

# Challenges Encountered in Teaching English in Rural Sri Lankan Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Bandaranayake Secondary School in Kiriibbanwewa, Moneragala District

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**Abstract:** English language competency is a necessary skill in Sri Lanka. With this in mind, successive governments have implemented various approaches to strengthen English Language Education in the rural outskirts of the country. These initiatives include projects like 'speak English our own way' and attempts to recruit candidates as teachers with higher diplomas in English in order to address the dearth of qualified English teachers. However, it is unclear to what extent these efforts have been successful. This study sets out to examine the challenges encountered in English teaching and learning in rural Sri Lanka today, taking Bandaranayake Secondary School in Kiriibbanwewa, Moneragala District as a case study. Data was collected through ethnographic research methods utilizing qualitative observational data and semi-structured interviews, and was then analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings demonstrate that students at Bandaranayake Secondary School, regardless of their grade-level, lack of basic English proficiency beyond an A1 level. This language outcome is a result of teaching methods that prioritize textbook-based reading and writing over speaking and listening skills, while emphasizing accuracy over fluency. In order to address this gap between ELT methods and outcomes, researchers recommend conducting ELT training with English teachers in rural secondary schools through tertiary educational institutes local to the area.

**Keywords:** English, Language, Education, Rural, Secondary, Schools, Sri Lanka

## 1. Introduction

After the British brought English to Sri Lanka in 1815, the language began to function as a new criterion for stratifying society, providing status, wealth, and power to rich, upper-caste, urban males (Canagarajah 1995, p.193). Today, English language fluency is still a privilege of a handful of people in Sri Lanka, while at the same time serving as a gatekeeping process in accessing jobs and higher education as English cannot be separated from Sri Lanka's economy or communication and technology systems. As stated by Attanayake, English "has marked its unchallengeable status with its expanding and accommodating nature in the education and employment sectors, inviting policy changes at the national level" (2017, p. 08). Although Sri Lankan students learn English starting in grade 3, most students lack the language competency required for social, economic, and political mobility by the time that they graduate from secondary school or university. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Education notes that "English has been taught for almost over 11 years as a core subject [in the Sri Lankan education system], but the student performance is not at a very satisfactory level" (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2018). Attanayake locates this dissonance in English teaching methods: "The answers to the how and why questions behind this phenomenon are generally known, scientifically and empirically proven: the problems are found in the teaching methods, the materials in use or both" (Attanayake, 2017, p. 02).

There is a clear gap between the need for English skills and the actual English teaching methods and outcomes in Sri Lanka. This gap is particularly wide in the rural context. As Indrarathne and McCulloch note, “schools in rural areas and in certain provinces tend to fare worse [when it comes to the status of English language acquisition] than those in the urban areas and in the south and west of the island.” (2022, p. 38). Furthermore, while more teachers at rural schools achieve below a B2 CEFR level than those in urban schools, rural school teachers still have less access to teacher trainings than those in urban areas. (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022, p. 31, 34). These realities demonstrate that there are both significant challenges and opportunities in improving ELT in rural Sri Lanka.

Understanding the existence of this problem, this case study sets out to examine the extent to which current English Language Teaching (ELT) methods at Bandaranayake Secondary School in Kiriibbanwewa, Moneragala result in successful learning outcomes for students’ English reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. In assessing these methods and outcomes, this study also seeks to provide recommendations for improving ELT in rural Sri Lanka.

## **2. Literature Review**

Since the 19th Century, a myriad of different language learning approaches have been adopted in Sri Lanka and around the world. These approaches have later been critically questioned to determine whether more emphasis should be given to traditional methods – accuracy-based – or non-traditional methods – fluency-based. This paper will define these approaches and terms in the paragraphs that follow, also elaborating upon their respective pros and cons.

Language acquisition is a process in which people utilize their own intellect and thinking processes to find the rules of the languages that they are learning. Constructivist theory underscores that learners must be active participants in their learning journeys and that

knowledge is built through experiences. In keeping with this understanding, non-traditional approaches to language teaching are guided by affect, activation of schema, discussions, real-world examples, stimulation of kinesthetic senses, negotiation of meaning, etc. In non-traditional approaches, learning activities are designed to ignite fluency through comfort, enjoyment, and stimuli (functional reactions), while accuracy (no grammatical errors allowed) is given less prominence.

‘Gattingno’s silent way’ is one such non-traditional, fluency based language learning approach in which the teacher either speaks very little or remains silent while eliciting and subtly reinforcing verbal output from learners. The teacher emphasizes progress, not perfection. Student errors are considered to be natural and indispensable in this process. At the same time, students are encouraged to explore the language with the option to self-correct their errors; the teacher would intervene to correct these errors only as a last resort. As Freeman explains, “students make errors when they first begin speaking and teachers are expected to be tolerant and only correct major errors. Even these should be corrected unobtrusively” (2000, p.115).

In non-traditional methods, such as total physical response, students learn by observing actions as well as by performing the actions themselves. This approach corresponds to the constructivist emphasis on memory stimulation and motor activity, allowing students to act in response to their listening skills without yet having to actually speak. In other approaches, such as in communicative language teaching, authentic communication is encouraged amongst students. Students are urged to work in groups so that they begin to feel affinity towards learning from each other through cooperation. In this process, errors are allowed and considered to be a natural result of the development of communication abilities, especially where students with low linguistic knowledge can nonetheless communicate effectively (Freeman 2000). During these fluency activities, the teacher may make a note

of common errors and return to them later with an accuracy-based activity. This testifies to the fact that fluency can be fostered amongst students without focusing on students' errors.

Community language learning is a non-traditional method that is consistent with the notions of constructivist and cognitive theories, which builds relationships, student confidence, community, self-reflection, independence, decision making, etc. Per Curan (as cited in Freeman 2000), who advocated for this method, notes that the strategy does not require any textbooks. Instead, there is a group of learners sitting in a circle who themselves initiate a conversation in the target language. They are aided by the teacher who acts as a counselor while language data is recorded. The most particular aspect of this method is that, as Freeman (2000) puts it, teachers work in a non-threatening way. One option is for teachers to correctly repeat what the student stated incorrectly and to not focus on mistakes in order to maintain a polite and non-defensive connection between students and teachers. For example, if a student says, "I did not go school yesterday," then the teacher can respond to the student and say, "Ah you did not go *to* school yesterday?". In this situation, the learner's mistake is rectified by repeating what the learner uttered without drawing undue attention to their error, since the primary concern is to foster fluency, not accuracy.

'Desuggestopedia' (Lozanov, 1991) is another prominent non-traditional teaching method. This strategy pays close attention to pupils' feelings and psychological barriers. Indirect positive comments are given to boost students' self-esteem and help them believe that they can succeed. The usage of fine arts in turn heightens their mental faculties. Most importantly, learners' errors are corrected with tolerance and a 'soft' voice for "the activities are varied and do not allow the students to focus on the form of the linguistic message, just the communicative intent" (Freeman, 2000, p.85). This clearly elucidates the fact that the foremost importance is given to fluency while overlooking accuracy.

Okazaki (2005) succinctly summarizes another non-traditional ELT approach: problem-posing within Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy. "[Freire] proposed that when literacy is taught as a collection of decontextualized, meaningless skills...the learners cannot be reflective or bring their own experiences to the learning process...Freire calls this the 'banking model' of education. He suggests instead that a 'problem-posing' process makes literacy immediately relevant and engaging by focusing on problematic issues in learner lives" (2005, p. 177). In problem-posing, teachers choose class content that is directly linked to students' lives and experiences. This approach necessarily makes class more engaging and motivating to learners – because they can relate to it. Ira Shor explains, "We are what we say and do. The way we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us" (1999, p. 1). Shor argues that helping students to understand the power of language in building their own, their communities', and their societies' futures is an integral part of the ELT task because it connects language learning to students' lives, increasing students' motivation to learn.

Thus, it could be postulated that non-traditional approaches and methods leading to a generation of students who focus more on fluency than on accuracy would positively impact learners in multiple ways. It has been empirically found that most South Asian Learners today suffer from Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Language Attitude Anxiety (LAA) as a result of teachers pointing out individual and group errors constantly (Attanayake, 2020). In fact, in Sri Lanka, "a large majority of students [86.8%] are reluctant to speak English as they are either afraid or shy or both that others will laugh at their mistakes" (Attanayake, 2020, p. 03). Thus, it is of "it is of paramount importance to build learner confidence to speak English as part of our teaching methodology" (Attanayake, 2020, p. 03). In tandem with the Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) technique, creating a 'safe'

classroom environment creates space for students to escape FLA and LAA; “the teacher’s transference from an ‘ordinary teaching position’ to that of an observer who ‘overlooks’ the errors and mistakes found in student speech is highlighted as one of the key characteristics” in this process (Attanayake, 2019, p. 6). These studies demonstrate that a greater emphasis on fluency over accuracy will improve learners’ ability to communicate in, learn, and eventually master a foreign language.

The study by Durdans et al (2017) exemplifies how “Sri Lanka faces several complex systemic challenges when it comes to the status of English language in general education”. He emphasizes how these disparities are mostly reflected in the dissemination of resources in different parts of the country. Schools in rural areas tend to have fewer resources than those in the urban, south, and west parts of the island (Dundar et al., 2017). In rural areas, there is often a lack of qualified English teachers. “Although newly qualified teachers are required to spend time working in a rural area, they tend to then transfer to what are seen as more desirable locations, meaning that rural schools not only lack English teachers, but that the teachers that they do have may be inexperienced (Dundar et al., 2017), leading to lower-quality teaching. This problem is compounded by a relative lack of teacher training in rural areas (Little et al, 2018)” (38).

As demonstrated by these empirical studies, the present-day English teaching context in Sri Lanka demands change. Attanayake (2019) points out that after more than 70 years of teaching English as a second language in the educational system, Sri Lanka did not achieve a 50% pass rate in O/L English until 2017, when it narrowly passed 50%. Revisiting teaching methodology is one of the key remedial factors in addressing this problem.

An empirical study reviewed the English Language test papers from the 2016 and 2017 GCE O-Level and 2017 GCE A-Level in English Language. This study demonstrates how public tests are designed to assess language

proficiency (grammar and vocabulary), reading comprehension, and writing – but not listening and speaking skills (Indrarathna, 2020). This exemplifies the overwhelming prominence given to reading and writing over speaking and listening in the classroom and in testing across Sri Lanka. And yet, this approach has not been shown to deliver successful outcomes in language proficiency. “The preliminary studies conducted in Sri Lanka, starting from 2007/2008 through the past decade, continually demonstrate that the learners’ most sought-after skill is learning to speak in English” (Attanayake, 2017, p. 22). And yet, the most commonly taught skills to students are reading and writing. This raises the following inevitable concern: what is taught to the learners is not actually what they need or want.

Scholars in their studies of secondary schools in particular explain that “it is important for teachers to bring in authentic speaking samples to class and, also most importantly, highlight natural features of speech” (Indrarathna, 2020, p.02). This includes pauses, repetitions, back-channelling, hesitations etc. Script based speaking examples given in books lack these authentic scenarios and thus learners find it difficult to improve their competency and are unable to handle real-life speaking contexts. For these reasons, it is essential that learners’ needs are meticulously studied in keeping with the notions of post method language teaching and that materials are customized accordingly before proceeding with teaching methodologies.

### **3. Methodology**

In this case study, ethnographic research methods utilizing qualitative observational data and semi-structured interviews with Bandaranayake Secondary School English Teachers have been used. Qualitative data was collected while observing classes at Bandaranayake Secondary School over the course of four months from April to August of 2022. The relevant observations from this period have been incorporated into the findings below. In order to include teachers’

perspectives on the extent to which current English Language Teaching (ELT) methods at Bandaranayake Secondary School result in successful learning outcomes for students’

#### 4. Discussion

In order to retain teachers’ anonymity, they are referred to throughout this paper by the first letter of their first names. S, T, and D have been working at Bandaranayake Secondary school for over twenty years, five years, and five years respectively. Below, Table 1 depicts teacher responses to the semi-structured interview questions.

Table 1.

Codes	Categories	Concept/Themes
Singing songs	ELT Methods	ELT Curriculum
Group work		
Pair work		
Repetition		
Presentations		
Videos		
Concept checking questions		
Discussions		
Field trips		
Pair work		
Repetition		
Presentations		
Demonstration		
Matching varieties		
Visualizing		
Summarizing		
Highlighting		
Underlining		
Project-based learning		
Re-reading		
Practice testing	Possible Improvements to ELT	Teachers’ Perceptions of Effective ELT
Conduct extra classes for weaker students		
Emphasis on the alphabet		
Help students feel less fearful of speaking English		
Make class more fun		
Use competitive methods to motivate students		

Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

Drawing from teacher responses, Table 1 seems to show a balanced curriculum employing both traditional and non-traditional approaches to all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Speaking- and listening-based experiential approaches such as ‘project-based learning’, ‘field trips’, and ‘presentations’ can be observed. Table 1 shows that these methods are balanced with traditional reading and speaking approaches such as ‘re-reading’, ‘summarizing’, and ‘matching varieties.’ However, on-the-ground observations depict a different reality.

When comparing the respective teachers’ responses, fundamental differences in teachers’ perceptions of effective ELT, especially in terms of the students’ strengths and the most important English skills, become visible. For example, S states that students are strongest in speaking and listening, while T argues the opposite – that students are most competent in reading and writing. Similarly, S posits that reading and writing are the most important ELT skills, while T contends that speaking and listening are most important. In combination with her practical emphasis on extra classes on the alphabet, this data shows that S prioritizes written over spoken English. T on the other hand, highlights the need to help students feel less fearful of speaking English, showing that her teaching approach prioritizes spoken over written English. Both the discrepancy in assessment of strength and the disagreement on what is important in teaching English are cause for concern in Bandaranayake Secondary School’s English curriculum. Researcher’s observations below corroborate T’s perception of student outcomes.

English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, Bandaranayake English teachers were asked to respond via voice message to the following four questions: 1) Can you explain how you teach your English class? What techniques and methods do you use to teach English? (ex: showing video material, singing etc); 2) When students leave the school, how strong are each of their skills in English? Reading? Writing? Listening? Speaking?; 3) Which English skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) do you think are most important?; 4) How do you think English teaching at Bandaranayake could be improved?. Responses to these questions have been coded and categorized using the thematic analysis method in Table 1. Where relevant, responses have also been transcribed.

*"I asked four students from grade 12, 'How old are you?'. All four students answered, 'Sixteen.' This seemed incorrect to me, so I wrote the number 16 on the board. 'No,' they said. 'Are you eighteen?' I wrote the number 18 on the board. 'Yes, we're eighteen.' The 12th graders could not correctly tell me their age."*

*"I asked students what the subject of their previous lesson had been. They responded, 'Uncountable nouns.'"*

*"One of the English teachers told me that the older students didn't want to work with me because they wanted to focus on their textbooks so that they could prepare for their O- and A-level exams. The textbook itself emphasizes reading and writing exercises with very little focus on speaking or listening."*

These interactions show that 12th grade students at Bandaranayake are unable to understand and respond to basic questions in English, such as "How old are you?". Furthermore, these older students are largely uninterested in improving their spoken English; they would prefer to improve their written language skills so that they can perform well on their exams. This lack of motivation in speaking demonstrates that students do not understand the importance of being able to speak English in their own lives.

*"At the beginning of class with grade 9, the regular teacher, D, asked if I wanted to work on grammar points. I suggested that we work on speaking and listening instead, as it is unusual for students to be able to practice their English with a native speaker (myself). I asked students to get into partners and then ask and answer the following question: 'What did you do today?' The students didn't understand the question. D spoke up, 'they aren't very good at speaking or listening, but they understand the textbook well.'"*

Once again, this moment demonstrates students' struggle to successfully listen and speak, providing another piece of evidence consistent with T's perspective that students are weak in listening and speaking. Furthermore, by first suggesting work on

grammar points and later highlighting students' ability to work in the textbook, D displays curricular focus on written over spoken English. In this way, two of the three English teachers – a majority – at Bandaranayake Secondary School prioritize reading and writing over speaking and listening in their ELT methods.

As explained by Indrarathne and McCulloch, "Pressure on teachers to focus on preparing students for national exams mitigates against developing listening and speaking skills, as these are not yet tested in the O- and A-level exams" (2022, p. 13). Because O- and A-level exams score students based on their reading and writing skills, it makes sense that S and D would believe that these skills are most important, and that this approach would then result in weaknesses in students' spoken English. Indrarathne and McCulloch go on to say that "Most students, by Grade 11, achieve only CEFR level A1 (basic user). Speaking and listening scores are particularly weak" (2022, p. 13).

Being unable to correctly state your age or explain what you did during the day is consistent with an A1 level. Given this fact, it is particularly concerning that S has evaluated students' speaking and listening skills as strengths. This perspective, especially of a teacher working at the school for over 20 years, indicates that assessment tools at Bandaranayake are not effective. In this way, not only do the school's ELT methods and curricula need improvement, but assessment methods must change as well.

*"T asked me if I could do a listening exercise. She gave me a textbook from which to read. I read the passage three times, a discussion of two British men's experience visiting Sri Lanka. Based on my reading, students were asked to fill in the blanks in the text in their own workbooks."*

*"T suggested that I conduct class for the day using the textbook, a lesson on Leonardo Da Vinci and the Mona Lisa. A passage explained basic information about the artist and reading comprehension questions followed."*

Such grammar and textbook-based lessons, even for the development of speaking skills, as compared to game-, experiential-, or discussion-based lessons, show thematic focus on accuracy over fluency in foreign language acquisition at Bandaranayake Secondary School. In addition, both textbook lessons that T suggested are Euro-centric in their content. The first takes the point of view of British tourists and the second analyzes the life and work of an Italian artist. Neither of these lessons focus on the actual lived experiences and contexts of students, taking a 'banking model' instead of a 'problem posing' model of education, as described by Okazaki and Freire. As a result, it might be difficult for students to actually connect the usefulness of English to their own lives; English usage is instead located elsewhere, beyond students and their community. Therefore it follows logically that motivation to learn this foreign language amongst students is low; teachers are not making apparent the utility of English right here in Sri Lanka.

At the same time, teachers at Bandaranayake Secondary school do show some interest in and occasional practice of non-traditional methods that foreground fluency over accuracy.

*"T showed me the murals that she was starting to draw on the walls of the language learning room. 'This way we can use the classroom itself to teach English,' she said."*

In this moment, T practices the "visualizing" ELT method that she had described in her semi-structured interview. Murals allow students to see English on their walls and read these sentences and words again and again to acquire vocabulary and sentence structure. This approach also ideologically opposes the suggestion to teach lessons on British tourists and Leonardo Da Vinci as it situates English directly within the lives of students. This mural teaching method therefore constitutes a fluency based, non-traditional approach to English language learning.

In her semi-structured interview, T noted that students are 'fear[ful]' to speak English, which is consistent with Attanayake's (2020) findings on South Asian English Learners. However, T states that she hopes to help her students feel less fearful. T is therefore indicating in her observation of fear and her desire to assuage it, in combination with her mural teaching approach, that she might be open to more non-traditional fluency based ELT methods.

## 5. Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that Bandaranayake Secondary School's English program prioritizes reading and writing over speaking and listening skills, while emphasizing accuracy over fluency. After six years of English classes at Bandaranayake Secondary School, students have skills consistent with an A1 level (basic user), indicating little to no improvement since they began their classes in grade 6. Further, although 12th grade students speak in English to an A1 level (basic user), one teacher assesses their speaking and listening skills as a strength. This mismatch between teacher assessment and student performance, combined with teaching methods that are ineffective at producing outcomes beyond an A1 level illustrates that Bandaranayake's approach to ELT must change if it is to effectively improve students' English proficiency.

Given this apparent need for improvement in teaching methods and outcome assessments along with the dearth of teacher trainings in rural Sri Lanka, it is posited that non-traditional fluency-based ELT teacher trainings for Bandaranayake Secondary School teachers through local tertiary institutions' ELT departments would be beneficial. Such a collaboration could serve as a model for the improvement of ELT methods and outcomes in rural Sri Lanka, especially in areas in which tertiary institutions are located. As such institutions teach in the English medium, teach the subject of English through their ELT departments, and have academics who conduct research in ELT best-practices, this kind of an

exchange of methods and knowledge would not only improve English fluency at the secondary school level, but would also improve students' English capacities if they are to enter university later in their academic careers.

Furthermore, tertiary institutions and secondary schools are already connected in their academic practices. The National Institute for Education (NIE), which is responsible for developing English curricula and teacher training (Indrarathne and McCulloch 21, 2022), is governed by both a council and academic affairs board made up of experts and academics. These academics include an acting vice chancellor, former vice chancellor, retired department chairs, retired professors, professors, and senior lecturers (NIE Academic Affairs Board 2022, NIE Council 2022). In this way, academics in tertiary education are already intimately linked to English teaching methods in secondary schools. Therefore, ELT workshops directly connecting tertiary and secondary school educators would be within the scope and convention of existing practice and policy.

Pursuing such an improvement to English capacity in Sri Lanka before students enter university would help to address the industry need for graduates fluent in English. In this way, English teacher training conducted by tertiary institutions with secondary schools has the possibility to positively impact both learning and employment across the country.

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