

**THE FUNCTIONS OF ENGLISH AS
A SECOND LANGUAGE IN SRI LANKAN BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS
EDUCATION**

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Abstract

This article explores how and for what functions ESL is learned and taught in Buddhist monastic system of education in Sri Lanka. The article begins with a definition to ESL generally in the field of language learning and teaching. Then it briefly explores the position of English as stipulated in Sri Lanka's constitution. It also discusses the Buddha's attitudes to the role and functions of a language in Buddhist missionary services. Finally, the article attends to its central focus of discussion: teaching and learning ESL in religious education in the country. The article concludes highlighting the impactful significance of learning and teaching ESL in the Buddhist monastic system of education.

Keywords

English, Language Learning and Teaching, Monastic Education,
Buddhist Missionary Service

Introduction

Language helps people for variety of functions in a society. Especially, in a multilingual setting, the extension of its roles accommodates the needs of diverse assemblies of humans with varying motives. This article explores how English as a second language (ESL), as an instrument of knowledge, is learned and taught in Sri Lankan monastic system of education, and how it functions to facilitate gaining and disseminating knowledge. Thenceforth, the situation will be discussed under the following headings.

1. Definition: Language in the field of second language teaching and learning
2. The position of English
3. The Buddha's attitudes to language, and its effects on teaching the Dhamma in English
4. English Language in Religious Education
5. Conclusion

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The first heading “Definition: Language in the field of second language teaching and learning” explores what a language is in a nutshell. Secondly, with reference to the position of English, it will discuss how the Sri Lankan constitution defines English language, and explores how a second language may be useful throughout the country. The third heading, “The Buddha’s attitudes towards language, and its effects on teaching the Dhamma in English” opens the discussion to see the Buddha’s views on language usage and how it relates to understanding the purposes of teaching English in religious contexts. Next, “English Language in Religious Education” further explores the nature of learning. Finally, the conclusion draws the entire picture as a summary.

Definition: Role of Language in Second Language Teaching and Learning

The knowledge of English is needed in the present world. The non-native speakers who wish to apply for permanent residency or citizenship in English speaking countries such as the USA and United Kingdom must learn, practice and gain competence in all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They should be able to function adequately in English within such settings as those pertaining to commercial, educational, and general communications. One’s competency in all four language skills is essential for them to be able to fully participate in the political, economic, and academic sectors in English speaking countries and in the world.

For people involved in foreign travel, living overseas, or using internet links to the wider world, English plays a significant role as an international language in one’s life. Therefore, gaining literacy and proficiency in English will benefit nearly every individual.¹ The academics’ and policy makers’ awareness of the significance of learning English helps them carefully study the language teaching/learning methods in English speaking countries such as UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Academics and policy makers can pay attention to the use of English as a tool to access to different sources of information, as a language of travel and sightseeing, for social survival and as a language of study.² In this regard, schools of both English speaking and non-English speaking countries have a moral and educational responsibility to promote and facilitate teaching and learning of ESL. Such efforts will enable the non-native English speakers who wish to learn English as a functional tool.³ Teaching a second language henceforth involves providing information and competency regarding the structure and the linguistic components of the target language, which is, in our study, the English language.

Teaching is therefore viewed as a science, involving scientific investigation, and empirical research to understand and become competent in the valid principles of teaching. Good teaching involves the application of the findings of research, and the teacher’s role is to put research-based principles into practice. Teaching is a thinking activity, a process.⁴ Teachers must consider, in practical terms, of how knowledge can be disseminated to learners and put their thinking into practice. For instance, teaching grammatical elements/concepts is considered as an act of providing necessary tools for the language learners to clarify

information while building sentence level knowledge in a second language.⁵ When teachers deliver the knowledge and theories on how a second language is structured, the learners receive the input and then practise to develop better outputs. This is called learning. In other words, they develop their ability to master the language components and the ability to use these components strategically for different functions and necessities. This notion of best teaching and learning practices can be seen with reference to second language studies. Both teaching and learning attend to enabling the language learners to gain competence in both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Teaching and learning of grammar and vocabulary are practices to enable the language learners to gain mastery in the four competencies.

The Position of English in Sri Lanka

As mentioned above, Language policy makers in every country have many options and strategies when making decisions to plan policies in terms of teaching and learning of a certain second language. English plays a critical role as an international or second language in Sri Lanka. Some argue that it is a link language.⁶ It has been defined in different terms by academics and policy makers in different countries. While Sri Lanka promotes Sinhala and Tamil as both official and national languages, English is treated as the link language.⁷ The use of English is entitled with categorises. When publications of legislation are made in both Sinhala and Tamil, English translations must be published. In addition, orders, gazettes, and the other government documents must be accompanied by their English translations.⁸ Thus, the constitution defines English as the link language of the country. Especially, English has been recognized by the constitution as the link Language for social skills and can eliminates language prejudice for establishing a culture of learning and it further mentions that English suits multiple categories of learners who are in the fields of education, state and the private sector. Having people who are adept in English and are employed in these sectors benefits the country through assisting with long term social integration by providing a link language between language groups such as Sinhala speakers and speakers of Tamil.⁹ English in Sri Lanka has not been simply British or international English. It is a distinctive variety of English which can be accurately called Sri Lankan English. With a special regional and social identity, it has been a post-colonial institutionalised second language. Hence, English is an additional language for Sri Lankan regular speakers of English.¹⁰ All these studies give an insight for recognition of the position of English as the country's link language by the constitution.

The Buddha's Attitudes to Language, and Its Effects on Teaching the Dhamma in English

Teaching is defined as giving the information about a particular subject to a class and showing someone how to do something.¹¹ In teaching English, teachers transfer the information and skills to the language learner on how to use English for both oral and written communications. In religious contexts, English

language is a principal tool in understanding the religion and conducting other activities like praying, meditating, and preaching.¹² Religion can affect all parts of a community, for example, lifestyles, science, education, architecture, marriage, behaviour, and ethics. Religion can fuel a revolution easily. In this regard, language plays a significant role, and this role is mostly functional.¹³ As Rahim further argues, the use of language can work as a weapon in religion.¹⁴ Hence, academics and policy makers should carefully think of the functions for which language should be taught in religious contexts. Teachers need to teach English to enable the language learners to communicate. At the same time, they need to make sure their teaching is appropriate for the religious values, concepts, and teachings¹⁵ of a particular religious group. This shows that English as a second language needs to be taught for specific purposes in the religious context.

In Sri Lankan Buddhist religious educational institutes, ESL is taught to novice monks to use when sharing the message of the Buddha and when communicating in English to people who want to learn about the Buddhist religion. When activities are conducted with non-native speakers, it becomes a crucial tool of communication. Therefore, the beliefs about teaching have to be considered according to the nature of schools, students, lessons, materials, the way students and teacher interact with one another, and the way of problem solving for students in schools and in their social setting.¹⁶ When teaching English to novice monks in Buddhist monastic systems of education, teachers should consider developing their competence in language so that they can function better in their own context. For example, they should be taught vocabulary related to religion and culture. With this knowledge and competence, students should be able to read and understand Buddhist literary canons and perform religious activities in English.

On the other hand, Cooper¹⁷ states that religions use languages as tools to maintain their sacred texts and they usually adhere to the use of texts in the original languages as in the case of Arabic in Islam and Hebrew in Judaism. But, Schiffman¹⁸ argues that the political changes can stimulate religions to use different languages for maintaining their texts. A good example is Hinduism which uses Hindi and Urdu and a wide variety of regional languages in addition to the original Sanskrit (the proto language).¹⁹ In the same manner, teaching English is necessary to connect Buddhists whose native languages differ. In Sri Lanka, this is an important political and social necessity.

The Buddha taught to His disciples that learning to communicate in a language is a socio-political necessity. He used different terms to refer to languages and interpreted in a meaningful way in His teachings. A language is constituted of phonological (sounds), morphological (words, names) and syntactic (grammatical) elements.²⁰ Appearance of those parts of speech in clusters is an indication of a meaning which is recognized by the Buddha as a language which is to be used for a variety of activities. In discourses, paragraphs, sentences, there can be several clusters which contain the aforesaid parts.²¹ They can be

emphasised in terms of *Patha* and *Loka*. The following are the clusters, according to the way of *Patha*:

1. way of expression
2. way of synonyms
3. way of etymology²²

In terms of *Lokha* too, particularity of the language has been discussed. It is the commonality or generality of grammar, vocabulary and other linguistic features of the language. Definitions given to words and etymology, which is to trace the historical use of a word back to its original form, are part of *Lokha*. The accepted usage of the different phrases like patterns, sounds, punctuation, and other linguistic features are known as the way of expressions. In addition, etymology of words in the same language as they relate to usage in the countries, provinces and villages can be seen. Agreements and convention are identified as another aspect.²³ All these linguistic components in the English language should be taught to the learners so that they can articulate/convey the real religious messages properly. Another scholar explains:

Now a man of a particular locality, when he is in other localities where different names of the same thing are in the vogue, knowing that in different localities different names of the same thing are used conventionally by the gentlemen, uses different names in different localities without any attachment his own local form. This suggests Buddha's preference for local dialects²⁴

According to this explanation, the use of language in Buddhism is a sociolinguistic and practical matter. The Buddha's main interest was in conveying the sense of his teachings in a form of language clearly understood by his audience, and he freely adapted his language to the needs of those who listened to his teachings. Therefore, how the society uses the language in common usage, understood by the people, is the way the Buddha used to communicate and convey his message. His disciples are responsible for using the same method.

Buddhist religious education trusts that the usage of those components must be well taught to the learners. Literary works like stories, verses, stanzas, discourses, songs, and poems can be utilized in teaching English. According to those aforesaid matters, it is obvious that teaching in a religious background offers a clear path for teachers into an innovative and interesting profession. It demonstrates that teaching English in religious backgrounds can be considered as a variety of situations where English is taught or learned for specific purposes. The overall purpose is to propagate the Buddhist teachings in English. This training should be given to the monastic learners from the beginning of their education. Monastic schools have the responsibilities to bring the teaching of English for the purpose of communicating the Buddhist teaching to the forefront.

Unfortunately, success in the mastery of English among the monastic learners cannot be seen due to few major barriers in learning materials. We can list some

of the problems as follows: such heavy text books, lack of exposure to actual English conversation and other usage of the language, lack of limitations of using bilingual approach (in that the learners rely heavily on Sinhala in their classes rather than moving into wide usage of English), lack of proper materials such as stories centred on religious themes, lack of practice worksheets to distribute to the students, lack of technological devices and internet, with resultant lack of usage of multimedia, and importantly, lack of proper training for teachers.²⁵ All these prevent the learners from receiving proper training in acquiring the use of the language. The resultant lack of facility in English results in an obstacle for missionary service. As the way of the explanations and the attitudes of the Buddha, in learning and teaching a language with the purpose of disseminating the Dhamma, solutions such as insight about grammar rules, vocabulary and communicative usage to the aforesaid barriers can be achieved. .

English Language in Religious Education

The Majority of Sri Lankans are predominantly Sinhalese Buddhists, and Buddhism is considered as the state religion. Sinhala and Tamil function as the two official languages while the Constitution defines English as the link language. Hence, learning English enables an individual to have a medium to gather information for both academic and professional purposes. In monastic schools, students learn English to be able to read books, newspapers, articles, and other documents in English and to communicate and disseminate the religious messages in English.

The main purpose of learning languages at a monastic school contains a list of goals. The following goals emphasize the importance of learning English as a second Language:

1. To establish the rule of religious law. Knowledge on the teachings and obedience to Teachings to continue the legend of the venerable followers of the Buddha;
2. To give practical knowledge and decency in the mission of disseminating Dhamma locally and internationally and engaging in other practices or professions, which are suitable for the Buddhist clergy; and
3. To give the opportunity to the Buddhist clergy to obtain a deeper knowledge on the subjects like Buddhist Philosophy Culture, History, Sinhala, Pali, and Sanskrit²⁶

Above mentioned goals indicate that learning English is very important for monks in religious education though English was never used as a medium of instruction in the historic tradition of Buddhist education. However, the needs of the modern time as well as the role and place of a language in the wider social arena can change our choices of the language to be used as the medium of instruction. The need to use English as a tool in disseminating dhamma locally and internationally has clearly emerged. The teaching English as a second language in Buddhist system of education plays a significant role in enabling the Sri Lankan Buddhist monks to provide religious services internationally. There

is also the significant matter of the Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy being able to communicate with members of the Buddhist sangha from other countries such as Thailand and Myanmar. Such oral communication will invariably be in English language, with written Pali also playing some role as a shared language. Thus, as English holds the position of the second language or lingua franca in the country of Sri Lanka and in the Buddhist world, Buddhist religious education prioritises learning of English.

Language learning comprises of activities such as learning grammar rules, extensive reading and listening, role playing, practising drills, information-gap-filling and matching activities. For example, the role play between monks and devotees, discussion on the teachings, solving problem through religious views are often practised in English language classrooms. These are language-oriented activities that help the learner to pick up the language patterns, vocabulary, and terminology. Learning English is important for Buddhist monks and other students because it is one of the six main compulsory subjects that they need to pass at General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level). Failing English is considered as failing the whole exam. Thus, English has become a compulsory subject and students need to assure themselves that they have a pass for English when applying to government or private sectors jobs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the purpose of Buddhist religious education is linked to the missionary service both in the domestic and international contexts. Having competence in one local language is not enough in this regard. Learning a second language is essential as the Buddhist education system is preparing to cater to the purposes of the Buddha. According to the Buddha's opinion, Buddhist monks are responsible to consider the differences of the dialects that people speak in different villages, towns, provinces, and the countries, since the message should be conveyed in local language while travelling. Sri Lanka's Constitution acknowledges the necessity of learning/using English as a link language when dealing with the rest of the world. This necessity is equally applicable to religious education because learning English for both academic and professional purposes assures the Buddhist monks' success in missionary service. All that has been explained above henceforth illustrates that learning English as a second language for religious purpose is timely and appropriate, and that it complies with the purposes of Buddhism.

Endnotes

- ¹ Carrasquillo, 1994
- ² Richard, 2020
- ³ Carrasquillo, 1994
- ⁴ Richard, 1994
- ⁵ Richards, 2005
- ⁶ Constitution, 2015
- ⁷ Ibid.

- ⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Wakkumbura, 2016
¹⁰ Mukherjee, J., Schilk, M., Bernaisch, T., & Liebig, J, 2010
¹¹ Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 2010
¹² Dazdarevic, 2012
¹³ Rahim, 2011
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Wong & Mahboob, 2018
¹⁶ Baurain, 2015
¹⁷ Cooper, 1989
¹⁸ Schiffman, 1996
¹⁹ Baurain, 2015
²⁰ Kalupahana, 1999
²¹ Ibid.
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid.
²⁴ M. Deshpande, 1994
²⁵ Vineetha, 2014
²⁶ Ibid.

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