

# Sri Lankan English as the Standard/ Model for Language Assessment in English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka: Understanding Tertiary Level Teacher Resistance

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**Abstract** — *Although the argument for adopting periphery varieties such as Sri Lankan English (SLE) as the standard for English Language Assessment (LA) has been established both in the World Englishes scholarship and by prominent Sri Lankan scholars, there has been considerable resistance to this suggestion by academics and teachers. Thus, this study investigates why English teachers resist adopting SLE as the Standard/ model for LA in English Language Teaching (ELT). The study adopts a qualitative approach since similar studies of quantitative nature have been conducted. The study collected data from 10 teachers who teach English at two Faculties (Humanities and Social Sciences as well as Natural Sciences) at a state university through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The collected data were coded and then analysed using the method of thematic analysis. Seven themes explaining teacher resistance to SLE as the model/ standard in LA in ELT were identified through the analysis of data: SLE as ungrammatical and unacceptable outside Sri Lanka, teachers' sense of professional responsibility to train the students in "correct" language usage, lack of awareness regarding variation within SLE, difficulties arising in marking student answers due to lack of codification of SLE, image as a competent teacher and pressure from the academic community, SLE as unacceptable in the domain of English for Academic Purposes and accepting SLE as the standard as discriminatory against students whose mother tongue is Tamil. The study highlights the importance of further research, particularly of qualitative nature, on SLE as the standard in other practices in ELT such as material development and pedagogy.*

**Keywords** — Sri Lankan English, TESL, Language Standards

## I. INTRODUCTION

Among theoretical and ideological concerns that have been addressed in the scholarship of World Englishes (WE), the question of language standards or models of English is uniquely relevant to English language teaching (ELT) contexts traditionally designated "non-native", such as Sri Lanka. The field of WE advocates not only recognition to all varieties of English in the world where English is used as a second/ additional language, i.e. considered "not-native", but also points out that these varieties are not inferior or "deficient" (Kachru, 1996, p. 56) when compared with "native" varieties such as British or American English,

either structurally or in terms of their socio-cultural relevance. Thus, the WE scholarship also argues that ELT should adopt language models/ standards which are locally and regionally relevant (Kachru, 1996, p. 56). In the case of countries like Sri Lanka, this implies - at least in the theoretical sense - that all ELT practices including Language Assessment (LA) should be reimagined in terms of Sri Lankan English as the Standard/ Model.

The question of SLE as the model/ standard is a crucially important question in the area of Language Assessment which is a practice in ELT that involves developing tests and marking rubrics as well as rating student written and speech performance against a certain language variety as the model/ standard. Scholars such as Parakrama and Meyler prescribe SLE as the standard/ model for teaching English in Sri Lanka for several reasons. Parakrama (2010) is of the view that the English education system in Sri Lanka should adopt a language variety which is familiar to the students and that this cannot be achieved through a variety of English which is alien and alienating, such as British or American English (p. 92). Meyler (2015) also argues in a similar vein when he points out that it is "unrealistic and unfair to test students' English ability according to an alien and outdated standard" (p. 182).

However, there has been a fair amount of criticism and disagreement towards SLE as the standard/ model as well. For instance, the *English Our Way* programme introduced to the Sri Lankan school system in 2009 was discontinued amidst criticisms of falling standards of English (Bernaisch, 2012). Some scholars too criticise SLE in its relevance in the field of ELT in Sri Lanka, pointing out that it is a "substandard variety" (Fonseka, 2003). Studies on teacher attitudes towards SLE as the standard/ model in ELT, also highlight teachers' reluctance to accept SLE as the standard. For instance, Medawattegedera and Devendra's study (2004) involving 55 school teachers finds that teachers are more inclined to accept SLE in students' speech rather than in their writing. And in a more recent study involving 50 school teachers, it was found that 77% teachers believe that British English in the standard variety (Amunugama et al, 2019).

While the acceptance or rejection of SLE as the standard/ model for LA is largely a question of language ideologies

and attitudes by gatekeepers such as teachers, the number of studies on attitudes towards SLE are very few, however. And even the few studies that do explore this question have been conducted in the context of state schools involving school teachers and largely quantitative methods of data collection. Since these studies are largely quantitatively oriented, they report the reluctance of teachers to accept SLE as the standard/ model in ELT only in a numerical sense. They do not adequately explore reasons for their resistance, nor focus on reasons for their reluctance within the context of LA in ELT. This study therefore fills this research gap in several ways: the study involves perspectives of English educators on SLE as the standard/ model in the context of LA in a state university setting. It also focuses on qualitative methods of data collection and analysis for more nuanced findings. The research question guiding this study is as follows:

*Why do tertiary level English educators resist adopting Sri Lankan English as the Standard/ model for language assessment practices in English language teaching?*

## II. METHODOLOGY

In this section, particulars regarding the research site, research participants, design of the study, methods of data collection and analysis are discussed.

### I. Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in a state university in Sri Lanka. Data was collected from 10 educators teaching English at two Faculties (Humanities and Social Sciences as well as Natural Sciences) of the said university.

### II. Research Design

Research Design was primarily qualitative, since studies of quantitative nature have been conducted.

### III. Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data to investigate English educators' resistance towards adopting SLE as the model/ standard for LA practices. The interviews were first transcribed and the data was then analysed using the method of thematic analysis.

## III. RESULTS

The transcribed data from the interviews were categorized under seven themes. These themes that explain teacher reluctance to accept SLE as the standard/ model for LA, are as follows:

### I. SLE as ungrammatical and unacceptable outside Sri Lanka:

One reason that teachers were reluctant to accept SLE as the standard/ model for LA, was the belief that SLE is ungrammatical and that SLE is not an acceptable variety of English especially in countries outside Sri Lanka. Due to these reasons, the teachers were reluctant to adopt SLE as the standard. These opinions are clear in the following comments by the teachers:

“SLE forms are grammatically wrong. We can't accept that kind of writing and speech as correct.”

“SLE is not accepted out there.”

*Teachers' sense of professional responsibility to train the students in “correct” language usage:*

Closely linked with teachers' belief that SLE is ungrammatical and not accepted internationally, is teacher's sense of professional responsibility to train students in “correct” language usage. The teachers believed that by assessing students' language production as SLE as the standard, the teachers would not be preparing students in terms of the reality of English locally nor internationally. The teachers' viewed SLE as an inferior variety which will not be accepted neither in Sri Lanka's in the corporate sector, nor in academic and professional settings in countries outside Sri Lanka. Thus, the interviewees were of the opinion that it was their moral and ethical obligation to train their students in “correct” language usage, which in their opinion, was not SLE:

“SLE will not even be accepted in Sri Lanka's corporate sector”

“We will be doing a disservice to the students by not teaching them proper English.”

“It's my job to assess students according to the kind of language that is acceptable out there.”

“Do you think SLE will be acceptable when these students migrate and they have to work and live in foreign countries?”

*Lack of awareness regarding variation within SLE:*

The teachers' view of SLE as non-standard/ungrammatical in and of itself signals at the teachers' lack of awareness of variation within SLE such as Standard SLE and non-standard SLE which is also derogatorily called “not-pot English” (Gunesekera, 2010, p. 35). It can be observed that teachers' lack of awareness on variation within SLE causes other issues for them when they have to judge/ assess varietal features as “correct”/ “acceptable” and “incorrect”/ “unacceptable” when occurring in students' writing/ speech. Thus, it can be surmised that teachers' reluctance to accept SLE as the standard in LA stems from their lack of awareness regarding a.) variation within SLE, b.) status of varietal features in SLE:

“Some SLE features are grammatical and some are not. So SLE is confusing. Especially when we have to mark students' work.”

### *I. Lack of codification:*

Another reason for teacher to resist SLE as the standard/ model in LA in ELT is the lack of codification of SLE. The teachers pointed out that when it comes to questions regarding students language production especially in writing, they refer to resources with information on American and British varieties of English. For instance, dictionaries and pedagogical resources adopt British or American English varieties as the standard and the participants of the research pointed out that information on SLE is not so conveniently available. According to the teachers, this causes difficulties for them when rating/ marking student answers.

“There aren’t even dictionaries on SLE. How can we check if something is correct in SLE?”

### *II. Image as a competent teacher and pressure from the academic community*

It was found that teacher reluctance to accept SLE as the standard/ model in LA is influenced to a great extent by their perceptions of a competent teacher as well. Due to their perception of SLE as substandard, the teachers believed advocating SLE as the standard in LA will mark them as incompetent teachers:

“I can’t accept SLE as the standard when marking student answers. I am able to distinguish between good English and bad English and SLE is just not it.”

The teachers were also worried about negative judgments from the academic community they operate in, if they were to accept SLE as the standard in their LA practices. This belief was particularly prominent in educators teaching English in Faculties of natural sciences.

“We have to keep up the standards. Otherwise we will lose the footing [in the academic community]”

“If students can’t even speak grammatically doing a presentation or write a report in good language because we passed them, the blame will be on us.”

“SLE is not accepted in the academic community”

### *III. SLE as unacceptable in the domain of English for Academic Purposes*

Another reason for teachers to reject SLE in LA was the belief that SLE is not relevant in the domain of English for Academic purposes (EAP). Since English teaching in the university contexts involve EAP, teachers were reluctant to accept SLE as the model for LA:

“SLE is not acceptable as the standard when it comes to English for Academic Purposes”.

### *IV. Accepting SLE as the standard as discriminatory against students whose mother tongue is Tamil*

Another theme that emerged when investigating teacher reluctance to accept SLE as the standard/ model in LA in ELT, was the view that doing so would discriminate students whose mother tongue (L1) is Tamil. They were of the opinion that many documented and accepted features of SLE have originated from Sinhala and that forms of SLE originating from Tamil have neither been adequately researched nor considered intelligible by teachers whose L1 is Sinhala. Given these reasons, the teachers were of the opinion that accepting SLE as the standard/ model in LA, would discriminate against students whose L1 is Tamil:

“If we accept SLE as the standard, Sinhala students’ pronunciation errors and direct translations will be accepted but what about Tamil students?”

“SLE is not neutral”

## IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the research expands the understanding of the relevance of SLE both in ELT in general as well as in LA, in several ways. Firstly, the study reveals that one of the main reasons for the view of SLE as non-standard/ ungrammatical and inferior to other varieties of English, could be the lack of awareness regarding the variation within SLE and extremely negative attitudes towards the so-called “non-standard” varieties within SLE. It can also be observed that the difficulty faced by educators in distinguishing between the standard and non-standard varieties of SLE, makes it harder for them to make judgments on student language performance, i.e. in LA. While the existence of “standard” versus “non-standard” varieties is a natural phenomenon of language, in the case of SLE, the “non-standard” variety is viewed by teachers as stigmatized and therefore particularly unsuitable for LA in ELT.

The second observation that can be made is with regard to the impact of the academic community/ institutional requirements on standards of ELT. The belief that SLE cannot be accepted as the model for LA, was prominent among English educators particularly from natural sciences. This finding not only highlights the prestige occupied by varieties such as British and American English in natural sciences, but it also evokes questions of the role of the English educator within such teaching contexts.

Thirdly, the findings of the study also points at the inadequacies of the research field of SLE itself, particularly with regard to codification and forms of SLE that are of Tamil origin. This is an important finding that is relevant for future research in the field of SLE as well.

While this study provides several useful insights on SLE as the standard/ model for LA in ELT, it should also be noted that the findings are limited since the data was collected from

teachers of one state university in Sri Lanka. In order to fully understand and appreciate the relevance SLE as the standard/ model for LA in ELT, further research involving English language teachers from non-state tertiary level educational institutes and also policy makers, is also necessary.

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