

Teaching American English to Sri Lankan Military Officers

Introduction

Even though English is considered the link language by the 13th amendment to the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (Gunesekaera 2005, p.11), in some occasions it has been recognized more than the two main national languages: Sinhala and Tamil. This is due to the fact that Sri Lanka was governed by the British Empire for a long time and British East India Company was a pioneer in dealing with business matters during that era. Therefore, English was used as the official administrative language in public and business administration. A system was created in that era where the locals conversant in British English had the opportunity to get white color jobs. This tendency had increased to a greater extent in later years. The significant aspect in this regard was that when Sri Lanka was given the independence status the administrative power was handed over to the Sri Lankan elites who used English accurately. Mainly, when speaking they used RP (Received Pronunciation) accent.

The Sri Lanka Military Forces were properly established on the eve of the independence. Mainly these forces were used to assist the allied troops in Second World War matters. Later the three Sri Lankan Military forces: Sri Lanka Army, Sri Lanka Navy and Sri Lanka Air Force were compelled to be engaged in more ceremonial duties. Therefore, the elite administrative factors of the post colonial era were thoroughly practiced in the three military forces. As a result English had been used as the main lingua franca for communication in the military. Moreover, most of the British military pamphlets and documentations have been used. For example the method of Service writing in Sri Lanka Army is based on the British Military Service Writing. Therefore, to a greater extent British English had been used in the three Sri Lankan Military Forces.

After 1978 Sri Lankans have had many opportunities to travel, study and work abroad. As a result the different variants of English such as American English, Australian English, Indian English, etc. became popular among Sri Lankans. In particular, the influence of the Hollywood movies and Internet played a major role in spreading American English. Nowadays it is unlikely to meet Sri Lankans who use RP accent or British English.

The Sri Lanka Military Forces could not escape from this tendency. Furthermore, due to various reasons, Sri Lankan military officers have been getting opportunities to undergo advanced military training in the USA. Prior to training the officers should pass the English Comprehensive Level Test (ECL). The normal cut off mark of this test is 80%. This test is purely based on testing American English, from which 50% is based on Listening and the rest is Reading. Apart from that the test practices and evaluates the pronunciation skills, and reading capabilities based on American English. Moreover, these officers have to be engaged in tough military training conducted in American English; therefore, the competency in American English is utmost important to complete such training successfully.

Due to the operational capabilities of the Sri Lanka Military forces, especially the Sri Lanka Army, Sri Lankan troops are attached to UN peacekeeping missions annually. The most popular UN mission is UN peacekeeping in Haiti. There especially the military officers have to communicate with Haitian interpreters in American English, even though the national language of Haiti is not English.

Due to such reasons the Sri Lanka military insists that there is a huge need for teaching American English to the military officers of the Sri Lanka Army, Navy and Air Force. Moreover, a separate American English course is conducted at the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University for the military officers who undergo special military training in the USA.



Background

When we consider the immense development of military equipment based on American technology and the sophisticated military training programmes conducted, it is obvious that any country prefers getting American assistance to uplift the standard of its military organizations. Sri Lanka is also in the same process.

However, countries like Sri Lanka who had the British colonial influence face problem when sending their military personnel who had exposure only to the British English to USA for special training or dealing with new American military technology. This is due to the fact that there is a vast difference between American and British English, particular in applications.

Teaching American English to Sri Lankan Military officers has emerged as a very important aspect due to the fact that Sri Lankan Military Officers get ample opportunities to undergo special training in various US military institutes. Sometime US trained military personnel visit Sri Lanka to carry out certain collaborative training programmes.

The Department of Languages of the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) was requested to conduct a special American English Course to cater to the needs of the Sri Lankan military officers with relevant to American English. This request was made due to the fact that two language laboratories are functioning under the Department with special American English language materials. Moreover, the department members had the opportunity to attend various American Language Teaching Courses in USA.

The study aimed at analyzing the difference between British and American English and whether American English should be separately taught to the Sri Lankan military officers. It also aims at analyzing whether the courses conducted by the Department of Language of the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University is appropriate, relevant and sufficient enough in this regard. It was hypothesized that American English should be taught separately since it is different from British English which is widely used in Sri Lanka.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are

- a. To verify whether
 - i. the Sri Lankan military officers/ have any idea of the existence of the two varieties: American English and British English,
 - ii. they have come across any difficulties due to their lack of knowledge of American English, and whether they agree that American English should be taught to the military officers,
 - iii. the special American English course conducted by the General Sir John Kotelawla Defence University is relevant, appropriate and sufficient enough
 - iv. the officers who had been engaged in UN peace keeping duties in Haiti face any difficulties due to the lack of knowledge of American English
- b. To propose appropriate recommendations in teaching American English.



Literature Review

Many books, articles, papers and internet articles have been published to prove the existence of the two English variants: British English and American English. There are many methods introduced to teach both varieties independently or based on compare and contrast method.

One important aspect that the linguists emphasize is the cultural diversity and another is the difference in pronunciation in American English. The language learner should understand the reasons for using different terminology in different occasions in order to understand the complete meaning of a term. For that, one needs the knowledge of the particular culture. For example, in Sinhala there are different terms for 'rice' depending on the occasion (Vee, Haal, Bath, Batha etc), but the only English term is 'rice'. This is due to the fact that the Sinhala culture and the English culture are different from each other. The same thing happens to us when we talk about 'snow'. We only know that word, but people who live in countries where there is snow, use different terms for different stages of snow. This emphasizes the importance of knowing culture when learning a language.

Language and culture of a country go hand in hand. This is emphasized as "The study of language is not complete without studying the culture of the people who use that language." (DLI writing team, 2002). Therefore, it is obvious that one must be exposed to the identical culture when learning a language. However, most of the Sri Lankans have been exposed to British culture and we are good in using their language also. The best example of exposing to British culture is that the wide popularity for the game of cricket in Sri Lanka. Most of the citizens in Sri Lanka do not have any idea about American football, and the significance of the "Thanks Giving Day" for the Americans. According to Arthur Gordon many people visiting USA remain baffled; they could not get adjusted themselves to the endless paradoxes with typical Americans. Moreover, the regional diversity of Americans normally confuses the visitors. (Gordon, 2003) Therefore, it is obvious that teaching American English without giving an exposure to their culture is inappropriate. In this regard authentic American English Teaching materials should be used when teaching American English.

Even the widely popular British English Dictionary: "Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary" always assists its users to identify the various linguistic differences in the two varieties of English. The difference in spellings, pronunciation, idiomatic usage, etc. are described in many entries; moreover, in its reference section the differences in the two varieties are categorized under four main sections as pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling and grammar. (Wehmeier et al., 2005).

Methodology

This study was carried out by analyzing the primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from the sample group, and the secondary data were based on various publications with relevant to American and British English.

The study was carried out with the participation of twenty-five personnel in a sample group which consists of ten military officers of the Sri Lanka Army, Navy and Air Force who



followed the one month special American English Course conducted by the Department of Languages of the KDU and subsequently followed special military training in USA. Six military officers from Sri Lanka Army, Navy and Air Force who had not had any experience dealing separately with American English, three lecturers/instructors of the Department of Languages of the KDU who underwent special American English courses at Defense Language Institute, in Texas, USA and who have been engaged in conducting the aforesaid one month special course, three lecturers from different Departments of the KDU who attended special courses/ programmes/ seminars in USA, and three Sri Lanka Army officers who engaged in peacekeeping operations in Haiti were also included.

The collection of primary data was based on a questionnaire of which each member of the sample group answered in detail. The questionnaire was both object and subject oriented. It was prepared considering the objectives of the study. It consisted of six questions; five questions demanding affirmative or negative answer first. Then each question could be answered in detail to share the opinions, ideas and suggestions of the sample group.

Primary Data Analysis

The first question was whether the participants believe that there were two variants of English existing as American English and British English. Almost all of them affirmed the existence of the two variants of English. In the same question there was an additional section for the participants to reveal the type of language components they had come across to double check their answer. They emphasized mainly the variations in spellings and pronunciation. Five participants revealed not only the variation in spellings and pronunciation but also the variation in idiomatic expression and grammar.

Under spellings they emphasized the difference in writing colour vs. color, labour vs. labor, and dialogue vs. dialog. Under pronunciation they have mentioned the pronunciation of the words such as "schedule, conversation, etc."

The second question was whether the participants experienced any difficulties due to their lack of knowledge of American English. Most of the military officer who underwent training in the USA said that they faced difficulties in certain occasions; however, they were able to manage. Some were of the view that they visited USA for a short period; therefore, during such short periods they had not encountered any difficulties.

The third question was whether the participants agreed that American English should be taught to Military Officers of Sri Lanka Army, Navy and Air Force. Almost all the participants agreed for the need to teach American English to Sri Lankan military officers. They came out with different reasons for their answers. The most common reason was that the officers who will undergo special military training in the USA and who will be engaged in joint training exercises with the Americans, and who will be engaged in UN peacekeeping missions will be able to build up their confidence through such courses. Majority came out with the idea that American English has progressively become the language of internet; therefore, to have quite feasible internet browsing the knowledge of American English is required.

The fourth question was for the participants who attended the special American Language Course conducted by the Department of Languages of the KDU. It was to verify whether the course was relevant, appropriate and sufficient for them. All the selected participants appreciated the usefulness of the course. They suggested allocating more time to practice language skills thoroughly. All the officers hailed that the course not only improved their



English knowledge but also the materials assisted them to get adjusted themselves for various types of situations that they encountered in the USA.

The fifth question was especially for the participants who visited the USA or who were engaged in UN peacekeeping duties in Haiti. It was meant to identify whether they faced any difficulties due to their lack of knowledge of American English. They pointed out that even though the majority of the Haitian people speak their native language, which is a different vernacular of French, they faced many difficulties due to their lack of knowledge of American English because the main interpreters use American English. Moreover, Haitians are very fond of learning American English because they are dreaming to migrate to the USA one day.

Secondary Data Analysis

With reference to the special American English course conducted by the Department of Languages of the KDU a comparative data analysis was done based on two text books: one was a British English military text book and the other was an American English military text book. The analysis was to find out the differences between British and American English.

Basically there are many differences in naming the military ranks. For example equivalent of the British Army Brigadier is Brigadier General in the American Army. Moreover, British and American Air Force ranks are totally different. In a very popular British Military English text book: *Breakthrough* by the writing team of the British Council's Peacekeeping English Project, a separate section is allocated to compare the American and British Military ranks. (The writing team of the British Council's Peacekeeping English Project, 2005). This shows that certain components of American English are also important for the British Military. Furthermore, the book *Breakthrough* has many other differences than *American Language Course Book 25* pertaining to British English and American English.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier the officers who undergo training in the USA should pass the English Comprehensive Level Test (ECL) scoring more than 80% marks. Otherwise they are not eligible to continue the special military training programmes in the USA. All the ECL tests are based on the American Language Course books. Altogether there are 34 American Language Course books used in the overall course. Moreover each book has its own identical language laboratory practice text book. There are three types of ECL tests as test A, test B and test C under each book. Normally test A is conducted at the beginning of the book, test B in the middle and test C after finishing the book. While playing a major assistance to teach American English the ingredients of these books give a greater exposure in cultural and social aspects which are directly relevant to the American language. The aforesaid test evaluates both the students' language proficiency and their exposure to the American culture and society.

The candidate cannot answer the questions in the tests without referring the relevant books. For example following is a question extracted from the American Language Course, Book 28 Quiz A booklet.

- c. *Williams Air Force Base, Arizona. Lt Col Olmstead congratulates Capt Rogers, center, and 1Lt Rambo, left, before the graduation ceremony for their undergraduate pilot training class. The captain and lieutenant were part of a group of ten female officers who were the first women to graduate from the course.*
- i. *The women finished a course which taught them to*
- 1.) *Train young officers*
 - 2.) *Fly airplanes*
 - 3.) *Be good officers*
 - 4.) *Conduct graduation ceremonies*

(DLI writing team, 1992, Booklet 0494)





It is obvious that the Sri Lankan military officers who learnt many military aspects in British English will get confused when finding the right answer because they have not come across a situation where a Captain and a Lt Col working in Air Force. In addition to that the rank 1 Lt is a new concept for them.

The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms emphasize the value of having a knowledge of idiomatic expressions of a language as: "The accurate and appropriate use of English expression which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners." (Cowie et al., 1993). When considering the difference in idiomatic meanings, remarkable variations are there between American and British English. For example, in British English, what is meant by: "a pack lies" is an account of something that is totally or largely untrue (Cowie et al., 1993). In the American Language Course Book of Idioms published by the Defense Language Institute it is said that in American English the idiomatic expression of making untrue statement is "lying through teeth" (DLI writing team, BOI, 2001). Moreover the British English equivalent of American English idiomatic expression "be at loggerheads" (DLI writing team, BOI, 2001) is "argue the toss" (Cowie et al., 1993).

There are a lot differences in pronunciation as well. In standard British English there are 24 consonants, 12 monophthongs and 8 diphthongs. In American English there are 24 consonants, 7 monophthongs and 8 diphthongs. As a result pronunciation differs in many words. For example 'schedule' is pronounced as /fɛdu:l/ in British English but /skedʒu:l/ in American English. The word 'half' is pronounced as /ha:f/ in British English but /hæf/ in American English (Wehmeier, 2005).

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the collected data it is obvious that there are two varieties of English as British and American, and also most of these differences are not able to be understood without an explanation. For example the differences in idiomatic expressions are very difficult to figure out.

Almost all the participants agreed that Sri Lankan Military officers should be taught American English especially those who are expecting to follow advance military training courses in the USA. Moreover, it is also accepted that American English should be taught giving a better cultural and social exposure simultaneously.

The sample group members have appreciated the special American English Courses conducted by the Department of Language of the KDU. The officers who participated in such courses accepted that the course is appropriate, relevant and sufficient enough.

Limitations

Even though the research was carried out mainly based on the sample group and authentic publications, there were certain limitations. One of the main limitations was that the cultural

barrier that the participants faced while in the USA and dealing with Americans cannot be evaluated. (The requirement of appropriate cultural exposure to teach a language is discussed emphasizing certain publications in the literature review). Therefore, when collecting data it was neglected due to the aforesaid reason even though this matter had become very important.

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