



Journal of Multidisciplinary and Translational Research (JMTR)

journal homepage: <https://journals.kln.ac.lk/jmtr/>



Teacher perspectives on using Sri Lankan English as a model for assessment of English Language proficiency at tertiary level English language teaching in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

A central concern of Language Assessment (LA) in English language teaching is the question of standards used for the assessment. In the scholarship of World Englishes, it has been observed that standards for English language assessment should be pluricentric. Experts in the field of Sri Lankan English (SLE) point out the merits of advocating SLE as the model/standard for LA in Sri Lanka. Against this theoretical backdrop, this study investigated the perspectives on the acceptability of SLE as the model/ standard for LA among teachers for tertiary level English language education. The study was conducted in a state university in Sri Lanka involving 12 English language teachers. Purposive sampling and volunteer sampling techniques were used to select participants for the research. Necessary data was collected through five semi-structured interviews and a focus-group discussion with seven teachers. The collected data were analyzed using methods of thematic analysis and data tables. Thus, the study employed a mixed method approach. The study found that teachers' sense of ownership towards SLE influenced their LA practices such as designing of marking keys and rating of student writing. The study also found that teachers held conflicting views on what the varietal features of SLE are and on whether all those features could always be accepted as correct, especially when they are manifested in student language production. The study highlighted the importance of recognizing the pedagogical implications of SLE such as its use as a standard for LA in English language teaching as well as a tool for investigating teacher responses to the challenges they face.

Keywords: Language Assessment, TESL, Standards for language assessment

Article info

Article history:

Received 22th February 2023

Received in revised form 19th March 2023

Accepted 29th May 2023

Available online 30th June 2023

ISSN (E-Copy): ISSN 3051-5262

ISSN (Hard copy): ISSN 3051-5602

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.4038/jmtr.v8i1.65>

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Introduction

According to Tosuncuoglu (2018), LA in English Language Teaching (ELT) refers to “methods and techniques used to gather information about student ability, knowledge, understanding and motivation”, and is often understood to be an objective and technical activity. However, scholars like McNamara (2000) and Brown & Abeywickrama (2019) explained that it was problematic to conceptualize LA as a mere technical act. This is because LA is based on certain fundamental assumptions which are being increasingly challenged at an ideological level. One such basic concept of LA which has been questioned in recent years is the notion of language standards. Even though language standards have been traditionally defined according to the standards of inner-circle varieties of English such as British and American varieties of English, Kachru (1996), through his “different not deficient” perspective, explained that notions of “correctness” and “errors” were relative since language standards are not universal but variety-specific. Given this pluricentric nature of language standards, scholars like Kachru (1996), Canagarajah (2006) and Tomlinson (2021) proposed that ELT practitioners should adopt local varieties of English as the model for ELT practices including LA, since local varieties of English are the most relevant to the communicative needs of locals.

The argument for adopting local varieties of English as the model for LA is relevant to the Sri Lankan context since many Sri Lankan scholars were of the view that Sri Lanka has its own variety of English, i.e. Sri Lankan English (Gunesekera, 2010; Mendis & Rambukwella, 2010; Parakrama, 2010). Sri Lankan English (SLE) has been defined as “the language spoken and understood by those Sri Lankans who speak English as their first language, and/or who are bilingual in English and Sinhala or Tamil” (Meyler, 2007), the variety of English appropriated and used by Sri Lankans “for whatever purpose in Sri Lanka” (Gunesekera, 2010) and as a variety of English with a certain “regional identity” (Kunstler et al., 2009). SLE has also been prescribed as the model for ELT practices in Sri Lanka. For example, Parakrama (2010) called for teaching SLE for students since teaching varieties of English such as British and American varieties of English is alienating for students, while Meyler (2015) supported SLE as the model for LA since it is “unrealistic and unfair to test students’ English ability according to an alien and outdated standard”. Additionally, SLE was promoted in Sri Lankan government schools in 2009 through the “Speak English Our Way” initiative. However, despite prescriptions of SLE as the model for ELT and LA practices, there are also practical issues in adopting SLE as the model. This is due to the heterogeneous nature or the “dialectal variation” of SLE (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2021). According to scholars, there are at least two dialects, i.e., varieties within SLE, namely standard and non-standard varieties (Bernaisch, 2012, 2015; Fernando, 2010; Gunesekera, 2010; Herat, 2022; Mendis & Rambukwella, 2010 & 2021; Meyler, 2007). Despite identifying such variation within SLE, there have been very few attempts to distinguish standard SLE from non-standard SLE. In fact, even Micheal Meyler who authored the first dictionary of SLE, refused to attempt to distinguish between the two forms by stating that,

“In deciding what to include in a dictionary of SLE, and what to exclude, one constantly comes up against the question of standards: Where do you draw the line between what is an acceptable example of SLE, and what is better described as an “error”? In contrasting SLE with “standard” British English, there is a danger that many readers will interpret this in terms of right and wrong,

which is not the idea. On the contrary, the intention is only to describe the way the English language is used in Sri Lanka, without attempting to make any judgment on whether it is "correct" (Meyler, 2007).

This lack of clarity regarding the definition of SLE/ standard SLE has wrought a lot of mistrust towards SLE as the model for ELT practices. Indeed, Fonseka (2003) called SLE "substandard" while Gamage (2013) argued that adopting SLE as the model for ELT practices would lead to "lingual anarchy". Nevertheless, given that "standard SLE is used in universities and schools" (Bernaisch, 2015) and that SLE is a socio-linguistic reality in Sri Lanka, ELT practitioners are faced with the task of not only either accepting/ rejecting SLE as the model for LA, but also of making decisions regarding the acceptability/ unacceptability of SLE in their professional activities such as LA. And yet, teacher perspectives on the acceptability of SLE as the model for LA has been an area of research on which little research has been conducted. Thus, set against this research gap, this study attempted to address the following research questions:

- To what extent do teachers accept SLE as the model for LA?
- What words/ expressions are identified by teachers as features of SLE, in authentic samples of student writing?
- What words/ expressions are identified by teachers as correct/ acceptable, in these authentic samples of student writing?

Methodology

The study was conducted in the Faculty of Humanities of a state university in Sri Lanka, and involved English language teachers as research participants. The data was gathered using several methods. The first method of collecting data was semi-structured interviews with 5 teachers. These 5 teachers were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience in designing tests and marking keys, since the majority of teachers in the research site did not have experience with these tasks. The model questions which served as the point of departure for the semi-structured interviews with the teachers were as follows:

- Do you consider SLE as the model/ standard against which students should be assessed in the tests you design? What are the reasons for your position?
- Do you usually make the raters aware that the language standard expected from the students in their writing/speech is SLE? Why/ why not?
- Do you think your beliefs/ attitudes towards SLE as the model/ standard have influenced the way you design tests/ marking keys? Explain how.

While semi-structured interviews were used to explore teacher perspectives on the extent to which they accept SLE as the model for LA, a focus group discussion was used to collect data on teacher identification and acceptance of SLE features. Since this data was based on authentic student writings, 4 writing samples were selected prior to conducting the focus group discussion. The writing samples were continuous assessments administered to first year undergraduates with basic level competence in English, and the four writing samples were selected from group no. 15 out of the 29 basic competence level classes. Of the four writing samples, two were informal

letters while the other two samples were argumentative essays. Thus, the selected writing samples belonged to two domains of English Language Teaching: English for General Purposes and English for Academic Purposes. Additionally, the two writing samples on writing an informal letter and the two writing samples on writing an argumentative essay were selected randomly from 16 and 18 sets of writing samples respectively.

After selecting the 4 writing samples, a focus group discussion was conducted to investigate what words/ expressions were identified by teachers as features of SLE, and whether teachers find these words/ expressions correct/ acceptable. For the focus group discussion, 7 teachers were selected and this selection was based on volunteer sampling method.

After collecting the data, the data were analyzed using several methods. The data collected through the focus group discussion was analyzed through data tables. When analyzing the data from semi-structured interviews, MS Excel was used to first identify themes on teacher perspectives on their acceptance of SLE as model for LA. These themes were then refined further to avoid repetition of themes.

Results and discussion

Semi-structured interviews with the five teachers revealed information regarding the extent to which teachers accepted SLE as the model/ standard against which students should be assessed, and the reasons for their positions. These themes were as follows:

- SLE as “ours”: SLE as the model/ standard for language assessment practices:

All five teachers who were interviewed agreed that SLE was and should be the expected standard against which students should be assessed. The main reason for their stance was their sense of ownership of SLE, which could be observed through the following comments:

Sanduni: “We teachers, students, everyone all use Sri Lankan English. We have to acknowledge it.”

Lihini: “We have to have our own standards. Some people think we speak British English. But we don’t.”

Given that SLE is the socio-linguistic reality, the teachers were of the opinion that SLE should be the model against which student English language proficiency should be assessed as well.

- Language assessment as a premise for broadening standards of English:

Three of the five teachers interviewed saw acknowledging SLE as the model/ standard for language assessment as a statement they were making as English language teachers in the country. Those teachers were acutely aware of the negative attitudes about SLE which are prevalent in the society as well as in the field of English language teaching in Sri Lanka, and saw language assessment as an opportunity for them to broaden the accepted standards of English language:

Sanduni: “There is this idea Sri Lankan English is not standard. I think [the area of language assessment] is a great opportunity for us to stop being hypocrites about it and to make a statement about how we should be more flexible about language standards.”

- SLE and language assessment in the domains of English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP):

Two teachers commented on the relevance of SLE in language assessment, especially in the domain of EGP. Those teachers were of the opinion that the expected standard in EGP should be SLE for two reasons of practical and ideological nature. The first was that students are more likely to encounter English language users of SLE than any other English variety in their real-world language interactions. The second reason was the belief of teachers that it is unfair to test students from socio-economically underprivileged backgrounds based on a language standard (such as British or American English) which might be unfamiliar and daunting for them. Those teachers held the view that students should be given the freedom to express their thoughts, ideas and creative impulses freely in the domain of EGP and that language assessment should also support and acknowledge students’ use of SLE even to the extent where the distinction between standard and non-standard is challenged:

Nalin: “Sometimes we have to make marking keys for tests based on day-to-day writing and speech tasks. I think this is where we can really push the boundaries and give the advantage to the students. This is really important when it comes to socio-economically disadvantaged students.”

Given these reasons, the teachers explained that, when it comes to designing marking keys to assess language tasks in the domain of EGP, they would allocate more weight on the content and creativity components rather than the language component. However, they were of the opinion that language component should be given more weight when designing marking keys in the area of EAP, given the formulaic nature of language use in the domain of academic English as well as the expectations of the academic community, which are quite rigid. As such, the teachers felt that students should be assessed based on their competence in Standard SLE in the domain of EAP.

The findings of the focus group interview where seven teachers were invited to identify features of SLE in authentic samples of student writing and judge whether these features were correct/acceptable, are presented in the two following tables. Table 1 summarizes the findings from a writing test administered in the domain of EGP while the Table 2 summarizes the findings from a writing test administered in the domain of EAP.

Table 1: Teacher perspectives of features of SLE as identified in student writing from the domain of EGP (n=7)

Identified feature/ expression of SLE	Acceptable	Unacceptable	Not sure
1. May the triple gem bless you	7	0	0
2. Mango friend	6	1	0
3. A funny trip	0	7	0
4. Badge trip	0	7	0

5.	Rasika anna	7	0	0
7.	Dr.	0	6	1
8.	My friend is white	0	6	1

Table 2: Teacher perspectives of features of SLE as identified in student writing from the domain of EAP (n=7)

	Identified feature/ expression of SLE	Acceptable	Unacceptable	Not sure
1.	Cope up with	6	1	0
2.	Return back	2	4	1
3.	Another thing I forgot to tell...	3	3	1
4.	Loose	0	7	0
5.	Drinking cigarettes	1	5	1
6.	We want to protect...	0	6	1

While the above tables provide information regarding the features of SLE as identified by teachers through student sample writings and number of teachers who judge each feature as acceptable/unacceptable, it was equally important to understand teacher reasoning behind their judgements.

All seven teachers judged the expression “may the triple gem bless you” as an acceptable expression of SLE because it was considered a unique religious and cultural reference. The expression “mango friend” (meaning “best friend”) was also considered acceptable by six of the teachers due to the Lankan flavor it carried, due to the creativity of the coinage and also due to the fact that the teachers considered the expression appropriate to the context where it was used, i.e. in an informal letter to a friend. However, one teacher did not accept it as acceptable because her L1 was Tamil and the expression was unfamiliar to her. The expressions “a funny trip” (as opposed to an “enjoyable trip”) and “badge trip” (as opposed to “batch trip”) were identified by teachers as SLE expressions as they had observed this use among many students in their classes. However, all teachers rejected these two expressions as acceptable. The expression “Rasika anna” (“brother Rasika”) was also considered acceptable by all teachers because of its unique cultural connotations, i.e. using the term “brother” designating a friend who is not related by blood, for which an equivalent cannot be found in other varieties of English. “Dr.” which is a shortened form for “dear”, was not accepted by six teachers since they considered it was a SLE form used when chatting/ on social media and therefore not suitable for a letter, even when informal. The teachers identified the word “white” in “my friend is white” as an expression in SLE often used by students to mean “of fair complexion”. But this expression was categorized as unacceptable by the majority of teachers because they considered it an inappropriate use of the adjective.

In Table 02, one teacher considered the phrasal verb “cope up with” unacceptable because she considered “cope with” as “more standard”. Of the six teachers who categorized it acceptable, four were of the opinion that they themselves would not use the expression even though they would allow it in students while 2 teachers said that they also use the expression. The expression “return back” was considered unacceptable by 4 teachers because they judged “back” as redundant. The third expression, “another thing I forgot to tell” was considered SLE because it was a direct translation from Sinhala. However, opinions were mixed as to whether it was acceptable or

unacceptable. Three teachers felt that it should be accepted because the expression was grammatically unproblematic while the other three teachers noted that it was stylistically unacceptable and unsuitable for the context where it was used (i.e. in academic English). “Loose” as opposed to “lose”, “drinking cigarettes” as opposed to “smoking cigarettes” and “we want to protect” as opposed to “we should/ must/ have to protect” were also categorized as unacceptable by most teachers since those expressions were judged to be lexical errors.

The findings of the focus group discussion were important in several ways. Firstly, it was found that SLE expressions that are creative, evokes Sri Lankan ethos and carries socio-cultural connotations to which there is no equivalent in other language varieties (such as British or American English) were categorized as acceptable by teachers, especially in the domain of EGP. However, some SLE forms which have been influenced by the Sinhala/ Tamil languages may be unintelligible for the rater and this may lead the rater to mark these forms as incorrect, such as in the case of the expression “mango friend”. Additionally, it was found that teachers had difficulties in identifying whether some expressions in student writing were features of SLE or just language errors. While scholars such as Kachru (1996) addressed this concern on the identification and treatment of varietal features versus deviations, the findings of this study highlighted the practical and pedagogical dimensions teachers must tackle head on in English language teaching practices such as LA.

Conclusions

While the field of World Englishes is well-established and influential, the discussions involving the scholarship remain still speculative and highly theoretical. Similarly, research on SLE to date also focused predominantly on studying its varietal features and speaker attitudes. The significance of this study therefore lied in the fact that it investigated teacher perspectives towards SLE and how they were reflected in language assessment practices such as designing marking keys and rating in English language teaching. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of conducting further research on implications/ role of SLE in various areas of English language teaching as well as that of openly discussing the status and relevance of SLE in language assessment practices in TESL at different instructional and educational settings in Sri Lanka.

Conflicts of Interest

The author confirms that there is not conflict of interest.

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