
Peace building through better communication

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The English Teacher Training Project, a key component of the Cities of Excellence Program and the Presidential Initiative on English and IT, was launched yesterday. The purpose of the project is to bring together English teachers from around the country for specialised training so that they can better facilitate the teaching of English in their own districts when they return.

The project is implemented by the Ministry of Education, assisted by the Presidential Initiative for English and IT, and coordinated by the Peace Secretariat. It is supported by the US Embassy in Colombo and the Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO. The current batch of trainees come from four districts: Jaffna, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Their training session is scheduled to run for three weeks. The Hon. Minister of Education, Mr. Susil Premajayantha, Mr. Sunimal Fernando, Advisor to H.E. the President and Coordinator Presidential Task Force on English and IT, Professor Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat, along with representatives from the US Embassy in Colombo, were present at the opening ceremony. It was stressed that the project has a larger and more overarching rationale than merely to improve the standards of English around the country. It has three core goals. First, it is premised that communication is a primary "bridge builder" between people. Hence, to have a "link language" such as English will facilitate much better communication between the different ethnic groups in the country, particularly the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Second, to empower the rural areas of the country by making it easier for children in those areas to learn English. And finally, to use the contacts generated through the project—not just among the teachers but among students—to promote and facilitate peace building efforts. The speakers at the ceremony touched on all these themes. The Hon. Minister Mr. Premajayantha said, "At a time when Sri Lanka is on the brink of commencing a new chapter in her history, it is vital to provide our young generation with the encouragement and motivation they need to look ahead into their future and rightfully hope for better days." He concluded with a remark of Nelson Mandela's, "Education is the most powerful weapon that can be used to change the world." Professor Rajiva Wijesinha, in his remarks, pointed out that the central goal of the program was to make "communication more thorough" between and among the different communities. He also said that in his view one of the major reasons for the present problems in Sri Lanka was "the failure to empower regional sectors." Such marginalisation had led to economic stagnation. The way out, therefore, was to have an educated populace capable of taking advantage of new economic opportunities—which meant, most importantly, facility in communication, particularly in a worldwide language such as English. Mr. Sunimal Fernando, advisor to H.E. the President and Coordinator, Presidential Task Force on English and IT, in his remarks, recalled the days of his own youth—a time long prior to the present troubles—and the conditions of interaction among the different communities. His observations are particularly pertinent with respect to the overall aspirations that inform the present project. Recalling his schooldays, he said, "Few if any Sinhala students could speak Tamil: nor could the Tamil students or their families converse in Sinhala. But there was so much English around at that time in the schools and in the wider multi-ethnic community outside in settlements such as ours that students as well as elders were able to communicate across their ethnic and cultural borders in English, and interact with one another very freely as friends and cousins for that matter, and develop long lasting bonds of understanding, solidarity and mutual support." Summarising the necessity of having English as a "link language", he said, "Interaction is the key to mutual respect and understanding; interaction is the key to peace and harmony; and language—that all important tool of communication—is the key to interpersonal interaction in society. This is the reality that feeds the concept of English as a link language, a common tool of communication that makes it possible for Sinhala and Tamil speaking people to interact with each other and develop strong bonds of mutual support and understanding through which the two communities will be bonded to each other within the framework of a common Sri Lankan identity." That then, in short, is the sentiment informing and fuelling the present project. Nobility of sentiment and aspiration, however, must always be balanced with practicality. The success of any program is ultimately dependent on the people on the ground who have to implement it. And in this also the present project has managed to be quite fortunate. It has in its first batch, not just thirty dedicated and enthusiastic professionals, but persons with personal knowledge and experience of the situation on the ground with respect to English teaching in their own districts. Asked about their expectations of the three-week program, one participant was succinct, "We need a very simple methodology (which we can take back)." Another participant, from Jaffna, remarked that she was looking forward to learning techniques that would help "English language teaching with respect to weak students or slow learners." Another, from the Anuradhapura district, said she hoped to take back "new methodologies through which we can improve standards." A participant from Batticaloa said, "Teachers are not given proper training" especially in updating their knowledge and getting to know the latest developments in their discipline. A number of participants also indicated that one of the greatest problems they encountered in teaching English was the "gap" between the primary and secondary-school standards. They said that children in primary school (grades 1-5) had often not been exposed to the basics of English, and so were completely unprepared to handle the much higher standards in secondary levels. They stressed the need, therefore, to teach the basics. As one teacher put it, "Basic English is essential. When students went to primary school they often missed English. Some students don't even know the alphabet. So they need to know the basics." In the coming weeks, it is hoped that these dedicated professionals will gain the tools and techniques they need to remedy some of these needs in their respective districts. From auspicious beginnings, it is said, come auspicious results. If the sentiments expressed at the launch of the present project, as well as the calibre of the participants, are any indication, there is no doubt that only great things will follow from the first step taken yesterday. Media Unit Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace

Process Courtesy: SCOPP