

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyse the benefits as well as negative effects of re-introduction of English as a medium of instruction in schools in Sri Lanka. The field data collection for this research was conducted in Sri Lanka by following a mixed quantitative and qualitative research methodology. Evidence was collected from post-secondary students and parents, education policy planners and administrators, principals of state, private, international schools, and university academics. In general, these groups agree that there is a mismatch between the skills taught in mother tongue-based education in state schools and the skills needed by a new generation of job seekers. Students, their parents and others want graduates able to meet the requirements of a globalised economy. The quantitative data analysis shows that rural, state school students have less favourable attitudes to English and to their general education than urban, international and private school students. Likewise, students studying Arts subjects in their mother tongue have less favourable attitudes to English and their general education than students in science and commerce where English is the medium of instruction. The qualitative research informants generally agreed that English medium education in state schools is urgently needed to create a work force equipped with the linguistic and technological skills needed in the globalised world of work.

The thesis recommends that primary education up to Grade 5 be conducted in the mother tongue; that English be introduced as a second language from Grade 3 to Grade 5; and that secondary and higher education be conducted in English from Grade 6 onwards. In addition to teaching curriculum content in English, the aim of this policy is to produce students as proficient in English as in their home languages. Retaining proficiency in Sinhala and Tamil is crucial to minimize the ill-effects a dominant world language could have upon Sri Lankan national languages and cultures. Thus, as a safeguard, it is recommended that indigenous aesthetic, cultural, and religious values be taught in the mother tongue. To ensure educational equity and social justice, rural schools must be provided with teachers adequately trained in English language and information technology. To help restore inter-communal harmony and understanding, it is recommended that Sinhala language be taught to Tamil-speaking students and Tamil to Sinhala-speaking students as third languages.

As well as increasing the competitiveness of graduates in the globalised world of work, English medium education would help improve communication between the present monolingual ethnic communities now divided by language. English might then function, as it did a few decades ago, as an inter-communal link language, facilitating

progress towards national reconciliation as the prime social goal for Sri Lanka at this moment in its history.