

SPICE/Tharunyata Hetak Spoken English Training Programme In Sri Lanka's Northern Province, March 2013

Killinochchi, located three hundred kilometres to the north of Colombo, situated in the "Dry Zone" and well in truly in the "Vanni". It served as capital of the Eelam State during the 28 year long Civil War that many had branded as "unwinnable". It was vacated during the second battle of Killinochchi when the Sri Lankan Army's 57th and 58th Divisions defeated the LTTE in January 2009. Capturing the town had not been an easy task; when the LTTE withdrew the damage was considerable.

Mohan Samarasinha founder and Chairman of the UK registered "SPICE" charity had chosen the area to support two intensive five day in-service workshops for local teachers. He felt deprived towns like Killinochchi and Mullaitivu deserved help because of the suffering they had experienced during the cruel war. The goal of the teacher training programme was to introduce new and powerful methods of furthering spoken British English by developing listening and speaking skills.

The old LTTE capital of Killinochchi is now a bustling place of redevelopment, spread out straddling the A9 road. The town's old water tower has been upended by explosives and lies as a stark reminder of the destruction metered out at the hands of the "Tamil Tigers". Today it boasts two or three hotels, signifying it is opening up to visitors once again. **The Spice Teachers Training project started on Monday 18th March at the "Zonal Education Office."** There were 22 enthusiastic participants.

The first day was devoted to discussing problems faced by the teachers. By far the biggest challenge was the lack of resources. Most of the primary schools lacked qualified teachers, so the onus fell on the secondary sector for the introduction and later teaching of English. This made it extremely difficult for the participants to understand the syllabus. Overall there seemed to be a lack of serious commitment on the part of many of the students. Until English becomes a compulsory subject in the system, this difficulty will continue. The political will was somewhat lacking as many teachers think they have little voice in the birthing of change in their region. If they do not confront the authorities and speak up for better conditions, it is unlikely the current situation will change terribly much. Fortunately Spice is there to accomplish its mission, devoted to speaking, promoting and introducing children in Sri Lanka, to English. This charity run from the UK, works in close partnership with the Rajapaksa brothers youth organisation "Tharunyata Hetak" (A Tomorrow for Youth). Such a link-up eases the way for SPICE to work with schools and teachers. It depends on kind donations from the public to make its work possible.

One of the most pressing issues stressed in the training is that the tendency to revert to the native language in monolingual classes. This has to be discouraged. The purpose of the SPICE Training Programme is to emphasise the skills of listening and speaking. To achieve this objective, it is stressed that carrots are much stronger motivating tools than sticks. A tremendous emphasis was placed on games and

other activities that inspire participants to speak. For many of the children, the only experience of listening to someone speaking English comes by interaction with their own teachers. It is, therefore, paramount the teachers themselves speak an acceptable form of Sri Lankan English conforming to recognized grammatical rules. The purpose of a language is to communicate and most importantly not to be misunderstood. The Teachers own communication skills need to be enhanced. An enthusiastic teacher can do a lot to help him or herself by repeated exposure to the language. It is not enough to do this on an occasional basis; the exposure needs to be daily. The Internet is an invaluable resource that enables people to listen to spoken English and thanks to Skype and other voice based programs to speak it, too.

The Course explored methodologies via micro teaching and demonstration lessons. All this is a far cry from the time honoured and highly restrictive practice of slavishly following the text book, which by the very nature of the exercise emphasises reading and writing and side-lines the communicatively more basic skills of listening and speaking. Although such an approach is much easier for the teacher, it is far less useful to the student!

Day 4 time was devoted to exploring how spoken English could be encouraged by means of extra curricula activities. How to set-up and use an English Club which meets on a regular basis with the intention of generating interest through drama, music, songs and games. Teachers already using such schemes were singled out to tell others on how to set them up. An extension of the English Club is the English Camp, where exciting activities can be incorporated into an intensive one or two days out of school event. Teachers are encouraged to introduce these concepts into their own schools. Plans are afoot to develop a residential “English Camp” at St. Thomas’s College, Gurutalawa. This will be run in conjunction with the UK’s leading “Millfield School”.

On the final day, procedures designed to assess competency in spoken English were also examined. It is stressed that fluency in spoken English can only be tested by speaking the language. All tests have to be spontaneous to ascertain a realistic level of ability. **The Training ended on Friday 22nd March.** Hopefully, the message stressing that language learning is all about communication got across; if you are not mis-understood you are communicating. Many of the teachers attend courses like this one to interact with native speakers. True, they want to learn from the native speaker, but they also need to be able to determine how well they can communicate with them. Bear in mind this will be the first time some of these adults have had any extended conversation with someone who speaks English as a “Mother tongue.”

A significant purpose of these trainings is to identify the future leaders amongst the teachers attending. Spice has already addressed the issue where UK graduate and TEFL expert Tom Cellar along with Sophie Minor have been in Tangalle assisting local teachers put on trainings such as this one for their colleagues. Mohan

would like to see more projects in a similar vein take place in the North. Such plans need funding. Feedback from these courses is resoundingly positive. The teachers are eager to participate. However, funds are not always available to make such exciting schemes materialise.

...The 10 Year National Master Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka has provided equal opportunities for all Sri Lankans to obtain skills in Sinhala and Tamil as languages of communication and debate with English as a life skill at levels suitable for individual needs and ambitions. Sunimal Fernando President's Advisor and Co-ordinator on the Task Force on the Teaching of English.

The Mullaitivu Teachers' Training Course began on Monday 25th at the recently constructed Mullaitivu Mahavidalay M School. It was built under the auspices of UNICEF, and funded by the Cathal Ryan Trust. The trust is named after Cathal Ryan, son of Irish billionaire and founder of low cost airline Ryanair, Tony Ryan. Cathal spent several years in Sri Lanka flying for Air Lanka; he died of cancer in 2007. The estate was valued at Euro 250 million on his death; his brother and daughter Danielle worked with family members to set-up a trust to give some of this money back to Sri Lanka. The school was a result of the donation.

The Course starting on March 25th began with 16 participants; this number grew to 19 as the week progressed. Tuesday the 26th was Full Moon or 'Poya Day'. In Sri Lanka such days are public holidays. Participants, in a vote of confidence on the Spice Programme, universally agreed, to come in on their day off, for which Spice rewarded them with a lunch. The material covered was the same as in Killinochchi, except it all had to be condensed in to four days. The reason for this was Friday 29th was 'Good Friday'. Good Friday is also a public holiday. Besides many teachers had homes and families in faraway Jaffna, understandably they wanted to spend the long week-end with them. The course ended, therefore, on Maundy Thursday, the 28th of March. There was a short ceremony where speeches were made, and the winning team received their prizes of an umbrella apiece. This was followed by a short reception where all enjoyed short-eats and Coca-Cola. The participating teachers were so delighted with their Course they made a collection; three of them then crept out of the classroom, made for the market and presented the facilitator with three beautiful shirts as a token of thanks.

Several of the teachers displayed injuries received during the war. Many had harrowing tales to tell but asking impertinent questions about their traumas seemed somehow indelicate. Ilango had a badly scarred arm, Mary Rejinah told of how she sheltered in a bunker for three days whilst being shelled by the SLA. Kathya Yasotharan's husband was killed, leaving her to bring up her son and daughter as a single mother. It would be fascinating to know more but intrusion without invitation is an invasion of privacy.

Such trainings can only continue with your help. If you feel such projects are worthwhile, please donate generously.

SPICE is a UK Registered Charity No.1143962 and its registered address is 24 Tretawn Gardens, Mill Hill, London NW7 4NR. Donations made by UK tax payers under Gift Aid will entitle the charity to a tax rebate of an additional 25%.

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