

# Sri Lankan English teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards Sri Lankan English

## 12<sup>th</sup> International Research Conference of KDU

AMWDGK Amunugama<sup>1</sup>, HBH Pravini<sup>2</sup>, and MLS Madhuwanthi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya Sri Lanka

<sup>3</sup> Department of English Language Teaching, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

# Corresponding author; [hirushikapraveeni1997@gmail.com](mailto:hirushikapraveeni1997@gmail.com)

**Abstract**— While Sri Lankan English has been established as a standard variety of English for many years, the speakers of various social groups in Sri Lanka perceive different views towards Sri Lankan English. Law, administration as well as the education sectors of the country possess a great power in spreading and influencing the beliefs of the Sri Lankan English speakers. As the pioneers in widening the knowledge about Sri Lankan English among the next generations of Sri Lanka, it is necessary for English teachers to have a positive outlook towards Sri Lankan English. This study aims to examine the attitudes and perceptions of Sri Lankan English teachers towards Sri Lankan English. In addition, this study further inspects in which manner the teachers encourage learners to use Sri Lankan English, along with teachers' recommendations to improve the awareness of Sri Lankan English among teachers and students. Questionnaires were given among fifty teachers of English from schools and tuition, and ten teachers were selected for the interviews, to collect the required data. Analyzed data revealed that although Sri Lankan English teachers acknowledge Sri Lankan English, they lack knowledge about Sri Lankan English; teachers had confusion between Sri Lankan English with British English and they showed reluctance to accept that their spoken variety is Sri Lankan English.

**Keywords**— Sri Lankan English, Attitudes, Sri Lankan English teachers

### I. INTRODUCTION

“English language was introduced to Sri Lanka as a gift from the colonist” (Herat, 2005); and it has developed over two centuries into a variety called Sri Lankan English (SLE) (Siromi, 2011, Fernando, 1977), therefore many controversies were built surrounding Sri Lankan English. According to Gunasekara (2006) “Sri Lankan English is the language used by Sri Lankans who chooses to use English for whatever purpose in Sri Lankan context”. Conversely, Kandiah in 1981 has emphasized SLE as a variety of English

spoken by the “habitual Lankan users of English” who “live in towns” and belong to the “westernized middle-class”. In contrast to this statement, Herat (2006) mentions, SLE is “no longer the prerogative of small elite” since “SLE is increasingly used in the public domains by a large number of people who have another language as their best and/or native language” (p.66).

However, after decades of English usage within the country, the new Education reforms in 1997, introduced by Sri Lankan Education Ministry, established as to what variety of English should be used for educational purposes. The English textbooks were written using Standard Sri Lankan English (SSLE), as well as other necessary teaching materials: samples of SSLE phonology, grammar exercises, syntactic analysis, etc. A new subject: General English was introduced into G.C.E. Advanced Level for all the students to follow, not only to those who wish to specialize in English.

As Gunasekara (2005) states that there is a little awareness or acceptance in Sri Lankans towards SLE but also that it is growing; similarly, even though SSLE is much of a part in English curriculum, even today some teachers are unhappy about the usage of Sri Lankan variety of English in education as British English is considered to be the model of English used in Sri Lanka. Madawattegedara and Devendra (2004) further investigated that, “teachers find lexical features in SLE are largely unacceptable and incorrect in the written form”. Many speakers of SSLE show reluctance to accept that the variety they are using is not British English. The notion that Sri Lankan English transmits is the connotation of “inferiority” or “non-standard”, and it has been revealed as the cause for this lack of acceptance.

However, time and constant exposure have made Sri Lankan English to be known among English speakers in Sri Lanka; Maylor in 2009 investigated that there have been increasing awareness of SLE in the academic circle (p. 56). English teachers are taught about SSLE in their teacher

training process and they acknowledge the existence of Sri Lankan English. Teachers are aware that SSLE consists of phonology, morphology, syntax, etc. This study focuses on the attitudes of Sri Lankan English teachers towards Sri Lankan English and the issues regarding the subject matter discussed.

#### A. Research Question

The study investigates Sri Lankan English teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards SLE. Furthermore, the study intends to probe whether teachers encourage learners to use SLE. The study presents recommendations to improve the awareness of SLE among teachers and students. Hoping to investigate these areas, this study addresses the following research question:

What are the perceptions and attitudes of Sri Lankan English teachers towards Sri Lankan English?

The assumptions made before conducting the study were, teachers will have knowledge about SLE and teachers will have positive attitudes towards SLE.

## II. METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

This chapter contains a description of the participants of the study, instruments which were used to collect data and the manner of data analysis that were used to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of Sri Lankan English teachers towards Sri Lankan English.

#### A. Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 50 teachers of English who are currently teaching English as a second language. School and tuition teachers from Colombo, Kandy, Gampaha, Rathnapura and Kurunegala were included in the study due to the convenience of the researchers.

#### B. Design

Quanti-qualitative research was carried out to collect data in order to fulfil the aim of this study: examining the attitudes of Sri Lankan English teachers about Sri Lankan English.

#### C. Instruments

Questionnaires and interviews were used as the instruments of the study. The questionnaires consisted of both demographical data and the questions useful in investigating attitudes. This study adopted 14 closed-ended questions and 4 open-ended questions. Attitudes were further investigated through interviews to maintain the validity and the reliability of the answers collected through questionnaires. 10 questions were employed to

collect the reasons behind the attitudes of teachers regarding Sri Lankan English.

#### D. Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed among 50 teachers of English. Clear instructions were given and complicated questions were explained.

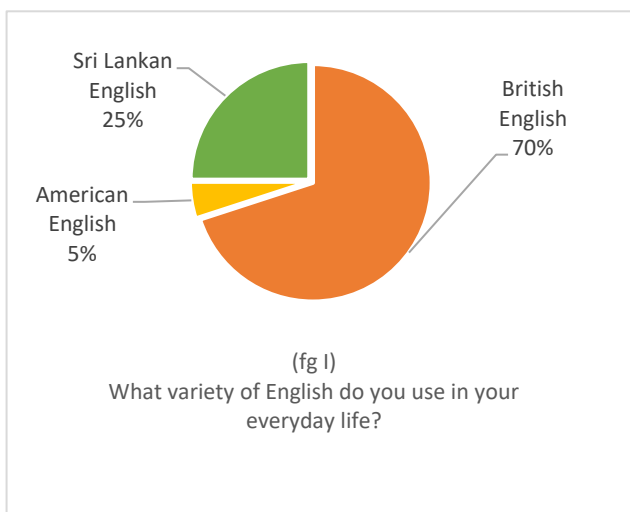
10 English teachers among the 50 teachers, who were knowledgeable about SLE, who recognized SLE as a separate variety and also who said they were able to distinguish the differences between SLE and BE, were selected to partake in the interviews after considering the data gathered from the questionnaires. Interviews were conducted individually for 10-15 minutes.

#### E. Data Analysis

The answers collected through questionnaires were statistically analysed and the attitudes of teachers collected through interviews were examined and analysed, afterwards. Critical thinking was used to synthesise the data.

## III. RESULTS

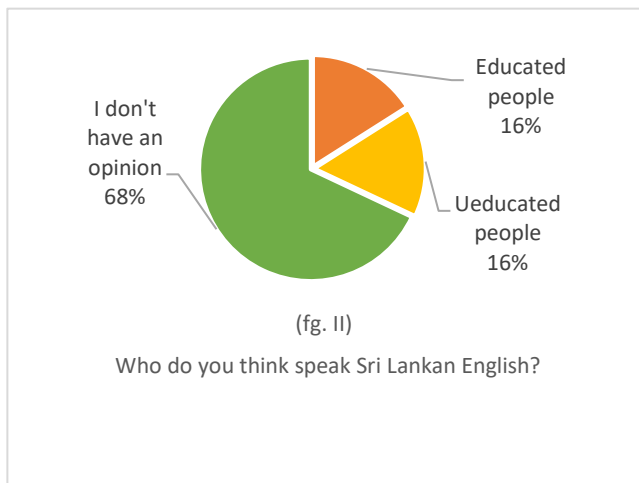
#### A. Findings from the questionnaire are as follows



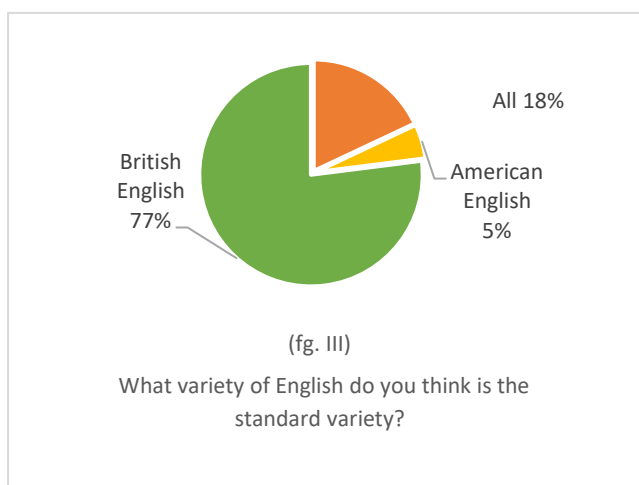
As shown in the above chart, 70% of the teachers stated that the variety that they use in their day to day activities is British English. Furthermore, 25% of the teachers stated that they use Sri Lankan English and it is only 5% of the teachers stated that American English is the variety that they use in their day to day activities. However, none of the teachers claimed that the variety they use is Australian English.

It was found out that 96% of the teachers are aware of Sri Lankan English while the rest of the teachers did not have

any knowledge of Sri Lankan English. As a result, 68% of the teachers were unable to express the community that uses Sri Lankan English. 16% of the teachers think that educated Sri Lankans use Sri Lankan English and another 16% of the teachers think that uneducated Sri Lankans use Sri Lankan English (Fig.II)



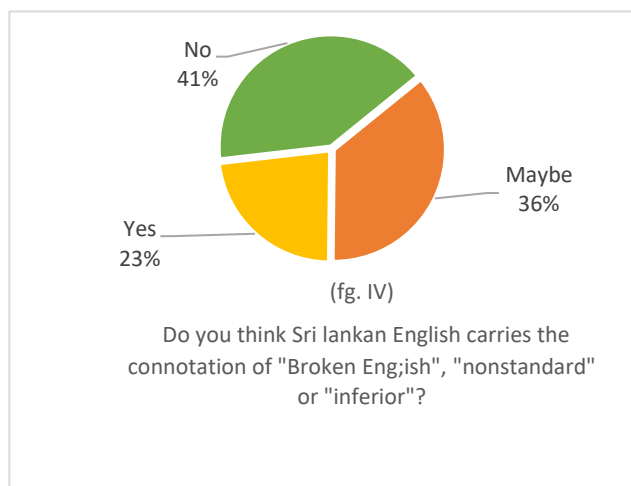
77% of the teachers claimed that they consider British English to be the standard variety. Only 5% of the teachers considered American English to be the standard variety. 18% of the teachers said that they consider all the varieties to be standard and that includes British English, American English, Sri Lankan English and Australian English. (Fig.III)



Furthermore, 77% of the teachers considered Sri Lankan English to be a separate variety and the rest of the teachers did not consider Sri Lankan English to be a separate variety.

41% of the teachers claimed that they do not consider Sri Lankan English as an inferior/broken variety. On the other hand, 23% of the teachers considered Sri Lankan English to

be an inferior/ broken variety. 36% of the teachers were unable to give a clear answer as to whether they consider Sri Lankan English to be broken or inferior. (Fig.IV)



*B. Findings from the interview*

Through interviews, teachers were questioned about their attitudes towards students speaking Standard British English (BE) and Sri Lankan English (SLE). As shown in Table 1, on both instances, 23% of the teachers said that they were very happy, yet none of the teachers was unhappy to hear their students using British English. In addition, 17% of the teachers were unhappy to hear the students using Sri Lankan English.

**Table 1: Attitudes towards students speaking Standard British English (BE) and Sri Lankan English (SLE)**

	BE	SLE
<b>Satisfied</b>	54%	36%
<b>Very happy</b>	23%	23%
<b>No difference</b>	14%	23%
<b>That I have taught well</b>	9%	1%
<b>Not happy</b>	0%	17%

Furthermore, eight teachers said that they encourage their students to use Sri Lankan English as the students are still learners and Sri Lankan English is unique to Sri Lankan. It

was revealed that many teachers were incapable of differentiating between SLE and BE in regards to syntax and morphology. However, teachers were only knowledgeable about the phonological distinctions of SLE. Thus, the findings support Maylor's (2009) statement "...they (English teachers) remain relatively unaware of what exactly it (SLE) consists of" (p.56). Finally, the teachers expressed that seminars, workshops and the including SLE into the school curriculum will improve the knowledge of SLE among teachers.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This survey study discussed the Sri Lankan English teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards Sri Lankan English (SLE). According to the findings of this study, it was revealed that, even though the most of the teachers have accepted and acknowledged SLE, there is a loophole in their knowledge about SLE. Many teachers considered British English (BE) as the standard variety of English. Similarly, most of them did not accept that they use SLE in their daily lives. Especially, there is a confusion about the contrast between SLE and BE among Sri Lankan English teachers. Only phonological distinctions are explained as the differences between SLE and BE, and morphological and semantic features were not identified by most of the Sri Lankan English teachers. Therefore, it was revealed that most of the teachers are unaware of how SLE differs from BE.

This study will be helpful to take further actions to improve the knowledge of Sri Lankan English teachers regarding Sri Lankan English. At the same time, this study will give an idea about the areas (morphology, semantic features) of Sri Lankan English that teachers should be more focused and knowledgeable when working in school curriculum.

This survey focused only on the attitudes and perceptions towards Sri Lankan English in a few geographical areas, and the scope of participants was limited to 50 teachers. Also, this study does not consider the attitudes and perceptions towards SLE among university instructors. It is recommended for future research to widen the scale of areas and the scope of participants to obtain more reliable and distinctive information about attitudes towards SLE. Also, it is encouraged to gather attitudes and perceptions of university instructors about SLE to obtain further valuable information.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the lecturers of Department of English Language Teaching at

the University of Kelaniya, for encouraging us to do this study. We would also prefer to offer our special thanks to our parents for their immense support in successfully finishing this study.

#### References

- Fernando, C. (1977) 'English and Sinhala Bilingualism in Sri Lanka', *Language in Society*, 6(03), pp341- 360. doi:10.1017/S0047404500005054
- Fernando, S. (2011) 'Sri Lankan English (SLE) Vocabulary: A New Vocabulary in a New Variety of English', *Journals of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7(8), pp160- 179.
- Gunasekera, M. (2005) *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English*. Colombo: Katha Publishers.
- Herath, M. (2005) 'BE variation in Sri Lankan English', *Language Variation and Change*, 17(2), pp181-208.
- Herath, M. (2006) 'Substitution one in Sri Lankan English' [online]. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265154484\\_Substitute\\_one\\_in\\_Sri\\_Lankan\\_English](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265154484_Substitute_one_in_Sri_Lankan_English)
- Kandiah, T. (1981) 'Lankan English Schizoglossia', *English Worldwide*, 2, pp63- 81.
- Meyler, M. (2009) 'Sri Lankan English: a distinct South Asian variety', *English Today*. 100, 25(4), 55-60. doi: 10.1017/S0266078409990447
- Sivakunaran, K. S. (2006) 'Manique Gunasekara gives a place for Lankan English', *The Island*, 15 March, p. 4.