

An Assessment of the Official Languages Proficiency Bar Examination for Public Officers

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Abstract— Every citizen of the country has the right to seek services in both official languages in public institutions according to the chapter IV of the constitution of Sri Lanka. According to the public administration circular (PAC)7/2007 every public officer who was recruited to the public service after 01.07.2007 should obtain the proficiency of their second official language in order to give their service to the public in both official languages. The second official language of a public officer is the official language which is not the medium through which he/she has entered public service. Thus, general public expect that they can obtain the services in public institutions in the language that they prefer, and government expects that public officers will give their service to the general public in the language that the public prefers.

Keywords— Sri Lanka, Public Service, Official Languages

I. INTRODUCTION

Government has realized that the language issue as one of the crucial barriers to social integration and ethnic reconciliation between Sinhalese and Tamil. However, the public sector is still being criticized for not delivering their service in both languages. Many observations have been carried out to examine overall constraints to implement the OLP in this regard. They have found out that the dearth of the bilingual public officers is the one of major facts to cause this problem overwhelmingly. In reality, the service of the public officers, those who have passed the proficiency examination is far from the expectation of the government.

With the effect from 01.07.2007 it has been made obligatory that the obtaining the proficiency in the other official language within a period of 5 years PAC No. 07/2007 enunciated that all officers recruited to the public/provincial public service to learn the official language in addition to the medium through which they

enter the service in order to carry out their functions and duties in both Sinhala and Tamil.

This study was set out to examine to what extent the public officers qualifying the Official Languages Bar Examination find it useful in the process of service delivery to the citizens.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study relies on both primary data and secondary data in analysing the above problem statement thus as the first step, a structured survey of the relevant literature was carried out to get an approach to the study from the published reports, journal articles, books written on the subject.

As the second step, the heads of public institutions and teachers who teach second language to the public officers were interviewed. The teachers interviewed have registered as second language teachers in National Institute of Language Education and Training (NILET).

In addition, a sample of 35 employees who have faced the language proficiency exam, at a divisional secretariat office, a police station, a town council, and a hospital in the Colombo District were interviewed face to face. The accumulated data was set against analysing the main research question which the viability of conducting the Official Languages Bar Examination for the public officials.

III. DISCUSSION

The efficiency bar exam for public sector officers in Official Languages was introduced in July, 2007. Since then, all new recruits to state sector employment, according to their profession, are required to prove their proficiency in the National language other than his/her mother tongue within a period of seven years from recruitment. The Official Language Department is

entrusted with the final responsibility of certifying the officers' knowledge in National Languages by conducting exams in terms of a pre-defined outline. This examination, which anticipates achieving universal bilingual competency of public service, presents a unique case in language policy owing to its ambitious outlook and declared interests to reinforce national integration. (Harindra, 2016) However, the post applicability of this exam is questionable when analysed the language competency of the public officials.

When discussed with the public officers as to know the intermediate time between their appointment of the job and the commencement of the language classes, many evaded the question saying that they do not know any particular reason for the time gap. Some have replied that they have requested from the institution, but classes started later, some have participated private classes because classes organized by institution was not held regularly and for some reason the teachers do not teach enthusiastically in contrast to the private classes.

Another group of officers stated that although it is included in the appointment letter that they were not aware about the second language examination, thus it was delayed starting a class. When it is discussed with the head of the institutions concerned, they pinpointed out that the officers are made aware about the requirement on second language acquisition, but they face difficulties when they try to search resource persons to teach second language to the government rates. Qualified people are not willing to conduct classes on stipulated rates; thus, these rates should be increased or there should be a system which the institution can pay some additional payment to them. In addition, they agree with that there is no mechanism to assess the officers who participate the classes, pass the examination or to assess the post-applicability of their competency for institutions' work. They expressed that they usually used to get the service from native speakers when there is a necessity in second language as it prevents time consuming.

Twenty percent of officers say that their competency in oral is very good while 30% say that their written competency is very good. Fifty percent of officer's state that their competency in oral and written is good. Finally, 30% persons have satisfactory level of competency in oral communication in second language while 20% in written communication. Although they ensured their ability as such when they are asked whether their ability is enough to fulfil their duties, 57.14% answered in negative.

The reason that they pinpointed out that since they cannot use the language is they do not get work to do in their second language and after some period they forget the language. In addition, they cited reasons as public use the other fluently or they fetch someone who knows the other language when they come. Officers who have worked in an area where the second language is used in many occasions either before passing the examination or after passing, expressed that they can use the language fluently.

Furthermore, teachers are also agreeing with the officers' claim that number of officers decrease gradually in classes and they stated that there might be professional as well as personal reasons for that. Specially some of them described clearly that all the head of the departments usually give support to the classes, but middle management staff does not render such support for them by releasing officers to come to the classes.

Head of the institutions stated that they release officers, but officers' enthusiasm deteriorates gradually to learn the second language and they hesitate themselves to go to the classes and they give excuses saying that they have duties. Nursing officers had the problem to get duty leave and they have participated to the classes using their personal leave and only their head of the institution explained that according to the responsibility of their duty they cannot release nursing officers to go to the classes in some occasions.

For the public officers who have been recruited to the public service before 2007 are entitled to the allowances and increments according to the PAC 3/2007 while public officers who have been recruited after 2007 are not entitled so. Many public officers pointed out that as a motivation tool the allowances or increments should be there for all officers who have obtained their second language proficiency. Only 3% of persons have obtained the allowances for obtaining their second language proficiency while others have obtained their second language proficiency as it is compulsory, and some had no idea about the allowances and related circulars.

When considered the opinions of the teachers 100% expressed that they persuade officers to do self-study, but their capacity is limited because their opinion was they cannot give homework to officers or ask questions during the class because they start not to come to the classes if they couldn't complete the homework or

couldn't answer the questions properly. Further, they described that officers take leave for the classes, but they are not coming to the classes, instead they used to go for their personal work. Thus, they stated that the enthusiasm is deteriorated gradually, and they persuade to stop the class without completing.

Apart from that some officers are willing to show that they can speak English although they cannot use Tamil, so they manage the duties using English. Some officers in same institutions express that they have not enough human resources to give the service to the minority communities.

The officers argued that though it is good to have a rule to obtain the language proficiency it cannot be agreed that this qualification is the gateway to obtain the increments, this predicament as they stipulate has led them to learn the language as a burden while some others say that instead of suspending increments, it should have a system of giving some benefits as a motivation to the officers who have obtained the language competency and more facilities to learn as well. Majority express that they learned the language using their time and effort but have the chances of usage is minimal. Those who have passed the language proficiency examination and who are interested should be trained as the second language teachers to teach other officers in their institutions as finding a second language teacher is a commonly difficult in public institutions.

Only nursing officers raised a problem on duty leave stating that other officers get duty leave to go to the classes, but they have no such opportunities. They had to go to classes using their personal leave. So, they stated that either there should be a course during their training period focusing this examination or they also should have equal opportunities to learn the language as other public officers. Police officers also stated that the number of residential trainings conducted for them by government is not enough and they should be increased.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though the public officers have gained the second language competency, they are not offered sufficient encouragements to practice what they have gained. On the other hand, there is a general insufficiency of encouragement to naturally learn and practice. Even though the government tries to teach second language

for public officers, all officers do not have the same competency level to learn a second language. So, the way of giving second language knowledge to the public officers should be changed according to their competency level. Therefore, it is important to give opportunities to the public officers to acquire the language than forcing them to learn the language.

The circulars issued on implementing Official Languages should be revised with the discussion of governing bodies as they are not relevant with one another. The second language proficiency exam should be conducted in a manner the public officers can get the true competency of the second language or else only the positions that requires language proficiency otherwise the huge expenditure and time spent on language training is a waste of public money

Though it is good to stipulate laws to force all public officers should learn the second language proficiency, it should not force which level they should achieve since each person's ability to acquire a second language is different from one to another. Instead government should give a chance to select which level they are going to achieve and there can be introduced financial incentives or non-financial incentives such as giving marks for each level they have obtained when they are having promotions etc.

There should be a system of exchanging public officers between areas where the different administrative languages are used in order to give an opportunity either to acquire the language or to monitor the learned language. Exchanging programs will be successful than the transfers because due to many personal reasons officers are not able to work in such an area for a long time. Even though the government implements a system to make transfers, it can be failed due to political interferences.

There can be organized language societies or equivalent gatherings officers who have passed the second language proficiency examination. Though they have no opportunities to use the language in their institutions, they can organize competitions, cultural exchange programs, seminars on different topics in second language etc. to enhance the knowledge. Then they can continually update their existing knowledge and their interest to learn the language also will be increased. Interesting teaching methods such as games, filling puzzles etc. should be introduced and should be

encouraged the second language teachers to use those methods as possible as in the classrooms.

The persons who have passed the language proficiency examination and who are interested should be trained as the second language teachers to teach other officers in their institutions as finding a second language teacher is a commonly difficult in public institutions.

There should be a requirement as which level should have been acquired to become a second language teacher and they should be paid for the service. As well a circular should be issued to update rates per hour for second language teachers

Annually, there are several training programs which held for public officers (e.g.: skill development training). Likewise, it can be given annual second language training programs also. When there are efficiency bar examinations a language paper can be included to examine the proficiency of both official languages. However, as a motivation tool there should be a regular financial incentive system for all officers who have the second language proficiency and this system should be monitored regularly as well.

The policy implications that have mentioned could be used to limit or eliminate hindrances to use official languages among public officers. The study discussed, explained and analyzed the research problem along with the policy implications that could be adopted to resolve the problem. The study relates only to one bilingual Division in Sri Lanka but many more bilingual divisions in the country face the same problem and it is the responsibility of the policy makers and state to take necessary steps to resolve the identified problem.

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