

The Keynote Address

English Language Teaching or ELT – what is it all about?

by

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This seems a rather obvious question with an equally obvious set of answers. There is nothing particularly complicated here – it should be a straightforward matter of teaching a language, something that humans anyway acquire naturally. However, ELT is far from being straightforward, it is complicated and messy and immensely so due a number of complex interrelated reasons. An ELT degree will help you navigate some of these complexities and ultimately enable you to become a transformative and effective teacher.

Let's look at why I called ELT complicated and messy – both are words we might consider negative but I am invoking them in a positive sense of cultivating a nuanced and critically conscious attitude towards the teaching and learning of English. Let me begin the unpacking of ELT by looking a little more closely at the three things signified by the three letters in the acronym ELT. What is English? Is it a language, a cultural phenomenon, a *kaduwa* that excludes marginalizes significant segments of our polity or a gateway to a globalized world? I would argue that it is all this and more. I would also like to make one clarification, though I use ELT throughout this talk, in effect what I am referring to here is TESL, or the Teaching of English as Second Language. However, I deliberately use ELT because the ideas I express below I think are relevant to teaching English as a whole.

English has a particular colonial history in Sri Lanka and South Asia in general. It was quite literally the language of oppression in a number of ways. A person was socially stagnant without English, was considered culturally deprived without it and institutionally marginalized as well. Social mobility in colonial society was very closely tied to the ability to speak English and also to perform an Anglicized identity – this was your ticket to a better place in colonial society. Culturally, English was considered the most advanced of all languages. Thomas Macaulay, an influential British politician and official, argued in 1835 that English medium education was the only way to modernize India and that education in vernacular languages needed to be abandoned. In his now infamous *Minute on Indian education* Macaulay argued that one shelf of a good European library excelled all that was

written and published in eastern languages over the centuries. His views on English as the language of modernity were closely tied to what we today call progress or progressivism – the belief that the success of human society depends on moving from an archaic past into a modern future. As we shall see these views about progressivism are still very strong and continue to inform how we look at the English language. Institutionally if you did not have access to English you were hampered in a number of ways. This is perhaps best expressed in the Sri Lanka context in the courtroom scene in Leonard Woolf's *Village in the Jungle* where a hapless Silindu stands helpless as the court appointed translator twists the truth and the judge becomes a mere spectator in a miscarriage of justice because he cannot communicate with Silindu directly due to Silindu's ignorance of English and the judge's ignorance of Sinhala. Woolf's novel is an indictment on a colonial justice system that fails the people it's supposed to serve and the English language as the institutional medium is shown to play a critical role in this systemic failure.

In 1956 Sri Lanka attempted to correct this institutional failure by switching to Sinhala as the official language. However, in doing so two bigger problems were created. One was the marginalization of Tamil which should also have been given official status due to the significant presence of Tamil speakers in Sri Lanka. The other problem was that this policy also unintentionally strengthened the position of English because the language continued to function as a form of elite discourse. The switch to the vernacular while empowering in one sense laid the conditions for English to emerge even more powerful and exclusionary in the 1980s because a vast majority of the population from the 1950s onwards lacked access to quality English education. Therefore, when the country liberalized its economy in 1978 and opened its doors for global capital to invest in Sri Lanka, English again became a language that gave access to privilege and social mobility – hence the term *kaduwa*, a sign of both its oppressive force and a weapon that one desired to hold in one's own hand. One might argue that this very brief ideological history of English provided here is marginal to the business of teaching English but as I would argue at the end of this talk all of this matters in classroom practice as well. We are not teaching students who are culturally and politically neutral – the students in our classes carry traces of this ideological history and when we engage with them, we have to be conscious of these ideological histories.

Now I would like to turn to the second letter in ELT – language. The nature and being of language has always been subject to philosophical debate. In older language teaching approaches influenced by Saussurean structural linguistics, language teaching was seen as

mainly a cognitive activity. That is to say that language was mainly conceptualized as a highly structured system with underlying rules – once these rules were uncovered, language could at least in theory be taught effectively. Grammar-intensive approaches to teaching language were influenced by such thinking. The legacy of Saussurean linguistics also led to the increasing scientific study of language. Language was studied the way a scientist would study the natural environment for instance. It was thought that one could isolate linguistic features and subject them to minute analysis, much the same way a scientist would obtain samples from the natural world and subject them to intense analysis within the controlled environment of a laboratory. Structural linguistics influenced many branches of modern linguistics and there was an increasing trend to isolate discrete parts of language and subject them to what is called synchronic analysis – or little bits of language isolated from their context and frozen in time. The scientific rationality underlying this approach, or the idea that language was similar to a natural phenomenon, also impacted how language was seen, understood and taught.

While this was undoubtedly an important moment in the evolution of the modern study of language it also came at a price. Prior to this language was seen largely through historical terms with philologists, the precursors to modern linguists, looking at the evolution of language from a historical perspective. What was gained in terms making the study of language more scientific and analytical was lost in terms of looking at the rich social and cultural history within which language always operates. If we look at language as a system of communication or signification what we quickly realize is that language always operates in context – it never makes meaning in isolation of this context. However, because of the scientific orientation linguistics took and because of the way linguists looked at language as an independent and homogenous system, the teaching of languages also gave little recognition to the social and cultural dimensions of language. There was a time when language was taught almost like mathematics – a logical code that could be internalized by learning its rules.

Alongside this was also the belief that language (and by extension identities) could be neatly demarcated. While earlier philological scholarship had traced inter-connections between languages newer early twentieth century modernist approaches tended to draw rigid demarcations between languages. Monolingual approaches to teaching language derived from this belief. Strictly imposed in the colonial classroom, a rigid monolingualism impacted English language teaching for much of the twentieth century. The use or introduction of a

second language or even the mother tongue in the case of English was taken as a form of linguistic debasement – another language could corrupt the purity and integrity of the language that was being taught. However, this was a kind of theoretical abstraction. In real life people tend to use whatever linguistic resources are at hand in order to communicate. It is only in highly formal contexts that this kind of language purity is exercised. But most language teaching approaches in the early and mid-twentieth century adopted and stuck to this kind of highly formal, monolingual language teaching models. It was believed that this is the form of language that had the most institutional validity and prestige and therefore taught to students, regardless of the fact that in their ‘real’ lives they would use language in very different ways. The language classroom therefore was an abstract place, often far removed from the day-to-day uses of language.

Teaching -- the third word in ELT has also had a rather complicated history. In many traditional classrooms like the one I experienced as a student in the 1980s through the 1990s in Sri Lanka the teacher was the source of all knowledge. There was largely one-way traffic between the teacher and student with the teacher transmitting knowledge and the student supposed to absorb this transmitted knowledge. Such classrooms were also rarely places where there was a dialogic encounter between teacher and student with the two interacting to produce new knowledge. In Sri Lanka particularly this situation was further intensified due to the exam oriented nature of our education system. The main instrumental motivation for students was to somehow absorb as much knowledge as possible and reproduce it at the exam. Such a teaching approach did little to cultivate an environment of learning or a spirit of critical inquiry. Traditional approaches to teaching also followed a one-fit-for-all system where students’ individual strengths, weaknesses, social and cultural inclinations were not taken into consideration. Anyone who did not fit the mould would become marginal and at times excluded within the classroom and the education system as a whole.

Now let me come back to ELT and briefly reflect on why an ELT degree is an important professional as well academic qualification for teachers of English. What I have given here is a very brief historicized account of the complexities of the three main categories informing the discipline of ELT. When you read for a degree in ELT or obtain postgraduate qualification in ELT you will study all three of these areas at considerable depth. This will allow you to become an effective and informed teacher of English. You will come to realize that English has a specific ideological history and learn how that ideological history impacts how the language is constituted and consumed in Sri Lanka specifically and globally in

general terms. Some of you may hold misconceptions about English that you will be able to critically confront through the conceptual and theoretical knowledge you gain through an ELT course. This will allow you to be a socially sensitive teacher and a change agent in the environment you work in. It will give you insights into the wide social spectrum of students you will encounter as a teacher and to empathize and understand the varied and complex relationships they are likely to have towards English.

In terms of teaching methodology you will receive a sound grasp of the various methods used in the teaching of English as a second language. Instead of simply grafting methods from elsewhere, an ELT qualification will also help you adapt them to suit your teaching and learning context. Most importantly you will also be able to rise above the monolingual ideologies that dominated teaching of English in the past and to use the strengths of the mother tongue to support and encourage the teaching of English. This will also allow you to orient your teaching practice in a way that is inclusive and student centered, allowing students' desires and pedagogical aims align with each other. You will in short discover a whole new way of approaching teaching.

For many years teaching was narrowly conceived and seen merely from a professional perspective. However, through a proper ELT training and qualification you will be able to appreciate language teaching from a much broader perspective. Also for those of you who plan a career in academia a degree in ELT will open up a number of possibilities. Since ELT research and publication is very dynamic you can consider doing postgraduate qualifications in ELT itself. Or you can opt to specialize in an aspect of linguistics and through that build an academic career. Whatever the aspirations you have, an ELT degree will lay a good basis for your future education and career development. But I think most important of all an ELT degree will help you locate the English language in a realistic and critical way. It will be a balanced position that will not give into the narrow cultural nationalist position of simply dismissing English as a left over colonial remnant but it will also not be a position that uncritically looks at English with adulation as 'the' global language. It is only through such a balanced and critical perspective that a phenomenon as complex as English can be grasped holistically and ultimately taught and learned more effectively.

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