

M. A. THESIS IN LINGUISTICS

**A STUDY OF ELOCUTION AS A METHOD
OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING
IN SRI LANKA**

*WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON TEACHERS
ASSOCIATED WITH CALSDA*

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ABSTRACT

English language teaching methodology evolves to suit the needs of students and objectives of teachers, and according to the progression of society. Elocution has been a part of Sri Lankan society for decades; initially as a means of improving the presentation skills of the elite, but now, as means of mastering the English language itself.

The objectives of this thesis are to provide a comprehensive definition of Elocution as a method of teaching English, and to study the teaching techniques and beliefs of those who function under the brand. Questionnaires were administered to teachers and students, while expert interviews were conducted of selected Sri Lankan and British elements.

Findings prove that Elocution is a method of English language teaching which can be called eclectic at best, that covers all four major skill sets, with a greater emphasis on practical speaking. Classes are conducted outside of the school curriculum most often, and popularly cater to students from Sinhala and Tamil speaking backgrounds of government schools. Unlike international spoken English syllabi there is a greater focus on precision of grammar, pronunciation and style of speaking. In the opinion of teachers and students, Elocution offers a wider range of services such as building confidence, creativity and interpersonal skills that are necessary for children to enter the modern world. However, these findings can be improved upon by further research into the actual functioning and efficacy of such classes. In time, Elocution as a method of teaching English could provide insight and inspiration towards streamlining teaching methodology employed in Sri Lanka.

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my father and grandmother

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The national initiative should be designed in such a way that English is delivered purely as a 'Life Skill' that is desired for its utility value, as a vital tool of communication with the outside world of knowledge, and a skill that is required for employment.

President Mahinda Rajapakse at the ceremonial launch of '2009 - Year of English and Information Technology'

1.1 Introduction

The roots of the need to speak and converse in English can be traced to colonial times, when the British enforced their language on the Sri Lankan people. In that era, if one was to succeed in society, one had to be capable of using the language of the rulers and elite. Decades later, language is still an essential topic of discussion, within academic circles, among legislators and also among the common members of society. It can be argued that, not much has changed in the past 60 years since Sri Lankan independence from British colonialism, in the need and use of the English language: it is still accused of being used to create social and cultural divisions among the people. The vestige of British influence can also be seen in the teaching methods used at present in the country. Over the years English language syllabi and their teachers have been accused of a range of deficiencies, from trying to emulate the colonizers to mangling the English language itself.

1.2 Recent steps towards teaching English

The need to streamline and modernize teaching methods has been brought to the fore this year with the launch of '2009 - Year of English and Information Technology.' As evident in the quote above His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapakse wishes to take the teaching of English in the country in a new direction – so that it is a life skill, a vital tool of communication and a skill required for employment. In his speech at the ceremonial launch of the initiative he also states that there will be a

complete break with the past, and that a process of re-training for teachers in the delivery of Spoken English to schools has already been activated.

According to Sunimal Fernando Presidential Advisor and Coordinator (English) of the Special Presidential Task Force on English and IT (2008a), “Except in the small number of fee levying private and international schools accessed by the children of affluent families, and in an exceptionally few government schools, the quality of English teaching in the mainstream government schools is extremely low... There are about 1623 private tutoring institutes / tuition classes spread throughout the country. English classes are very popular in these totally unregulated private institutions. Being totally unregulated, the quality of English teaching in this sector is no better than what prevails in the schools. But in the absence of a better product, parents send their children and school drop-outs to these English classes as they link the future career of their children to their skill in English. There is thus an immediate need for radically upgrading the English teacher base in the country, both in the government sector and in the unregulated private teaching sector. English teaching methods that are in practice are highly outdated and state-of-the-art spoken / communicative English teaching methodologies are few – if at all – and far between. Mainstream teaching methods and course content have evolved in a manner appropriate for teaching English to persons from homes and environments that already use English. They have been found to be largely inappropriate for teaching English to persons from Sinhala and Tamil speaking homes and environments. The content of the diversity of courses offered, syllabus and teaching methods are not even minimally regulated. There is a need to introduce a certification system for English teachers. There is no nationally recognized English proficiency examination that is conducted on a set syllabus by a recognized institution such as the Department of Examinations towards which English training programmes, especially in the widespread ‘private tuition’ industry functioning across the country can be directed; whereby uniform standards can be maintained, the public made aware of the required standards and service, and learners can obtain a certificate of value which could help them move upwards at the end of their course of study.”

1.3 Definitions of Elocution

With this background in mind, this thesis looks at a brand of teaching English which was first introduced during colonial rule and has since evolved – Elocution. It has risen to become one of the main means of learning English outside of the school curriculum.

According to the Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language, Elocution is “The study and practice of oral delivery, including control of breath, voice, pronunciation, stance, and gesture; the way in which someone speaks or reads aloud, especially in public.” An early meaning of the term was literary Style, as distinct from Content, and relates to the Latin meaning of *elocutio* (‘speaking out’), one of the canons or departments of Rhetoric. Elocution as training in how to speak ‘properly’ (as in taking elocution lessons) was a feature of education, particularly for girls, in the 18–19c.

Dr. Anne Jones, (the General Secretary of the Society for Teachers of Speech & Drama based in the United Kingdom) in an electronic interview explained that “...the term Elocution was used until the mid 1970's and some people when making enquiries about a teacher of speech still use the term. It became associated with the upper classes in the UK and a rather false way of speaking; therefore the word was put to one side. Gradually teachers were called speech teachers, voice coaches or speech & drama teachers. Nowadays the importance of clear speech is recognized and also the power of communication skills which are provided by teachers of speech”. Dr. Jones further states that it was taught and still is (although not with that name) - in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Singapore, South Africa, Malaysia and India.

Therefore, Elocution can be ideally defined as the art of speaking or reading aloud, especially in public, with importance being given to clarity of speech and communication skills. Areas taught would include speech technique and performing skills which effects oral delivery, methods of correct breathing and breathe control, voice production, pronunciation, stance and gesture.

It must be borne in mind that these old school Elocution classes were conducted by native speakers of the language for native speakers whose only need was to better their style of speaking. As described by Dr. Jones, the more commonly used term at

present is Speech & Drama. In the broader context today, Speech & Drama is mostly taught by those who consider English their first language to those of the same position. In Sri Lanka, Speech & Drama is taught by specialist teachers who hold qualifications in the subject. They train students in the art of speaking, as defined by the old term Elocution, as well as acting and stage performance.

1.4 Elocution in Sri Lanka

The term Elocution is still in use in Sri Lanka, however, with a different connotation. During British rule it was used as described above, but over the years and in response to the demands of society, teaching methods and the focus of such lessons have evolved and expanded.

Today, when one refers to Elocution classes in Sri Lanka, one is usually referring to the teaching of Spoken English. According to Mrs. Lakshmi Jeganathan, a teacher of Speech & Drama with over 50 years teaching experience based in Colombo, “Elocution in Sri Lanka refers to the teaching of performance skills and pronunciation as well as grammar, vocabulary and conversation skills. Therefore a person who emerges from such a background is articulate and able to express his thoughts effectively in English.” She also states that while she prefers the term ‘Speech training’, ‘Elocution’ is probably the more household term. During her interview Mrs. Jeganathan also agreed with Dr. Jones’ definition of Elocution that “Elocution is a very Victorian term that referred only to performance work and not grammar”. She also went on to explain that in her experience, during her earlier years of teaching nearly 50 years ago, the demand was largely for Speech & Drama. Later during the 1980’s and 1990’s the focus was on Spoken English. However, now she feels that there is a resurgence of interest in and demand for Speech & Drama as parents feel it is more ‘posh’ and that students gain a greater depth of knowledge in areas such as English Literature which is otherwise neglected. She also stressed that students who do Speech & Drama in addition to the regular Spoken English class improve faster in their language skills.

Therefore in a Sri Lankan context, the term Elocution requires a redefinition. It is a form of English as a second language teaching that focuses not only on the traditional forms of syntax and vocabulary, but also gives importance to

pronunciation, intonation, communication skills and style. Its main focus is on Speaking, but the skills of Listening, Writing and Reading are also given prominence. Speaking is facilitated through a variety of techniques such as conversation, speaking of poetry, story telling and reading aloud.

However, with the growth of Elocution classes as an option to the traditional English tuition class, there has also been an increase in the negative response to this method of teaching. Some speak disparagingly of the focus placed on elements such as style of speaking and pronunciation, and are critical of 'Elocution' as being a vehicle for suppressing genuine Sri Lankan identity. There are also those trained as Speech & Drama teachers with a background in performing skills who prefer to be called 'Speech trainers' rather than mere Elocution teachers since they offer more than the usual English language training. Therefore, it is challenging to bring together perception and reality, teachers' personal beliefs and the common terminology used by parents and students in their demand for English classes.

1.5 The demand for Elocution in Sri Lanka

Elocution classes are very much in demand – so much so that one can almost find an 'Elocution Teacher' at every street corner. Brief interviews, in preparation for this thesis, of parents who enroll their children in the researcher's own classes revealed that they are dissatisfied with the practical use of the English language in schools. The common complaint is that although writing is taught students are exposed to very little of the spoken language so that their listening and speaking skills are undeveloped. Reading too is undertaken en masse and very little individual attention is afforded to judge actual ability. Such parents also ask that their children be taught 'how to speak nicely' or 'with the correct accent'. They feel that since numbers in an Elocution class are limited their children will receive the individual attention sorely lacking in a school classroom. Furthermore, they believe that Elocution teachers speak to the children mostly in English rather than the vernacular, thus exposing the students to more language. Students also sit for Elocution examinations annually (i.e. Spoken English Examinations) and parents are able to judge their progress through the results thus obtained. It is also considered quite prestigious when a child receives

an award for his efforts at the Annual Prizegiving organised by examination bodies that conduct Elocution examinations.

Parents' expectations reveal that demand is for a mixture of the old and the new. Parents look for Spoken English classes that not only teach the basic tenants of the language such as grammar, vocabulary and fluency in speaking, but also a better style of speaking. They want their children to be like 'native speakers'.

1.6 The efficacy and impact of Elocution

The various skills which make-up an Elocution class are what make teachers of Elocution stand apart from other educators in the country, as they are seen by parents and students as more interactive and communicative, dealing with the spoken word.

However, there is a doubt whether Elocution classes conducted in Sri Lanka actually deliver all they promise. There is no regulatory body with the mandate to oversee the qualifications or expertise of those who claim to teach Elocution. The abilities of teachers also vary greatly and depend largely on how much exposure they have received to new and innovative methods of English Language Teaching. Practical experience of the researcher in dealing with a variety of teachers from around the country has indicated that not all who call themselves Elocution teachers have the training to function as required. Hence they are not always equipped to instruct students in 'how to speak nicely...with the correct accent', or in certain cases to even teach basic language skills as demand dictates.

When analysed from a linguistics point of view, the question arises as to whether Elocution teachers who stress style of speaking and pronunciation are in fact doing more harm than good. Fernando, S (2008b) states that, "During the immediate post colonial period, the westernized social elites of Sri Lanka crafted and delivered an English language product to serve as a hallmark of their exclusive elite status. English became a gateway to the west, as a rejection of one's cultural roots, a language therefore that should be spoken as an Englishman would speak it – unblemished diction, perfect grammar, and technically perfect pronunciation." Therefore if Elocution teachers still hold the 'native speaker' ideal and attempt to train their students to speak the 'Queen's English', they may very well be chasing the moon. On the other hand, a well – trained individual who is capable of introducing a

globally acceptable use of the English language will be able to bridge the divide and provide the knowledge and skills needed to equip students to use English as a communication tool and a life skill. Such an approach would ensure that learners are rooted in their own culture but able to communicate acceptably at an international level.

1.7 The objective of the research

Therefore, the main objective of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive definition of Elocution as a method of teaching English, and to study the teaching techniques and beliefs of those who function under the brand Elocution. This research is justifiable as Elocution has become a popular means of acquiring English as a second language countrywide. Therefore, questionnaires were administered to teachers around the island to see whether Elocution teachers are merely teachers of English as a Second Language or whether they place any focus on style and speech training. All the teachers are those associated with the Colombo Academy of Language Skills and Dramatic Art (CALSDA), an examination body which functions out of Colombo, and conducts examinations around Sri Lanka. Although, this study does not analyze the teaching practices of all teachers associated with Elocution, conclusions drawn could illuminate the practices of all who work in the field. A select number of teachers were also personally interviewed regarding their practical approach. Furthermore, a questionnaire was given to students to evaluate their opinion of the classes they attend. Finally, a foreign expert in the field of English language teaching was interviewed with regards to his views on Elocution as a method of teaching English, and to provide a comparison with practical teaching methods used in the United Kingdom and Sri Lanka.

1.8 Conclusion

The time has arrived for diligent thought to be applied towards updating and refocusing English language teaching in Sri Lanka. If Elocution is proved to be an effective means of learning, it should be accepted as a legitimate means of language teaching with much to offer a country that has been struggling to find a healthy attitude towards English. In time, policy makers could evaluate the merits of

Elocution and, if applicable, even incorporate some of its approaches into mainstream language teaching.

As highlighted in '*2009 - Year of English and Information Technology*', classes that teach English outside the mainstream education system need to be evaluated, the teacher base in the country needs to be updated and certification systems need to be regulated. The most significant aspect however convoluted the argument and difficult the decision making, is this:

“It is hoped that ...the new ideology of English and its associated teaching methodology and course content will – unlike in the past – encourage rather than inhibit the appropriation of English as a tool of communication by mainstream Sinhala and Tamil speaking society in the years ahead.” Fernando, S (2009)

Chapters 2-4 are available by contacting me on
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Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

'...The source of growth for (a) profession is the growth of ideas in different people and the development of these together, (and) the influencing of one another, gradually, imperceptibly.

Prabhu, N.S. (in Maley, A 1989)

With the influence of the 'global village', learning English as a second language has grown in popularity world over. Many consider it an essential component of international communication, for both personal and corporate needs. Therefore the role of English in modern society cannot be overstressed. In Sri Lanka too, acceptance has increased of the need for English language skills in order to survive in a competitive world. Fuelled by this need, many have stepped forward to provide the necessary service in training and teaching. As the government education system copes with the requirement in its own way, many private institutions and individuals too conduct English language classes; some provide a genuine service, although a few attempt to merely profit from the desperation of others.

Elocution is one such avenue open to those who wish to learn English. Elocution classes are conducted islandwide, and the term itself has entered the social psyche so that any laymen too would recognize it and associate it with a certain method of teaching. The focus of this research was the Colombo Academy of Language Skills and Dramatic Art, an examination body that functions out of Colombo and conducts examinations islandwide. This institute was considered representative of the many other examining bodies that train and guide Elocution teachers.

The main objective of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive definition of Elocution as a method of teaching English, and to study the teaching techniques and beliefs of teachers who function under the brand Elocution. To achieve this goal, questionnaires were administered to teachers and students, while expert interviews were conducted of selected Sri Lankan and British elements.

Every effort was taken to ensure reliability and validity of findings. The questionnaires were designed to allow for both fact and opinion. Respondents were

afforded as much opportunity as possible to provide their own ideas and justifications and to come to their own conclusions. Respondents covered many parts of the country, mostly centred on the western and eastern provinces. The teaching methods and beliefs of the teachers were compared and as complete a description as possible was provided of the functioning of Elocution classes. Information gained from the teachers was then compared with the opinions forwarded by students. The basic premise governing Elocution teaching as required by the CALSDA syllabus was then compared with the functioning of a syllabus designed in the United Kingdom.

Problems encountered

There were a few difficulties encountered during the conducting of this research.

- The low response rate of teachers to the main questionnaire and the possibility of invalidity in certain areas and sections left unmarked by the respondents could be due to misunderstanding of concepts or a lack of enthusiasm towards sharing private information.
- Negation of permission from the CALSDA office lead to the inability to cover the entire country, which also restricts the findings.
- Since convenience sampling was adopted only teachers personally known to the researcher were targeted in the follow-up interviews, and as they are all trained and competent practitioners the descriptions provided in that section of the study are not representative of the majority of Elocution teachers.
- The lack of time to include classroom observations means there is less empirical evidence in the study and that opinions have not been confirmed through direct observation.

Nevertheless, the study was successful in determining certain key factors.

Summary of findings

a) Definition of Elocution

In Chapter 1 Elocution is given a two-fold definition –

‘The study and practice of oral delivery, including control of breath, voice, pronunciation, stance, and gesture; the way in which someone speaks or reads aloud, especially in public.’

‘A form of English as a second language teaching that focuses not only on the traditional forms of syntax and vocabulary, but also gives importance to pronunciation, intonation, communication skills and style.’

The data collected and analyzed through this study has provided the following conclusions:

1. As a profession, Elocution has expanded over the past decade.
2. The term Elocution itself has entered colloquial speech over recent years and although teachers qualified in speech and drama, and those with greater number of teaching experience do not refer to themselves as such, the younger generation of teachers see themselves as Elocution teachers.
3. Although some teachers work in schools, a majority teach the subject as a weekly extra-curricular activity either at an Elocution academy or on their own premises.
4. Classes are commonly taught in small groups of students catering to both primary and secondary age groups.
5. Examinations are considered an essential component of the system by both teachers and students.
6. The demand for Elocution is most seen among students from Sinhala or Tamil speaking families with poor to medium ability in English who attend government schools.
7. All four basic skills of language are taught but Speaking is given higher importance, and Reading aloud, Pronunciation, Conversation, Writing, Grammar, Vocabulary, Reading for comprehension, Communication skills, Listening and Speaking poetry are considered main elements of a classroom.

8. Those who specialise as Speech & Drama teachers include skills such as Acting, Poetry, Story telling, Public speaking, Performing skills, Physical aspects of speech and voice production in their lessons, and use them in language training as well. However, such specialized teachers are not commonly found in this profession.
9. Two means of teaching emerged – classes of approximately 20 students that are organised by age or grade and taught with focus on the whole group, and classes of up to 10 students that are of mixed age and ability that focus on individual work.

b) Beliefs and teaching techniques commonly used

1. The methodology employed by a majority of teachers is an amalgamation of traditional and modern approaches used internationally, with some remnant of the old-school idea of Elocution, and is possibly closest to the Structural Oral Situational Method popular in India.
2. Both teachers and students agreed that Elocution classes offer much more than merely language teaching, and the unique relationship between the Elocution teacher and her students is appreciated by a majority of students.
3. Vocabulary, Grammar and Pronunciation are believed by teachers to be the most important of the skills taught in an Elocution class, of which Grammar and Pronunciation are also seen as the most challenging to acquire. Students found Conversation and Reading to be the skills in which they have most improved. However, internationally, focus has shifted towards successful communication in language teaching, over precision in grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation favoured in Elocution classes.
4. Teachers recognise the comparative use of Drama, Public speaking and Performing skills in language teaching, although a majority do not use them in their classes. However classes in the United Kingdom do not include these skills, nor Speaking poetry which is an important element of Elocution, in language teaching. Nevertheless, both teachers and students provide justification and efficacy of the inclusion of these skills in language classrooms.

5. A majority of teachers believe it is justified to speak to students sometimes in their mother tongue.
6. The teaching of Received Pronunciation is a sensitive topic and a majority acknowledged its use in the classroom. They also believed that one's style of speaking is of importance and that English is a life skill. However, RP is no longer advocated as essential in language classes in the United Kingdom and the strong focus on such may overstress precision over communicative ability.
7. A majority of teachers believe in individual student centred learning, while the use of drills was common and language games were considered a successful method of teaching that allow students to enjoy the learning experience.
8. The teachers saw Elocution classes to be better than the English lessons taught in school, a view confirmed by the students questioned.

Final definition of Elocution

Keeping the above in mind, it is possible to arrive at the following definition of Elocution – it is a method of English language teaching which incorporates elements of many approaches and can be called eclectic at best. There isn't one all-encompassing methodology used by all teachers, but classes can vary according to specialisation, qualification and experience. Unlike the Victorian view of the term, Elocution classes cover all four major skill sets, with a greater emphasis on practical speaking. Unlike international spoken English syllabi there is a greater focus on precision of grammar, pronunciation and style of speaking.

Therefore Elocution classes are no longer geared towards those already proficient in the English language, neither are they mere language classes but, in the opinion of both teachers and students, offer a wider range of services that are necessary for children to enter the modern world.

Suggestions for future research

1. Classroom observations could be conducted to verify opinions given in this study as to the efficacy of this teaching method and to compare the benefits of whole class teaching as opposed to classes based on individual work
2. A comparative study could be conducted to verify the efficacy of Elocution classes as opposed to English lessons at schools
3. A wider survey could be conducted to cover other examination bodies which function in the country, as well as more geographical variety to verify the wider applicability of the findings of this study
4. A comparative study could be conducted to evaluate the efficacy of language games as used by Elocution teachers.
5. The syllabus of the Colombo Academy of Language Skills and Dramatic Art, or a similar body, could be evaluated

Further Recommendations

As highlighted in '*2009 - Year of English and Information Technology*', classes that teach English outside the mainstream education system need to be evaluated, the teacher base in the country needs to be updated and certification systems need to be regulated. Therefore,

- Elocution can be accepted as a legitimate means of language teaching with much to offer a country that has been struggling to find a healthy attitude and an effective means of English language teaching.
- As there are important differences within the beliefs and practices of teachers, teacher-training could be better streamlined
- The practices of Elocution could be updated to agree with more current international approaches and to break completely from any vestige of the Victorian attitude to Elocution.
- Policy makers could evaluate the merits of Elocution and, if applicable, incorporate some of its approaches into main stream English language teaching.

Chapters 2-4 and appendices are available by contacting me on
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