

# A Linguistic Study on Excluding Formal Instruction in Second Language from Initial Grades One and Two: A Study Based on a State School and a Private School in the Central Province–Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** *Start age for formal instruction in second language varies throughout the world. Presently, In Sri Lanka, formal education in second language commences at grade three in government schools. However, deviation from the curriculum was observed as a common trend, especially in private schools. In the private school selected for the research, formal English education starts at grade one itself. This research uses two contradictory theoretical bases as benchmarks to investigate the hypothesis to be tested: On one hand there were nativists who pinned down the significance of role played by environment factor in SLA. On the other hand, there were the innatists pioneered by Chomskian theory of Universal Grammar that maintain the earliest possible commencement of language learning. These major SLA theories present two determinant factors of second language acquisition (SLA); environment and age. Consequently, it was hypothesized that by providing a language rich environment at the youngest possible age through formal second language instruction, school can expedite the process of second language acquisition of Sri Lankan students. The research employed both primary data and secondary data. A grammaticality judgment test was conducted in two grade three classes of a government school and a private school. The results of the tests were represented graphically and analyzed. The results of the two schools demonstrated a notable difference where the students of private school did far better. Therefore it was concluded that early start age of formal English education can have a strong positive impact on the expected level of second language acquisition in grade three.*

**Keywords:** Formal instruction, Second language, Behaviorism, Innatists, start age

## 1. Introduction

Formal instruction in second language - English commences in Sri Lankan government schools at grade three. In grades one and two they are exposed to English through a subject called Activity Based Oral English (ABOE). In ABOE, students are exposed to common vocabulary items, simple commands, day today greetings etc. (Primary Curriculum, Key stage 1: 2006). There is no special teacher assigned for teaching the subject. Class teacher is expected to impart the content of ABOE while she teaches other subjects such as Maths and Environmental studies. One of the main objectives of introducing ABOE is to maintain 'equity' in providing educational opportunities to all (PTF: 2000 p.2, PTF: Presidential Task Force: the committee appointed by the President to undertake educational Reforms in 1997) Nevertheless ABOE was found to be ailing from several constraints. Namely they are, lack of confidence in class teachers to use English, lack of guidance for teachers and disparity between urban and rural schools. (SLAED 2000, Fernando and Mallawa: 2003) In addition, parents are dissatisfied with the knowledge of English their children are receiving at grades one and two and they seek outside support to enhance their knowledge in English, though enthusiastic, parents in rural areas do not have the opportunity to provide outside support. (Fernando and Mallawa: 2003) At the same time, teachers of English complain that students find it difficult to follow the text book in grade three due to the absence of exposure to reading and writing of English in prior grades. Moreover researchers believe that SL instruction should be in consistency with SLA theory. (Krashen 1982 p.13 Ellis 1985.p.1) But this study suggests ABOE is at odds with both

nativists and innatists as the study further claims that, by excluding formal English instruction from grades one and two, syllabus designers have ignored the significance of environment factor (Watson 1924, Thorndike 1932 Bloomfield 1933 Skinner 1957) and age factor (Lennerberg 1967, Chomsky:1967 Asher and Gracia 1969) in SLA. According to Behaviorist view through repeated reinforcement a certain stimulus will elicit the same answer time and time again, which will then become a habit. All skills are established in this way including language. For behaviorists, the processes involved in second or foreign language learning consisted of imitation, repetition, and reinforcement of grammatical structures. (Klein 1982 p.35)

Conversely, Chomsky (1967) claimed that capacity to learn a language is totally an internal phenomenon. He maintained that children have an innate faculty that guides them in their learning of language. One obvious possibility is the innate system that guides child acquisition no longer operates in adult foreign language learners or weaker or its operation is partial and imperfect. Lennerberg also suggested that there are constraints associated with age in his theory of critical period hypothesis. Lennerberg suggested humans' capacity to learn languages declines after puberty. Also automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear after this age and foreign languages have to be taught and learnt through conscious and laborious effort (Lemnerberg 1967 p.176) Brain Plasticity theory also claimed a similar phenomenon as regards SLA. The brain plasticity theory suggests that the young child's brain has a cellular receptivity to language acquisition. This receptivity may be a function of cellular elasticity which is controlled by a sort of biological clock. With age the biological clock

changes the cellular plasticity which reduces the organism's capacity to learn a language. (Asher and Gracia 1969 pp 334-341).

Similarly Rod Ellis (1994) observes that formal instruction in second language distinguishes between implicit (acquired) and explicit knowledge (learnt) on one hand and controlled and automatic processes on the other. The "automatization" of implicit knowledge (Ellis 1994 p.99) seems to need opportunities for use of language in natural communication. The automatization of explicit knowledge can be achieved through more traditional 'controlled' grammar practice activities. (Lightbrown et al 1980 p.102)

In conclusion, it can be observed that in cognitive/nativist point of view, early instruction on second language is advantageous because it capitalizes on the innate language learning ability that all children seem to have. Delaying second language instruction during early childhood would therefore be to fail to take into account these critical and cognitive linguistic predispositions. The period of optimal language learning that is postulated by nativists is supported by neuro-scientific evidence. Apparently there is a disadvantage in starting second language instruction late, namely the relatively reduced time period for learning. (Genesee 1987 p.150) Similarly in a behaviorist point of view delaying formal instruction reduces the opportunities for receiving comprehensible input and interaction and consequently less scope for response -reinforcement to take place. The language competence that a young child has acquired during early grades can serve as a solid ground on which to build many sophisticated language skills in senior grades. (Genesee 1987 p.150)

## 2. Methodology

Both primary and secondary data were collected in the research. Primary data consisted of a grammaticality judgment test, syllabi of grades 1, 2 and 3, direct observation and interviews with teachers, parents and principals.

A grammaticality judgment test was administered to a grade 3 class in a government school. The class consisted of 21 students; both girls and boys. The selected government school was *Siddhartha College Ampitiya* in Sri Lanka which was a semi urban school. It was selected on the basis that ABOE functions as the only means of exposure to the second language in grade 1 and 2. Their counterparts were in a private school following the local curriculum in the city of *Kandy*. The selected grade three classes comprised of 39 boys. In the private school second language instruction begins formally from grade one itself. Having their autonomy as a private organization they have chosen to teach English in a formal manner from the initial grade. In the selected private school supplementary materials are taught under the guidance of an English teacher paying attention to the development of all four skills. Grammaticality judgment test (Cook, V.1993.p.88) was designed to cover all areas of basic grammar which are used in the text book of grade three.

The test paper comprises of ten sets of questions. Each set has one correct answer and a wrong answer out of which the

pupil had to tick the correct one. The questions test their awareness of ten simple grammatical formations in English. All sentences are based on the frequently used structures in the grade three text books. They are not required to write anything but expected to identify the correct structure instinctively.

The test was to judge the students' degree of familiarity with simple grammatical structures frequently used in the English text book of grade three. The test was a grammaticality judgment test in written form. The test comprised of ten pairs of sentences. Each pair contains one grammatically correct sentence juxtaposed with one incorrectly written sentence. Seemingly they are alike except for one rule violation in one of the duo. Sentences are simple sentences in which the length ranges from 3-5 words. The rule types tested in the sentences are:

- 1) Wh questions
- 2) Yes /no questions
- 3) Third person singular
- 4) Auxiliary verbs
- 5) Pronouns
- 6) Nouns (persons)
- 7) Nouns(singularity/plurality)
- 8) Articles
- 9) Present progressive
- 10) Word order

The ten rule types were selected to represent the frequently found structures in the grade three English text books provided for government school students.

### Wh questions

Two sentences are placed successively as Set no 1 in the paper. Out of them one is ungrammatical whereas the other is impeccable. The ungrammatical wh question has no subject-auxiliary inversion. The subjects were expected to judge the correct one out of the two.

1. (a) Where you live?  
(b) Where do you live?  
Yes/ no questions  
In the pair of sentences that tests this rule type the error is in the inversion of "be" verb. In the incorrect sentence the "be" verb is copied and not inverted;
2. a) Is she tall?  
b) Is she is tall  
Third person singular  
In the following pair of sentences, the ill-formed sentence is created by omitting the 's' ending in the lexical verb;
3. a) Ravi likes ice cream  
b) Mala like ice cream  
Auxiliary words  
To test the familiarity with this rule type, subjects were provided with one correct sentence placed along with one incorrect one. In the ill-formed sentence the auxiliary verb violates the accepted norm by using an incorrect auxiliary verb;
4. a) How old are you?

b) How old do you?

**Singularity /plurality of pronouns**

Subjects were expected to identify the meaning of the given pronouns. In the given pair of sentences, rule violation is in the subject verb agreement. Students were expected to identify the plural form from the singular form of the pronoun.

5. a) they is good
- b) She is good

**Nouns- (persons)**

The pair of sentences for this rule contained first person singular noun with an incorrect form of verb "be" is placed along with a third person singular noun with a corresponding form of verb : "be"

6. a) I are your friend
- b) She is my friend

**Nouns (singularity and plurality)**

The error in this pair of sentences is found in the auxiliary verb, which does not agree with the plural noun.

7. a) Dogs are pets
- b) Dogs is pets

**Definite article "the"**

The familiarity with the use of the definite article was tested with a basic sentence pattern. In the incorrect sentence in which grammar rule is violated, definite article is found preceding a proper noun.

8. a) The Pancha is my friend
- b)Kandu is my friend

**Present progressive**

Since simple sentences in this structure are found frequently in the grade three text book, subjects were presumed to be familiar with the correct form. In the ungrammatical sentence "be" verb is omitted.

9. a) a boy is speaking
- b)a boy speaking

**Word order**

In the incorrect sentence of the pair, basic rules of word order in English are violated. In the pair of sentences to test subjects' awareness of word order in English, a sentence corresponding to the pattern modal verb+subject+verb+object is found. In the ill formed sentence the words are rearranged violating the rule:

10. a) Can ride he bicycle?
- b) Can he ride bicycle?

The subjects were given a paper containing the ten pairs of sentences and they were asked to identify and tick the correct sentences.

**2.1 Interviews**

Interviews were held with the following stakeholders.

- Principle and teachers teaching grade one and two of one urban public school
- Principle and English language teachers of one semi urban government school

- Principle and teachers of English language in a rural public school
- Teachers teaching English in grade one and two in a private school

The following interview questions were posed to the teachers and the principles of the selected schools.

- Do you think ABOE is adequate in grade one and two for students to acquire the expected level of proficiency they need to follow formal English education which is to begin in grade three?
- Can the class teachers handle ABOE effectively?
- Do you use any extra materials in those classes to teach English?
- Do you introduce reading and writing in the first two grades of the primary classes?
- Do you evaluate English language proficiency of the students at the end of the term?

**2.2 Direct Observation**

An English lesson in the private school was directly observed. The class was a grade two class in Sri Chadananda College Kandy. Lesson materials, activities and methods were taken notice of.

**2.2.1 Secondary Data**

Government publications of NIE (National Institute of Education) who is the major authority in curriculum Development in government schools were studied. Researches done by local researchers on Activity based oral English and related topics were drawn from. Academic journals and websites were also referred to.

**2.2.2 Data Analysis**

The result of the grammaticality judgment test shows a noticeable discrepancy between the two groups of subjects. Subjects who represent the private school have done far better than the subjects in the government school in eight questions out of ten.

Table 1 below indicates percentages of correct answers given for each question by the subjects of *Siddhartha College* at grammaticality judgment test.

**Table 1:** Average Marks obtained by subjects in *Siddhartha College*

Grammar structures tested	Average marks obtained for each question Siddhartha college %
Wh questions	57
Yes/no questions	38
3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular	19
Auxiliary verbs	57
Pronouns	52
Nouns (persons)	62
Nouns (singular/plural)	33
Articles	52
Present Progressive	38
Word order	66

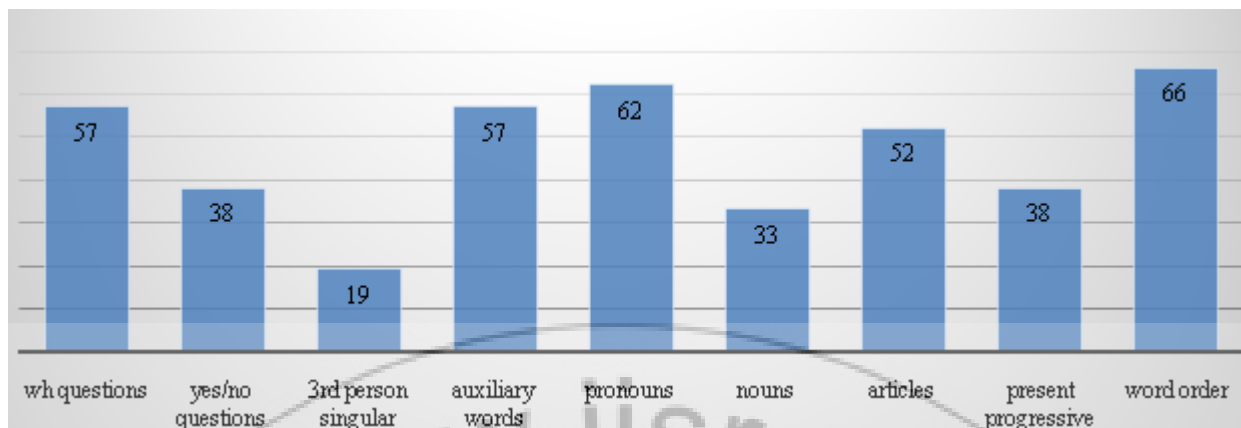


Chart 1: Average marks for each question: Siddhartha College

According to the data, the highest average is 66 which have been received for the question one- word order. In contrast the lowest marks are obtained for 3rd person singular.

The marks obtained by the students of Sri Chandananda College are as follows.

Table 2: Average marks obtained by the students for each subject in Chandanada College

Grammar structures tested	Average of marks for each question Sri Chandanada college %
Wh questions	100
Yes/no questions	49
3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular	84
Auxiliary verbs	87
Pronouns	72
Nouns (persons)	90
Nouns (singular)	87
Articles	36
Present progressive	97
Word order	62

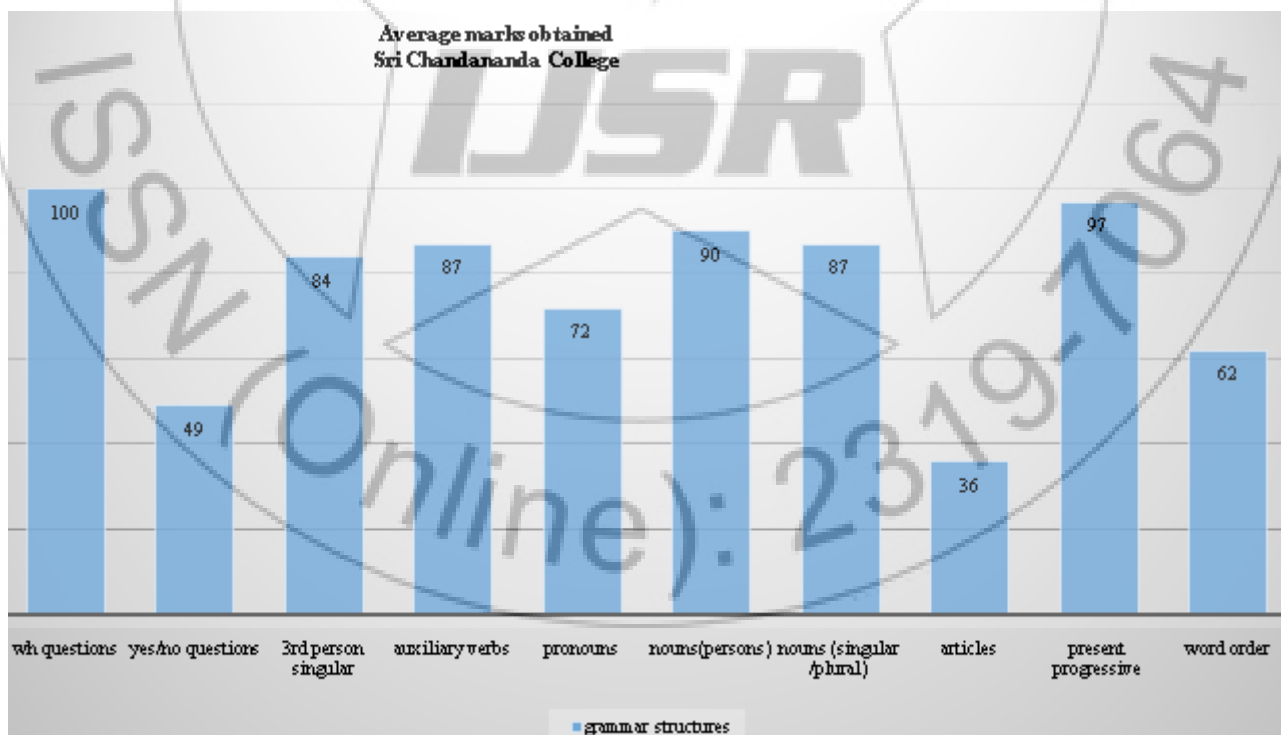


Chart 2: Average marks obtained by Chandanandians

Chandanandians have been able to score their highest average as 100% for wh questions. Their lowest average is

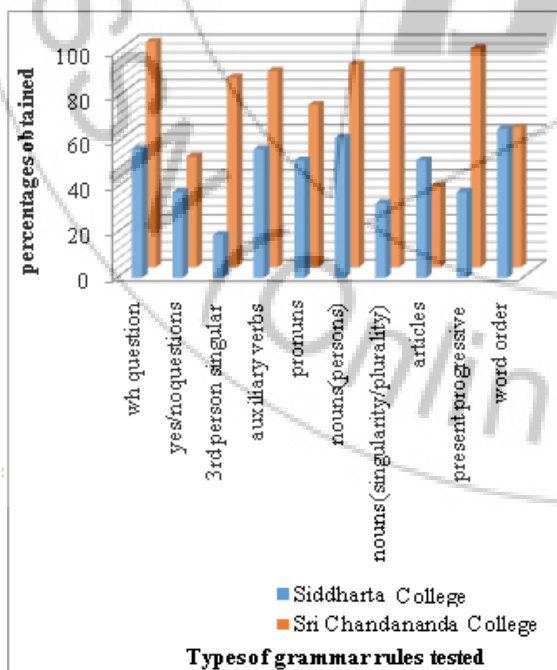
for the sentence on articles. That is as low as 36%. However except for three items their marks range between 72 -100.

Graphical presentation of the averages of each question obtained by Chandanandians places them in a somewhat superior position compared to their counterparts in Siddhartha College. In the following table the average of total marks obtained by both groups are displayed. (Average was obtained by dividing the aggregate of total marks obtained for each paper by the subjects in the group by the number of subjects sat for the paper. Aggregate of total marks is calculated by di)

The tested hypothesis of this study involves examining whether formal English instruction in grades 1 and 2 could have a significant impact on SL language development in children. The results of the grammaticality judgment test tabulated above show a noticeable gap between the two groups. Subjects were grouped based on whether or not they received formal instruction in English in grades one and two. The results of the grammaticality judgment test stand as strong evidence to prove that formal instruction in English in grade one and two have significantly influenced the proficiency level of grade three students. The following table positions the average marks obtained by each group side by side making it easier for comparison.

**Table 3:** Average marks obtained by Siddhartha College and Sri Chandananda College

Grammar rules tested	Average marks obtained	
	Siddhartha college %	Sri Chandananda college %
1. Wh questions	57	100
2. Yes/no questions	38	49
3. 3rd person singular	19	84
4. Auxiliary verbs	57	87
5. Pronouns	52	72
6. Nouns(persons)	62	90
7. Nouns(singularity/ plurality)	33	87
8. Articles	52	36
9. Present progressive	38	97
10. Word order	66	62



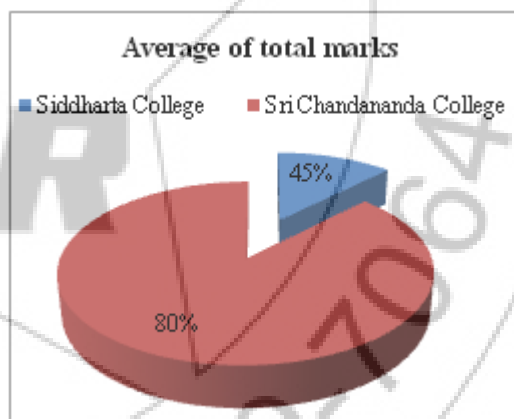
**Chart 3:** percentages of the correct answers given for each question by the two groups of subjects.

The graphical presentation of data indicates that Sri Chandananda College has outperformed their counterparts. The first comparison involves acquisition of wh question construction. Only 57% of the subjects of Siddhartha College got the answer right in contrast to the 100 % score of their counterparts in Sri Chandananda College. However the largest discrepancy in figures can be observed in 3rd person singular (Q.3) where difference reaches 75%. Subjects representing Sri Chandananda College have performed better than their counterparts in eight questions out of ten. Siddhartha college also have performed better in Articles (Q8) and word order question (Q: 10) In Q: 8 the difference as a percentage is 16% In Q: 10 the difference is only 4%. Another question where there is a significant difference is Q: 9 –Present progressive. Subjects of Chandananda have obtained a higher percentage of the correct answer where the difference between the two groups is 59%.

As for the total marks obtained by two groups, once again Sri Chandananda College stands ahead. According to table 2 average of total marks obtained by the subjects of Siddhartha College is 45 % while Sri Chandananda College have obtained 80% as the average of their total marks. Meanwhile students of Siddhartha College have scored an average total of only 45%.

**Table 4:** Average of total marks

School	Average of the total marks
Siddhartha college-Ampitiya	45%
Sri Chandananda college-Kandy	80%



**Chart 4:** Average of total marks

The above pie chart graphically presents the overall performance of the subjects. Far better performance of Sri Chandananda College in comparison to their counterparts in Siddhartha College provide empirical data in support of the hypothesis formal instruction in English from grade one has a strong positive impact on the acquisition of L2.

### 3. Discussion

Teachers, parents and even principles revealed in the interviews that delaying to teach writing and reading of English makes it very difficult for students to follow the text book in grade three. Moreover many expressed the view that children should be exposed to rich input of second language from an earlier grade. Though many parties concerned,

opted for an earlier start, they would not be permitted to do so owing to the restrictions laid down by the curriculum.

But, on the other hand private bodies of education use their autonomy to address the issue. Deviating from the common curriculum they would resort to supplementary texts and materials to impart formal instruction of L2 from the very first grade. Through the grammar test it was proven that formal instruction from grade one has impacted the level of knowledge of the students in grade three in a positive manner.

In theoretical point of view, subjects of *Chandananda College* were probably given more opportunity over a longer period of time to practice grammar structures in a formal setting. The test proves they had a stronger sense of right and wrong where grammar is concerned or they had a better "feel" for accuracy. (Krashen 1982) Accordingly it is reasonable to assume their better performance in the test is a result of automatization of L2 rules through continuous practice over a longer time period. Researchers postulate that automatization is crucially important in L2 acquisition because it leads to improved L2 performance (VanPatten, 1987)

The other obvious reason why formal English instruction has been excluded from the initial grades is the widely held notion that early L2 instruction might affect L1 development of children negatively. In any society L1 proficiency is generally valued over that of L2, and promoted especially during the first years of school life. (Hayes 2005 p. 27)) Some educationists are of the view that early instruction in English might cause confusion between the two languages- L1 and L2 (Chang K S, p. 63). On the other hand the results and findings of the study did not bring forth any empirical evidence to reinforce the opinion of the alleged negative effect of L2 on L1. For example sample of Chandananda College of the grammaticality judgment test was far better than their counterparts. They had received formal instruction in English from grade one. An inquiry into their performance at public examinations such as G.C.E Ordinary level exam and scholarship examination in grade 5, has negated any such negative notion regarding the influence of L2 on L1. Particularly in Grade 5 scholarship examination candidates' creativity in mother tongue is one of the assessment criteria. In 2014 percentage of pass rate of grade 5 scholarship exam is 20% which is regarded as a high percentage (School sources Sri Chandananda College Kandy 2014) satisfactory pass rates in public exams stand as strong proof in favour of their unaffected L1 proficiency.

#### 4. Conclusion

Many countries in Asia consider L2 instruction in primary grades mandatory. Countries in Europe too have identified the significance of early L2 instruction. The need for taking formal L2 instruction seriously has been felt by many nations world over owing to the rapid development in technology. It has been understood that proficiency in the global language is mandatory for all citizens in the world to interact and communicate with one another in any kind of situation. Consequently many nations world over have identified earlier commencement of formal L2 instruction

would yield fruitful results in making more proficient speakers of L2. An overview of the international scenario reveals that many nations were considering lowering of formal L2 instruction to the initial grades.

Several studies apparently show that formal learning environments are best for attaining second language proficiency as it supports both acquisition and learning. (Krashen 1986 p.6) Accordingly, it is evident that subjects from Chandananda College are doubly advantaged over their counterparts in terms of opportunities for practice in L2 structures and age of commencement of formal instruction in L2.

The findings suggest that students of Sri Lankan government schools are at a disadvantage owing to delaying of formal instruction in English. The delay starting formal L2 instruction seemingly could have other repercussions too. For example, it can affect their ability to follow studies in English medium from grade 6 onwards. Sri Lankan government has introduced English medium education from grade six onwards in the educational reforms in 1997. Though it is an ambivalent phenomenon in the field of education in the country, theory questions the success as regards the adequacy of English proficiency level of the average student in government schools. According to the research, in order to be able to follow education in English, students should have learnt it at least for five years. Studies have revealed that it takes at least five to seven years of learning to reach a level of English language proficiency sufficient for academic success in English (Cummin, 1979; Collie, 1987, Thomas and Collie, 2002) Such studies suggest that 3 years of formal instruction in English probably does not provide a strong foundation for English medium education in grade 6.

It is evident from the grammaticality judgment test conducted in *Siddhartha College Ampitiya* and *Sri Chandananda College Kandy* that those subjects who received formal instruction in grade 1 and two seem to have a noticeable advantage over those who did not receive formal instruction in English. They seem to be more familiar with the structures found in grade three text books. They may not be explicitly aware of the rules of L2. But they seem to have developed a stronger sense of grammatical accuracy. On the other hand lack of exposure partly owing to the deliberate down play of importance attributed to L2 in public schools (NIE publication) seems to have hindered their L2 development.

#### 5. Findings

- 1) In the year 1997 Activity Based Oral English was first introduced to grades one and two into the school curriculum of government schools. The main objective was to provide equal opportunities to all students in government schools to acquire language skills in English. (NIE publication 1998) Yet the study reveals there are shortcomings in implementing ABOE practically in schools. For example many class teachers find that they lack confidence to deliver the content of ABOE syllabus in English.

- 2) Teachers teaching English in grade three claim that students lack the competence to follow the content in the text book of grade three. They further said it would be much beneficial if the students were taught at least the alphabet in first two grades.
- 3) Principals of the government schools who were interviewed strongly believe students of grade one and two should be receiving English instruction of formal kind. Most of them try to impart some extra knowledge to students by way of projects conducted by English trained teachers who are found in excess in most urban and semi-urban schools.
- 4) Parents who have realized the necessity of English knowledge as a basic skill try to seek outside help to teach their children English as they believe in school they are not taught adequately for them to be able to reach a high proficiency level and they prefer to start teaching their children English as early as possible.
- 5) But the situation is different in the private school sector. Though they follow the local syllabus in mother tongue, formal English instruction begins in grade one itself. The reason is that they are aware of the demand for English and the advantages of starting to learn it early. Moreover they are independent of the strict inspection of department of education, being private bodies. Therefore they have the freedom to teach English in a formal manner from grade one itself under a specialist teacher in English.
- 6) However it seems one of the primary objectives of ABOE syllabus has been abated in practice. Namely whether ABOE has been able to provide equal opportunities to all Sri Lankan students is doubtful as the most deprived group in this regard seems to be the students of rural schools –the children of the rural areas. They seem to be getting the least exposure to English as usual.
- 7) In many countries in the world policy makers are considering lowering the start age of formal instruction in English. This is due to the increasing awareness worldwide that English has become the major global language and it is a basic skill that should be imparted to children while their very young. There is no internationally accepted age to start Formal instruction in second language. Yet fuelled by such theories that claim the importance of age factor in language learning there is a considerable tendency towards lowering the start age of teaching English formally as a second language in the first grade at school.
- 8) Reasons for excluding formal instruction in English seem to be both cultural and psychological in the Sri Lankan situation as discussed in the research earlier. Yet the researcher is of the view with carefully designed teaching /learning materials to teach primary grade students, any possible impediment of cultural sensitivity could be avoided.
- 9) Further the public opinion held by certain sectors of society that early L2 instruction may cause confusion with their L1 development can be easily refuted with the findings of the research. For example the high pass rate in grade five scholarship exams in the recent years of Chandananda College disapproves any such notion. Those figures vouch for their unaffected L1 development in spite of receiving formal instruction in English.
- 10) Moreover if one expects to follow English medium education from grade 6 onwards in a government school, three years of formal instruction in English would not be adequate to reach the expected proficiency level.
- 11) Results of the grammaticality judgment test strongly supports the hypothesis that formal instruction in English from grade one onward have brought the students to the expected level of proficiency in grade three.
- 12) Average marks obtained in the test by each group for each question show that subjects of Sri Chandananda College Kandy have done better in eight questions out of ten.
- 13) There is also a vast discrepancy in the total marks obtained by each group. Average of total marks of the student group of *Sri Chandananda College* is 80% while it is only 45% among the subjects of *Siddhartha College Ampitiya*.
- 14) It is also seen the highest mark range is dominated by the students of Chandananda College Kandy. For example 59% of the students of *Chandananda College* have obtained 80-100 marks. Conversely only 9% of students in *Siddhartha college* fall within that range.
- 15) All in all, test results of the grammaticality judgment test stand as empirical data to claim that formal English instruction in grades one and two has had a strong positive effect on the expected level of proficiency in grade three students.

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