this could hold a strong argument, and would open avenues for empirical research, some of the notions seem to be quite far from it. Of the four lecturers who were interviewed, only one seemed to hold the above view. Others in unison observed that lack of English is the main reason for a graduate to lose opportunity to procure an employment. A staff member of the Computer Unit, Sabaragamuwa University stated that undergraduates were willing to learn in the medium of English “because of the unemployment problem. And multinational companies recruit people who are competent in English.”\(^2\)

Furthermore, as a result of having switched over to English medium instruction in the Faculty, the Dean, Faculty of the Management, University of Colombo admits, “Now we do not have complaints about the job problems that we used to have previously.”\(^3\)

A lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of Kelaniya sharing his views on the issue states:

After 1998, the main body that gave employments to graduates is the government. And English is not important for government jobs at the

\(^1\) Personal interview held on 28.04.2008 in New Delhi
\(^2\) Personal interview held on 28.04.2008 in New Delhi
\(^3\) Personal interview held on 30.06.2008 at the Faculty of Management, University of Colombo
recruitment level. Even while in service it is not always necessary to learn English. There is a contradiction between government policy and the practice.\footnote{1}

This reiterates the fact that has been discussed in detail under the interpretation of the Official Languages Commission: Notwithstanding the country’s stance of taking remedial measures to meet the gap that exists between the education given to its younger generation and the needs of the modern society in regard to language issues, there are some deficiencies at the implementation level.

This study therefore, has been designed to examine the relevance and effectiveness of the existing English language teaching curriculum in supporting undergraduates meet the demands made upon them by the society in the context where “the current and recent attempts to revive English-medium education in order to maintain a competitive edge in global business” (David & Govindasamy, 2005). When initiating a new curriculum design or in planning new lesson materials, planners should be well equipped with the knowledge of national and political priorities of the existing society. This is because such priorities provide the basis for the needs of that society. “The interdependency between the programmes of developing language, education, communication and the economy needs to be considered in a systematic way” (Das Gupta & Ferguson, 1977, p.4). As mentioned before, in this regard, there are three main areas that need to be considered: (a) the role of English in education, (b) the role of English in the employment sector (i.e. labour market), (c) the role of English in the process of modernization. (Dubin & Olshtain, 1987) In the light of above, this study sought to examine whether the prevalent university curricula/syllabuses for undergraduate English language teaching were able to help undergraduates meet the demands made in the above three areas in terms of English language proficiency.

Language policy is sometimes overt in terms of pronouncements, laws, regulations, constitutional provisions, and a series of measures by

\footnote{1 Personal interview held on 03.05.2008 at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi}
governmental and non-governmental organizations and agencies. Quite often, however, language policy is covert and can only be inferred from observed practices. Whether overt or covert, language policy is ever present, and, by implication, so is language planning, irrespective of number, status, size, geographical spread, and power of the languages in a country. One reality of language policy discourse in the world today is that it inevitably gravitates toward the role of English. This is regardless of whether such discourse relates to any of Kachru's categories of Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. It is, of course, entirely understandable that English should loom large.

(Ayo Bamgbose 2006, p.645)

3.10. Conclusion

The first part of this chapter discusses languages in various domains. Therein, language in the socio-political and educo-economic domains are discussed to show the influence of both political and economic domains on language/s of Sri Lanka and the impact of such influences on the domain of education. The next part of the discussion has been devoted to English as the link language with its evident implication as a cultural instrument. The need to interpret the meaning of 'link' in the contemporary Sri Lanka is established through the discussion. The government bodies of authority on languages and their observations are examined against the social realities. Also, the employment opportunities for graduates are discussed in the backdrop of the requirement of English language proficiency. In the next section, the legislation of universities and their power structure in relation to decision making are examined. The interviews with the Minister of Higher education, Registrars, Vice Chancellors, Deans of Faculties, etc are used to find out the influence of administration on language issues in the Sri Lankan universities. The outcome of such interviews reveals that the decision making is bottom-up as per the requirements of the society as felt by the respective Faculty. Apart from that universities adhere to tradition by and large in maintaining the English medium of
instruction for academic affairs. The next part deals with some notions in the society in the milieu of changed economic policies that pave way for more private sector involvement—both local and foreign—in the country's economy that require English language proficiency as a prerequisite for employment. Consequently, the education system has been forced to find new measures in order to meet the challenges. However, the changes that have been made in the education domain and those of the economic domain do not keep pace with each other. As a result, the education output is pressurized, especially graduates with low English language proficiency levels. In this background, finally, graduate unemployment problem has been discussed taking into consideration the views held by the university academia.