

REFLECTIONS ON M.A. IN LINGUISTICS,
UNIVERSITY OF KELANIYA

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ABSTRACT

The M.A. in Linguistics has been taught at the University of Kelaniya for over 10 years. It is a highly successful program in the Faculty of Humanities, and has showcased the popularity of the discipline in many spheres. The objective of this research paper is to examine this program from the perspective of the stakeholders: the students, the lecturers, the administrators and academia at large.

This study begins with an analysis of the students who register for this course. It is based on a questionnaire survey distributed to the M.A. English medium students on their first day of lectures. This provides a student profile of the M.A. in Linguistics participants and their goals in reading for this degree. Data from the lecturers, administrators and other academics are from informal interviews and personal observation.

The results of the study show a mix of pluses and minuses. Many English teachers have risen in their careers because of the M.A. in Linguistics. However, this success has resulted in some animosity from other universities offering similar postgraduate courses, and criticism from linguists who feel that the course does not live up to its claims, or that the claims are not pragmatic enough. Another negative aspect of the course is the role of money – it is not just the income for the university but the money spent by some participants in going for tuition classes to pass the exams of the M.A. in Linguistics.

The conclusions deal with sociolinguistic issues: the objectives of the course and language competency of the students who consider it an opportunity at upward mobility. The overall finding is that the course remains popular, but some students are not able to manage with what the university offers – they seek the non-formal sector to bolster their grades through tuition.

1.0. Introduction

The Master of Arts (M.A.) in Linguistics is the brainchild of the Department of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya. It was inaugurated in February 1999, as a one year degree course. Subsequently, in 2006, it

was converted to a two year Master's Degree with a research component. It has two-streams of students: the Sinhalese stream and the English stream. Students with a first degree in any discipline are eligible to follow the course; the result is a mix of graduates from disciplines even as far afield as Medicine to graduates closer to Linguistics, such as those who have read French and German for their first degree.

By 2008, approximately 1112 students had registered for the M.A. in Linguistics, and 622 had completed the course¹. One of the reasons for the initial success of the course was that it could be used to confirm lecturers in their positions and more importantly, it was the launching pad for Instructors in English to gain entry into the academic cadre of probationary lecturers. The result of this incentive was that Instructors in English from all the national universities of Sri Lanka flocked to register for the M.A. in the English medium. This was to a great extent, at the expense of the other universities, such as the Open University of Sri Lanka which offers a Postgraduate Degree in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), geared for Instructors in English who wish to attain academic status.

The main objective of this study is to take stock of the M.A. in Linguistics as it reaches its second decade as a postgraduate course, conducted by the Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya. It is timely in that it is over ten years since its inauguration, and five years since the change from a one year Master's to a two year degree.

2.0. Course Objectives

According to the first Academic Coordinator of the M.A. in Linguistics, the objectives of initiating this course were twofold: to challenge the myths regarding language in society and to provide language teachers with linguistic knowledge². In this noble endeavour, the Coordinator claims that the course has been successful to a great extent. The purpose of Linguistics, which is the scientific study of language, has been popularized in society through the successful participants who are not only teachers, but educators as well. The Coordinator cited the Director of Education of the Sabaragamuwa Province as an example of a person who is in a position to disseminate this knowledge of Linguistics gained through successful completion of the course.

The course objectives of the M.A. in Linguistics fit the overarching goals of higher education in contemporary Sri Lanka. The World Bank report of 2009, describes the role of higher education institutions in post-conflict Sri Lanka as quoted below.

Higher education institutions are of central importance for the cultural, political and social life of a country. They shape the values and norms of a society, and create the space for enlightened citizenship and democracy. This aspect of higher education is particularly important for a country such as Sri Lanka, which has a variety of ethnic and religious groups, and is emerging from a longstanding ethnic based secessionist conflict.

(The World Bank Report, 2009: E13)

In terms of its stated objective, the M.A. in Linguistics shapes the values and norms of the teaching fraternity/sorority and leads them towards enlightened citizenship. The path is clearly defined, but whether the process matches the goals is the investigative purpose of this research paper.

While discussing the objectives of the M.A. in Linguistics, it would be pertinent to keep in mind the distinction between Theoretical and Applied Linguistics. As Premawardhena (2009), amongst many others, points out, the differences are immense:

While a Linguist is more concerned about structural and pragmatic aspects of language and how it is used in daily discourse, the Applied Linguist has a more difficult task, i.e. to find out how a language can be best taught and learned. This will include all structural and pragmatic aspects identified by the Linguist as well as finding an effective way to impart this knowledge to learners. (Premawardhena 2009: 144)

The reason this difference is highlighted here, is the twin objectives of launching the M.A. in Linguistics – it seems to be a mix of theoretical and applied aspects of the discipline, and has an impact on the perceived success or failure of the course.

3.0. Profile of M.A. in Linguistics Student

The first group of stakeholders of this Master's degree to provide formal input was the students. A questionnaire was distributed to students in October 2008³, to solicit their views on the M.A., at the start of the course. Approximately eighty two students following lectures in the English medium responded to the questionnaire survey. The purpose of the survey was to record the students' goals in following this course, and to chart some aspects of commonality in their linguistic make-up. For example, if the class was multilingual, the lecturer would be able to draw on the many languages represented in the class to discuss aspects of phonology, and make the sessions more meaningful and interactive. The questionnaire included questions on the students' first degree, their occupation, mother tongue etc., while the last question asked, "How will your M.A. in Linguistics help you professionally?" Table 1 shows the institutions of higher education represented in this sample, followed by Table 2 which provides the professions of the sample population.

Table 1:
Academic Profile of M.A. Class of 2008

Institution	Number of Graduates
1. University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka	32
2. University of Sri Jayewardenapura, Sri Lanka	15
3. University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka	10
4. Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka	06
5. National Institute of Education, Maharagama	06
6. Open University of Sri Lanka	02
7. University of Colombo, Sri Lanka	02
8. University of Rome ⁴ , Italy	02
9. Rajarata University of Sri Lanka	02
10. Eastern University	01
11. University of Tiblisi	01
12. Council of the Pracina Bhasa	01

While the range of tertiary education institutions represented in the class is impressive, it is also significant that approximately 40% of students are graduates of the University of Kelaniya, the institution granting the second degree too.

Table 2:

Occupations of M.A. in Linguistics Students

Occupation	Number
English Teacher	45
English Instructor	15
Visiting/Temporary/ Probationary Lecturer	12
Other ⁵	08

As shown in Table 2, the majority of students (90%) are involved in teaching, with most being teachers of English. In this context, Figures 1 and 2 are significant since they demonstrate the mother tongue and home languages of the students.

Figure 1:

Mother Tongue of M.A. Students of 2008

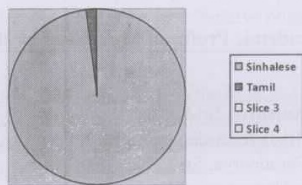


Figure 2:

Home Language/s of M.A. Students

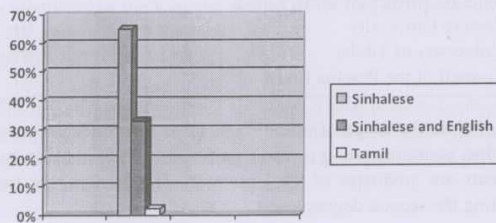


Figure 1 demonstrates that 98% of the students say their mother tongue is Sinhalese, while Figure 2 shows that over 60% speak only Sinhalese at home, while approximately 30% use Sinhalese and English as home languages. The minority of Tamil students say they speak Tamil at home. These statistics are revealing because 90% of students are teaching English (mainly) although only 30% use English as one of their home languages. This finding is significant because the English teachers themselves seem to be restricting the use of English to the classroom. In the question on how the M.A. will help the students professionally, the responses fall into three main categories: to improve their teaching, to be able to help students better, and to lead them to higher status positions in the workplace. Some of the comments are given below:

- A. "The M.A. in Linguistics would enable me to study and understand the structure, nature and the functions of the languages that I use, helping me to become a good Instructor in English."
- B. "I will be able to respond to the students' needs in language more sensitively."
- C. "I might be able to get a promotion with the added qualification – promotion means more money."

In this way, the questionnaire survey gives the linguistic background of the students and their aspirations in reading for the M.A., but a more complete picture would have been obtained if the researcher conducted a follow-up survey at the end of the course. With the available data, there is no record of the difficulties faced by the students when following the course.

One of the findings of the informal discussions with students is that most of them feel that attending classes is not required. The general impression is that one can skip classes, get the handouts (called 'tutes'), 'cram' at the end of the semester, sit the exam, and pass it⁶.

4.0. Lecturers' Perspective

The lecturers conducting courses for the M.A. in Linguistics are eminently qualified to do so, with postgraduate qualifications in Linguistics or TESL⁷. However, evidence of student-centred teaching is not the norm, although a few Applied Linguists are making the students solve problems, make presentations and do group work in an interactive manner.

The lecturers tend to belong to two schools of thought: those who think the M.A. is too theoretical, and more Applied Linguistics modules would help, and those who feel that a thorough grounding in Theoretical Linguistics is required for a language teacher, rather than 'new fangled' applications. In keeping with this division in Linguistics in universities the world over, the Applied Linguists use the 'student-centred' approach to teaching, while the Theoretical Linguists are still in the 'teacher-centred' mode.

However, the lecturers are united in voicing one concern: that the standard of English of the majority of participants is shockingly low. This sweeping statement is based on student performance in in-class activities and end-of-semester written examinations.

A revealing and related fact was discovered by a lecturer⁸ who conducted an informal survey among the students and found that the majority of them wanted to improve their English, and that is why they registered for the M.A. in the English medium.

The two year M.A. program with the addition of the dissertation is another burden to the lecturers/supervisors. This is because the students are very keen to submit their research, but too much time is spent on error correction of the language of the dissertation itself.

5.0. Administrators' Perspective

From the perspective of the authorities of the University of Kelaniya, the Department of Linguistics is doing a service to the teaching profession, and earning much needed funds for the development of the university. In the decade since its inception, the M.A. in Linguistics earned over Rs. 21,50,000/= for the University of Kelaniya⁹.

However, the authorities and the lecturers lament the lack of space to conduct this program in the Faculty of Humanities. The classroom used for the lectures doubles up as a 'common room' and a 'lunch room' for the students. Additionally, the material comforts of the classroom leave much to be desired – it is exceedingly hot, some of the fans are not functioning properly, and the lecturers have to tone down their lectures so that the neighbouring class is not disturbed. In comparison with the privileges and comforts offered to other postgraduate students of the

same university, such as the MBA students¹⁰, the Linguistics students seem to be short-changed.

6.0. Perceptions of the M.A. in Linguistics

The Quality Assurance team of the World Bank Project in their Subject Review Assessment of the Department of Linguistics (2006) suggested three changes to the M.A. The team proposed that the eligibility criteria for admission be narrowed to graduates of disciplines related to Linguistics, that the standard of teaching be raised to the level of a contemporary postgraduate program, and that a research component be included in the expanded two year degree.

The Department of Linguistics accepted the feedback in the spirit in which it was given, and included the dissertation as a requirement for the degree. However, the standard of the course being raised to the level of a postgraduate program is difficult because of the flexibility of the admission criteria: the acceptance of students from any discipline. The result is that this postgraduate course has to start from scratch, as in introducing the IPA¹¹ symbols for instance. The result is that the Phonetics and Phonology module for example, cannot go beyond dealing with the basics because the students are not familiar with the vocal tract or the symbols of the IPA. Another side of this phenomenon is that graduates of language departments who have studied Linguistics topics are at a distinct advantage as in the case of students from the Department of English who come in with a firm foundation in phonetics.

Another aspect of the perceptions of the M.A. in Linguistics is that it is considered an 'easy' course by lecturers in the Languages Division or the Post Graduate Institute of English (PGIE), Open University of Sri Lanka and other universities. While the pass rate of the PGIE Master's in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) is abysmally low, the pass rate of the M.A. in Linguistics is abnormally high. The end result is the popularity of the University of Kelaniya course, along with the belief that it is much easier than the PGIE course.

7.0. Linguistic Issues

Based on student performance in assignments and classroom interaction, the main linguistic problems are in the areas of phonology and syntax. Some of the phonology problems are manifested as spelling errors as in the following examples from student assignments:

- i. Actually it is like a jork. [phonology]
- ii. Affroximants and lateral affroximants [phonology]
- iii. ... and vowels can stand along. [phonology]
- iv. It is a borny structure. [phonology]
- v. At first, they learned one English variety, then they teach another English variety, and at last they are trained in separate variety of English. [syntax]
- vi. When we explain on articulation it deals with the organs which are operated inside the mouth... Also when we make a sound like /b/ we have to close our lips for produce that particular sound. But here it is very important that when we denote a sound we should careful on several facts. [syntax]
- vii. Differences of consonants are depend on the nature of the obstruction of the air stream. [syntax]
- viii. When we concern about the basic principles or primary principles we have three major sections. [syntax]
- ix. In phonetics we pay a much emphasis on the study of the production of speech sounds. [syntax]
- x. When we articulate sounds we can see how these vowels are produced based on to the each part of the tongue. [syntax]

When examining the first four examples cited above, they represent phonological issues to speakers of English in Sri Lanka. Examples i, iii, and iv are problems of mixing /o/ and /ɒ/, a thorny issue of language variation in Sri Lanka. A phonological characteristic of Standard and Non-Standard Sri Lankan English is the confusion of these two back vowels. Additionally, Fernando (2006) discusses the dialects of Sri Lankan English based on the mixing up of these back vowels. Example ii is a result of mixing up /f/ and /p/ and transferring it to spelling. In the case of both phenomena the tendency to overuse /t/ and /f/ is possibly the identification of these two sounds as English sounds, not associated with Sinhalese or Tamil and thereby sanctioning their overuse. The use of "jork" and "borny" for 'joke' and 'bony' also shows the students' non-familiarity with English morphology or lexicon, since these are not English words.

Examples v to x represent syntactic problems, mainly in the case of articles, prepositions, adverbs and verb phrases. In example v, the student uses "at last" instead of 'finally' or 'lastly.' The inappropriate

use of adverbs is a relatively new phenomenon among users of English in Sri Lanka.

Example vi demonstrates problems with prepositions and verbs as in the overuse of prepositions in the phrase "explain on articulation," and insertion of "for" instead of the infinitive form of the verb 'to produce,' and "careful on" for 'careful of.' Additionally, the overuse of the passive form as in "are operated" for 'operate' and deletion of 'be' in "we should careful". Example vii is similar to vi in the use of "are depend" instead of the present tense 'depends.' In example viii, the reverse is apparent as in "we concern" which can be 'we are concerned' or the morphological mix up of "concern" for 'discuss the basic...'.

Example ix is another contemporary issue of English usage in Sri Lanka, with the phrase "a much emphasis." The use of the indefinite article "a" with a non-count noun is a violation of traditional rules of grammar. In example x, the phrase "based on to the each part of the tongue" represents overuse of articles and prepositions.

To sum up this section of the paper, the examples given above demonstrate the difficulties faced by the M.A. in Linguistics students in using English for written purposes. The problem is compounded by the fact that the majority of students are English teachers grappling with English phonology, morphology and syntax in a course dealing with these topics at postgraduate level.

8.0. Conclusion

The popularity of the M.A. in Linguistics course as a stepping stone to confirmation in academia, and as a launching pad to leap from Instructor status to Probationary Lecturer position is well established. The quality of the program is the issue under consideration. From the point of view of all stakeholders, there is room for improvement. As stated by a lecturer in the program¹², the content of the M.A. in Linguistics is not contemporary; it tends to be old fashioned, and some lecturers simply re-cycle hackneyed views rather than introducing innovations in the field. He recommends that the course takes a trendier, pragmatic turn towards Applied Linguistics rather than focussing on theoretical issues. The students too, are clamouring for change, mainly because they have problems with the content and the medium. Their problems lead to a

questioning of the admission criteria. The reason the course is difficult for the majority is because they have not studied Linguistics before. Additionally, it is in a medium they are supposed to be familiar with, but in fact are struggling to come to terms with. According to informal discussions, they have found an interim solution to their problems – going for tuition classes in Linguistics. The grapevine reports that the cost of a session with a tuition master who has successfully completed the M.A. in Linguistics at the University of Kelaniya, and is adept at handling most of the topics is Rs. 20,000/=, irrespective of the number of students.

On the other hand, once again, because of the flexibility of the admission criteria, graduates from the language departments 'have an easy ride' since they have already covered the basics of Linguistics in their undergraduate courses, but are unhappy in that they learn relatively little as new information by reading for the M.A. in Linguistics. However, the research component leading to a dissertation is a challenge to all the students, irrespective of whether they have read Linguistics before or not.

Overall, the M.A. in Linguistics symbolizes a praiseworthy effort in disseminating knowledge in English, the language of the privileged, and the Department of Linguistics is to be congratulated for its timely intervention in this regard. As in the words of Pandit Nehru (1963), quoted by Abhai Maurya¹³ in Graddol (2010), using English is a sociolinguistic advantage:

In the old days, we produced a relatively small, though numerically fairly large, class of people who knew English and who formed a kind of English-knowing caste in India. In this land of castes, everything turns into caste. And people who knew English even though they may not have known it very well, considered themselves superior to those who did not.

(Graddol 2010: Foreword)

Therefore, the M.A. in Linguistics is perceived by the students as a path to upward mobility, to belong to the caste that is fluent in English, but the problem is that the rest of academia is not so egalitarian or tolerant. The detractors of the course consider it too easy, and that too many English

teachers who are not fluent in English are moving into the academic cadre when they have not mastered the language or the knowledge to be effective teachers of English. The consensus in academia is that the admission criteria should be confined to admit graduates who have read Linguistics at undergraduate level or have degrees in related fields in the Humanities. By opening the M.A. to all graduates, the quality is naturally diluted, since the teaching tends to be confined to the basics. Furthermore, a dissertation is then expected of these students who have barely mastered Linguistics.

In conclusion, while maintaining that the Department of Linguistics in conducting the M.A. is doing the education sector a service, despite the shortcomings, the standard of English of the students is a much more complex issue.

To my point of view, the accent inherent to Sri Lankans would be much easier for them to use rather than trying to imitate British accents which is uncomfortable and sometimes which is impossible for Sri Lankans to produce due to their mal-formation of vocal codes to articulate a foreign accent. [Extract from assignment]

This sample of student writing, in addition to its linguistic errors, represents an archaic mindset which talks of the 'mal-formation of vocal chords' of Sri Lankans. It is this attitude of the student or English teacher which needs to be addressed if the M.A. in Linguistics is to carry on the task it has set out to do – to challenge the myths of language [such as the above] and to disseminate knowledge amongst language teachers to make them more effective teachers.

To end on a more positive note, the students are not all colonized/brainwashed Sri Lankans, as the following statements by students¹⁴ denote:

I would like to proceed in my education toward speech therapy and it is a prerequisite to have a degree in Linguistics or related field. The knowledge of English communication and language will make me qualify as a teacher of language. Hope to engage in research and do a better service to the future generation.

As these comments demonstrate, the M.A. in Linguistics is many things to many people – therefore, it is in our best interests to fine-tune it to a postgraduate degree worthy of its name.

Footnotes:

- 1 Information/statistics given by Mr. Boralugoda, Administrative Assistant to the M.A. in Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya.
- 2 Interview with Professor R.M.W. Rajapaksha, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Professor of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya, July 30, 2010.
- 3 The class of 2008 can be considered to be representative of the M.A. students – the year was randomly selected, but fits into the near decade existence of the course.
- 4 Graduates of Theology.
- 5 Other Occupations: Principal, Publishing Coordinator, Payroll Assistant, Development Worker (Medical doctor), Program Assistant, Journalist, Media Officer, Dubbing Assistant
- 6 Data from discussions with visiting/probationary/assistant lecturers following the M.A. in Linguistics from Rajarata University and University of Kelaniya, 2008 -2010
- 7 Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)
- 8 PC – Ms. Kaushalya Perera, Lecturer, English Language Teaching Unit, University of Kelaniya.
- 9 Data from Mr. Boralugoda, Administrative Assistant, Department of Linguistics.
- 10 Master's in Business Administration (MBA), Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies, University of Kelaniya.
- 11 International Phonetic Association (IPA)
- 12 Professor R.M.W. Rajapaksha, first coordinator and Professor of Linguistics.
- 13 Professor Abhai Maurya, Vice Chancellor of EFL University, Hyderabad, India.
- 14 Questionnaire Survey: Response to question on how the M.A. in Linguistics will help them professionally.

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