

# English Language Performance and Teaching Profession - A Case Study of the Conflict-affected Vavuniya District of Sri Lanka

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## 1. Introduction

In light of the sociopolitical context in Sri Lanka, the idea of creating bilingual – bicultural Tamil – English coeducation has been in and of itself, an enterprise to facilitate social harmony through a third medium, English. Unfortunately, the Sri Lankan language education system has not facilitated a trilingual (Tamil, Sinhala and English) system which has been one of the original causes of the protracted conflict.

It is necessary to initiate and foster egalitarian Tamil – Sinhala cooperation in education, primarily through the development of ELT programs and bilingual and multicultural coeducational institutions. The core of language teacher education must centre on the activity of the teaching itself, the teacher who does it, the context in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done (Freeman and Johnson, 1998). Teacher education is posing great challenges to teachers within the English as a second language (ESL) context in countries, such as Sri Lanka in particular. This context requires the language teachers to have "a combination of competencies and background that may be unprecedented in the preparation of language teachers" (Curtain and Pesola, 1994: 241). However, relatively little has been studied in ESL teacher education, even less among Sri Lankan Tamil teachers of English teaching at the school level.

The treatment of learner error, grappling with such issues as whether, when, what and how to correct, has been described as 'a potential crisis point' in a teacher's classroom life (Allwright, 1988:198). The present government of Sri Lanka introduced many educational reforms at all levels of education suitable for the 21st century. One of the key components addressed the urgent needs for professional development for in-service teacher education, which has the impact on the secondary teachers of English, and millions of students learning English at the secondary level in Sri Lanka. Upgrading their subject and pedagogical knowledge of this enormous number of teachers - with only less than 10% of the secondary teachers of English respectively holding a university degree either in English or ELT at the moment of this study - provides a daunting task for Colleges of Education Colleges and Teacher Training Colleges.

## **2. Problematization: English Education in Conflict-Ridden Areas**

English language education has the potential to help overcome a wide variety of societal and cultural tensions. However it remains controversial and frequently misunderstood. The present study is also based on a context in which socio - historical and political factors, in conflict-ridden areas, influence language attitudes and the implementation of bilingual and ELT educational initiatives geared toward encouraging socio-cultural tolerance and the recognition of each of the participating groups while enabling students to become bilingual. More specifically, it is necessary to look at how a particular bilingual Tamil - English or ELT program is interpreted and implemented in an integrated Government educational initiative in the war-torn Northern Sri Lanka. The current effort hopes to stimulate educators, English Language teachers, students and policymakers into thinking about how to develop dual-language or ELT programs to address the particular contextual challenges which, when left unaccounted for, can prejudice their ELT and bilingual educational efforts. It will further ignite the conflict situation with ethno-nationalism.

Like all the other programs, in ELT programs, intergroup power relations play an important role in either reproducing or overcoming conditions that subordinate language minority students and their communities (Paulson, 1994). The language practices of educational institutions are caught-up in the legitimization of power relations among ethno-linguistic groups. Recent studies conducted by Papademetri and Routoulas (2001) emphasize the ambivalence reflected in the views and opinions of minority groups toward bilingual and bicultural education. Bissonauth and Offord (2001) suggest that the association of language with high status and prestige influences language use in multilingual societies. Obeng (2000) shows how attitudes encompassing a wide spectrum of values, beliefs, and emotions concerning language influence participants' perspectives toward languages in general and toward educational bilingual initiatives in particular. As has been shown in recent ethnographic studies, there is no doubt that political and historical contexts affect people's judgments and opinions about languages and their use (Obeng, 2000). Yet, for the most part, studies in language attitudes have paid little attention to these.

## **3. Objectives**

The present study is a partial attempt to understand and approach these challenges on the part of English teachers in the war-torn Northern Sri Lanka. The study is concerned with the influence of social, historical, and political contexts in conflict-

ridden areas on the implementation of bilingual and ELT educational initiatives geared toward encouraging tolerance and the recognition of each of the participating groups while also enabling the students to become bilingual.

It was decided to survey a group of ESL teachers in Vavuniya as an initial case study. The purpose of this study is

1. to explore who these ESL teachers are,
2. to explore under what teaching context these teachers are teaching,
3. to explore what their professional development goals are in TESL.
4. to identify the teacher attitudes to error treatment.

## **4. Literature Review**

### ***4.1. The Sociopolitical and Educational Background***

As much as any other modern nation-state, the state of Sri Lanka is a product of an invented national identity institutionalized through public education, a standardized legal system. The protracted linguistic conflicts in the provinces of the North and East and the awakening of Sinhala and Tamil national consciousness have problematized the seemingly natural construct of the role of English. Paraphrasing Edward Said, it could be said that we are dealing with “two asymmetrical communities with symmetrical fears” (1994, p. 9). Both sides believe they have a monopoly on the objective truth of the conflict and on the identification of the perpetuating villain. These perceptions undermine the prospects for conflict resolution. The traditional and nonindustrial social and cultural character of Tamil society in the context of Sri Lanka’s modern semi- industrialized makeup has further implicated the ELT in the North.

All school sectors fall under the umbrella of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education. In spite of the structural constraints reflected in the educational system, the Tamil population of Sri Lanka has made great progress in literacy. The ELT professionals lacked physical facilities, teacher qualifications, retention rates, and levels of special services especially in this conflict situation.

Some of the features of the Tamil educational system in Sri Lanka reflect the unique sociocultural background of this population. Within the classroom, there exists an authoritarian model of student–teacher relationships and a formal teaching approach that



is pedagogically very traditional. For teachers there is a sense of conflict regarding their loyalty toward their employer, the Ministry of Education, and their loyalty toward their Tamil community. The Ministry of Education imposes curricular constraints on the English education by, for example, not allowing schools to freely choose their own narratives concerning issues related to their cultural and national histories. The security measures traditionally used by Sri Lankan officialdom (e.g., authorization permits) to restrict teacher appointments is one evidence. Consequently, an enormous gap has developed between the two systems, leaving the Tamil educational system decades behind.

#### **4.2. Conceptual Background**

'English Language Performance Lapses' accommodates all the performance deviations such as errors, lapses, and mistakes (Corder, 1973). But the definition of each differs from the other. Errors are not recognizable to the learner and so are not amenable to self-correction, but lapses are recognizable, being those slips of the tongue or pen, false starts, and confusions of structure or 'syntactic blends', typical of native speaker and ESL learner alike. Allwright & Bailey, (1991:88) say they are not failings in competence and lapses are sometimes referred to as 'performance errors'. Mistakes are 'inappropriate utterances' (Corder, 1973), where there is a failure to match the language to the situation. These distinctions are valuable for the teacher at classroom level in determining when and how to treat a deviation, but identifying the category of a deviation is problematic. It can be done only through analysis, based on detailed knowledge of the situation and the learner (Dulay, Burt & Krashen; 1982:1939).

A study in this area is complicated by the fact that there are potentially a large variety of factors which can influence the extent to which a teacher reacts to learner error. The level needs and purposes of the learner, the aims of the course, the cultural mores of the society, in particular its attitudes to language regularity and its perceptions of the roles and status of teachers and students, are among the factors which can operate here. There is consequently a danger of confounding the effect of different variables (Chaudron; 1988:185) and research needs to be interpreted with this caution in mind.

James (1977) compared the responses of seventeen native speaker teachers and seventeen non-native speaker teachers to fifty sentences demonstrating a range of syntactic and lexical errors, and concluded that the latter tended to mark more severely.



However, James observed that they tended to fall into two groups; one, relatively tolerant of error in line with the former, the other, intolerant. His study speculated on the relationship between the differing ESL teacher tendencies and levels of language proficiency and teacher training.

Hughes & Lascaratou (1982) showed the native speakers, particularly the non-teachers, judged errors much more leniently than the non-native speakers. The difference between these two groups was rated significant. Intelligibility was indeed the main criterion for determining gravity among the natives, while the latter were more concerned with the extent to which an error infringed a basic rule that they felt these students should already have mastered.

Hughes & Lascaratou surmised that the greater leniency of the native speakers was probably attributable to better knowledge of the language, and to a greater awareness of the wide and flexible scope of its norms. The results had implications for the teaching style of ESL teachers, whom they felt should pay more attention to the communicative focus of ELT and to the criterion of intelligibility rather than to accuracy alone.

Sheorey's (1986) study also confirmed the findings of Hughes & Lascaratou showing native speakers much more tolerant of error. Sheorey sees these results as instructive for non-native teachers. Based on the premise that it is important for them to acquire a native-like sensitivity to error and, he urges the ESL teachers to move into line with native speaker teachers, adopting a more lenient approach and adjusting their perceptions of the relative gravity of different error categories.

Another vexed question here is why non-native teachers appear to be less tolerant of error. Hughes & Lascaratou attribute it to differential language proficiency between native and non-native, the native speaker teachers' tolerance being based on 'better knowledge of the language, particularly of the wide variety held, as a survey of over two hundred teachers, the majority of whom were the latter, confirms (Medgyes : 1994). The picture of the latter emerges as one where they are "usually preoccupied with accuracy, the formal features of English, the nuts and bolts of grammar, the printed word and formal registers. Many lack fluency, have a limited insight into the intricacies of meaning, are often in doubt about appropriate language use, have poor listening and speaking skills, and are not familiar with colloquial English" (Medgyes: 1994:59).

He sees this as explaining the results of error treatment studies where the latter lay great stress on grammatical errors and priorities accuracy over intelligibility. The

native teachers generally regard language as a means of achieving a communicative goal but the non-native teachers regard English primarily as a school subject to be learnt and only secondarily as a communicative medium to be used. Nevertheless, he insists that 'deficient knowledge of English' is the main factor in determining error treatment practice (Medgyes; 1994:63).

## **5. Research Methodology**

The tools were mainly structured questionnaire and interview and a correction task secondarily. The random sample consisted of twenty Vavuniya district ESL teachers belonging to the available five national schools in the Vavuniya Divisional Secretariat area. Four teachers from each school were selected. Most of the schools had four English teachers in average. It follows that sound sampling procedures can compensate for restricted sample size (brown: 1988). Teachers who were accessible to the researcher were chosen through personal contacts and those were the ones more or less available in these five major schools in Vavuniya. It has been called 'convenience' and 'purposive' sampling (Cohen & mannion: 1985). Such a sampling procedure is common in small-scale or preliminary studies, though this too reduces the generalisability of the data (Nunan; 1992:142). The names of the schools selected were such as Rambaikulam Girls Maha Vithiyalayam (RGM), Muslim Maha Vithiyalayam (MMV), Saivapragasa Ladies College (SLC), Tamil Maha Vithiyalayam (TMV), and Vibulanantha Maha Vithiyalayam (VMV).

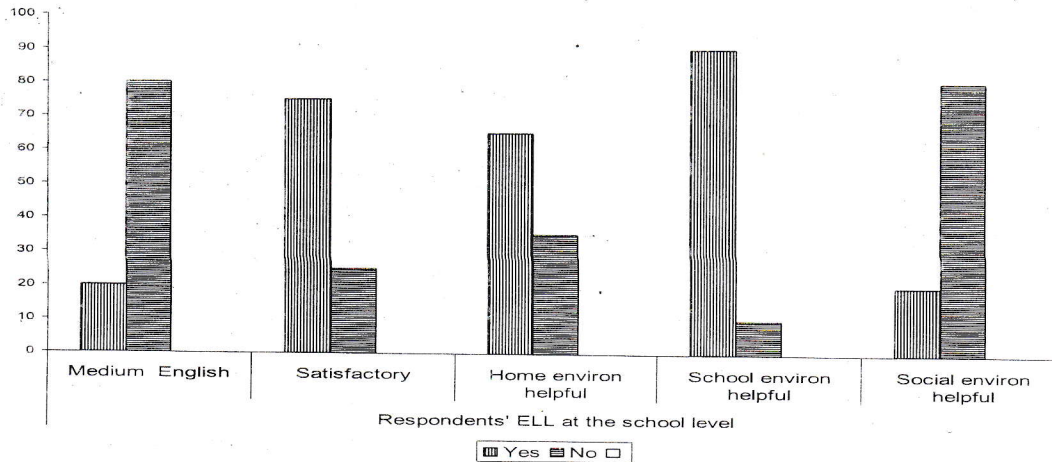
Qualitative data were carefully analyzed, looking for patterns and thematic issues of relevance. Quantitative data obtained from the structured questionnaires were submitted to statistical analyses, mainly for comparisons. This study analyses teacher attitudes, professional efficiency, bilingual perspectives, and strategies, based primarily on qualitative data on educational events and contextual sociocultural processes involved in the functioning of the schools.

## **6. Data Analysis and Findings**

The chart 1 gives information about the English language learning situation when they were at the school. It proves that their social environment was not conducive to learning English and most of them studied in Tamil medium. However, they expressed their satisfaction in learning English in general.

Most fundamental to the sampling procedure was a valid application of ESL teaching concepts. Though there were some significant personal, educational and professional differences among the sampled respondents, the sample were tried to confine to less controversial cases. 80% of the respondents were between the age ranges of 30-40 years.

**Chart. 1. Respondents' ELL at the School Level**



Source: Field Survey 2004/2005

The sample consists of people for whom English is their second language, which they acquired primarily in school and English mass media. While the distinctions between international varieties of English are somewhat elusive, this is a 'British English' they have learned and teach. The ESL teachers were themselves largely schooled in British English. Being Tamils, 75% were Hindus.

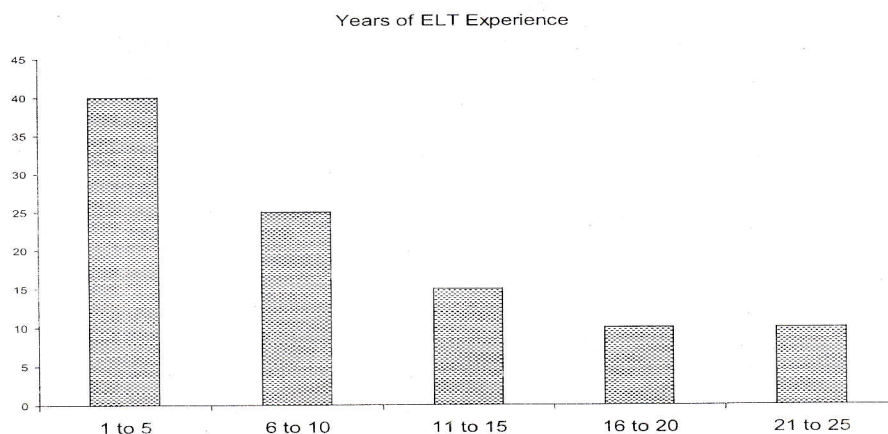
They were born in the Northeast of Sri Lanka and Tamil is as their mother tongue. All had their first contact with English at school and learnt the language through formal instruction. Learning began before puberty in all cases, which is seen by some as conferring a decisive advantage (Lanneberg: 1967).

If early exposure is significant, this is relevant to the concern of this study to identify the teachers whose level of English is high, for only then would individual differences be meaningful. 45% possessed only Advanced Level (A/L) academic qualification. 55% were graduates.



For these teachers, it also seemed important to establish criteria for professional competence. The untrained 'teachers' of English were fewer than they were. It would be natural to find that they had difficulties in judging acceptability or had an incoherent approach to error treatment. Thus, all the respondents had some professional grounding in ELT. The ESL teachers were all either graduates of the Sri Lankan universities or the trained teachers of the Sri Lankan state teacher-training colleges. They were therefore well-acquainted with the issues this study is concerned with, and their language level was more or less high. Although some had passed out very recently, they were in general an experienced group of teachers. It is customary in Sri Lanka to teach before and sometimes, during one's training. They had experience teaching learners of all ages and all had taught up to at least the Ordinary Level under the Sri Lankan educational system. 30% of the respondents were appointed as teachers in-between 1984-1990; 15% in-between 1991-1995; 20% in-between 1996-2000; only 35% were appointed in-between 2001-2005. So the majority are senior teachers. Chart 2 illustrates the years of service of the teachers.

**Chart. 2. Years of ELT Experience**

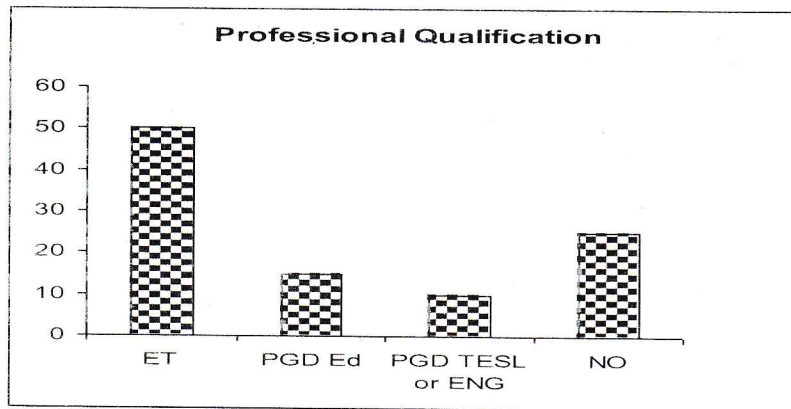


*Source: Field Survey 2004/2005*

They included respondents with post-graduate study experience, and three of them were currently teaching at the tertiary level institutions such as Vavuniya Campus, Technical College, College of Education and so on. Some had as a minimum requirement

such as the Certificate in English or ELT, while five of them had either the PGD in Education or TESL or Diploma in English. Eleven of them were university graduates. Some were good at using Sinhala language available in Sri Lanka as well.

*Chart 3. Professional Qualifications*



*Source: Field Survey 2004/2005*

Thus, levels of linguistic awareness and ability were high. The average length of teaching experience for them was six years, involving work with most age groups and levels, including, in all cases. All were currently employed at both public and private language institutes in the North of Sri Lanka. Further as Chart 3 shows, 50% underwent English Teacher Training (ET) and the other 50% possessed Postgraduate qualification in Educational Training.

The female representation in the sample was 75%. Though the researcher is not aware of any research suggesting that gender is a significant factor in error treatment, they were less balanced in terms of this factor than ideally he would have liked. They were broadly comparable as regards age. Another possible interference factor, though based on rather impressionistic evidence, may be cultural.

From the experience of the respective educational systems, the British system would be characterized as tending to be relatively permissive and democratic. It allowed the learner more freedom of expression and more autonomy in general. The Sri Lankan system and the teachers were educated as relatively rigid

and authoritarian, reflecting in large measure the ethic of orthodoxy encouraged by the hegemony of the Hindu and Catholic Church missionary schools, recent experience of military and ethnic conflict and the consequent upheaval of Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms. 95% started learning English while they were six to eleven years old.

### **6.1. *The Teachers***

It was discovered that among the 20 teachers in the survey 78.7% of them started to learn English when they were in junior secondary school (Grade 7-9, Age 13-14), and 8.5% started during senior secondary (Grade 10-12, Age 16-17). Only 12.8% started learning English when they were in elementary school. It has been studied (Krashen's critical period hypothesis, 1985) in the second language acquisition (SLA) that the age at which learning of another language starts is a crucial factor determining how proficient a learner can achieve. This indicates majority of these teachers started to learn English after the critical period.

When the teachers were asked to identify the kind of teaching methods when they were learning English, many reported grammar-translation method, very few reported communicative method and audio-lingual method respectively. However, the rest reported other methods and a combination of different methods. Regarding the context of their education, majority of them received their education from rural areas and small towns respectively. There is a disparity in regional distribution of the resources in Sri Lanka. Due to the poor staffing and relevant teaching facilities in Sri Lanka, the quality of English education varies to a great extent. The quality of teachers, teaching resources and the amount of time spent on English in class can vary depending on where a learner receives his/her education. Cities tend to have advantages over the quality of the teachers and teaching resources in Sri Lanka.

When these teachers were asked about their educational qualifications, many of them had a three-year degree certificate from teachers' colleges. A considerable number had a bachelor's degree, and 1 out of 20 teachers had a master's degree. Among the teachers, majority of them were currently teaching at the junior secondary level. As is reported in Sri Lanka, many teachers of English who are teaching at the junior secondary school do not have a bachelor degree with English or ELT or applied linguistics as a subject. However, the result also indicates that this group of teachers was relatively experienced.



From the result, it is understood that this group of teachers of English started to learn English after puberty. They were taught predominately by traditional teaching method. Majority of them had only three-year college education. They were, however, 'very experienced' teachers; many of them have more than 10 years' experience. Experience is measure red in terms of years of service than proficiency and performance. This shows a typical group of secondary teachers in the Sri Lankan context with limited English language proficiency and teaching methodologies, yet they are the major teaching force in Sri Lankan secondary schools.

## **6.2. *The ELT Implementation***

All teachers made great efforts to apply the "rule" during class periods. In each classroom, they planned the activities, allocating equal amounts of time for instruction in each language irrespective of the subject. Nonetheless, in spite of these efforts, symmetry has not been easy to achieve. Their students had only a very limited, if any, knowledge of English. English teachers, like all Tamil citizens in Sri Lanka, are generally bilingual having grown up in a context that uses English as the second language of communication. In addition, all the teachers in the schools had been trained in one of the regular English Teachers' colleges. The teachers, when engaging their students, sought to sustain the conversation in English although they switched to Tamil when they felt that they were not understood. The teachers communicated primarily in English, and more so with the Tamil children. The students preferred to interact with the teacher from their own national background.

The teachers' language proficiencies revealed that English instruction could have been more successful among the Tamil students provided that good attention had been paid on other aspects of ELT. Both the observations and the language assessment tests articulated this fact and made obvious that, an ideology based on symmetry would not in itself be sufficient to achieve the cherished dual-bilingual and English Language Learning (ELL) goals as fully as desired.

Though teachers' interactions were officially conducted in English on certain formal but rare occasions, and Tamil was the reigning language of teachers' meetings, training sessions, parents' meetings, and steering committee meetings. On the other hand, it has to be accepted that, with the introduction of English into the school curriculum, teachers and their students increasingly abandoned learning the language of the majority community, that is, Sinhala, or alternatively they reduced the amount of time invested in

such instruction. That may be a drawback in the language education system of Sri Lanka, for, in many schools, there are no Sinhala or Tamil teachers and teaching these languages is not in the curriculum planning or implementation. However, teachers also expressed positive feelings toward increasing the time allotted to the study of the English language.

### **6.3. *The Teaching Context***

The education qualifications required to teach in their current schools, their workload, their class size, and the influence of standardized testing on their instruction are analyzed below. Further it looks into their teaching responsibilities, their teaching activities, their teaching evaluation, the factors influencing their teaching, and the challenges they face in teaching English in Sri Lanka. This study explores from the teachers' perspectives the challenges their students face in learning English and the kind of activities they do to motivate their students to learn.

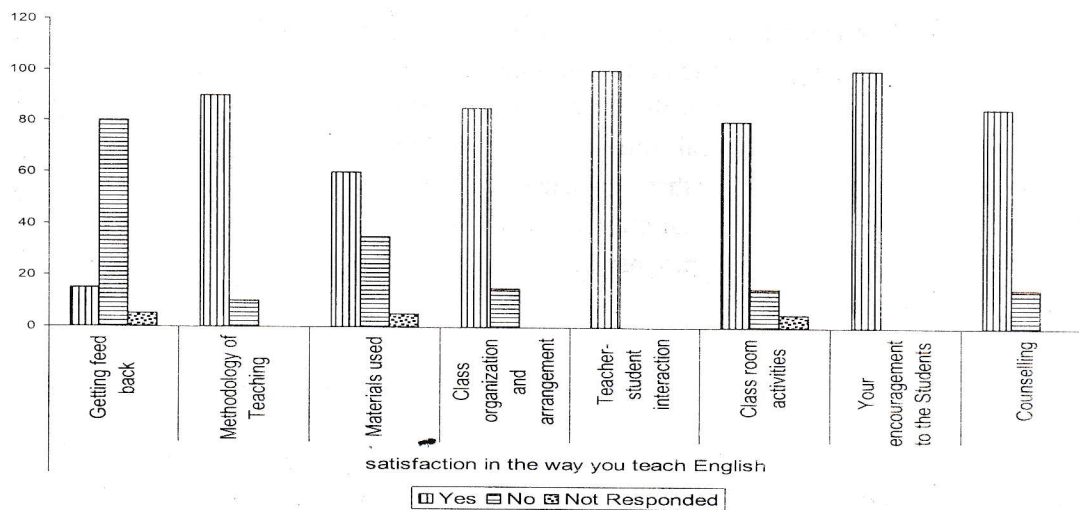
They reported that a certificate from teachers' colleges was required to teach in their current schools. None of the schools where the teachers were teaching required a master's degree. The rest commented that a combination of qualifications was required to teach in their schools. This again indicates a teaching force with limited language proficiency and lack of teaching methodology training within a three-year teacher education program. The teachers were teaching 25 hours per week. This seemed to be heavy considering the size of their classes. Many were teaching a class of 50 students which were extremely large for a language classroom where language interaction is a great challenge to these teachers. This demanding teaching context together with the lack of language proficiency and teaching methodology contribute to the current English language teaching situation in Sri Lankan secondary schools. In addition, within this environment, they commented that their students had to take standardized testing at the national, provincial, or district levels and such testing was influencing their teaching.

When asked how often certain teaching activities in their teaching were conducted, it was shown that the majority listed reading as the most commonly used activity whereas some mentioned practicing grammar items and learning vocabulary as the other two frequently used activities respectively in their teaching followed by doing mock exams and writing. Group discussion and conducting games are the least frequent activities in these teachers' classrooms. From this, we can almost sense the English teaching and learning atmosphere in Vavuniya secondary schools.

#### 6.4. Teaching Responsibilities

When the teachers were asked about the kind of teaching responsibilities they had in their schools, it turned out that 77% of the teachers were mainly involved in teaching. No one was involved with curriculum development. Very few teachers were involved with material development and administration (3%) and research (1%) respectively, 16% were involved with testing. When they were asked how their teaching was evaluated in their schools, it turned out that 75% of the teachers were evaluated by their students' test and examination scores. This indicates the important role that standardized testing plays in teaching and learning in Sri Lankan schools, and what would drive teachers to do more in their classrooms. However, teachers' opinions seemed to split half when they were asked about the impact of testing on their instruction. Completion of the subject contents and evaluation by principals or school inspectors were preferred by 7.5%; the rest of the choices such as evaluation by colleagues by 5.25%; own reflections on teaching by 2%; inspection of students' work by 1.5% and anonymous student evaluation of teaching by 1.25% trail behind. Furthermore, the factors mainly influencing these their teaching were also public examination (56.5%) followed by the need to obtain satisfaction in teaching (21.75%) and teaching experience and beliefs (9.5%). Professional training (4%), learners' expectations (2%), academic seminars or workshops (1.5%), teaching syllabus and past experience as a language learner (1.75%) and textbooks (1.25%) came next in the scale of significance.

**Chart 4. Satisfaction in the way you teach English**



Source: Field Survey 2004/2005

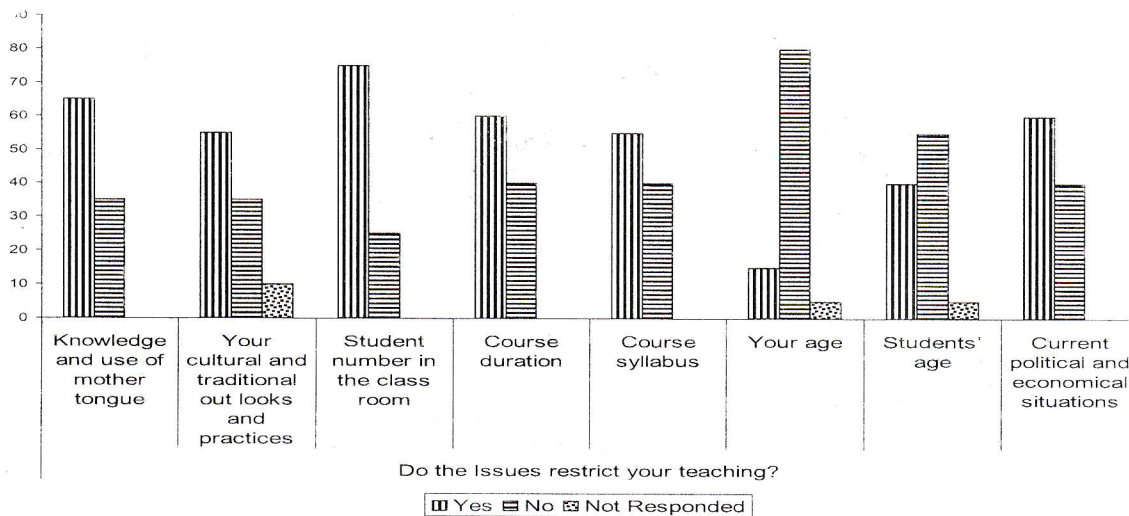


When asked about the challenges these teachers were facing teaching English in Vavuniya, 26% listed teaching methods, followed by 20.5% standardized testing, which also indicates an examination-driven teaching context. Besides, more than half of the teachers commented to be concerned about their own language proficiency (12%) and skills in English (10.5%), which is consistent considering the teachers' characteristics discussed above. And half were concerned about ways to motivate their students to learn (10%). Poor English learning environment (15%) and fewer class hours (6%) were given low priority.

Chart 4 shows that many were not satisfied with getting feedback from the students but all were satisfied with teacher-student interactions. Further many were satisfied with their methodology of teaching and even 60% with the materials they used. Satisfaction in the class room organization and arrangement was another positive trend. The other two such as teachers' encouragement to the students and counseling also were in practice. Then the answer to the question why there was such a poor performance on the students' part is that still many of them possessed the traditional and prescriptive attitudes regarding these issues. Still many practiced teacher-centred, chalk and talk methodology. Communicative pair and group activities were rarely encouraged. It seems that most of the respondents responded to these questions on the basis of the theoretical knowledge of ELT not of the way they really practiced.

Chart 5 shows whether the issues mentioned restricted their teaching. All the issues such as knowledge and use of mother tongue, our cultural and traditional out looks and practices, student number in the class room, course duration, and course syllabus, current political and economical situations are restricting factors except teacher and students' ages. It becomes clear that still teachers feel that knowledge and use of mother tongue, our cultural and traditional out looks and practices are restricting factors but the modern ELT experts have even proposed that these two, if properly integrated with ELT, will become supporting factors.

*Chart 5. Do the Issues Restrict your Teaching?*



*Source: Field Survey 2004/2005*

Many comparative language studies have emerged. Error analysis and L1 interference have become matters of ELT field to accommodate these issues. The other three such as student number in the class room, course duration, and course syllabus can be restricting factors if they appear in quantitatively unmanageable proportions. It is interesting to note that though they were satisfied with their teacher-student interactions, methodology of teaching, and the materials they used. The last issue-current political and economical situations - was also really a restricting factor in the Vavuniya district of Sri Lanka.

Vavuniya has been a place exposed to the destruction and vagaries by the intensive conflict. It has caused lot of unnecessary obstacles to ESL teachers and students. Everybody is blaming everybody else for what has happened. The senior teachers accused the juniors of not having been productive enough, ironically speaking, amidst a political and social situation destructive enough for the last three decades. They claim that it is the junior teachers' fault for every drawback the students' academic works. There is nobody taking a lead with research, which discourages the juniors to adapt the right path. There are Little Cliques meeting in the school corridors. The school environment should have a mature democracy in which all can have a good 'academic row' with good humor. Marking the examination papers is also another overburdened

task as there are a large number of students in large number of ELT classes. Unfortunately Vavuniya district has shortage of ELT staff to cater the needs of the whole district.

Another sad state of affairs is the zero level of student counseling especially when it comes to their financial pressing situation or their highly negative and demotivating attitudes to learning English and learning other subjects in English medium and this trend could be witnessed. Generally, very rarely students dared to come to the student counselor to address their personal problems but harmful to education. There is no any welfare service or the grants which are available at the time of necessity. The vehicle facilities for transport too were very poor in the district due to the war situation in the past. Both the students and the staff had to spend lot of money for it. Being located in the peripheries of Sri Lanka, and endangered by war threats, no any academic expert dared to visit the district to deliver his or her training service to the teachers. The ESL Teachers and students could not have the means to access internet ELT and ELL websites for fulfilling this need. It had been a severe demoralizing deprivation as it is realized in all the parts of the world that Internet can provide and guide both teachers and students living any parts of the world to become the students with international standards.

As colleagues, teachers need the cooperation of others to have a critical understanding of the changing career context appropriate to the war context and its region. Many schools suffered from serious problems of acquiring the essential infrastructure facilities and staffing in promoting ELT. They could not fulfill the task of training junior teachers to the changing trends and practices. Vavuniya lacked the ESL academic character of collaboration with others within and across institutions, departments and disciplines. Shaw and Perrons (1995:7) say that individual may be able to exert some influence of the culture of an organization, the shape of the hierarchy or the methods of recruitment and promotion, but they cannot, alone, affect the political, welfare or economic contexts in which we all live; only organized collective action can achieve change at this level.

The students showed more interest (majority with the intention of merely passing the English exams not acquiring the skills) in following the English classes. It will be clear that, only when the students feel the real necessity for using it in real situations like seeking jobs, and working in places where English is the medium of interaction, they give importance to it. Sadly the students had some "other real situations" like surviving in the



conflict constraints which did not press any importance in learning this language. In the classroom interaction, 65% of the respondents used both English and Tamil; 20% used only English and the rest use these two approaches depending on the classroom and lesson needs in turn.

Teachers have experienced that some students, though feeling indifference towards learning, they followed for the sake of obtaining a pass so that they can fulfill the job requirements. The ELT staff of the district could not manage the teaching part; sometimes it was very difficult to conduct the ELT activities due to physical, social, professional and attitudinal differences. There were shortcomings. Though teachers were paid, and conduct the sessions without fail, still it is difficult to say how efficiently they did it. Sometimes it was felt that it is difficult to convince the staff members older in age, about some innovations in ESL teaching as they look at the modern trends doubtfully. Really it has been a disappointing experience in the district.

### **6.5. Challenges and Activities**

A/L General English is meant for the A/L student of science, commerce and arts streams. It has been found that, these students showed slight interest in learning the language. They seem to have excitement for the oncoming adventure of entering the university. With lot of hopes, tension and “romance”, they seem to have no time in learning the language earnestly. Major expectation on the part of the students is that the sessions should be “enjoyable and ‘socializable’”. When these teachers were asked about the challenges their students face in aspects of learning English, 55% listed speaking and test-oriented educational system, followed by poor English learning environment (50%) listening (35%), memorization of new words (30%), how to use grammar and communication skills (25%) and writing (20%). Combining with the results about what teachers do mostly in their teaching, it is not surprising that speaking is the most challenging task. There is any time for practicing speaking in their classrooms.

When teachers were asked about the ways they used in their teaching to motivate their students, doing more simulated exam papers were again rated highly by 50% of the teachers, followed by organizing real-life activities and interesting language games (20%). Encouraging students to learn was commented by only 20% of the teachers and 25% mentioned better classroom discipline. To use more authentic materials (15%), to create a positive attitude toward language learning and to provide student with effective language learning strategies (10%) come last.

### **6.6. *Teachers' Professional Development***

This analysis first explores the kind of teaching methods these teachers used in their teaching, the activities they were involved for professional development and the kind of professional development activities they participated, the learning experience that contributed to their professional development, and access to teaching resources. Then it explores what they wish to learn more about teaching, and what they wish to do to improve their teaching. It explores further the reasons why they entered the teaching profession, whether they wanted to continue the profession and the reasons for the continuation.

When asked about the most popular teaching method these teachers used in their teaching, many mentioned that they used communicative teaching method, followed by grammar translation method and audiolingual method. When they were asked to rank two professional development activities they had been involved over the past five years, developing teaching materials was the first choice for 30% of the teachers and test preparation was chosen as the second choice by 25% of the teachers. Curriculum/syllabus (15%), organizing extracurricular activities in English (10%) and research reports (5%) were preferred after that.

When asked about the kinds of professional development activities they participated over the five years, only 10 % commented on observing other teachers' classes, 15% of them mentioned attending courses, 10% conferences, and surprisingly 50% workshops and 10% visiting other schools respectively. Generally workshops were conducted on a regular basis at the District Education office. Furthermore, 30 % commented working with other teachers in their schools had contributed to their professional development. About 25 % of the teachers felt that membership in professional teachers' association and writing reflective journals helped their professional development. Only 20% of the teachers said they had access to English teaching journals, books, 25% membership in English teachers' association, 30% other informal learning and (5%) internet resources. Many of the teachers (80%) said that they did not have access to the above resources, which might be due to the economically undeveloped nature of this war-torn town in the province where these teachers taught.

The teachers were also asked to rank two things that they would like to learn more about English language teaching. 55% of them commented on communicative language teaching as their first choice. 35% of the teachers ranked computer-based and



assisted teaching and learning as their second choice, material development (15%) and classroom management and unit, lesson, and curriculum (syllabus) planning (10%) were preferred respectively. Surprisingly, only 10% commented on the desire to learn more about testing and evaluation in such a highly examination-driven context even though many of the teachers' teaching was evaluated by their students' test scores. In the ways they wished to do to improve their teaching, 50% mentioned pursuing advanced degrees, followed by working with other teachers (20%), and mentors (25%), attending workshops and courses (15 %). Distance programs (or self-study) (10%) and being observed by others and receiving feedback (5%) come last.

The type of students they had for their classes did not enter the class rooms with real motivation and interest. The sad truth is that many of them were keen in only passing the A/L to enter the universities, not the competency and job skills required. So it is a real challenge on the part of the teachers to create a positive atmosphere for effective and efficient learning and teaching in Vavuniya. The impact of the war was another big hurdle to leap over successfully.

We see "the process of development as the process of increasing our conscious choices about the way we think, feel and behave as a teacher. It is about the inner world of responses that we make to the outer world of the classroom. Development is as a process of becoming increasingly aware of the quality of the learning atmosphere we create, and as a result becoming more able to make creative moment by moment choices about how we are affecting our learners through our personal behaviour" Underhill (1991). This idea clearly demonstrates that the teaching staff should not be biased and prejudiced or disappointed about the learning atmosphere or about the attitudes students have. The teachers have a great responsibility to change the existing atmosphere into a positive one. As the ESL teacher, it was a real experience for them to overcome these problems in an objective and understanding manner among staff and students.

Teachers were then asked why they chose to be an English language teacher, 35% said English is useful but, surprisingly, 30% said they simply like English (affective and ideological inclination). Other reasons such as loving children, liking to be a teacher and personal reasons were commented by 40%, 60% and 80% of the teachers respectively. The majority of the teachers said that they would continue to teach, yet more than one third of them indicated that they were unsure at the time of the survey, no teachers said no to continue to teach English. The reasons for them to continue to teach are listed as liking teaching English by 35% teachers, loving teaching by 65%. English being useful by 80% and loving children by 25%.



## 7. Discussion and conclusion

### 7.1. *ELT Professional Challenges*

The case study helps to understand this group of teachers in Vavuniya within the context described. Fewer empirical studies have been conducted at the secondary level or in the light of the Sri Lankan government's mandate to upgrade these teachers' knowledge and skills within a short period of time. Overall, they were less prepared in their subject matter knowledge compared with TESOL teachers in the other parts of Sri Lanka and of the world. Though many of them had two year-teaching diploma, it indicates the lack of subject content knowledge, probably pedagogical content knowledge. However, they had been in the teaching profession for more than 10 years. Yet the majority of them only started to learn English when they reached Grade 7, and were taught predominately by grammar and translation method. These factors could have serious implication on their English proficiency and on the way they teach English in their classroom. Improving their English language ability, subject content knowledge and language awareness, and pedagogic content knowledge in English, should have been the task for pre-service teacher education before they enter the teaching profession. Also in order to succeed in second language teaching as indicated by Schrier (1993), they need a much wider array of knowledge and skills. Further they also need the language culture, the culture of the school's community, expert in curricular design and implementation. They are technologically sophisticated. This indicates that the professional upgrading of teachers of English in Sri Lanka is an urgent need and requires a great deal of research.

The teaching context where these teachers taught were involved with very large classes - 80% of the teachers with more than 50 students, and highly influenced by standardized testing - 75% of the teachers commented that their students were required to take standardized testing. 90% of their teaching is evaluated by students' test scores and 60% agreed that public exam is the most influencing factor in their teaching. This finding pictures a context where standardized testing plays a dominating role and has a tremendous impact on instruction. The challenges that these teachers face are teaching methods, high-stakes testing, their language proficiency and ways to motivate their students to learn English. Such a context can also be found in other parts of the world especially within the ESL teaching and learning context where English is taught as a subject in schools (Cheng & Watanabe with Curtis, 2003).

To meet these challenges, 35% of the participants mentioned that the predominant communicative language teaching (CLT) was what they needed to gain more knowledge. And computer-based and computer-assisted teaching and learning technology was the second choice in their professional development needs (40%), which demonstrated the significant role that technology could play in the ELT when the learning of English is not immersed in aspects of life. With the advance of technology and Internet development, more and more information and English language input should be available to those teachers if proper guidance and training is included in this type of professional development course. Among this group of teachers, 85% commented they would continue their English teaching profession, which is encouraging for English language education in Sri Lanka.

The results from this survey offer some implications for the large-scale in-service teacher education endeavor and further serve as a window to understand the kind of challenges that the secondary teachers and learners of English are facing. In terms of methodology, we recognize the limitation of this small case study using a questionnaire with a small group of informants from a single research site. The ideal situation would be to conduct follow-up interviews with the teachers and observations of their classroom teaching, which can offer a much richer source of data. Also due to the small sample, I could not conduct more detailed analysis thus limiting me looking at the data only at the descriptive level.

This study, however, offers implications to other ESL contexts where teachers of English who started learning English later in secondary school, were taught mostly through traditional teaching methods, and were lack of advanced subject and pedagogical knowledge in English. Furthermore, this study helps to inform other teaching contexts where there is also a predominated centralized examination driven system. In addition, we recognize the reconceptualization of what language teachers are and what they do is necessary. But the transformation will not occur in Sri Lanka or in other similar ESL contexts unless teachers themselves feel the need for such a transformation.

## **7.2. *The Socio-Ideological Context of the ELT***

All Tamil children learn English in schools, starting in the third grade, for 3 to 5 hours per week from Tamil-speaking teachers of English that integrates children, parents, and the rest of the community jointly with governmental institutions (Ministry of Education local authorities) in building a cooperative framework structured on the basis

of equality and mutual respect. The bilingual study can be instrumental in deepening each group's understanding of the other, and mentions that bilingual education is an empowering pedagogy which helps increase the self-esteem of minority students.

The present concern about ELT development is restricted to Vavuniya, where a quality ELT and literature program should be at the core of its mission. Moreover, the focus is from an inner and outer standpoint regarding the schools and the ESL courses. On the one hand, it could be perceived that both less and more experienced teachers are regularly confronted with a variety of situations and contexts where they are required to make use of professional expertise in an autonomous and self-directed way. On the other hand, there is a slow but steady increase in the number of private English language schools and institutes in the town that must share the local demand for English language services, to put it in economic terms. Therefore, promoting this discipline in the district, and competing on the basis of sound professional teaching should be regarded as surviving tactics.

### **7.3. *Attitudes to error treatment***

An attitude questionnaire showed that they were broadly favourable to a tolerance of error in learners, and to other error treatment practices in line with the emphases of communicative language teaching. While this tendency was rather more pronounced among them, thus challenging previous research assumptions. Though the difference was statistically significant, there must be doubts as to how meaningful the difference is, bearing in mind the inherent limitations of attitude surveys and the mismatch between attitude scores and observed error treatment practice.

All teachers proved quite traditional in the categories of error they responded to, focusing more on sentence level errors than discourse errors. They were also more conservative in practice than in attitude as regards their tolerance of error, though this may reflect the fact that they were dealing with an Advanced Level student preparing for a General English examination. Nevertheless, in the course of the interviews, the view was often expressed that teachers have a responsibility to deal thoroughly with errors that this is one of the teacher's principal duties, and that if learners wanted a more naturalistic approach they would not take language lessons. This, of course, rather assumes that learners have a choice in the matter, which is not always the case.



## **8. Suggestions and Recommendations**

English teachers should engage in to promote their professional development and the students' academic development by updating recent developments in her/his field; reflecting on her/his own professional activity in order to improve her/his own practice; collaborating with other teachers in their practice and also sharing experiences with them; interacting with the students flexibly so that he/she can improve the learning environment positively for the students since this discipline is linguistically, culturally and socially distanced from those of the learners who were mostly Tamils from the North and East of Sri Lanka.

I firmly believe that "academic development takes place when teachers, as individuals or in a group, consciously take advantage of such resources to forward their own professional learning" (Ur, 1999: 318). Development does not just happen with time, it happens with awareness of a need to change.

The society also plays a significant role in critical reflection. In order for ESL teachers to become critically reflective, they have to transcend the technicalities of traditional academic administration and think beyond the need to improve their instructional and innovative techniques. Thus they should be made like to locate ELT in its broader social and cultural context. Sharing experiences, problems and successes are necessary. Some possible activities are meetings or discussions with colleagues, spontaneous, informal chats, or, a kind of more formal interaction. Conscientious professionals may be sympathetic and suggest solutions or encourage their peers to look for their solution; individual presentation on new teaching ideas, classroom experiences, something they have read, etc.; observation of other teachers' classes. In this particular case, certain understandings need to be negotiated ahead of time since observation has always been a sensitive issue; journal writing should be carried out alone or in groups if teachers built in some ground rules on the entries to be included.

## **9. Implications and suggestions for further research**

There may be limits to the extent to which differences previously observed apply in all contexts. With the respondents of the Vavuniya ESL teachers at least, the differences postulated by other researchers do not hold. It may be that they should not be treated as an undifferentiated mass, and that a number of other variables, like training and

cultural background for example, could be more important than mere teacher status (James, 1977).

The sample was small and the attitude questionnaire was not adequately supported by interview data and one correction task seems insufficient. A larger sample and more data are necessary. Ideally too, data needs to be collected from what teachers actually do day by day when dealing with student writing. The teachers interviewed were very positive about the focus of this research. Responding to the survey helped concentrate their minds on issues which they saw as fundamental to their everyday practice and they were keen to receive feedback on the study. The more teachers had the opportunity to reflect upon the issues involved in treating error.

## **10. Conclusion**

Research has suggested that ESL Teachers and users, even those with high levels of competence and proficiency have considerable difficulty when it comes to making judgments of acceptability. Cultural dislocation and linguistic alienation, inappropriate professional training and inappropriate conflict context for practicing ELT have been the reasons for the existing level of performance and the implications for the error treatment practice of ESL teachers, in terms of their identification of error and of their assessment of the gravity of different types of error. If so, this may explain research findings which have shown significant differences in the ESL teachers' reactions to error both quantitatively and with respect to perceptions of relative gravity.

The current study has attempted to explore English Language performance and teaching profession in the conflict context of the Vavuniya district of Sri Lanka, where the Sri Lankan Tamil community prevails primarily. After some consideration of the validity of the concept and of issues relevant to error treatment pedagogy in general, the procedure and results of the study were described. Substantial differences did show up in terms of attitude to error. Differences were less marked in the way they responded to the actual piece of student writing. Moreover, the differences that did emerge in attitude and actual error treatment were the consequent results identified in the conflict context of the Vavuniya district of Sri Lanka.

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