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Barriers to Professional Opportunities in Sinhala Related fields for Upcountry Sinhala-Speaking Tamil Communities in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This research study delves into the linguistic proficiency of upcountry Tamil communities in Sri Lanka in the Sinhala language and explores the intricate challenges they face in securing professional roles within fields such as Sinhala teaching, media, translation... Despite their remarkable Sinhala language skills, upcountry individuals encounter multifaceted barriers that hinder their entry and advancement in these professional domains. This research aims to identify these barriers and proffers strategies for enhancing their access to professional opportunities in Sinhala related fields.

Upcountry Tamil communities in Sri Lanka, predominantly Sinhala-speaking, have exhibited commendable proficiency in the Sinhala language, a fundamental skill for roles in Sinhala teaching, media, translation, and related fields. Nevertheless, systemic and societal obstacles continue to impede their progress in these professional spheres.

The research is conducted using mixed-methods approach, which includes interviews, and document analysis. The study involves a representative sample of upcountry individuals and stakeholders within Sinhala teaching, media, and translation are engaged to gain profound insights into the specific challenges faced by upcountry Tamil communities in accessing professional opportunities.

The research findings elucidate a range of interwoven barriers, encompassing limited access to quality education and specialized training programs, a dearth of information regarding job openings, cultural biases, and networking and mentorship challenges. Collectively, these impediments obstruct the prospects of upcountry individuals in entering and thriving in Sinhala-centric professions.

This study underscores the implications of the identified barriers and underscores the imperative need for a holistic approach to address them. It posits a series of targeted interventions, including the enhancement of educational infrastructure, culturally-sensitive vocational training programs, heightened awareness campaigns, initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion, and platforms for mentorship. These interventions are designed to empower upcountry Tamil communities, facilitating their participation in Sinhala teaching, media, translation, and related domains.

In conclusion, upcountry Tamil communities in Sri Lanka possess commendable Sinhala language proficiency, making them well-suited for professional roles reliant on linguistic expertise. However, deeply entrenched barriers thwart their access to these opportunities. Collaborative endeavors involving governmental bodies, non-

governmental organizations, educational institutions, and the private sector are crucial in dismantling these barriers and fostering an inclusive environment. In doing so, we can harness the untapped potential of upcountry Sinhala-speaking Tamil communities, contributing to a more diverse, equitable society, and bolstering the professional landscape of Sinhala-related fields.

Keywords: Upcountry Tamils, Sinhala Language, Professional Opportunities, Barriers National Language Policies in Sri Lanka.

1. Official Languages

Sinhala and Tamil shall be the Official Language of Sri Lanka
 - Article 18(1) and 18(2) as amended by 13th amendment.

2. National Languages

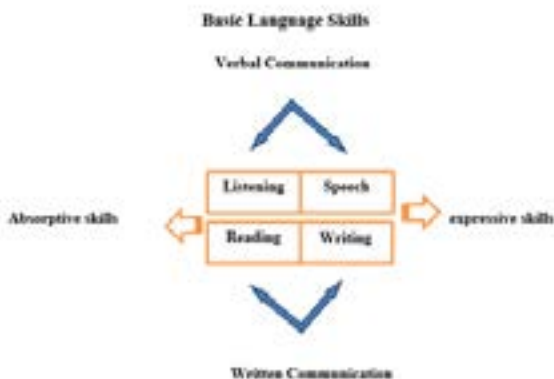
The National Languages of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala and Tamil.
 - Article 19

Introduction

The languages in use worldwide are characterized by both spoken and written forms. Some languages, like those of indigenous peoples such as the Narikkuwar in India and the Vedars in Sri Lanka, are primarily based on dialects. In contrast, languages such as English, Tamil, and Sinhala operate in both spoken and written contexts. It is noteworthy that a significant number of languages worldwide can be classified as double-case languages.

Basic Language Skills

Humans mostly use language as their medium of communication. Language is used by humans to absorb and express their thoughts, opinions, likes and dislikes, emotions etc. Gestures, symbols, colors, lines, and other many types of media are used in communication. However, it is significant that language is the main communication medium or tool nowadays. Such a language consists of four basic language skills. They are as follows:



Sinhala is a language that encompasses both spoken and written components. It is the language of the Sinhalese, the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka, with a rich history dating back to before the Common Era. The language exhibits a notable blend of vernacular influences and possesses numerous ancient literary resources. Influenced by Buddhism, Sinhala belongs to the Indo-European language family. The Sinhalese alphabet, introduced around the 3rd century AD, is considered to have evolved from the North Indian Brahmi script. Additionally, the influence of languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, Bengali, Telugu, Orisa, and Tamil is evident. Notably, after the period of foreign rule in Sri Lanka, Dutch, Portuguese, and English languages have also left their mark on Sinhala.

Language Environment in Sri Lanka

Sinhala, being the predominant language in Sri Lanka, holds the status of both the national and official language. Meanwhile, Tamil, a major language among the minority languages, is also recognized as a national and official language. English serves as the communication or link language throughout the country. Sri Lanka is, therefore, considered a trilingual nation, with Sinhala, Tamil, and English being the preferred languages.

Presently, Tamil is taught as a compulsory subject in Sinhalese schools, while Sinhala is similarly taught as a compulsory subject in Tamil medium schools. This educational approach underscores the commitment to a multilingual education system in Sri Lanka.

Sinhala language proficiency is a requirement for civil servants in Sri Lanka, and allowances are provided to those who are fluent in both Sinhala and Tamil. Consequently, Sinhalese individuals who speak Tamil are increasingly expressing interest in learning Sinhala as a second language. Notably, there is a notable trend where Sinhalese individuals exhibit more enthusiasm in learning the Tamil language compared to Tamils showing interest in learning Sinhala.

Sinhala holds significant importance in Sri Lanka. Despite both Sinhala and Tamil being designated as national and official languages by the government, most activities are predominantly conducted in Sinhala. As a result, Sinhala is considered an essential language for Sri Lankan Tamils, especially for those in the hill regions. The following are highlighted as benefits that individuals with proficiency in the Sinhala language can enjoy, particularly for upcountry Tamils:

(a) Communication

The primary use of language is communication. That is why language is called a communication tool. The English word Communication is derived from the Latin word 'Communis'. In Latin the word has the meanings of generalize, share, effect, benefit, spread the word. Therefore, communication between one person, two people, many people or between many organizations and the resulting understanding is called communication. The term communication refers to the conveyer of a message conveying the idea or message to the listener or receiver using some symbols and trying to get the listeners' opinions. In the linguistic context, the sender and the receiver are human beings.

As far as upcountry Tamils are concerned, knowledge of Sinhala language is necessary to engage in exchange of ideas with Sinhalese. In a multi-racial, multicultural, and multilingual society Sinhala is the primary medium of inter-ethnic communication. Therefore, exchange of ideas is very important for ethnic unity and ethnic unity in a multicultural social structure. Sinhala language is very useful for that.

(b) Exposing the Life of the Two Communities

Sinhala language literature provides a platform to depict the life of the Sinhalese people, reflecting their cultural traditions. Similarly, to share the cultural traditions of the upcountry Tamils with the Sinhalese community, knowledge of the Sinhala language is essential. This two-way exchange contributes to a better understanding of the life and traditions of both races. Therefore, proficiency in the Sinhala language is crucial for revealing and appreciating the cultural richness of both communities.

(c) Teaching - Learning

In Sri Lanka, the government has mandated the teaching of Tamil and Sinhala languages as second languages, making it essential for upcountry Tamils to learn Sinhala. When teaching Tamil to Sinhalese students, it is a requirement for the teacher to be proficient in the students' mother tongue for successful learning-teaching activities. Additionally, if teachers instructing Tamil as a second language to Sinhala students acquire expertise in Sinhala language literature and grammar, they can establish connections between Sinhala and the subject matter they teach, identifying

similarities and differences between the two languages. This knowledge can also facilitate studies related to language, literature, and culture. Therefore, teachers engaged in teaching Tamil as a second language can enhance the organization of their teaching activities by mastering Sinhala.

(d) Writing Books

Various literary works are produced in the Tamil language in Sri Lanka, including literature, grammars, diaspora literature, folk literature, pedagogical works, and multidisciplinary works such as novels, short stories, poems, and dramas. With a stronger command of the Sinhala Language, upcountry Tamils can gain the ability to write books in Sinhala as well.

(e). Translation

Consideration of three different aspects of translation is necessary.

• Career Opportunities in Translation

Presently, numerous job opportunities exist in the field of translation, especially in Sri Lanka. There is a high demand for individuals who can translate from Tamil to Sinhala and vice versa. Proficiency in Sinhala can significantly ease entry into this job market.

• Translating Books

By translating various Sinhala and English works into Tamil, a very beneficial activity can be achieved for the Tamil and Sinhalese communities. That is, it becomes a great opportunity for the Tamil community to get to know the rare news in Sinhala and English language. Likewise, when the Tamil language is translated into Sinhala language, the Sinhalese community will get to know about Tamil language, its antiquity and its culture. Through such translations, the communities belonging to the two languages can learn about many rare words and their messages. Usually only translation from Sinhala language to Tamil language is included. Through this, Tamils can get to know Sinhala culture and traditions. But to know the Tamil language and cultural traditions of the Tamils, translation of Tamil and Tamil related subjects into Sinhala is the need of the hour. For that it is mandatory for upcountry Tamils to learn and master Sinhala language.

• Engaging in Machine Translation

Machine translation is developing as the most important translation method today. Machine translation activities related to Tamil-Sinhala languages have also been started in Sri Lanka and many people are involved in it. Sinhala language is necessary for upcountry Tamils to engage in such machine translation.

(f) Interpretation

The other field that offers career opportunities as easily as interpretation. There is a high demand for interpretation especially in Parliament and important sessions, seminars, workshops, conferences etc. A Sinhala language proficiency is necessary to take advantage of such opportunities.

(g). To get Career Opportunity in Media Industry

Today, the media industry is one of the most important sectors. There are various career opportunities in media such as Sinhala Newspapers, Television, Radio etc. To get such career opportunities related to the media industry, the Sinhala language proficiency is necessary to take advantage of such opportunities.

(h) Preparation of Dictionaries

- Tamil-Sinhala - Monolingual Dictionaries
- Tamil-Sinhala and Sinhala -Tamil Bilingual Dictionaries
- Tamil-Sinhala-English and Sinhala -Tamil-English Trilingual Dictionaries

Numerous dictionaries have been introduced in Sri Lanka over time, with a particular focus on Tamil and Sinhala languages. This surge is attributed to the government's implementation of a new language policy mandating Tamil and Sinhala as second languages for all Sri Lankan

citizens. The increased interest in learning these languages has led to frequent publications of dictionaries. Recognizing the demand for Tamil and Sinhala dictionaries, various governmental and non-governmental organizations have developed and published these lexicons. Such vocabulary resources prove highly beneficial for students, ranging from school to professionals. Proficiency in Sinhala is deemed essential for upcountry Tamils to actively engage in lexicographic endeavors.

Language Proficiency of the Upcountry Tamils

Upcountry Tamils are observed to possess effective communication skills, both in listening and speaking, in their mother tongue, Tamil. However, when it comes to writing, proficiency is evident only among those who have undergone formal learning. Notably, proficiency in the English language is predominantly found among the educated.

2. Objective

This research aims to identify the barriers and proffers strategies for enhancing the upcountry Tamils' access to professional opportunities in Sinhala related fields.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a research approach involving paper works, interviews, and observations. Young men and women working in shops, hotels, restaurants, and cafeterias in Colombo were the sample of this investigation. A total of 50 individuals, with upcountry origin, were selected for this study, and data was gathered through the following methods.

Sinhala Language Proficiency

(Listening – Speaking, Reading – Writing – Four Basic Language Skills)

Data were collected through the paperwork, interview, and observation methods to assess the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To gather data on listening-speaking skills, the following topics were presented to the participants:

- Profile
- Upcountry Tamils
- Sinhala language
- How did you learn Sinhala Language?
- What are the benefits of Sinhala language personality?

Participants were asked to express their opinions on these topics in Sinhala, and their responses were categorized based on the following criteria:

- | | |
|----------|-------------|
| 0 - 50 | - Average |
| 50 - 75 | - Good |
| 75 - 100 | - Excellent |

Similarly, to assess the reading ability of upcountry Tamils, a text written in very simple Sinhala language was presented, and subjects were asked to read it. For data related to writing skills, respondents were requested to provide written comments on the following topics.

- Profile
- Necessity of learning Sinhala as a second language for upcountry Tamils
- Benefits you get from learning Sinhala Language

The responses were then classified based on the criteria mentioned earlier:

- 0 - 50 - Average
- 50 - 75 - Good
- 75 - 100 - Excellent

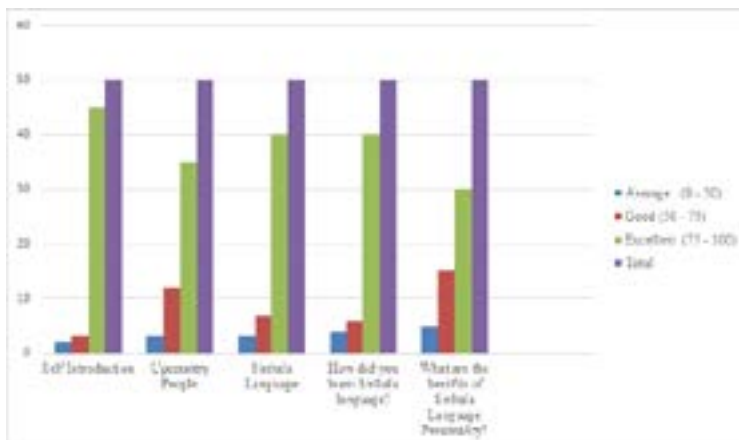
Results and Discussion

The evaluation of the Sinhala language knowledge and personality of upcountry Tamils, particularly young women, was based on the four skills of Listening-Speaking and Reading-Writing. Initially, topics were given to assess both listening and speaking skills, and participants were instructed to discuss them. The researcher asked intermittent questions to evaluate their listening ability.

Listening – Speaking Skills

The following five topics were presented to the participants, and their listening-speaking skills in the Sinhala language were assessed.

Topics	Average (0 - 50)	Good (50 - 75)	Excellent (75 - 100)	Total
1. Self-Introduction	2	3	45	50
2. Upcountry Tamils	3	12	35	50
3. Sinhala Language	3	7	40	50
4. How did you learn Sinhala Language?	4	6	40	50
5. What are the benefits of Sinhala Language proficiency?	5	15	30	50



Based on the table and this chart, for the first topic, Self-Introduction, two people spoke at a normal level, three spoke well, and 45 spoke very efficiently and without mistakes.

For the second topic, Upcountry Tamils, three people spoke in normal Sinhala, 12 spoke well, and 35 spoke very well.

Thirdly, when discussing the Sinhala language, three people spoke at an average level, seven spoke well, and 40 spoke very well.

For the fourth topic, “How did you learn Sinhala?” Four people had an average proficiency, six had a good proficiency, and 40 had a very good proficiency.

Regarding the benefits gained from the fifth topic, Sinhala language proficiency, five people were at an average level, 15 were good, and 30 were proficient.

Reading - Writing Skills

Two methods were used to assess the reading and writing skills of hill Tamils. The following passage titled “Food of the Sinhalese” was provided for reading.

isxy,hkaf.a wdydrh

wdishkq cd;slhska nyq;rhlf.a fuka u isxy,hkaf.a o m%Odk wdydrh jQfha
 n;a h' kuq;a w,ys.li we;s wjia:dj,oS;a n;g uosmdvq jYfhka ; yels
 wdydr j%. /ila ;snqKs' fldia ta w;r m%Odk úh' isxy,fhda ;=ka fõ,gu
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 wdmam"msÜgq"frdà"b`oswdmam"f;dafiwdoSwdydrj%.ieliSumSKsinyq,
 jYfhka lel=¿ iy,a msá o w;sf%al jYfhka l=ryka msá yd W`y msá o Ndú;
 flßKs' lsb;n;a úfYal wjia:dj, oS ilik wdydrhla jqj;a idudkH
 oskj, oS WoEik wdydrhla f,i o fhdod .eksKs'

Criterion

- 0 - 50 - Average
- 50 - 75 - Good
- 75 - 100 - Excellent

When such a criterion was applied to evaluate the reading, one or two people attempting to recite a particular ballad were unsuccessful. This was because, although they could recognize and read Sinhala vowels to some extent, they were unable to recognize other characters. Lack of language knowledge, information and training related to strokes were identified as reasons for this.

To assess the writing ability of the subjects, they were given the following three topics and asked to write about them:

- Profile
- Necessity of learning Sinhala as a second language for upcountry Tamils
- Benefits you get from learning Sinhala Language

Topic	Average (0 - 50)	Good (50 - 75)	Excellent (75 - 100)	Total
1. Self - Introduction	-	-	-	50
2. Necessity of learning Sinhala as a second language for hill Tamils	-	-	-	50
3. Benefits you get from learning Sinhala Language	-	-	-	50

When asked about their personal details, the most enthusiastic interviewees were only able to write their names. All others mentioned that they could not write. They also indicated that they could read and write Sinhala vowels but struggled to write the letters correctly.

Based on the given data, regarding the Sinhala language proficiency of the upcountry Tamils, it is evident that they excel in both listening and speaking skills among the basic language skills. Living alongside Sinhalese people, having daily opportunities for communication in Sinhala, and being exposed to the language environment from an early age allow them to express their personality effectively. However, due to a lack of necessity, opportunities, and a conducive language environment for written communication in Sinhala, it was evident that they could not acquire even basic knowledge in reading and writing skills. The following reasons can be cited for the upcountry Tamils not acquiring proficiency in both reading and writing skills in Sinhala language.

- **Discontinuity**

Due to poverty, family problems, familial responsibilities, and a lack of awareness about education, upcountry children often discontinue their learning activities at a young age. Those who leave the educational system early sometimes find employment as plantation laborers, and in contemporary times, some secure jobs in garment factories, in shops, hotels, restaurants, and cafeterias in Colombo.

- **Sinhala language is not taught Properly in Schools**

Despite the government's second language policy, which mandates the teaching of Sinhala as a compulsory subject in Tamil schools, its implementation is inconsistent. The primary reason cited for non-implementation is a shortage of teachers, particularly in many schools in the upcountry, where Sinhala is not taught as a second language.

- **Government's Interest in Teaching Tamil as a Second Language to Sinhalese - Lack of Interest in Teaching Sinhala to Tamils**

After the end of the war, the government focused more on teaching Tamil and Sinhala as second languages. However, there was a noticeable emphasis on teaching Tamil to the Sinhalese. The government facilitated Tamil learning for Sinhalese individuals working in government institutions by sending them to the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore. Unfortunately, Tamils did not receive adequate instruction in the Tamil language, even in the few schools available.

- **Lack of Website Accessibility**

In today's technologically advanced environment, opportunities to learn a language without a teacher on the Internet abound. Several institutes offer Sinhala language courses through websites, with some companies providing free language instruction. However, these resources are not readily available to the upcountry Tamils, particularly children, due to their limited access to the internet.

- **Lack of Awareness Regarding Learning Sinhala as a Second Language among Upcountry Tamils**

While upcountry youth exhibit proficiency in basic language skills such as listening and speaking in Sinhala, they lack proficiency in reading and writing. The absence of awareness about the importance of learning Sinhala as a second language hampers their ability to access career opportunities in Sinhala language-related fields.

To harness their natural Sinhala language proficiency and master the remaining skills, the facilities for such mastery and where to acquire such proficiency need to be identified. Sinhala language is taught in various institutions such as the Department of Official Languages, National Institute of Education, National Institute for Language Education and Training, and universities. However, there is a lack of awareness among upcountry Tamils about the opportunities they can gain from mastering the Sinhala language. For instance, the National Institute for Language Education and Training offers Sinhala language training every year, providing a permit to teach Sinhala to those who complete the course. However, the number of upcountry Tamils with speaking and listening skills attending these courses is limited.

There is a lack of awareness among the upcountry Tamils about the benefits that can be obtained from developing proficiency in the Sinhala language, including opportunities for employment in fields such as teaching, book writing, translation, interpretation, media, and research.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There are various career opportunities related to the Sinhala language in Sri Lanka, including teaching, translation, interpretation, text creation, dictionary preparation, and media-related professions. To assess whether upcountry Tamils possess the necessary language skills, a study was conducted with 50 upcountry youths and young women working in small shops, hotels, food outlets, and snack bars in Colombo city. While all participants exhibited proficiency in listening and speaking skills, none were literate in reading and writing. To address these challenges and develop the Sinhala language identity of upcountry Tamils, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Create awareness about the importance of education, particularly among young men and women in upcountry Tamil communities.
- Ensure proper teaching of Sinhala language in schools, emphasizing its importance as a second language.
- Advocate for government interest in teaching Sinhala to Tamils, similar to its efforts in teaching Tamil to Sinhalese.
- Sensitize the young upcountry community about the significance of Sinhala speaking and listening skills.
- Emphasize the need to develop reading and writing skills that are currently lacking.
- Disseminate information about Sinhala language teaching institutes.
- Facilitate internet access for language learning, especially in schools.
- Promote awareness of career opportunities related to the Sinhala language.
- Encourage investment in listening and speaking skills among upcountry Tamils.
- Remove barriers to learning Sinhala for the younger generation in the upcountry.

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