

Degree, Foreign Degree or Degree in English? The Case of Students Studying for Foreign External Degrees in Sri Lanka

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The demand placed on English as the international language by Sri Lankans has got a history which runs back to the days of the British colonisers. English was first transmitted to the elite class of Sri Lankans through the medium of education. An education in the English medium was offered to a selected group of Sri Lankans who could afford to pay for it. Consequently, English and economic status has been two inseparable social indicators of then Sri Lanka. The affluent in society adopted English as their home language and enjoyed the social and economic advantages that came with the language while the social and economic opportunities for the poor were constrained by the indigenous languages.

Many researchers working in the area of education still point out the existence of a similar trend in Sri Lanka. The demand placed on learning English or learning in English has been on the increase over the past few years. The most recent phenomenon which proves the existence of such a trend in Sri Lanka is the mushrooming of international schools in and outside Colombo. Added to this is the accelerated demand placed on external degrees offered by foreign universities, especially American, British and Australian universities. The current research is focused on such a sample of students studying for a Diploma (external), which is equivalent to the first year of a B.Sc. degree offered by a reputed British university.

As there is a dearth of research with students in similar study programmes, the current research has had to rely mostly on common sense understandings of such students and on my personal experiences of teaching in such a course in constructing its hypothesis. Five common perceptions can be observed about students enrolled in such programmes. The students are from rich families; They are drop outs of the main stream tertiary education, i.e. the national universities and therefore, have joined these external programs in order to obtain a degree; they are very fluent in English; their main interest is in obtaining a degree in the English medium and their main interest is in obtaining a degree from a foreign university.

The current research intends to find out the accuracy of these perceptions by testing the following hypothesis: The demand placed on external degrees is not a result of students 'wanting a degree' but a result of 'wanting a degree in the English medium'. In other words, the hypothesis implies that it is not the degree that is in demand but the language in which it is offered.

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