

AN ATTITUDINAL STUDY ON THE ELOCUTION ENTERPRISE IN THE CURRENT SRI LANKAN CONTEXT: AN EVALUATION OF ITS FUNCTION AND EFFICACY

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Introduction

Though not specifically explored by the researchers, elocution is an integral area of research with a wide array of perspectives which can be accessed from a diversity of fields such as Phonetics, Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics as well as Language Acquisition. While a profusion of books are available on teaching elocution and elocution lessons, the majority of them hardly explore the function and efficacy of elocution in a society. This study, in particular, deals with the attitudinal response of teachers, parents and students towards elocution. In a scenario where elocution classes have been in function from the British imperial times and are mushrooming in every street corner in the present, it is worthwhile to investigate the role played by these classes and the reasons for its utmost popularity. Accordingly, this study discovers the reasons for the high demand for elocution classes and whether they follow the true art of elocution or a mere trend.

Scope

The substantial attention paid to elocution brings into focus a need to evaluate the role played by the private elocution classes in the contemporary Sri Lankan society. In view of this observation, this study aimed to examine the function and efficacy of elocution classes by taking into account the perspectives of teachers, parents and students engaged in the enterprise. This being an attitudinal study, their expectations and opinions are weighed against the output of elocution classes. Thus, the most important and least evident question, whether teaching elocution is done merely with the intention of assisting students to learn the "art of clear and expressive speech" (Oxford 1996) or with other benefits is answered.

Elocution shapes pronunciation by accent reduction and addition. In the Sri Lankan context, the targeted accent of the elocution classes is the RP or the Standard British English pronunciation, which might, therefore, be looked at as

suppressing Sri Lankan English creating a gap between what is in the context (Sri Lankan English) and what the elocutionists are trying to impose (RP). Elocution, however, is still practised and acknowledged in the Sri Lankan society which is why this research ventures to analyze the points in favour and against the function of elocution while at the same time outlining ways and means to reach efficacy.

Methodology

Being an attitudinal study of elocution this research will maintain a sociolinguistic stance. Elocution will be looked at in diverse perspectives to investigate the variations of speech, style shifting and accented pronunciation. This study focuses on a sample population of 6 elocution teachers who currently conduct classes, 20 parents and 20 students aged between 5-12 years from both the Colombo and Gampaha districts. The primary data used to examine the practised pronunciation of students is a poem or a paragraph which he/she had already practised in class. Secondary data is collected by questionnaires, follow-up interviews and classroom observation.

Discussion and conclusions

Functioning under different labels such as 'elocution classes', 'speech and drama classes', 'speech training classes' and so forth, a substantial change in what is offered by and expected of these classes was discovered by the findings of the study. Elocution classes which were initially reputed for training the art of clear and effective pronunciation has now been altered predominantly to sending

students for examinations as well as teaching school text books and other work books for students ranging from five to twelve years old. Even the activities such as drawing and colouring pictures have also been a regular activity in these classes. These changes in its function could partly be due to what parents expect from elocution classes. This change was perceived as a digression from the true art of elocution which could, thereby, create cavities in the fundamental knowledge transmitted. Given the age range of the students, what pleased the majority were apparently, the medals, cups and certificates with which they are awarded in the examinations.

Elocution classes are generally acknowledged for teaching and promoting the RP or standard British English pronunciation. This study, however, exposed an emerging inclination towards teaching standard Sri Lankan English pronunciation in the elocution classes. Reasons such as consciousness of the Sri Lankan identity, familiarity, accommodation and recommendation of Sri Lankan English by certain elocution examination institutes have been instrumental in this particular tendency towards teaching standard Sri Lankan English pronunciation. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of the British accent in the Sri Lankan locale being received with mockery by certain groups of people could also be considered as a possible motivation for the positive attitude of the teachers towards standard Sri Lankan English pronunciation.

On the contrary, it revealed that the majority of parents who prefer their

children to be taught standard British pronunciation have erroneously internalized British English as the only standard and prestigious variety of English in Sri Lanka. It was felt that there is a need to make the parents aware of the legitimacy and recognition of Sri Lankan English and thereby obliterate the misconceptions in that regard. The study, at the same time, articulated that the exceptional reputation gained by elocution classes over the years is due to the teachers who genuinely and responsibly practice the art of elocution and thereby contribute to the English Language Teaching enterprise in the country.

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