

**English language teaching,
learning and assessment
in Sri Lanka:
Policies and practices in
the school education system**

Bimali Indrarathne and Sharon McCulloch

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Introduction to the series

Across South Asia, English is widely seen as the language of social mobility, educational opportunity, employability, global business and dialogue. Many consider English language skills to be an essential component of economic development and growth – both on an individual and national level. However, the inclusion of English within language-in-education policies that must simultaneously promote other national languages, along with its history as a colonial and/or elite language in most countries in this region, means that it does not always sit easily within education systems. The place of English within school systems in South Asia has fluctuated over time and a number of challenges remain around ensuring equitable, high-quality provision of English language teaching and learning for all who want or need it.

This report is one of a series of five focusing on the policy and practices relating to English language education in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It aims to provide a contemporary snapshot of the role that English currently plays within the lives of school children and the wider community. It explores the current scenario, considering both the private and government school sectors, including reflections on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. It also looks to the future: how might some of the current challenges be addressed, and what opportunities exist to support the development of this aspect of the school education system?

Across the series, the author teams collaborated in defining the overall focus and structure, and peer-reviewed each other's work to provide feedback and ensure coherence across the reports. The authors have focused primarily on a review of policy documentation, reports and data provided by relevant government departments, academics and international agencies. This is supported by input from a small number of important stakeholders such as teachers, curriculum and textbook writers, and policy officers. Their input is often included verbatim to provide further contextualised insight into the realities of the classroom and wider education system.

Providing a detailed overview of even a single subject like English within any school education system is a significant task, particularly in large, complex and multilingual countries. Coupled with the historical, political and cultural factors that are unique to English in South Asia, we are conscious that these reports have their limitations and can serve mainly as an entry point to this vast and complicated topic. Nevertheless, we hope that readers will find them informative and useful for critical discussion, research and development – particularly those who are involved in English language education implementation in this region.

To access the full series of reports, please visit our TeachingEnglish website: www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/english-language-teaching-learning-assessment-south-asia

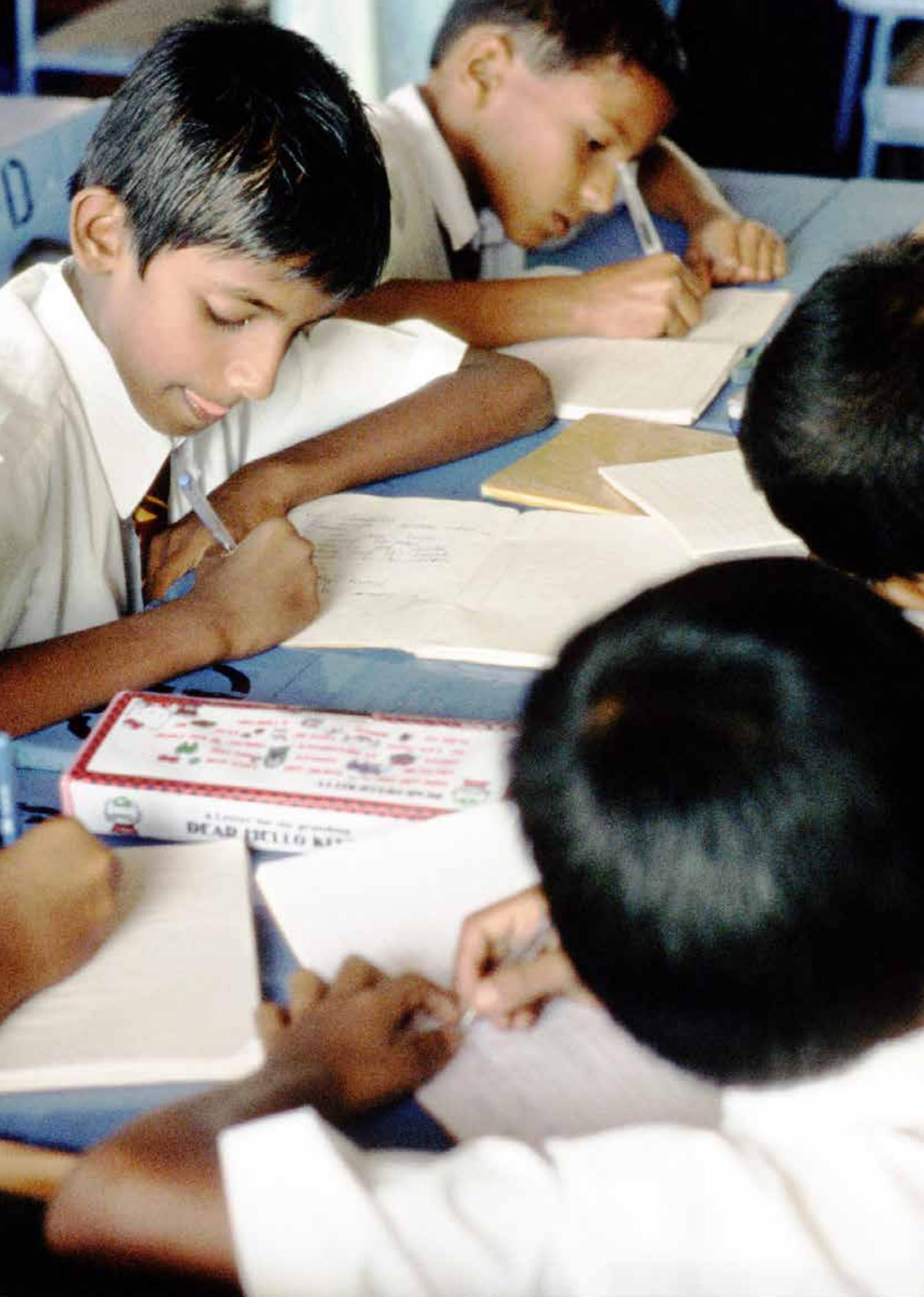
Amy Lightfoot

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Abbreviations

ADE	Assistant Director of English
BOI	Board of Investment
CBB	Council for Business with Britain
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
CELTA	Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DoE	Department of Examinations
DOL	Department of Official Languages
EfT	English for Teaching
ELT	English Language Teaching
EPD	Education Publications Department
ERE	Emerging Remote Education
GCE O/L	General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level)
GCE A/L	General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level)
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ISA	In-service Adviser
iTESL	Improving Teacher Education in Sri Lanka
MoE	Ministry of Education
MT	Master Trainer
NCoE	National College of Education
NEC	National Education Commission
NEREC	National Education Research and Evaluation Centre
NIE	National Institute of Education
NILET	National Institute of Language Education and Training
OLC	Official Languages Commission
RESC	Regional English Support Centre
SBA	School-Based Assessment
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths
SLE	Sri Lankan English
TEC	Teacher Educator's Course
TEE	Teacher Education for English
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
TfS	Teaching for Success
UGC	University Grants Commission



Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of how English language teaching and learning are currently situated within basic education (defined as education for children aged five to 16, or school Grades 1 to 11) in Sri Lanka, with the aim of identifying gaps in policy and implementation and any opportunities for future development.

The report was produced by analysing policy documents, sample materials and research reports as well as conducting a small number of individual interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders, specifically teachers, pre-service and in-service teacher trainers and representatives of the National Institute of Education and the Department of Examinations.

Sri Lanka has very high levels of literacy and no gender disparity in school education enrolment. There is a strong administration system for in-service training provision through which cascading training is quick and efficient. Evidence from recent initiatives shows that online in-service training can be successfully provided and thereby increase the professional development opportunities for teachers. This has the potential to form the basis for a nationwide community of practice for English teachers and to strengthen outcomes for their learners. Although it is necessary to pay attention to increasing teacher language proficiency in Sri Lanka, overall it is relatively high in comparison to the other countries in the region.

Although English holds high social prestige in Sri Lanka and is widely used in administration, higher education and private businesses, levels of learners' proficiency by the end of compulsory education are lower than that required for effective participation in higher education and the labour market. Most students, by Grade 11, achieve only CEFR level A1 (basic user). Speaking and listening scores are particularly weak.

At primary level, English language is introduced through play and activity-based learning from Grade 1, although this is generally taught by primary grade teachers who are unqualified in English language teaching, and who may lack the proficiency to introduce appropriate vocabulary and pronunciation. Formal English teaching begins from Grade 3 of basic education, with most students receiving three to four hours of instruction per week. There is a general consensus that teachers' guides and materials focus mainly on reading and writing with less emphasis placed on listening and speaking. Nevertheless, there are clear intentions to balance the input across the four skills as outlined in the primary syllabus and curriculum documentation.

Unclear competency descriptors and English curricula at secondary level mean that the syllabus can lack credibility among teachers and teacher trainers, and teachers require more guidance on what to cover in their classes. Reduced input on listening and speaking skills is also common at secondary level. Textbooks tend to promote reading, rote learning and imitation rather than speaking, and often contain inauthentic and inappropriate tasks and occasionally inaccurate language. Teachers' guides are also considered to be too vague and too generic.

Pressure on teachers to focus on preparing students for national exams mitigates against developing listening and speaking skills, as these are not yet tested in the O- and A-level exams. Assessment literacy among curriculum, materials and exam item writers is often low, leading to poor-quality assessment and lack of fit with the syllabus.

The existence of clearly demarcated pre- and in-service teacher development programmes is very positive. However, this could be strengthened to further demonstrate good teaching practice at pre-service, with continued support provided during in-service training. Ensuring that access to this professional development is equitable across the country is also important, along with increasing incentives for teachers to participate.

Aligning the English language syllabus, exams, textbooks and teacher training would lead to greater coherence and quality across all elements of the teaching, learning and assessment cycle. If the proposed national education reforms that are currently underway (Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs, 2020) are implemented effectively, they have the potential to resolve many of the issues discussed in this report, building on the successes already achieved.

1 Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island in South Asia with a population of ca. 22 million (World Bank, 2021). Two main languages are spoken in the country: Sinhala is spoken by approximately 75 per cent and Tamil by 16 per cent of the population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). English in Sri Lanka has colonial roots and it was made the official administrative language of the country in 1833 (Sittarage, 2018). Under colonial rule, a standard system of state schools was established and English was made the medium of instruction in these schools. The pre-existing temple schools still functioned to some extent in the vernacular languages.

Local languages became the medium of education and administration after 1948; however, the prestige enjoyed by English has not diminished. English is now nominated as the 'link' language in the country by the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (Parliament Secretariat, 2021). The concept of a link language arose as a common medium of communication or a neutral language between Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking communities with the three-decade-long conflict that prevailed in the country until 2009. Continuing today, English is used for administrative purposes, in education and it is the main medium of work in the private sector. In addition, high social prestige is associated with English; there is a belief that a good command of English will lead to better job prospects even within Sri Lanka, as well as the opportunity to gain social status.

The education system in Sri Lanka can be divided into three main levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. State education is the main mode of education in Sri Lanka, with private education available to a limited extent at all levels. State primary and secondary education are administered by the Ministry of Education (MoE), while tertiary education is administered by the Ministry of Higher Education. There are several MoE-registered private schools (Ministry of Education, 2020a) as well as private schools established by the Companies Act as private businesses (Wettewa, 2016). The latter are also called 'international schools' (ibid.). University education provided by state universities is managed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and there are also several private universities. In addition, tertiary-level vocational education is provided by hundreds of training centres. State school education, state university undergraduate education and most vocational courses offered by the state are free for all citizens.

English is one of the most important languages in education. It is introduced at kindergarten level and taught from Grade 1 in the state school system (Aloysius, 2015). It is the medium of instruction in almost all international schools (Wettewa, 2016).

English-medium education is also available in some state schools. It is important to note that the MoE labels schools that offer all subjects in English as 'English-medium schools' and those which offer only a few subjects in English and the rest in students' first language as 'bilingual schools' (Ministry of Education, 2020a). About 80 per cent of university courses, mainly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM subjects), are only available in English medium and the students who take undergraduate courses in local languages also study English as a subject (McCulloch et al., 2020).

The purpose of this report is to discuss the status of English language education in basic education in Sri Lanka. In doing so, we will first define what we mean by basic education in Sri Lanka and outline our focus. In defining basic education, we have taken 'compulsory education' into consideration. Under The Directive Principles of State Policy and the Fundamental Duties section of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka [Art 27 (2) (h)], one of the objectives of the state is 'the complete eradication of illiteracy and the assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels' which ensures the state's responsibility of providing education to its citizens (Parliament Secretariat, 2021). Compulsory education for children aged five to 14 was enacted by Education Ordinance No. 31 of 1939 and an amendment to the Ordinance made in 1947 increased the school-leaving age to 16 (National Committee for Formulating a New Education Act for General Education, 2017). Accordingly, Grades 1 to 11 fall within compulsory education. Therefore, this report focuses on English language education provision for children aged five to 16 (i.e. school Grades 1 to 11), which we define as 'basic education'.

Basic education is provided by both state and private schools. However, in this report, we do not analyse in detail the English language education provided by private schools. One reason for this is that according to the statistics available, both MoE-registered and international private schools account for only about three per cent of the total number of schools in Sri Lanka. MoE-registered schools mostly use the state school curriculum and thus our discussion is relevant to those schools too. We only highlight any differences in their provision of English language teaching where relevant. Accurate data on private schools known as international schools is unavailable, as they function as businesses and, as thus, do not fall under the remit of the MoE. However, we make brief reference to these schools where appropriate.

When it comes to English language education in Sri Lanka, teaching English as a subject is the main focus, although English-medium education (teaching all or some subjects in English) is also relevant. In this report, we do not cover English-medium basic education provision in detail, for two reasons. First, the topic is vast on its own and warrants a separate discussion. Second, schools offering English-medium education account for only approximately seven per cent of the total number of state schools (Ministry of Education, 2020a). Therefore, we make brief reference to English-medium education only where particularly pertinent.

In the next section of this report, we discuss the role of English in Sri Lanka. In Section 3, we provide an overview of the basic education system, including the status of English language teaching in basic education and students' proficiency in English. Section 4 covers English education policies in Sri Lanka and Section 5 analyses the existing English language curriculum, textbooks/resources, assessments, teachers and teacher education in basic education. It also contains a section on information and communications technology (ICT) use in teaching and learning. The final part of the report discusses opportunities, challenges and future trends in English language education in Sri Lanka.

In producing this report, we have given prominence to desk research. We have analysed documents such as official papers produced by the government of Sri Lanka, reports by several donor organisations, research articles and conference abstracts. We verified facts in some sections (e.g. the section on assessment) by contacting relevant officials. When no existing analyses of English language teaching (ELT) materials were available, we briefly analysed the content of textbooks and teacher guides.

We also interviewed the following stakeholders and relevant findings are included in the report:

- **Focus group 1:** six teachers from each of: a.) state school – rural, b.) state school – urban, c.) state school – primary, d.) bilingual school, e.) MoE-registered private school, f.) international school
- **Focus group 2:** six in-service teacher trainers, as follows: a.) in-service adviser, b.) master trainer, c.) assistant/deputy director of education, d.) Regional English Support Centre representatives
- **Focus group 3:** three pre-service teacher trainers from National Colleges of Education
- **Individual interview 1:** a representative from the Department of Examinations (DoE)
- **Individual interview 2:** a representative from the National Institute of Education (NIE)

It is important to note that we used a very small sample size for our focus group discussions and interviews; therefore, varying opinions of stakeholders may not be fully reflected in the report. In addition, we are aware that aspects such as English-medium education, the culture of seeking private English tuition and the rising number of international schools are influential factors in English language education in Sri Lanka. However, due to the limited scope of this report and non-availability of information, these have not been discussed in detail.

2 The role of English in Sri Lanka

English has a colonial history in Sri Lanka and was the official language of administration until independence in 1948 (Sittarage, 2018). In the 1950s Sinhala and later Tamil became the official languages and English was de-emphasised during a period of resurgent nationalism and ethnic conflict. English was re-established as a 'link language' in Sri Lanka by the 1987 13th amendment to the 1978 constitution (chapter IV). Language policy today has a 'trilingual' focus, with English acting as a supposedly politically neutral tool alongside Sinhala and Tamil to equip pupils for life and work in the 21st century (Liyanage, 2019). Today, Sinhala and Tamil are the official/national languages in the country. English does not, legally speaking, enjoy either of those positions, but is instead the 'link' language. It is given the title 'link language' to indicate that it is the common language between the Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking communities.

According to Article 22 of the constitution, which explains the language of administration, a person is eligible to receive communication in English if the original communication is available only in Sinhala and/or Tamil (Parliament Secretariat, 2021). According to Article 23 (Language of Legislation): 'All laws and subordinate legislation shall be enacted or made and published in Sinhala and Tamil, together with a translation thereof in English' (ibid:14). This indicates that although English is not identified as an 'official language' in the constitution, it enjoys the status of an official language in some respects. Mendis and Rambukwella (2010) note that, functionally, English plays a greater role than just being a link language. Specifically, it is still the language of the supreme court of Sri Lanka and a frequently used language in the court of appeal. In addition, it is widely used in media and advertising, plays an important role particularly in higher education and is the language of the commercial sector and private businesses (ibid.).

The status of English in society has been subject to tensions over the years between its historic role as a symbol of colonial oppression and its current role as a language of international business and communication. English is generally associated with high social prestige in Sri Lanka and is viewed not only as a necessity for securing employment but also as a means of achieving social mobility (Wettewa, 2015).

3 The basic education system in Sri Lanka

3.1 A brief overview

According to the Annual School Census Report 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020a), the number of state schools in 2020 was 10,155. Of these, 373 are national schools directly governed by the central government while the rest (9,782) are provincial schools governed by the provincial councils of the nine provinces.

All state schools, both national and provincial, use common curricula, syllabuses and textbooks, and all students sit the same national examinations. The administration of provincial schools (e.g. resource allocation and teacher transfers) is handled by provincial ministries; however, they have limited powers in terms of changing the centrally administered school education policy frameworks (National Committee for Formulating a New Education Act for General Education, 2017). In 2020, the total student population in state schools was 4,063,685 and the total number of teachers was 249,494 (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

According to the MoE's Annual School Census Report (ibid.), state school education is divided into four levels:

1. Primary (Grades 1–5) (Approx. age 5/6 to 9/10)
2. Junior Secondary (Grades 6–9) (Approx. age 10/11 to 12/13)
3. Senior Secondary (Grades 10–11) (Approx. age 13/14 to 14/15)
4. Senior Secondary (Grades 12–13) (Approx. age 15/17 to 16/18)

Of these, Grades 1 to 11 fall under compulsory education. Grades 10–11 are called O/L Grades because students sit the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) examination (GCE O/L) in Grade 11. This is the major national examination in the country. Grades 12–13 are called A/L Grades as students sit the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) examination (GCE A/L) in Grade 13. This is the second most important national examination, which determines students' eligibility to enter university. Schools cannot be clearly categorised as primary and secondary, as most schools have several levels of classes that span categories (e.g. Grades 1–13, Grades 6–13) (D'Souza and Moore, 2017). In 2020, there were 3,635,069 children in compulsory education in state schools (Grades 1–11) and 421,114 in Grades 12 and 13 (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

State school education is available in three media of instruction: Sinhala, Tamil and English. In 2020, there were 6,357 Sinhala-medium-only schools, 3,042 Tamil-medium-only schools, 42 Sinhala/Tamil-media schools,

524 Sinhala and bilingual (Sinhala/English)-media schools, 157 Tamil and bilingual (Tamil/English)-media schools and 33 trilingual schools (Sinhala, Tamil and bilingual (Sinhala/English and/or Tamil/English)) (Ministry of Education, 2020a). There were 99,396 students in bilingual education (either Sinhala/English or Tamil/English) in 2020.

The 90 MoE-registered private schools in 2020 had a total of 136,230 pupils in Grades 1 to 13 and 8,019 teachers (Ministry of Education, 2020a). In addition, as of 2020, there were also 816 Pirivena schools (Temple schools for mostly male Buddhist monks) with a total of 69,878 students and 7,336 teachers. Special education schools provide education for children with special needs such as visual/hearing impairments and developmental challenges. In 2020, there were 30 such schools with a total of 2,496 students and 545 teachers.

We did not find statistics on the number of international schools in Sri Lanka. However, Oxford Business Group (n.d.) claimed to have 256 such schools in 2017 with 56,919 students attending. The International Schools of Sri Lanka, an organisation with a membership of 26 leading international schools in the country, indicates that there are about 40,000 students in their schools (The International Schools of Sri Lanka, n.d.). It is likely that these numbers are currently higher. There is no direct regulating body for international schools, so the quality of education in these schools varies greatly (Wettewa, 2016). The investment that these schools make in educational resources is generally seen as positive, as resources in state schools can then be allocated to children from low-income families. At the same time, international schools are criticised for charging high fees and thereby maintaining class-based discrimination (Wettewa, 2016). (See further discussion in Section 3.3.)

3.2 Participation in education and performance

The population of Sri Lanka is 51.6 per cent female and 48.4 per cent male (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). The country has the highest reported youth literacy rate in South Asia: 99 per cent in 2019 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). The literacy rate was slightly higher for females (99.2 per cent) compared to males (98.7 per cent) in 2019 (ibid.). Participation in basic education is high in Sri Lanka with a gross primary education enrolment rate of approx. 100 per cent for both males and females over the last decade (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). The secondary education enrolment rate for females in

2018 was slightly higher than that for males and the overall average has been approx. 98 per cent over the past decade. The tertiary education (age 18–22) enrolment rate in 2020 was 26.7 per cent for females and 16.5 per cent for males, with overall enrolment of 21.6 per cent. According to undergraduate admission statistics in 2020 (as universities come under the UGC), 64.1 per cent were female students and 35.95 per cent were male students (University Grants Commission, 2021). We did not find information on graduation rates; however, in 2020, a total of 24,565 obtained bachelor's degrees (University Grants Commission, 2021). This includes students enrolled in different academic years, as the duration of different degree courses varies from three to five years. However, considering the average admission rate within the last five years, which is around 20,000 per academic year (*ibid.*), it is reasonable to suggest that the university completion rate is also high in Sri Lanka. Statistics reveal that female participation in education is higher than male participation (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). At secondary level this is compatible with the overall male/female population ratio, but in tertiary education, female participation is disproportionately high.

3.3 English language education

English is taught as a core subject from Grades 3 to 11. Most of the MoE-registered private schools use the state school curriculum and thus they also teach English as a core subject. It is also a core subject in the GCE O/L examination, meaning that all students need to take English as a subject in this exam.

In primary Grades 1 and 2, a programme called Activity-based Oral English is run, mainly to introduce English at a basic level (Aloysius, 2015). Primary class teachers (non-English generalist primary grade teachers) are expected to run this programme. From Grade 3 onwards, English language teachers teach English as a subject and there are ca. 27,583 English teachers in state schools (number verified by the NIE).

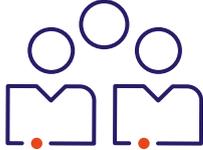
GCE O/L, which students sit at the end of Grade 11 (approx. age 15), is considered similar to GCSE in the UK; however, we did not find any international benchmarking between the two tests. A recent English Impact Study (Shepherd and Ainsworth, 2018) provides information on the English language proficiency that students achieve at the end of basic education, i.e. by Grade 11. They tested a representative sample of 1,437 Grade 11 students from 148 schools, administering the British Council's Aptis for Teens English language test, which tests reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar and vocabulary. According to the results, 58 per cent of the students achieved only basic user level (A1) of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). A further 30 per cent achieved the next CEFR level (A2), which still falls within the basic user level (A1 is the introductory/breakthrough level of basic user

and A2 is slightly higher than this introductory level). Students achieved lower scores in the productive skills of speaking and writing than in the receptive skills of listening and reading. This level is widely held to be inadequate for work or further study. Several studies have found that students in Sri Lanka entering university may not have an adequate level of English proficiency to study in English medium (Wickramasuriya, 2005; McCulloch et al., 2020). Several studies have also highlighted that those leaving school and entering the workforce lack the proficiency in English expected by employers (Dundar et al., 2017; Brunfaut and Green, 2019b).

Since English is the medium of education in most international schools, the English language proficiency of students attending these schools is believed to be significantly higher than that of students attending state schools (Wettewa, 2016). According to a survey conducted in four international schools in four different provinces, English language education has been recognised as the most important factor for parents in choosing private schools for their children (*ibid.*). The English-medium education provided by international schools is seen as narrowing the gap between employer requirements and the existing local curriculum (*ibid.*), although this seems to create a gap in skill levels between those who can afford to study in these schools and those who cannot.

Premarathna et al. (2016), who analysed English-medium education in state schools in Sri Lanka, note that most state schools who in theory offer English-medium subjects are unable to offer such classes for more than two subjects due to a shortage of teachers who can teach in English. They also noticed the use of both mother tongue and English in instruction in these classes. We did not find any relevant data on students' performance in English-medium schools or comparisons with performance where English is taught as a subject. However, Mahawattha's (2012) study highlights poor speaking skills observed even among students in bilingual education.

Key facts about education in Sri Lanka

Population 
21.9 million
 in 2020*

Political division **9** provinces
 **25** administrative districts

 **Number of government-funded schools**
10,155
 in 2020**

Private schools
 MoE-registered private schools **90** in 2020**
 International schools approx. **256** in 2017***

Number of in-school learners
 State schools (Grades 1–13) in 2020** **4,063,685**
 MoE-registered private schools (Grades 1–13) in 2020** **136,230**
 International schools approx. in 2017*** **56,919**
 Male **2,018,151**
 Female **2,045,534**

Number of teachers 
 State schools **249,494**
 in 2020**

MoE-registered private schools **8,019**
 in 2020**

Number of English subject teachers in state schools
 approx. **27,583**
 (verified by the NIE)

Compulsory education
Grade 1–11 (age 5–16)

Enrolment rates
Gross primary enrolment ratio¹
100.23 per cent
 in 2019****
 (net 99.1 per cent in 2018)

 Male **100.46 per cent**

 Female **100 per cent**

Gross secondary enrolment ratio
100.34 per cent
 in 2019****
 (net 99.1 per cent in 2018)

 Male **98.04 per cent**

 Female **102.63 per cent**

*Estimated by World Bank, 2021 **Ministry of Education, 2020a ***Oxford Business Group, n.d. ****UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019

¹The gross enrolment rate is the ratio between all students enrolled in primary education, regardless of age and the population of official primary education age. As over- and under-aged students are included this ratio can exceed 100 per cent. The net enrolment rate is the ratio between all students in the theoretical age group for primary education enrolled in that level and the total population in that age group' (Our World in Data, n.d.).



4 Policy context

4.1 Education planning

The Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for education planning across all subjects at national level. This includes curriculum, exams and choice of textbooks, which are delegated to the following three departments:

1. The **National Institute for Education (NIE)** is responsible for the curriculum and teacher training. It was set up in 1981 to promote research into and development of curricula.
2. The **Department of Examinations (DoE)** is responsible for national exams from Grades 5–13.
3. The **Education Publications Department (EPD)** is responsible for printing, publishing and distributing textbooks.

The MoE oversees human resources, continuing professional development, teacher training and quality assurance. It is also directly responsible for the administration of national schools, while provincial schools are managed by provincial councils. Provincial Council Departments of Education are responsible for the management and delivery of general education within their own province and for implementing policy decisions made by the MoE. They manage provincial schools and are responsible for deployment of teachers and principals, budgeting and monitoring and planning programmes. There are also 99 Zonal Education Offices and 312 Divisional Education Offices (Ministry of Education, 2020a), which ensure the day-to-day running of schools within their area. Each school also has its own administration team.

Private and international schools fall under the auspices of the Board of Investment (BOI). This was established as part of the Companies Act, which regulates commercial companies. As such, it does not monitor quality or educational standards (Wettewa, 2015).

In addition to these departments, there are also two main general education advisory bodies:

1. The **National Education Commission (NEC)** reviews and makes recommendations on education policy and advises the president
2. The **National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC)**, based at the University of Colombo, conducts research to advise education planners

4.2 English language policy history

A number of bodies have specific responsibility for language policy. The Department of Official Languages (DOL) implements official language policy in the country and the Official Languages Commission (OLC) makes policy recommendations and ensures compliance. The National Institute of Language Education and Training (NILET), set up in 2007, is responsible for training of language teachers (Sinhala, Tamil and English), as well as the training of translators, interpreters and public servants in the three languages. NILET, however, does not seem to have a major involvement in training English language teachers in state schools, as their mission is to be ‘a leading educator in developing bilingual/trilingual skills of staff in public institutions’ (NILET, n.d.).

English language education policy has gone through several changes in different periods. In the pre-independence colonial era (from 1836 when the state school system was established to 1948), English was the medium of education in most schools. In the 1940s, steps were taken to shift the medium of administration and education to local languages, but English was still recognised as a compulsory subject in all schools (Liyanage, 2021). English remained a core subject in the curriculum (Hettige, 2005) and was taught from Grade 3 (approx. age seven). In the 1960s, the government forbade the establishment of new private schools and most existing private schools were converted to state schools (Liyanage, 2021). As a result, English-medium education was confined to the few remaining private schools run by Christian missionaries. In the 1960s, the starting age of formal English instruction was Grade 5, moving to Grade 6 in the 1970s (Hettige, 2005). These changes led to a gradual decrease in the quality of English language provision. In the 1980s, attempts were made to give prominence to English language education and the starting age for instruction was again changed to Grade 3 (Hettige, 2005).

A set of general education reforms was introduced in 1997, with the aim of improving the quality of English language education from primary to tertiary level (Little et al., 2019). These reforms made English language a core subject from Grade 3 to GCE O/L and introduced play and Activity-based Oral English from Grade 1. Currently, the policy remains the same: formal instruction commences in Grade 3 while Activity-based Oral English starts in Grade 1. The 1997 reforms included a focus on student-centred learning and dictated that all four language skills should be taught. However, the policy did not specify how much time should be spent on each of these skills and Little et al. (2019) in their study of primary grades in 60 schools in 2014 found that only 50 per cent of teaching was student-centred.

Chapter IV, Article 21 of the 1978 constitution of Sri Lanka provides that people have the right to be educated through the medium of either national language (Sinhala or Tamil). However, English-medium education has been available since 2001 in state secondary education for some subjects in some schools. In 2001, science stream courses were made available in English medium at GCE A/L as part of the Secondary Education Modernisation Project (Liyanage, 2019). Bilingual education was recommended by the National Amity Schools Project in 2001. The purpose of this project was to foster integration through mutual understanding by bringing 'students from all ethnic groups' together in the same classroom to learn a few subjects in English (Premarathna et al., 2016). It was later renamed the Alternative Bilingual Schools Project via circular letter no. 4 issued in 2003. It recommended 'bilingual education' from Grade 6 of junior secondary (Premarathna et al., 2016). Despite its name, this initiative entailed offering a few classes in English medium rather than fully bilingual education. Thus, the main media of instruction in the state school system are Sinhala and Tamil, with limited English-medium instruction available at secondary school level in the state sector. In the international school sector, English is the main medium of instruction.

A presidential initiative known as English as a Life Skill was launched in 2009 in collaboration with the MoE and all its related bodies. This aimed to enhance the spoken or communicative language skills of students by providing training and teachers' guides on teaching listening and speaking skills (Bernaisch, 2012). This was also linked to another initiative called Speak English Our Way, which attempted to make teachers teach Sri Lankan English for oral communication (Liyanage, 2021). However, these initiatives appear to have been unsuccessful, since Shepherd and Ainsworth (2018) found that, upon testing the English language proficiency of 1,437 pupils across 148 schools, they achieved their lowest score in speaking – as described earlier. Furthermore, Brunfaut and Green (2019a) found that a range of stakeholders felt speaking and listening skills were still lacking in the curriculum.

The Transforming School Education Project (Ministry of Education, 2012), supported by the World Bank and other funders, aimed to transform school education to lay the foundation for a middle-income knowledge-based economy. This included developing students' English language, IT skills and knowledge of maths and science and introducing a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) framework to 1,000 schools. This project does not seem to have been a complete success. With regards to ICT, several recent studies have found low integration of ICT in both primary and secondary schools (Bandara et al., 2018; Karunathilake and Vidanagama, 2018; Palagolla and Wickramarachchi, 2019). Likewise, a study into the implementation of CLIL in science classes in four schools in the north-west

found that most teachers did not understand how to integrate the components of CLIL into their classes (Vithanapathirana and Nettikumara, 2020).

A new set of National Education Reforms (Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs, 2020) is currently underway. This project aims to overhaul curricula, assessments, teacher training and administration systems. It includes a National Curriculum Framework, which acknowledges that the purpose of language teaching should be to enable citizens to communicate effectively. This set of reforms proposes placing greater emphasis on formative assessment, raising the entry requirements for all teaching to degree level and establishing a formal in-service teacher training institute (not specifically for English). If successfully implemented, these reforms would likely address many of the issues raised in this report. (See Section 6.3 for a detailed discussion.)

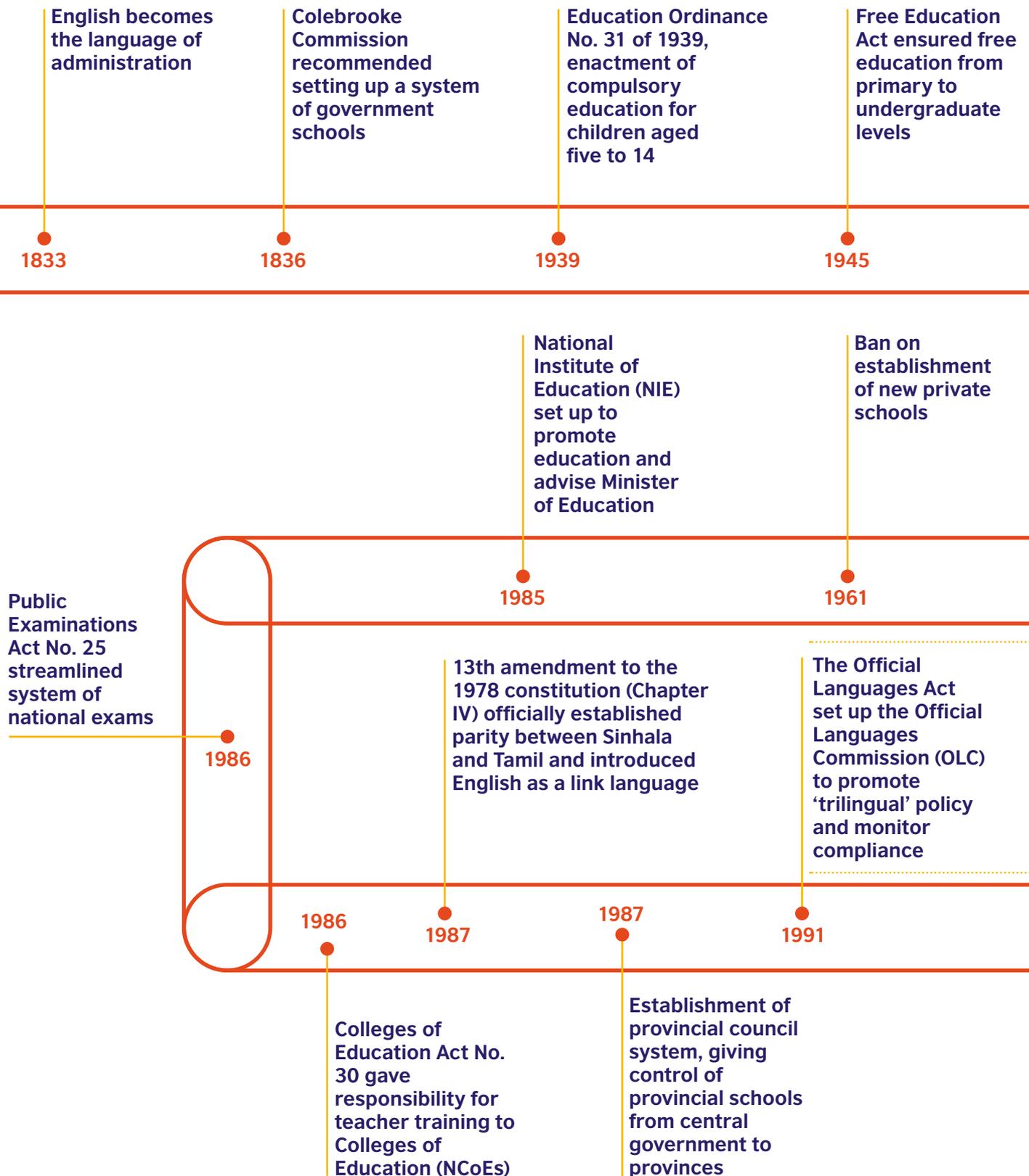
4.3 Enactment of English language policies

Students receive 200 days of schooling per year, with three hours of English instruction per week from Grade 3, rising to 3.5 hours per week by Grade 5 (Little et al., 2019). The National Committee for Formulating a New Education Act for General Education (2017) recommended that this be increased to five hours of English instruction per week at primary level and six hours at secondary level, but this was not implemented, and Shepherd and Ainsworth (2018) found that students reported receiving less than this. They surveyed students in Grade 11 and found that almost 37 per cent reported receiving three to four hours per week of English instruction and 14.5 per cent reported receiving two hours per week. The same number reported receiving five to six hours per week.

The variety of English taught and used in formal contexts is claimed to be Standard British English, although an acknowledged variety of Standard Sri Lankan English (SLE) exists (Liyanage, 2021). Mendis and Rambukwella (2010) point out that English has had a close connection with Sinhala and Tamil for more than two centuries and thus SLE has unique linguistic features. However, it seems that many people in Sri Lanka still claim that they speak and, in the case of teachers, teach, British English. It is unlikely that many would claim to be teaching SLE in basic education in Sri Lanka; but considering that teachers and materials writers are native speakers of Sinhala/Tamil, it is likely that features of SLE may be included in materials and teaching. However, we did not find any policy standards on which variety of English is taught at school level. This is a topic that warrants separate investigation.



Education and language policy timeline



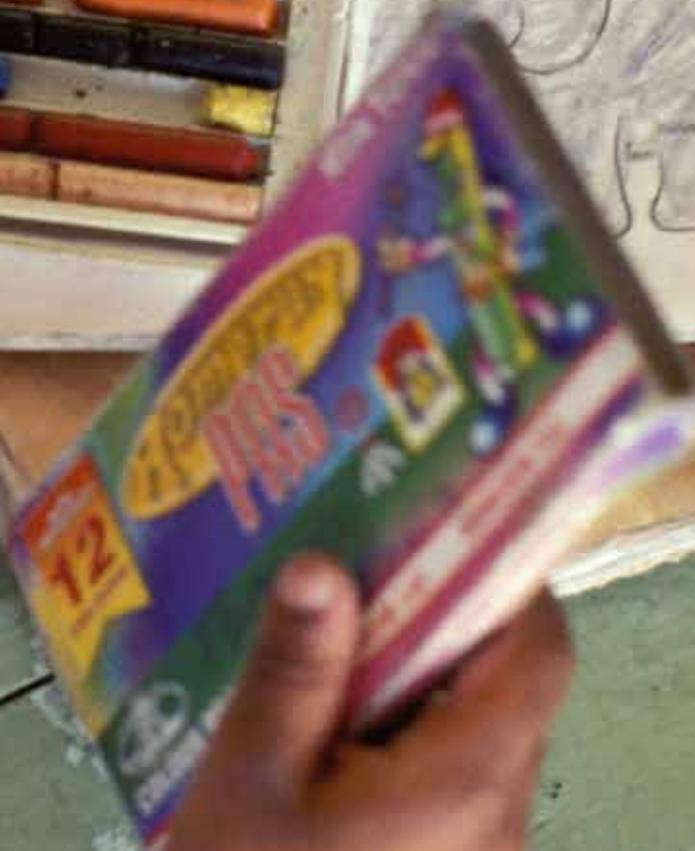
Read and match

- ① — one
 - ② — three
 - ③ — two
 - ④ — eight
- five
 - six
 - four
 - seven
 - nine

Count the legs



four



5 English language teaching in practice

5.1 English language curriculum, textbooks, resources and ICT use in teaching/learning

5.1.1 Curriculum

Primary-level education in Sri Lanka includes Grades 1 to 5. In Grades 1 and 2, students are exposed to an Activity-based Oral English programme (Aloysius, 2015). The pedagogic approach at this level stresses Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) rather than rote memorisation of grammar structures (Little et al., 2019). According to Aloysius (2015), this programme is confined to speech and listening, not reading and writing. Guided play and activity are used to introduce English under the core subject called Environment-related Activities (National Institute of Education, 1999, as cited in Aloysius, 2015:45). The expectation is for primary grade teachers to introduce basic English vocabulary and relevant structures orally when teaching different themes under this core subject (Atugoda, 2005).

Formal, textbook-based English language teaching starts at Grade 3. According to the syllabus for Grades 3 to 5, its aims are to:

- Lay the foundation for the gradual development of the students' abilities to communicate effectively in English through speaking, reading, writing and listening
- Enrich students' participation in primary school through positive enjoyable foreign language learning experience
- Develop positive attitudes in students that encourage them to learn English further in the secondary school
- Build students' confidence in their ability to succeed in learning the language
- Provide support to acquire the basic competencies related to the National Education Policy through an additional language teaching programme
- Provide sufficient command of the language to enable the students to use English in real-life situations as and when the need arises

(National Institute of Education, 2000, as cited in Little et al., 2019:03)

Several drawbacks of the primary English curriculum have been identified. Rohan (2012) notes that the limited vocabulary and incorrect pronunciation of primary grade teachers, who are not qualified English teachers, can have negative consequences on student learning in Activity-based Oral English in Grades 1 and 2. When it comes to the curriculum for Grades 3 to 5, Little et al. (2019) note that the syllabus is organised around the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and

writing; however, there is no indication as to how much time should be spent on each skill. They also note that the teacher's guide emphasises reading and writing, which does not seem to be the aim of the curriculum.

Brunfaut and Green (2019a) provide an overview of the existing English language curriculum at secondary levels (Grades 6 to 11). They identify that the curriculum aims to promote a competency-oriented approach mainly working towards the GCE O/L examination. The curriculum aims to develop both lower and higher order skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The overall objectives are as follows.

- *Creating the need to learn English as a Second Language in a multilingual society*
- *Creating opportunities for the Sri Lankan child to achieve the competencies in a link language*
- *Creating facilities to learn a language which can be used to build ethnic harmony*
- *Enabling the students to learn an international language which could be made use of in their later life for employment purposes*
- *Empowering the learner to communicate confidently, fluently and effectively in the English language*

(National Institute of Education, 2014)

Brunfaut and Green's (2019a) analysis highlights that the competency descriptors are too vague, which could lead to different interpretations by teachers. They also interviewed 32 key stakeholders in the English language education sector to understand their perceptions on the English curriculum. Participants emphasised the insufficient (or lack of) focus on listening and speaking skills and skills for further study or employment in the curriculum. Atugoda (2005) also notes that reading and writing are emphasised in the curriculum in preparing students for the GCE O/L examination. Since listening and speaking are not currently tested in this exam, it is likely that teachers also pay less attention to these skills in classroom teaching. The interviewees in Brunfaut and Green's (2019a) study also pointed out that too much emphasis is placed on linguistic accuracy and too little on language skills practice in the curriculum. The findings also suggest that the competency descriptors are unclear for materials writers, exam item writers and teachers, and that the curriculum lacks detail and clear guidance.

We conducted one focus group interview with both primary and secondary teachers who use the state school curriculum and another with teacher trainers,

who are also familiar with this curriculum. Both teachers and teacher trainers pointed out that the competencies given in the curriculum are inconsistent, unclear and difficult to understand. Some teacher trainers are of the opinion that the curriculum was not developed based on research. Both teachers and teacher trainers also stressed the importance of starting formal English language instruction from Grade 1, not Grade 3. It seems that the Grade 3 curriculum starts at a level that children have not yet reached in Grades 1 and 2. This may be due to the informal nature of English as introduced at the earlier grades. Some teachers indicated the difficulty of delivering the expected curriculum at Grade 3 for these reasons.

Both teachers and teacher trainers unanimously agreed that listening and speaking skills are neglected in class, while reading and writing are taught. They mentioned that both provincial authorities and school management are very keen on exam results rather than actual language proficiency that students achieve, so the teachers are pressured to achieve good scores. Since the exams do not test listening and speaking skills, these skills are neglected. In addition, teacher trainers reported that parents also tend to focus on their children's exam results rather than actual language proficiency, in the belief that speaking skills can be developed after exams have been passed.

In certain schools, English is given less prominence when allocating extra class times because school authorities think that subjects such as maths and science are more important. According to teacher trainers, this is because passing the English subject at GCE O/L exam is not a requirement to progress to the GCE A/L class, although it is a core subject in the exam.

A teacher from a state school where English-medium classes are available pointed out that the students in English-medium classes are better at speaking in English than the students in other classes and attributed their success mainly to the lower number of students in English-medium classes, i.e. teachers' ability to pay more attention to students in small classes.

Our focus group included a teacher from an MoE-registered private school and another from an international school. We asked them about the curriculum used in their schools and the enactment of this curriculum. The teacher from the MoE-registered private school mentioned that the state school curriculum is used in their school; however, extra time is allocated to speaking and reading in addition to the usual time allocated for the four skills. The teacher from the international school confirmed that they use the Cambridge curriculum and allocate equal time to teaching all four skills, with students encouraged to speak in English. She pointed out that all teachers in the school also speak in English with their students.

5.1.2 Textbooks

All state schools use the same syllabuses, pupils' books, workbooks and teachers' guides in all grades, which are provided free of charge by the government (Aloysius, 2015; Little et al., 2019).

The textbooks currently used for Grades 3 to 5 were first published between 2017 and 2019 (Education Publications Department, 2019 a,b,c). According to our analysis of the books, they contain items such as vocabulary activities, sentences containing basic grammar structures, songs and simple reading texts. Most activities in the Grade 3 book require students to listen and imitate or follow the teacher. Tasks include listen and say, listen and repeat and listen and play. In the books for Grades 4 and 5, in addition to similar listening activities, there are reading activities such as read and enjoy and read aloud. These include some dialogues which students must either read aloud or listen to the teacher and repeat. Although the books are not content heavy, these activities do not seem to promote communicative competence. Rather, the teacher is expected to 'read' and the students are expected to 'listen', which means that students are not exposed to authentic language input/situations nor given the opportunity to practise language in authentic situations. Speaking seems to be treated as a by-product of listening or as reading aloud. That is, students are mostly expected to practise speaking by imitating the teacher.

Commenting on textbooks for Grades 6 to 11, Aloysius (2015) notes that they mainly contain materials to develop students' reading comprehension skills. The topics of the texts vary from local themes to internationally relevant topics. There are various activities to develop writing skills and a relatively small number of activities aimed at developing speaking skills. Grammatical explanations with practice activities are provided in each unit. Brunfaut and Green (2019a) note that these books contain instances of inauthentic and unnatural language and inauthentic tasks and activities. As such, they promote discrete-point language knowledge. In addition, they contain a limited range of target language points to be taught and practised and they lack clarity on what language ability is being taught in some activities/tasks. Brunfaut and Green's interview with participants who commented on the textbooks highlighted that the textbooks lack practice tasks and workable activities for large groups and they over-emphasise the skill of reading. They also reported that these books contain errors, include un motivating input materials with unsuitable or insufficient tasks, lack sufficient practical guidance for teachers and are too complex and lengthy for some learners. Similar issues have also earlier been raised by Canagarajah (1993) and Karunaratne (2003).

According to Brunfaut and Green (2019a), the teacher instructional manuals for Grades 6 to 11 provide an overview of general national goals and basic competencies, subject objectives, competencies and accompanying descriptions. For each competency, a set of instructions for lesson planning, tips for teachers, instructions for assessment and evaluation and suggestions for further reading is provided. However, the assessment guidelines lack concrete practical examples or advice on how to assess different language skills/competencies, draw on outdated sources, do not operationalise the intended construct and represent inauthentic language (Brunfaut and Green, 2019a). Similar features are common in the teacher instructional manuals (teacher's guides) for Grades 3 to 5 that we analysed. The content in those manuals is generic and does not provide guidance on how to use the textbook or enact the curriculum.

Our focus group discussions highlighted similar issues. Teachers pointed out that there is a mismatch between the competency descriptors and activities in the textbooks. Activities are also not arranged in a coherent manner that would allow teachers and students to easily map them against the competencies in the curriculum. Our focus group participants reported using the teacher's guides only to check competencies since they do not provide useful information on how to effectively use the textbook to achieve the competencies. Teachers also told us that they do not always use the prescribed textbook, both due to these shortcomings and because they find some activities unsuitable for the level of students in their classes. More importantly, several teachers pointed out that in GCE O/L Grades they do not use the textbook and instead are sometimes asked to use exam practice books provided at provincial level to help students pass the national exam. The focus group discussion with teacher trainers echoed the same issues. They also pointed to a misconception that the teachers should cover all activities in the textbook and felt that most of the teachers are unaware of how to adapt textbooks to suit their own contexts.

A teacher from an MoE-registered private school mentioned that they use the state school curriculum and their students sit the national exams; however, they do not use the prescribed English textbooks. Instead, the school has developed materials to be used in their school. This also indicates that teachers and school management in this school have recognised issues in the existing textbooks and they seem to have more autonomy not to use the prescribed books. The participant from an international school confirmed that they use the Cambridge textbooks and teacher's guides.

5.1.3 ICT use to support teaching/learning

ICT was introduced as a subject in the curriculum in 2006 with the provision of infrastructure to 4,500 state

schools (Bandara et al., 2018). It was also introduced as a subject in GCE O/L and GCE A/L examinations with the aim of increasing ICT literacy among Grade 3 to 9 children (ibid.). Use of ICT in teaching other subjects was another aim of introducing ICT to schools. However, ICT use in teaching and learning at state schools seemed to be at a minimal level, pre-pandemic. As an example, a survey conducted by Palagolla and Wickramarachchi (2019) among secondary school teachers in North Central Province revealed low integration of ICT in schools and lack of ICT literacy among teachers. According to the study, challenges in ICT use in schools include lack of facilities such as computers, lack of teacher training and lack of leadership support. However, they also note that teachers demonstrated positive attitudes towards using ICT in class.

Karunathilake and Vidanagama (2018) reveal similar barriers based on a study conducted in Western Province. Bandara et al. (2018) analysed ICT use in teaching English vocabulary in primary grades by surveying 1,250 primary grade teachers from Western Province. The findings revealed that these teachers do not use ICT in teaching vocabulary, although they support the idea of doing so. Barriers they identified included lack of facilities such as school computers, poor network facilities and lack of computer literacy among teachers and students.

As in every other country, the pandemic brought several changes to the education system in Sri Lanka. The use of ICT in teaching increased due to the move to online teaching. A survey was conducted by Gangahagedara et al. (2021) among teachers, students and parents in 19 schools in the Kandy education zone. They found that 64.7 per cent of teachers used social media platforms for teaching while 27.9 per cent used standard online teaching platforms (e.g. Zoom and Google Classroom). Still, 7.4 per cent of teachers used traditional methods such as conducting small face-to-face classes and 'instructing students to self-study through SMS messaging and keeping learning materials near the school gate' (p. 09). Liyanagunawardena and Williams (2021) studied Emerging Remote Education (ERE) during the pandemic and collected survey data from parents and interview data from teachers. They reveal that some forms of ERE were offered by teachers, but uptake was unsatisfactory. They note that in areas where there are more computer facilities, remote learning has been more successful. In general, a common finding on ICT use is that the digital divide determines access to and outcomes of education.

A survey of 188 English language teachers in Sri Lanka about their teaching experience during the pandemic highlights that the majority did not have any pre-pandemic online teaching experience and had not used interactive tools in their teaching (Indrathne, 2021). However, with the pandemic, their confidence

in teaching online has increased and participants indicated that most students in their classes regularly take part in online classes. One of the key issues highlighted by participants was lack of teacher training in online teaching, as well as challenges such as students' lack of access to electronic devices, poor network coverage and lack of ICT literacy among teachers. When asked about the cost of the internet, the participants in this survey did not indicate it as a major issue. An overwhelming majority stated that they would prefer a blended mode of teaching (online and face-to-face) in future.

In our focus group with teachers, we asked about their use of ICT in class. All teachers (in state, private and international schools) agreed that ICT use for teaching and learning had increased due to the pandemic. Smart boards and computer laboratories are available in many state schools; however, availability is insufficient for the number of students. Teachers mentioned that they could take their students to computer laboratories only occasionally due to the insufficient number of computers available. Most teachers described using their personal laptops, bluetooth devices and smartphones in class. In addition, many rural schools have network issues and even insufficient power sockets to use equipment such as laptops. Teachers from private and international schools indicated that there are more resources available in individual classrooms in their schools.

5.2 Assessment

There are three major national examinations in Sri Lanka for school children: the Grade 5 scholarship examination, Grade 11 GCE O/L examination and Grade 13 GCE A/L examination. The Grade 5 scholarship examination is an optional examination (although the majority sits for it) that aims to give children an opportunity to choose their desired school for secondary education. Those from poor economic backgrounds can also win a scholarship for the rest of their school education to cover costs such as school stationery and transport. The medium of this examination is the local languages (Sinhala and Tamil) and only a few questions in English (mainly vocabulary items) are included. Therefore, we do not separately analyse students' performance in English in this examination.

GCE O/L is the main national examination students face after compulsory education and English is one of the core subjects in this exam. According to performance indices published by the Department of Examinations (2021), candidates' performance in English in this examination is worse than in other subjects. For example, in both 2017 and 2018, English was the subject with the lowest pass rate compared to the other 51 subjects listed (ibid.). In 2019, the English pass rate was slightly higher compared to previous years and higher than Sanskrit and Korean. However, as the number of candidates who sat Sanskrit and Korean was very low (6 and 240 respectively) and they are not core subjects, it is still reasonable to conclude that, of the core subjects in 2019, students performed worst in English. Table 1 summarises GCE O/L performance statistics in English from 2017 to 2019.

Table 1: Performance statistics in the English subject by school candidates in the GCE O/L examinations, 2017–19

Year	Total number of candidates	Total number obtained at least a pass	Percentage of students sitting the exam
2017	355,255	176,145	49.58
2018	356,385	191,308	53.68
2019	361,405	220,707	61.07

Source: Department of Examinations (2021)

Brunfaut and Green (2019a) analysed the current national English language assessments in Sri Lanka through document analysis as well as questionnaires and interviews. Their review of the content of both GCE O/L and A/L exam papers from 2016 and 2017 found that they target 'the assessment of language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary), reading comprehension and writing' (p.16) and the exams do not contain sections on listening or speaking. In other words, competencies related to listening and speaking, which are included in the curriculum, are not tested. Brunfaut and Green also note a lack of standardisation within and across these exam papers. The rationale for and transparency of what is being measured is lacking. The exams also include test tasks that do not reflect international guidelines for good language test task design and contain inauthentic input materials and test items. The language aspects tested are unbalanced and limited. There are also validity and reliability issues since the exams test some areas which are irrelevant to English language ability. As a result, according to Brunfaut and Green, these tests cannot provide a true picture of test takers' language ability.

The interview participants in Brunfaut and Green's study also emphasised the lack of testing of listening and speaking skills in the national exams and reported that they over-emphasise linguistic accuracy and memorisation at the expense of authentic language use. The interviewees also mentioned that teachers are not aware of the range of assessment formats that could be used and how achievement of curriculum goals can be assessed. A lack of language assessment literacy (knowledge of and professional skills in language assessment) among stakeholders was also identified as a key issue for Sri Lanka. These issues have also been identified by others such as Bandara (2014), Liyanage (2014) and Sedere et al. (2016).

A representative from the DoE who took part in our interviews raised similar issues. According to them, assessment literacy training is necessary for paper setters, moderators, examiners and teachers to design high-quality tests compatible with international language testing benchmarks. Another issue highlighted was the unequal regional distribution of English language teachers and resources, which prevents all students receiving English language education of a similar standard. Despite these regional variations, all students must sit the same national exam and the exams do not cater to regional differences.

One of the highlights in assessment is that the emphasis is mainly on summative assessments. Formative assessment of all subjects through School-based Assessment (SBA) has been encouraged in Sri Lanka (Asian Development Bank, 2017); however, it is unclear

how far this has been implemented in testing English language skills or the washback effects ('washback' is the term used to indicate the influence of language testing on teaching and learning – it can be positive or negative). Dissanayake (2016) who interviewed five English teachers on their experience of SBA indicates that teachers find SBA time consuming and difficult to manage with the excessive workload.

5.3 English language teachers

5.3.1 Teacher recruitment

The main entry route for English teachers to the state sector is through National Colleges of Education (NCoEs). Students who pass the GCE A/L examination are eligible to apply for a three-year pre-service teacher training programme at these colleges (Aloysius, 2015). However, university graduates of other degree subjects (mainly English literature), who may lack any knowledge of language teaching, and/or practical exposure to language teaching, are also recruited as teachers (Aloysius, 2015). In addition, based on provincial needs, there are other, more ad-hoc, recruitment initiatives. In these cases, candidates are usually selected through an English language test and an interview process, and the quality of such recruitment processes has been questioned. These are identified as 'untrained' teachers and a few teachers' colleges available in the country provide three-year in-service training to such teachers (ibid.).

5.3.2 Teacher proficiency in English

In a recent study, Allan and Mackenzie (2019) analysed the English language proficiency of English teachers in state secondary schools in Sri Lanka. They used a representative sample of 412 English language teachers from the nine provinces. This included teachers from categories of interest such as urban vs. semi-urban vs. rural, teachers' age, years of English language teaching experience and teachers' GCE O/L and A/L qualifications. The participants took the Aptis for Teachers test, which measures English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also includes a language knowledge module.

According to the results, 48 per cent of the teachers were at CEFR B2 level of proficiency (independent user level), while 36 per cent were at B1 level (independent user level, albeit at a lower level of proficiency than B2). Ten per cent of the sample achieved the C levels (proficient user levels) and six per cent achieved A levels on the CEFR scale (basic user levels). There was no significant difference in teachers' proficiency across the different language skills. More teachers in rural areas achieved below the B2 level than those in urban areas. Most teachers who achieved C levels were

from Western Province. Younger teachers with less than ten years of teaching experience demonstrated higher proficiency levels than the more experienced/older teachers. Although it would be ideal to have more teachers at B2 proficiency level, the current teacher proficiency in English in Sri Lanka is not totally unsatisfactory compared to other countries in the region.

5.3.3 Teacher education

Pre-service training

Since the main pre-service training providers in the country are NCoEs, we conducted a focus group with a group of lecturers from NCoEs and they confirmed that the NCoE curriculum is developed by the NIE. There are three elements to the curriculum: an academic component, a professional component and a general component. The curriculum aims to achieve the overall development of trainees as teachers. When asked about the ratio of academic to practical components of the curriculum, the lecturers reported that two hours per week are allocated to teaching practice in addition to four 40-day teaching practice sessions in their first two years of study, in which they go to schools for teaching practice. The third year of the course is an internship at schools. The participants reported that academic components are delivered using interactive activities such as discussions and presentations. They also highlighted some issues in current training provision: trainees' low proficiency on entrance, lack of resources in colleges, some trainees' lack of enthusiasm about the profession and lack of monitoring of the trainees after they join the profession. It seems there is a long delay between completion of the GCE A/L exam and subsequent recruitment to NCoEs, which the focus group participants see as a major problem in recruitment. The participants also reported that lack of CPD opportunities available for them as trainers hinders their ability to regularly update their knowledge and skills.

As a way of assessing the approach taken by the NCoEs, Kennett (2018) mapped the NCoEs' syllabus (General English Skills, Literature, Professional Subject, Classroom Practice and Literature) against the content covered in the iTESL (Improving Teacher Education in Sri Lanka) Teacher Educator's Course (TEC) and Teacher Education for English (TEE) course. The TEC is a specially designed course based on the British Council's Teaching for Success (TfS) programme with an emphasis on promoting learner-centred communication practice. The mapping showed that 90 per cent of the content of the British Council's TEC is covered in the ELT Methodology syllabus at NCoEs. In addition, some of the TEC components on assessments and mentoring skills, core-skills, diversity and inclusion and child protection skills can also be mapped to the content of some other subjects in the NCoE curriculum.

The TEE materials were developed based on the 'British Council's English for Teaching (EFT) which integrates English with methodology' (p.16) and 38 per cent of the content in English Subject 1 of the NCoE curriculum can be mapped to the EFT content. Content in some other NCoE subjects can also be mapped to components in the EFT.

Kennett (2018) observes that although these components are included in the syllabus, the way they are taught to trainee teachers in practice is not effective. While iTESL materials use a skill-based, professional approach based on the University of Cambridge's CELTA and the British Council's Teaching for Success (TfS) programme, the NCoE curriculum takes an academic, content-heavy and lecture-based approach. The latter reflects traditional teaching styles and 'encourages narrow subject specialisation rather than cross-cutting skills or content-and-process integrated delivery' (p.16). The delivery also lacks a collective teaching approach among staff members, leading to them delivering discrete sections of the curriculum, lacks 'systematic recycling of skills ideas, separates teaching practice from methodology input and accommodates a public service employment, payment and promotion structure which upholds a system of specialisation and segregation of subjects' (ibid.).

ELT methodology is taught at NCoEs in combination with English literature and 180 hours are devoted to ELT compared with 240 hours to poetry, drama and prose (Kennett, 2018:17). Within the ELT component, 18 hours are allocated to using teaching and learning aids without providing structured input on important aspects of teaching such as effective board use or digital resource use.

Kennett (2018) further observes that NCoE lecturers are given the flexibility to design their own materials and thus they interpret the syllabus according to their individual professional ability and preferences, which leads to lack of standardised teaching. Kennett (2018:17) interviewed Master Trainers (MTs) in four training centres and reported that no trainer was able 'to explain how they would convert former lecture notes to task-based input-task-output'. She highlights several other issues such as the use of lecturing about rather than demonstrating ELT methodology, non-quality-assured lecture notes, teacher-centred classrooms and rote learning.

As a further comparison, Wyburn (2019b) analysed the impact of TEE delivered by the British Council to trainees in NCoEs. This was delivered on top of the regular programme at the NCoEs. Findings showed that the trainees unanimously agreed that they felt more confident about their own use of English for communication and their teaching after participating

in the TEE programme. More importantly, the trainees reported being able to understand the practical aspects of the theory taught in their regular programme only through the TEE course. According to Wyburn, many lecturers also reported coming across the tools and approaches used in the TEE course for the first time on this course. This confirms Kennett's findings discussed above.

Wyburn's (2019b) report echoes one of the issues raised by our NCoE focus group participants. Wyburn notes that good practice instilled by pre-service training seems to get lost when trainees join the service, suggesting two main reasons for this. One is poor supervision at school level. The other is that supervising senior teachers in schools direct new recruits to 'cover the content' (p.07) rather than allowing them to exercise autonomy.

In-service training

In-service training is provided to English language teachers mainly via short-term, one-off programmes (Aloysius, 2015) organised by the MoE, NIE and other private providers such as the British Council in collaboration with the MoE. These one-off projects are designed for a specific purpose (e.g. improving teacher language competency) and run for a short period of time until the allocated funding runs out. Usually, there is no continuation of these initiatives, so not all teachers may receive the training.

Teacher trainers and training centres are available at national, provincial, zonal and divisional levels to provide in-service training (Gunawardhane, 2011). Such training initiatives tend to take a top-down approach and a cascading model is used to build skills and knowledge in teachers through these trainers (ibid.). There is a network of Regional English Support Centres (RESCs) run by the MoE/NIE covering almost all districts in the country (Tribble, 2014). Currently, there are 31 centres with ca. 70 full-time teacher trainers. They are mainly responsible for introducing and ensuring the enactment of the curriculum at school level and providing teacher training on teaching methodology (Ministry of Education, 2011). These centres also function for capacity building, exchanging knowledge and sharing experience.

A set of trainers called Master Trainers (MTs) is deployed at regional level, some of whom were trained as MTs through a one-off project called English as a Life Skill (Fernando, 2018) while the rest were trained by the British Council (Wyburn, 2020). They were selected from the teacher cadre and their main role was to implement these externally funded programmes. After the project period, they seem to engage in various in-service programmes and some have gone back to schools as teachers.

In-service Advisers (ISAs) are another group of trainers who provide in-service training. Their primary role is defined as 'mentoring' (Gunawardhane, 2011) and they are expected to make regular school visits to conduct classroom observations and engage in teacher capacity-building activities. In addition to the above-mentioned teacher trainers, Assistant Directors of English (ADEs) are available who support ISAs and other trainers (Wyburn, 2020). These teacher training roles are full-time positions recruited from the teacher cadre based on their education/professional qualifications and experience.

It is difficult to comment on the overall long-term impact of in-service training available as the current initiatives cater to specific needs. One such project was the Council for Business with Britain (CBB) teacher training project designed to improve teacher language proficiency and classroom practices, in which teachers sat the Cambridge Teaching Knowledge test at the end of their training (Dick, 2012). Lunt's (2014) analysis highlights positive outcomes of the project, with participating teachers showing improvement in their classroom practices. An ongoing project entitled Improving Teacher Education in Sri Lanka (iTESL) initially trained MTs, ISAs, ADEs and school principals on various aspects of language teaching such as mentoring, ELT methodology and 21st century skills. These trainers are currently cascading the training to teachers (Wyburn, 2020).

Due to the pandemic, a phase of the iTESL programme was delivered online (Dick, 2021a and b). An online Learning Management System (LMS) platform with other apps such as Zoom and WhatsApp were used and the main aim was to increase teacher proficiency. In the first online course, only 15 teachers participated and all those who completed the course improved their proficiency level. Another eight cohorts were trained thereafter (140 teachers), out of which 83 per cent increased their CEFR level by at least one level. The course was also able to build up strong collaborations between participants and there was interaction between participants from different parts of the country. This indicates the possibility of online delivery of in-service teacher training in future.

Our focus group discussion with teacher trainers included RESC trainers, ISAs, MTs and ADEs, who highlighted several issues with current in-service training provision. One is the different types of teacher recruitment initiatives that bring teachers with varying proficiency levels and professional and academic knowledge/skills into the system, making it difficult to maintain teaching standards across the country. Lack of a self-assessment system for teachers or internal supervision such as peer evaluation at school level hinders them from identifying their own strengths, weaknesses and training needs. The lack of

an accreditation system (e.g. performance evaluation and accrediting teachers based on qualifications and performance), not having a formal obligation to attend in-service training, automatic promotion after a stipulated number of years in service and lack of incentives to participate in in-service training are seen by the trainers as barriers to teacher development. Similar issues with teacher training are also noted by Dundar et al. (2017). Our focus group participants noted that self-motivated teachers always attend training, while there are others who have never attended any.

Provincial variations in in-service training provision and non-supportive school management (e.g. principals not allowing teachers to attend training) were also identified by the teacher trainers as current issues in in-service training provision. Teachers in the other focus group discussion emphasised the inconsistency of in-service teacher training provision across different provinces, which they see as a major barrier to their professional development. This issue is also highlighted in Wyburn's (2019a) report, which analysed the impact of an in-service teacher training project run by the British Council in 2017–18. It indicates that teachers in rural areas do not have access to the same in-service training opportunities that those in urban areas enjoy.

Teachers from private/international schools seem to fare better overall, describing established mentoring systems, peer observations and regular continuing professional development (CPD) activities in their schools.

Other CPD available

In Sri Lanka, CPD provision largely overlaps with in-service training. Apart from such training, there are long-term CPD programmes available for teachers (Aloysius, 2015). For example, various universities/institutions in the country run bachelor's and master's programmes in ELT. The NIE offers a full-time Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) for teachers who have more than five years of experience. However, most teachers may not have the opportunity to enrol in such long-term courses due to the limited number of places available (e.g. a master's programme may offer ca. 50 places per year) and the inability to commit to long-term programmes. Some of these courses of study are also criticised for the lack of practical components (ibid.).

5.4 Other forms of English language provision

Private tutoring is a very common phenomenon in Sri Lanka and demand for this is increasing. The greatest demand is for tutoring in subjects such as mathematics, science and English. As Suraweera (2011) points out, a survey conducted by the NIE revealed that 91 per cent, 73 per cent and 68 per cent of Grade 10 students receive private tuition in mathematics, science and

English, respectively. These statistics were obtained a decade ago and the current percentages may be even higher. In 2017, Dundar et al. reported that the cost of private tutoring accounted for an average of 36 per cent of household budgets in Sri Lanka.

There are three types of private tuition available in the country: one-to-one, small groups and large classes (Pallegedara, 2012). Teacher qualifications in private tuition vary from none to graduate degrees. Teachers offering private tuition may be either state school teachers supplementing their income, or full-time private tutors. Almost all tuition classes prepare students for national examinations and thus follow the state school curriculum.

According to Pallegedara (2012), there are several reasons for the high demand for private tutoring. Since state education is free until students complete their undergraduate studies, school enrolment, school completion and literacy rates are high. However, there are a limited number of state universities in the country and, therefore, national examinations to gain entry to higher education are highly competitive. Another reason is economic growth. As average household incomes have increased, parents are able to increase spending on their children's education. As a result, private tutoring expenditure is now seen as less of a luxury and more a necessity.

Since no established institution/body regulates private tuition in Sri Lanka, it is difficult to determine its quality. As private tuition usually aims to prepare students for national exams using the state school curriculum, we believe that a separate analysis of this aspect of English education is unnecessary for this report. Moreover, lack of research on private English language tuition makes it difficult to comment further. However, it is important to note that private tuition functions as a parallel education system with the same teachers as in schools often delivering tuition, thus it seems to bring serious consequences to the school education system. This includes poor school attendance since students skip school to attend private tuition, widening inequality in education and waste of resources (Damayanthi, 2018).

5.5 Gaps between policy and practice

As we have highlighted in several sections, there are a number of gaps between policy and practice in English language provision in basic education in Sri Lanka. The main gaps are summarised below:

1) Curriculum, textbooks, assessments and ICT use

- Overall, there is lack of alignment between curriculum, textbooks and assessments. For example, some competencies given in the curriculum are difficult to interpret and the textbook activities do not always match the competencies listed in the curriculum. In addition, some competencies are not

tested in national exams (none of the listening and speaking competencies are tested) and some test items lack validity and reliability.

- Textbooks lack activities that adequately promote communication skills and some items contain inauthentic and unnatural language. Teachers' guides are too generic and do not provide the support that teachers need to use the textbooks to achieve the competencies.
- Listening and speaking skills, which are the most important skills for everyday communication, are given less prominence in classroom teaching due to the fact that they are not assessed in national exams. In addition, certain listening and speaking activities included in the textbooks do not actually practise those skills (e.g. reading aloud as a speaking activity).
- There seems to be unequal ICT resource allocation to schools (urban vs rural).

2) Teacher recruitment and pre-service training

- Different teacher recruitment systems bring teachers with widely varying proficiency levels, pedagogic skills and professional and academic knowledge into the system.
- Although nearly 50 per cent of teachers have been found to be at B2 proficiency level in English, a considerable number do not have an adequate level of language skills.
- Although the pre-service training curriculum includes practical components, it seems that the practical components are not put into practice very effectively. Therefore, trainees do not seem to have adequate skills in practical teaching by the time they finish their training.

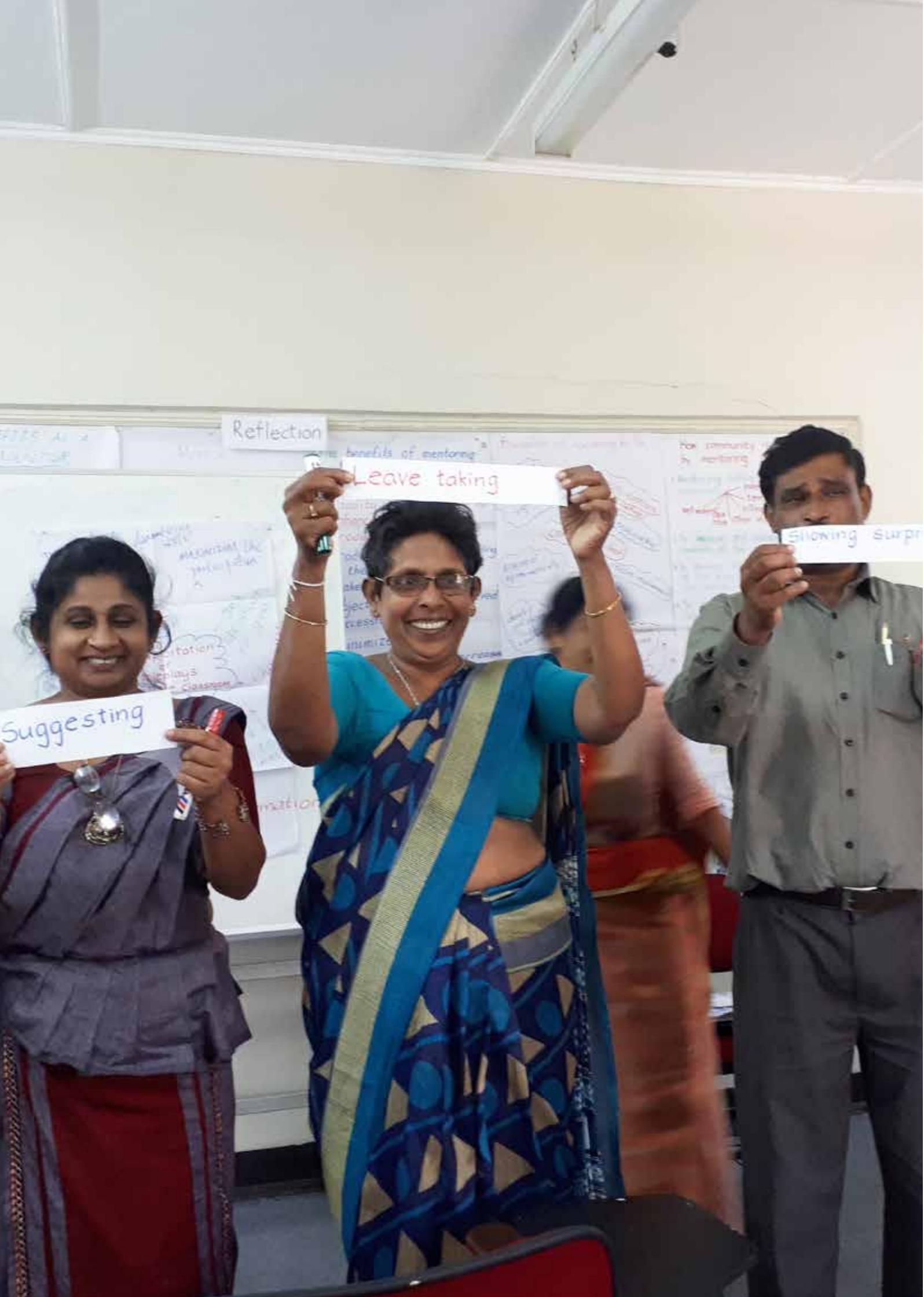
3) In-service teacher training and CPD

- No strong culture of self-assessment, peer evaluation, mentoring or supervision exists in the school system. In addition, there are no obligations or incentives for attending in-service training. As a result, good practice inculcated through pre-service training seems to get lost when trainees join schools as practising teachers.
- The lack of a teacher accreditation system means that less value is provided by CPD.
- Inconsistent in-service provision across the country is seen by teachers as unfair.
- Teacher trainers lack CPD opportunities.
- There seems to be too much emphasis on national exam results, with teachers pressured by school authorities and parents to demonstrate good results. This hampers teachers' ability to exercise autonomy.

4) Other types of English language education provision

- No regulating body controls the quality of English language provision at international schools and in private tuition classes.

As well as these issues – and perhaps because of them – there is a gap between student achievements and the English language demands of employers in Sri Lanka. A mismatch between education outcomes and labour market needs, particularly regarding soft skills and English proficiency, was identified as long ago as 2003 (National Education Commission, 2003) and has been highlighted more recently by Dundar et al. (2017). Brunfaut and Green (2019b) conducted an empirical study covering 21 different employment sectors in Sri Lanka. In some companies investigated, all jobs needed English proficiency while others, mostly higher-level jobs, required English. It seems all four skills are needed by employees with a main focus on oral and written business communication. However, they struggle to recruit employees with sufficient communication skills. Employees' limited English proficiency affects companies by causing extra work and having a negative impact on their image and reputation. Employers stress the need to develop good English skills among young people for the future economic growth of the country.



Reflection

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Showing surpr

Suggesting

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For community

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6 Opportunities, challenges and future trends

In this section, we discuss the opportunities, challenges and future trends by collating what we have discussed so far and summarising the recommendations made in different documents that we have analysed.

6.1 Opportunities

6.1.1 Curriculum, textbooks and assessment

Brunfaut and Green (2019a) provide a set of recommendations in relation to improving teaching, learning and assessment of secondary-level English language provision. They identify a lack of alignment between curriculum, textbooks, assessments and teacher training. Therefore, establishing a ‘full circle’ in English language education is proposed. This would include a systematic mapping of curriculum content, exam content and textbooks/teacher guides, as well as the need for clear communication of the intended outcomes to stakeholders (teachers/trainers). To establish such a full circle, Brunfaut and Green recommend close collaboration between departments, i.e. NIE (curriculum), EPD (textbooks), DoE (exams) and NCoEs (teacher training). We believe that this should also include RESCs, MTs, ISAs, ADEs and any other in-service teacher training providers/trainers. Little et al.’s (2019) recommendations on primary ELT provision are very similar to Brunfaut and Green’s. For example, they call for aligning curriculum intentions with the content of teacher guides and aligning both of these with classroom realities and in-service teacher training.

In addition to this overall recommendation, Brunfaut and Green further recommend equipping teachers with pedagogic skills to teach listening and speaking and to test those skills in national exams, since their current absence from national exams has meant that they have been deprioritised in teaching. In addition, the current lack of emphasis on listening and speaking skills means that students finish school inadequately prepared for higher education and employment.

One key point highlighted by Brunfaut and Green (2019a) is the lack of support for teachers provided by teacher guides. While revising the textbooks, it would be very useful to develop comprehensive teacher guides that clearly explain how to teach each component of the textbook in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Brunfaut and Green (2019a:38) see the need to improve the quality of language assessments and recommend implementing a full test cycle that includes ‘the development of test specifications and improvements in test, task and item design’. They believe that this will ensure that national exams follow international standards for ethical behaviour. Research on national exams is also recommended to validate the exams. They stress the

importance of developing the language assessment literacy of stakeholders at all levels of the English language education system, with higher levels of assessment literacy training for teacher trainers and those in key positions at the DoE. We also believe that assessment literacy should be included in both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes to facilitate teachers to engage in formative school-based assessments. This would enable them to use such assessment results to inform lesson planning and address the gaps in knowledge and skills. Assessing listening and speaking in end-of-term school tests was introduced pre-pandemic as a pilot project in some schools, and this should be implemented more widely to address the issue of the lower priority currently being given to teaching listening and speaking skills. Our focus group teacher participants also stressed the importance of moving away from exam-oriented English language teaching provision to make teaching and learning a stress-free process for both teachers and learners.

6.1.2 Teachers and teacher training

Proficiency

Allan and Mackenzie (2019), who studied teacher proficiency, make several recommendations on teacher development. Since teacher proficiency is a vital aspect of successful language teaching, they recommend setting ‘professional and linguistic standards’ for all English teachers and new recruits ‘with a required proficiency level of CEFR B2’ (p.36). The report recommends forming a working group to develop and deliver action plans to allow teachers already in the system to achieve the target proficiency level through language training initiatives. Developing incentive programmes to motivate teachers to achieve the desired proficiency level (e.g. badges for schools certifying that all their teachers are B2+) is also recommended. Making language learning resources easily available to teachers and monitoring teacher language proficiency by introducing a test tool compatible with CEFR levels would also be important steps towards achieving the desired proficiency. Allan and Mackenzie highlight the importance of considering the language ability of teachers when assigning them to schools to minimise the current provincial imbalance in quality of teaching provision.

Pre-service teacher training

Although the available literature does not make recommendations on pre-service training provision, from the discussion in this report it is possible to recommend several actions. First, it may be necessary to streamline teacher recruitment and provide consistent and equitable teacher training in terms of content and quality to all teachers recruited, even if they enter the system in different ways. Setting an initial proficiency standard at B2 level, as Allan and Mackenzie (2019) suggest, could minimise language issues prevailing among teachers.

According to the focus group participants consulted for this report, upgrading teacher training to a degree-level qualification and revising the existing pre-service curriculum to make it more practical and user friendly would enhance pre-service training. Providing CPD opportunities for pre-service teacher educators is also seen as a must. According to the interviewees, a continuous monitoring/supervision system to guide trainees who join schools after training may help retain the good practices inculcated in trainees. We believe that this would be possible by creating strong links between pre-service and in-service teacher educators.

In-service training

Tribble (2014), who evaluated the impact of the RESC network in Sri Lanka, sees several positive aspects. He recognises these centres as an invaluable asset in English language teacher education in the country but notes that their unclear system of management via different authorities such as the MoE and NIE means that staff face several challenges having to serve different masters. Tribble recommends determining qualifications and working hours for RESC staff, giving recognition to their service as teacher trainers, streamlining the management system of the centres, establishing a mechanism to release teachers regularly from school to attend teacher training organised by these centres, providing CPD opportunities to RESC staff, unification of in-service teacher training so that RESCs, MTs and ISAs work together, and providing more resources to RESCs. Wyburn (2019a) also recommends providing more opportunities to teachers from remote areas. Establishing a community of practice to share resources, lesson plans and experience is recommended to narrow the gap between the availability of training in different areas of the country. In a recent initiative, the ISA (In-service Adviser) service was established (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2019) which recognises ISAs as a separate cadre of teacher trainers. As such, there is greater opportunity now to establish

more systematic in-service training provision by giving ISAs a key role. Online in-service teacher training provision is another possibility, as there is already evidence of successful online delivery of such training (e.g. Dick, 2021a,b). This type of training may address issues such as lack of in-service training opportunities for teachers in rural areas.

The teacher trainer participants in our focus group discussion make several recommendations regarding in-service training provision. They highlighted the need for introducing a self-assessment system for teachers, a peer observation and feedback system, a teacher accreditation system and support-based intervention from school management and trainers. Ongoing support, regular mentoring and a strong monitoring system are also suggested. They also highlight the importance of establishing a culture of lifelong learning, supported self-learning where teachers are self-motivated, and that trainers and school management appreciate teachers and provide help and guidance rather than finding faults. Model lessons and coaching were identified as components that should be added to in-service provision. Greater awareness by school principals regarding the aim of language teaching and importance of in-service training for teachers were identified as essential requirements. Finally, the teacher participants of the focus group stressed the need for greater uniformity in training provision across the country.

6.2 Challenges

Sri Lanka faces several complex systemic challenges when it comes to the status of English language in general education. First, disparities in resources in different parts of the country mean that schools in rural areas and in certain provinces tend to fare worse than those in the urban areas and in the south and west of the island (Dundar et al., 2017). For example, there is a lack of qualified English teachers, particularly in rural areas (National Committee for Formulating a New Education Act for General Education, 2017; Liyanage, 2014). Although newly qualified teachers are required to spend time working in a rural area, they tend to then transfer to what are seen as more desirable locations, meaning that rural schools not only lack English teachers, but the teachers they do have may be inexperienced (Dundar et al., 2017), leading to lower-quality teaching. This problem is compounded by relative lack of teacher training in rural areas (Tribble, 2014).

As discussed, the overall effectiveness of English language teaching, learning and assessment in Sri Lanka has been questioned (Brunfaut and Green, 2019a), partly due to lack of alignment between training, curriculum, teaching materials and assessment. Each of these elements will need to be addressed to create a coherent, research-based system for teaching and learning. Attempts have been made previously to tackle issues such as overly teacher-centred methods and grammar-focused materials, but lack of co-ordination between departments has hampered the extent to which these initiatives have been effective. Not only will training be required for those designing materials and assessments, but also better lines of communication between the main departments responsible for the different elements of this cycle (the NIE, the DoE and the EDP, as well as training bodies and colleges of education) are also essential.

In interviews conducted for this report, representatives from the DoE and NIE indicated national-level challenges in addressing some of the key issues identified in English language education. One is the difficulty in assessing listening and speaking skills in national exams. A massive amount of training is required to train examiners to maintain consistency of assessment across the country when catering to ca. 700,000 test takers each year. Formative assessment of speaking may be a possibility; however, again, a massive amount of training needs to be conducted to orientate teachers. Another issue they highlighted is the difficulty of changing the attitudes of teachers, school principals and parents on the real purpose of language learning and shifting their mindset from the exam-oriented mentality.

6.3 Future trends

The ongoing National Education Reforms (Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs, 2020) led by the Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs in collaboration with the MoE are part of an initiative to restructure the whole education system in the country. The current system has been identified as too content-heavy, rote learning/memory-based and exam-oriented. With its rigid curriculum lacking in diversity, the system creates stress for teachers and students. The new reforms prioritise active and skills-oriented learning rather than knowledge-oriented learning, critical and analytical thinking, life skills and human values. This reform project aims to reduce paper-and-pencil exam pressure by giving priority to formative assessments, introducing performance-based assessment and connecting learning to real life and the

world of work. The ultimate goal is to create a proactive workforce equipped with knowledge and in-demand and highly valued skills. The current reforms also stress the importance of encouraging innovation, creative approaches and the use of new technologies in all aspects of work. Research in all sectors is also given greater importance.

To achieve these aims, the Presidential Task Force report (Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs, 2020) emphasises the need for policy changes, revising curricular and learning methodologies, redesigning assessments, comprehensive teacher training, restructuring administrative systems, redeploying investments and resources, quality assurance and control, and facilitating a better integrated system in both school-level education and higher education.

The National Education Reforms have also identified that many without professional qualifications have become teachers and that there is a lack of professional training available to education professionals. These reforms propose making a bachelor's degree the minimum qualification to be a teacher and plan to offer Bachelor of Education degrees to all trainees. They also propose establishing an in-service training institute. The Presidential Task Force report (Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's Education Affairs, 2020) also emphasises the importance of training teachers on digitising content and using alternative teaching methods.

As part of these proposed reforms, the MoE has prepared a National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2020b) for school education. When it comes to language education, they identify the importance of including Sinhala, Tamil and English as essential languages in the school education curriculum. The aim of language teaching should be to create citizens who can effectively communicate in local and global contexts. The framework emphasises that language teaching should not take a purely academic approach and instead should enable learners to use language as a tool when and where appropriate. The two main objectives of language education are to allow learners to use language for interpersonal communication and to master the four skills.

We asked our interview participant from the NIE about the proposed English language education system under the new reforms. Accordingly, the following have been proposed:

Curriculum

The new curriculum will define the proficiency level that students will achieve after each grade based on six band descriptors (some grades are categorised under one band, e.g. Grades 3 and 4 are in one band). These proficiency levels have been designed based on national descriptors and descriptors such as CEFR. The Activity-based Oral English programme will continue in Grades 1 and 2. Five areas of importance for the curriculum are identified: listening, speaking, reading, writing and literature/collaborative activities. Can do statements have been developed under each area for each proficiency level and learning outcomes have been developed under each Can do statement. In doing this, the function of language or language *in use* has been given prominence.

Textbooks

The new reforms propose not using textbooks, but taking a modular approach. Each school term will have three 10-hour modules; nine in total per year. These will be core modules for which students will receive credits. Further optional learning modules focusing on aspects such as academic writing will be available.

Assessments

For assessment purposes, performance standards have been designed and included in the curriculum, so that teachers can assess the learning outcomes. Students will carry a portfolio throughout their school life that indicates their performance in each grade. The reforms propose more formative assessment and less summative assessment. Listening and speaking skills in particular will be tested formatively. An external, provincial-level team will reassess some of the formative tasks to ensure consistency. It is also proposed that listening and speaking be tested in national exams.

Since these are at the proposal stage, it is difficult to comment on their actual implementation or quality. However, the proposals do represent an attempt to address some of the key issues that have been identified by many stakeholders and discussed in this report.

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This report provides an overview of how English language teaching, learning and assessment are currently situated within school-level education in Sri Lanka. The report provides up-to-date contextual information, exploring policies and practices. The authors draw on policy documentation, research studies and a small number of interviews and focus groups to provide an overall picture of the current scenario. They provide commentary on the status of English within the curriculum, classroom practices, how teachers are supported to develop their skills and knowledge and the opportunities, challenges and future trends that the authors have extrapolated from their research.

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