# The trilingual dream of post-war Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Language issues play a key role in Sri Lanka's post-war reconciliation, having contributed to past ethnic conflicts. Therefore, as a country still striving for post-war reconciliation, understanding the current status of its trilingual policy implementation remains vital for future language planning.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper first analyzes policy documents related to trilingual initiatives introduced to date while discussing what existing research reveals about these policies. The second section explores the current state of policy implementation at the grassroots level, primarily in the education sector and examines the perceptions and experiences of education stakeholders and officials from government and nongovernment sectors in implementing these policies. Accordingly, this study employs both policy analysis and data from 40 in-depth interviews.

**Findings** – The findings suggest that, although the trilingual policy has not entirely failed, it has fallen short of achieving its intended objectives due to successive governments' abandonment of implementation efforts, ineffective institutional frameworks, varying attitudes towards languages and other issues among hostile ethnic groups beyond language. It further showcases the strengths and weaknesses of trilingual language planning as a post-war reconciliation effort.

**Originality/value** – In the absence of a formal evaluation of the success of the trilingual education policy, the study, based on document analysis and empirical data, discusses language ideologies, problems and their connection to the identities of people and social harmony. By doing so, it offers insights for conflict-ridden contexts that aim to promote multilingualism amidst internal linguistic struggles, as well as the challenges of linguistic imperialism, globalization and internationalization.

**Keywords** Language policy, Post-colonial, Linguistic struggles, Ethnic conflict, Multilingualism

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

Language rights constitute a central factor in the emergence and perpetuation of ethnic tensions in post-colonial nations (Davis, 2023). These nations are expected to or have the pressure to promote inclusivity and diversity, thereby fostering the coexistence of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Globalization and transnational migration have further emphasized this need. Plurilingualism, multiculturalism, multilingualism and global citizenship can be recognized as some practical approaches to enhance inclusivity and promote diversity. The Sri Lankan government, like many other multicultural societies, such as India (Abbi, 2021), Nepal (Tamang, 2024) and Malaysia (Pillai, Menon, & Vengadasamy, 2016), has identified the crucial role of language education and language policies at different levels in promoting or hindering social cohesion. Considering its small size, Sri Lanka can be considered a suitable case study, offering valuable insights into other similar contexts.



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Post-independent, Sri Lanka endured a 26-year civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), fueled in part by language-related issues (Irshad, 2018). The civil war was between the majoritarian Sinhala (74.9%) government and LTTE drawn from the leading minority group, the Sri Lankan Tamils. Sri Lankan Tamils live mainly in the Northern part of Sri Lanka and account for 11.2% of the population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Sinhala is the language of the majority Sinhala ethnic group, while minority groups, including Sri Lankan Tamils, a large majority of Muslims and Indian Tamils [1], speak Tamil. English, a legacy of colonial rule, serves as Sri Lanka's *de facto* official language. Muslims primarily speak Tamil as their first language, although a small percentage speak Sinhala as their first language. Most of them are either bilingual (Sinhala-Tamils) or trilingual (Sinhala, Tamil and English). They do not constitute a separate ethnolinguistic group. In contrast, Buddhist-Sinhala and Hindu-Tamil are prominent ethnoreligious groups closely associated with Sinhala and Tamil languages, respectively. Muslims distinguish them from others based on religious grounds.

Given Sri Lanka's ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, intergroup tensions were evident both during the civil conflict and in the post-war period. The war from 1983 to 2009 necessitated the government prioritizing peace and reconciliation. Both during and after the conflict, successive governments implemented trilingual policies to bridge the divide between the hostile Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic and linguistic groups. While no single document explicitly outlines a "trilingual policy," this paper examines policies and national-level initiatives promoting Sinhala, Tamil and English as a trilingual approach. These policies aim to foster social cohesion and reconciliation by preserving linguistic heritage and promoting unity through linguistic integration. However, even 15 years after the war's end, issues related to linguistic justice and human rights persist (Davis, 2020b; Jayasooriya, 2025) and trilingual policies are widely considered ineffective due to a lack of support from successive governments.

In this paper, I analyze the policies promoting trilingualism and their impact on both the education system and the general public. To achieve this, I employ policy document analysis and data from fieldwork. The paper aims to address three specific research questions: What are the broader social and political issues associated with trilingualism in Sri Lanka? How do trilingual policies contribute to language politics and identity issues? Moreover, to what extent has the implementation of trilingual policies been successful in achieving their stated goals? To address these questions, I review and analyze policies related to promoting trilingualism, as well as relevant literature. Additionally, I conducted interviews with 40 stakeholders involved in the implementation of these policies, including teachers of second national languages (2NLs): teachers teaching Sinhala to Tamil students and Tamil to Sinhala students ($n = 10$), English teachers ($n = 4$), university lecturers ($n = 6$), researchers ($n = 2$), directors/material writers ($n = 7$), political leaders ($n = 2$) and officials from government and non-governmental organizations across three main provinces: Western, Central and Northern ($n = 9$). These interviews were conducted in all three languages, Sinhala, English and Tamil, to accommodate the language preferences of the interviewees. The researcher was capable of handling interviews in both Sinhala and English. However, support from a translator/s was obtained to conduct interviews in Tamil. All the interviews were transcribed, and interviews conducted in languages other than English were translated into English. The data analysis followed a deductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In light of the theoretical framework, I have identified themes derived from codes generated through the initial analysis of interview transcripts, researcher notes taken during fieldwork and interviews and policy documents. Accordingly, the paper sheds light on the current state of trilingual education in the school system and society at large, a topic that has not been adequately explored. It aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in language policies that envision a more unified and reconciled Sri Lankan society.

The paper commences by providing a brief background of South Asian contexts and establishing a theoretical understanding of politicized language policies. Thereafter, it

provides a historical overview of the trilingual policy and the current status of language education in Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on the Sinhala and Tamil languages.

**Post-colonial linguistic struggles**

In addition to the long-prevailing rich multilingual traditions in South Asian countries, the introduction of a new language through colonization significantly altered the linguistic landscape, as well as the sociocultural and economic climate, of many South Asian nations. This is mainly because the colonizer's language was then established as the language of administration, as well as the medium of instruction (MoI) in educational programs (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019). As a result of intentionally limiting access to English and English-medium education in colonial countries such as India (Kumar, 2005) and Sri Lanka (Liyanage, 2019), elites could be educated in English. Despite not being colonized, elites in Nepal were also educated in English medium before 1950 (Phyak & Ojha, 2019). Nevertheless, in contrast to the post-colonial situation in Africa, Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, India and Singapore have established the official status of local languages while also recognizing multiple local languages (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019). However, this recognition of local languages was either limited to specific languages or given gradually as tensions grew among different linguistic groups. Therefore, this recognition at different levels and to varying degrees in many countries has not necessarily contributed to linguistic harmony. Since much of the post-colonial language planning and policy reform in these countries, including Sri Lanka, was influenced by linguistic nationalism, it did not always contribute positively to ethnic and political harmony. Linguistic nationalism, which was portrayed as or used as a means to decolonize language education and language in administration, had consequences for ethnic harmony, as the linguistic communities whose languages were not recognized were discriminated against and marginalized.

For example, India, with around 780 different languages (Mohanty, 2019), opted to promote mother-tongue education as part of its nationalistic agenda. Its three language formula was introduced, recommending regional language/mother tongue as the MoI in primary years, Hindi in non-Hindi areas and any other Indian language in Hindi areas as the second language for three years starting from the sixth year. English was designated as the third language from the third year onwards (Mohanty, 2008). This three-language formula has evolved and been modified over time. Various states and school systems have interpreted it differently, leading to the replacement of Hindi with English as a MoI in specific contexts (Mohanty, 2008). English is widely taught as a subject and used as a MoI, serving as a link language between the central government and the governments of non-Hindi-speaking states (Shah, 2010). As a result, Mohanty (2009) highlights that nearly 80% of tribal students in India are school dropouts, as reported by the government. He argues that they are "pushed out" due to an education system that is unresponsive to their culture, language and identity. Given this situation, Mohanty asserts that there is an apparent subtractive effect on their mother tongues, leading these children to perceive their languages as irrelevant. Although Sri Lanka is not as linguistically diverse as India, this trend resonates with the contemporary shift in language ideologies in Sri Lanka, which is reflected in practice, where English displaces the importance of other local languages (Jayasooriya, 2025). Similarly, the tripartite policy in Pakistan, which promotes its official languages, namely, Urdu and English, alongside local languages, is practiced differently depending on the province and has led the elite community to adopt an English-centered education system (Mahboob & Jain, 2016). This is mainly implemented through private schools, while many government and rural schools use other national languages or regional languages, perpetuating the belief that English is the language of power. In contrast, other languages serve local purposes in everyday life.

Post-colonial Hong Kong has taken a different path through its official trilingualism (Cantonese, English and Mandarin) and biliteracy (English and Chinese); it continues to keep the colonial language (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019). Although Sri Lankan post-

independence language planning took a decolonial turn, current language planning in Sri Lanka resonates with Hong Kong's trilingualism (Jayasooriya, 2025). This is true of India and Singapore, as they recognize colonial language as an important lingua franca to bridge communication gaps between ethnolinguistic groups within the nation, considering English as a language not linked to a particular ethnic group (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019). The role of English as a neutralizing mediator or "unmarked code" (Canagarajah, 2000) between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka is also discussed concerning the reintroduction of English medium education (Wijesekera & Hamid, 2022). Nevertheless, despite not having ties to an ethnic group, the role of English as an "unmarked code" is problematic (Canagarajah, 2000; Canagarajah & Ashraf, 2013) as it is leveraged as a tradable commodity (Bourdieu, 1991) and associated with power dynamics in society.

Countries like Nepal, even without a colonial history, have not escaped the effects of coloniality (Mignolo, 2021) and linguistic imperialism. This affirms that issues related to language education and language-in-education policies are common to many South Asian countries, regardless of their colonial past. Despite the increasing trend towards English and English Medium Instruction (EMI), the governments of multilingual nations are tasked with balancing internationalization and local linguistic identities and diversities, a tension that Canagarajah (2005) identifies as between decolonization and globalization. Sah (2022) points out that while globalization emphasizes the importance of spreading international languages, the English Medium Education policy violates linguistic human rights, highlighting the need to recognize native languages and teach students in their most familiar language. Referring to Nepal, Fillmore (2020, p. 232) posits that educating around 7.4 million students using approximately 120 different languages across seven provinces has become a "wicked hard" language policy issue. According to Fillmore, as language policy issues are intertwined with identity, history, ethnicity and politics, there appears to be no definitive set of solutions to make language-in-education policies inclusive, making it a "wicked hard" problem. Sri Lanka has claimed to take up this challenge in a more complex sociolinguistic setting. Colonial experiences and 26 years of civil war it endured demand linguistic inclusivity. In response to this, making linguistic justice and social harmony key agendas for post-war Sri Lanka, successive governments have implemented policy decisions to promote trilingualism, thereby accommodating the three primary languages used in Sri Lanka. Understanding the ground-level realities of this trilingual policy and its implementation could inform other multilingual contexts grappling with inclusivity and linguistic and social identities.

## Theoretical framework

English, particularly in the globalized world, is considered a highly prestigious language, widely used in various domains and functions as a mediator among people and communities with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Becker, 2023). Despite post-independence attempts at linguistic nationalism, Sri Lanka, like many other South Asian nations, was unable to undermine the power of English. This situation can be understood as a result of linguistic imperialism stemming from the English-educated national bourgeoisie who occupied the dominant positions in the country as the colonizers left and continued to collaborate with them (Chen, 2010). As evident in the context of Switzerland, while reconciliation efforts aim to use language to connect culturally diverse groups and improve mutual understanding, it can also create barriers and social exclusion (Becker, 2023). Education research suggests that schools also reproduce social inequality rather than promoting inclusive values (Tawil & Harley, 2004). Becker (2023), analyzing the Swiss context, discusses how English, as a non-national language, can hegemonize the structures of national language use and education. She highlights how English can not only displace other languages but also infiltrate their vocabulary and cultural values. This tendency, characterized by the increased influence of English and the widespread use of English-medium education, is also discussed under the discourse of Englishization (Lanvers & Hultgren, 2018).

More importantly, the perception of English as a neutral, as well as one of the most valuable languages in education, commerce, entertainment and business is established in the globalized world. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony examines the relationship between culture and power under capitalism (Lears, 1985). He explains how dominant groups exercise hidden power over subaltern groups, making them accept the dominant worldview and ideology as legitimate (Becker, 2023). Lears (1985) explains this phenomenon of hegemony as, "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (p. 568). According to Gramsci, languages are not merely prescribed by authority but are introduced through hegemony, presented as freely chosen (Becker, 2023), and used for cementing the prestige and cultural leadership of dominant groups (Lears, 1985). Similarly, the current position of the English language in the world is not a natural occurrence resulting from global forces, but rather a deliberate outcome of government policies and political agendas put forward by English-speaking countries to promote English (Pennycook, 2017).

This conception resonates with Kroskrity's (1998, as cited in Irvine (2021, p. 227) argument about the concept of ideology as applicable to beliefs and practices that have been successfully "naturalized" and rendered unquestioned, rarely subjected to public critique, and seldom become part of individuals' explicit discursive awareness. Although definitions of language ideology vary, a common trend across all interpretations is its inherently political nature and its connection to power relations. This explains the ability of language ideologies to frame and influence most aspects of language use (McGroarty, 2010), and therefore, language policies at different levels, the micro-level (classroom), meso-level (institutional) and macro-level (national/socio-political). The need of discussing language policy referring to other aspects of sociocultural situation is informed by the fact that language ideologies are not simply about language but also involve social and cultural conceptions of personhood, citizenship, morality, quality and value, etc (Farr & Song, 2011, p. 651) and are linked with "political interest" (Irvine, 2021). Therefore, although language ideologies can be largely unconscious assumptions and not asserted rationalizations as opposed to linguistic ideologies (Irvine, 2021), their impact on language policy and society is undeniable and significant. In most multilingual contexts, including Sri Lanka, language ideologies are shaped by both global and local language hierarchies, within which English is typically positioned at the top, thereby exerting a significant influence on existing power structures. Accordingly, while governments strive to balance globalization and decolonization, citizens of these countries face multiple challenges in higher education, employment and social life due to the imbalance of cultural capital resulting from the commodification of the English language. Additionally, tensions between other languages also contribute to this complexity. Sri Lanka embodies three value orientations of language ideology introduced by Richard Ruiz in 1984: language as a problem, language as a right and language as a resource (Hult & Hornberger, 2016). Some Sinhalese monolinguals may perceive English and minority languages as a threat, while minority groups consider using their languages as a right. Conversely, the majority view language learning, especially English, as a valuable resource for academic and professional success.

Consequently, the status of Sinhala is widely seen to be at stake. Rambukwella (2021, p. 255) describes Sinhala as a majority language confined to Sri Lanka, facing marginalization during colonial times and oppression towards Tamil speakers. It is a nationally recognized language with limited functional value. Tamil, on the other hand, is primarily limited to legislative and symbolic recognition, with its status as an official and national language criticized for its poor implementation. English remains a dominant language, officially designated as a link language. The role of English as a lingua franca is highlighted as instrumental in bringing together previously hostile ethnolinguistic communities (see Jayasooriya & Vickers, 2025). This complexity allows dominant groups to manipulate and

politicize language policies, thereby hegemonizing language hierarchies and orders. Hence, in a context where language has been weaponized for inter-ethnic power struggles (Coperahewa, 2009) and instrumentalized for social division and political control (Liyanage, 2019), understanding how a pluralistic approach, such as trilingual policy, is received and practiced is critical. Additionally, it is worth exploring how such a policy functions within politicized institutions in Sri Lanka and how its implementation shapes the identities of the people. Understanding these dynamics and the current status of trilingual policy is crucial for future language planning and policies focusing on post-war reconciliation and social cohesion.

The following section provides an overview of post-independence language policy changes, including the trilingual policy, before moving to results and discussion. Understanding how policies evolved provides insights about the political issue of languages in Sri Lanka, which is also important for other nations grappling with similar issues.

## Language education and language-in-education in Sri Lanka

### *Post-independence policy changes*

English was eventually designated as the official language in Sri Lanka during the British colonial period (1796–1948), although its use in education was initially limited to a small elite group. Proficiency in English conferred social status, economic affluence and job opportunities, creating a divide between those who knew English and those who did not (Liyanage and Canagarajah, 2014). Notably, the Northern Province, which is predominantly Tamil, had greater access to English education (Lim, 2013) due to the availability of American missionary schools compared to other parts of Sri Lanka. The lack of educational and job opportunities for monolingual individuals triggered linguistic nationalism even before independence. After gaining independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan government enacted the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, designating Sinhala as the sole official language of the country. While both Sinhala and Tamil were used as media of instruction in schools following the introduction of free education in 1945, the Sinhala Only Act discriminated against Tamils, who had better English language skills than Sinhalese and poor or no proficiency in the Sinhala language, in securing and retaining government jobs (Lim, 2013).

In response to Tamil concerns and grievances, Tamil was eventually recognized as a national language in 1978 (Liyanage, 2019). Nevertheless, this recognition on paper was ineffective in addressing the linguistic grievances of the Tamil community. Following the outbreak of the civil war in 1983, the government attempted to promote the teaching and learning of Sinhala and Tamil. In 1987, English was designated as a link language and both Sinhala and Tamil were declared national and official languages of Sri Lanka. Despite the equal status granted to Sinhala and Tamil, practical implementation has still been limited. Many government institutions continue to operate solely in Sinhala, while those in the North and East primarily function in Tamil (Wyss, 2020). Additionally, public signage is often not displayed in all three languages (Davis, 2020a).

In addition to the civil war, Sri Lanka faced violent political conflicts in 1971 and from 1987 to 1989. Influenced by socialist struggles elsewhere, these insurrections were led by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP)/People's Liberation Front, which was mainly comprised of state university students and graduates, opposing the then-government. In response, the government established the Presidential Commission on Youth in 1989 to investigate the causes of unrest. The commission identified education as the primary culprit (Little, 2024). The commission report in 1990 stated that the discrepancy between the national education system and employment opportunities was one of the primary reasons behind the youth violence (Davis, 2023). These recommendations influenced the 1997 National Education reforms under which bilingual education was introduced. Following the 1997 Education Reforms, the government reintroduced English-medium education for Advanced Level (A/L) students in 2001. From 2002 onwards, bilingual education has been implemented in secondary schools, allowing students to study up to five subjects in English and the rest in Tamil or

Sinhala. This policy was limited to a few schools with adequate resources. While social harmony was cited as an objective, the reintroduction of English medium education is more likely to exacerbate linguistic divisions and favor the privileged classes (see Jayasooriya & Vickers, 2025). Even though multi-ethnic bi-media schools can enhance interaction among students from different ethnicities, two decades after introducing the policy, the total number of multi-ethnic bi-media schools in Sri Lanka as of 2021 was 0.56%. Even in this small number of schools with both Sinhala-English and Tamil-English bilingual programs, not all schools have classroom arrangements that accommodate students from both media in the same class to learn English, thereby limiting interactions among students from different ethnicities (Jayasooriya & Vickers, 2025).

In addition to the aforementioned language-in-education policy, a significant policy change happened in government administration. It was the introduction of public administrative circulars in 2007, mandating second-language proficiency for government officials. Public Administration Circular No. 07/2007 (1) (Ministry of Public Administration, 2007) required officers to attain the prescribed level of proficiency in the 2NL within five years of appointment, with salary increments deferred for those who failed to comply. The required proficiency was assessed through written and oral exams, with the specific requirements varying by service category. However, this policy was later relaxed, and Public Administration Circular 18/2020 (Ministry of Public Administration, 2020) replaced the former, mandating only the completion of prescribed language courses (100–200 hours) as proof of language proficiency.

Within the school education system, the bilingual education programme and, in public administration, the mandate of 2NL proficiency for government employees can be recognized as two key language policies introduced during wartime. Although there is ambiguity about the extent to which a bilingual education programme contributes to trilingual initiatives, the latter is part of trilingual policy initiatives in Sri Lanka.

*Second national language education*

Since the introduction of the 1945 "Free Education Act" in Sri Lanka, education has been free from kindergarten to university in state schools, while private and international schools charge fees and operate either under government regulations or independently. Education is compulsory for children aged 5 to 16 (Nawastheen, 2019). The constitution guarantees the right to education in either of the national languages (Sinhala or Tamil), as outlined in Article 21 (1) of Chapter IV: "A person shall be entitled to be educated through the medium of either of the National Languages" (Parliament Secretariat, 2023, p. 11). While education is available in both Sinhala and Tamil medium instruction in government schools, many schools are segregated along ethnic and linguistic lines (Cardozo, 2008). As part of trilingual initiatives, teaching of each other's languages as subjects was introduced. As a result, the 2NL (Sinhala for Tamil-speaking students and Tamil for Sinhala-speaking students) as a subject was introduced in 1999 for Grades 6 to 9. Subsequently, it became an additional subject for Grades 10 and 11 in 2001. This policy was extended to Grades 3, 4 and 5 in 2003. Oral teaching of the 2NL was initiated in 2007 for Grades 1 and 2 (NEC, 2016, p. 123). On the other hand, English has been taught as a compulsory subject since 1940 (Nawastheen, 2019) and is used as an MoI in a few government schools for selected subjects as a result of the bilingual education programme discussed above. However, English is the MoI in international schools and some private schools. Some of these schools teach Sinhala and Tamil as subjects. The shortage of qualified teachers is a significant challenge in implementing these policies. Over 7,000 schools lack teachers for Tamil and Sinhala as 2NLs (Prematunga, 2011; as cited in Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2014). In 2011, there were fewer than 4,000 teachers to meet the estimated need of 23,000 (Liyanage, 2019, p. 406). This issue is particularly acute in rural areas, where even English language teaching is often hindered by a lack of qualified teachers (Vaughan, 2022). A study by the National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC) (2018) revealed that overall oral communication skills in 2NLs among students are unsatisfactory.

*Status of language use*

Despite the promotion of learning each other's languages, nearly 90% of Sinhala speakers are unable to communicate effectively in Tamil or English, and 70% of Tamil speakers struggle to communicate in Sinhala (GoSL, 2012). While Colombo has a significant Tamil-speaking population (57%), only 1% of government institutions can provide public services in Tamil (GoSL, 2012). Lim (2013) estimates that only about 3% of the population is trilingual. A study of a sample of 30 translators revealed that only 20% could translate between Sinhala and Tamil, while others were limited to translating between English and either Sinhala or Tamil (Madhavee & Ariyaratne, 2020).

Beyond proficiency, attitudes towards local languages pose challenges. A study conducted in Colombo found that Tamils perceive Sinhala as practical for daily life and employment, while Sinhalese do not see similar benefits in learning Tamil (Malalasekara, 2019). This disparity is attributed to the lack of perceived political or economic advantages in learning Tamil for Sinhalese (Irshad, 2018). Additionally, the commodification of English has influenced attitudes towards local languages. Both Sinhalese and Tamils value English for education and employment, considering it a symbol of status (Malalasekara, 2019). According to Liyanage (2021), some argue that Sri Lanka could have achieved Singapore-like economic development if it had adopted English as the MoI nationwide. However, the emphasis on English has marginalized Sinhala and Tamil, creating a "linguistic apartheid" that favors English (Orelus, 2011, as cited in Liyanage, 2021).

The implementation of the official language policy in public administration and education system, which grants equal status to Sinhala and Tamil, has been inadequate. Numerous cases related to language issues have been brought before the Official Languages Commission, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. These cases range from the lack of Tamil language on public transportation signs to the availability of courses in both languages at state universities and the provision of bilingual services in hospitals (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015). A study by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (2015) found that the implementation of the official language policy in the transportation sector varied across provinces, with the Eastern Province showing the highest level of compliance and the North Central Province the lowest. This inadequate implementation has consistently raised concerns about second-language proficiency among students, employees, and the general public, as well as the public's awareness of official language policy. This shows that despite high literacy rates, proficiency in 2NLs among the population remains low.

## Trilingual policy

As briefly discussed, trilingual policy initiatives, including the promotion of 2NL learning in the school curriculum and mandatory proficiency of 2NLs for government servants in public administration, were introduced even before the end of the war. These initiatives, however, were implemented through government circulars without declaring them as trilingual policies or without a proper trilingual policy document. Following the end of the war in 2009, the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) recommended a trilingual language policy, emphasizing English as both a link language and a life skill (GoSL, 2012). The LLRC (2011) report highlighted the need to bridge communication barriers between different ethnic groups and promote national integration through the use of a common language. It emphasized the importance of effective implementation of the official language policy to foster understanding, diversity and national unity.

> The people of the North and East are separated from the people of the South due to communication barriers. Every effort must be made to foster a sense of belonging among all citizens, regardless of their race, religion, or social status. Language is what unifies and binds a nation. Therefore, policies related to language must be formulated with this end in mind. The official languages policy must be implemented effectively to promote understanding, diversity, and national integration (p. 310).

This recommendation aligned with the National Policy and Comprehensive Framework of Actions on Education for Social Cohesion and Peace, which called for a clear policy on the development of 2NL teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 2008). The post-war period, beginning in 2009, marked a significant shift in language policy. In 2012, the "Ten-Year National Plan for Trilingual Sri Lanka (2012–2022)" was introduced as the first comprehensive document outlining trilingual initiatives in the country. The plan aimed to create a national momentum to encourage the acquisition of trilingual skills and competencies, remove language prejudices and establish a culture of language learning (*GoSL, 2012*, p. 2).

This national plan gained impetus from a sociolinguistic survey conducted in 2010, which revealed a strong public desire to learn languages (*GoSL, 2012*). According to the survey, less than 10% of each ethnic group believed that learning another language was a waste of time. In comparison, over 90% of respondents from various provinces supported the need for children to become proficient in English. Accordingly, the trilingual plan proposed several initiatives, including making English and 2NL compulsory at all levels and in all examinations and providing language training for all three languages to university students (*GoSL, 2012*).

The NEC in 2016 noted challenges in implementing the trilingual policy, including a shortage of qualified teachers, a lack of interest in learning and teaching 2NLs, particularly among Sinhala students and teachers and pedagogically unsound syllabi and textbooks. A study conducted among 30 translators in Sri Lanka revealed that the majority support the trilingual policy, but challenges such as a shortage of qualified translators hinder its implementation (Madhavee & Ariyaratne, 2020). Malalasekara (2019) suggests that the trilingual policy is unlikely to succeed due to language-based discrimination or prejudice. Additionally, the segregation of schools along ethnic lines limits opportunities for students to learn from and interact with peers from different linguistic backgrounds.

In the next section, I discuss the prevailing status and progress of the trilingual policy, particularly after 10 years of implementing the 10-year national plan, drawing on empirical data.

## Current status of trilingual policy

I present the empirical data below to gain a better understanding of the current status of implementing trilingual policy, with a particular focus on teaching and learning 2NLs (Sinhala and Tamil). In doing so, I incorporate statistics and data from past research. The discussion is led based on four themes that emerged during the analysis. It is important to note that these themes are not mutually exclusive.

### *Resource distribution and access to resources*

The current study supports previous research findings regarding the scarcity of resources and the need for qualified teachers for 2NL instruction and English in rural areas. This issue was prevalent across all three provinces: Western, Central and Northern. Additionally, a shortage of teacher trainers and materials developers was attributed to poor recruitment policies and training opportunities (SN1, Director, Western Province). One significant factor contributing to teacher shortages is the insufficient number of training colleges dedicated to 2NL teacher education. Only three of the 18 colleges of education in Sri Lanka produce 2NL teachers (SN14, Director, Western Province).

Teacher shortages exhibit a disproportionate impact across schools. In the absence of adequate human resources and governmental support, urban schools have resorted to hiring teachers through funding from School Development Societies, Past Pupils Associations and diaspora communities (SN13, Director, Central Province and SN21, Teacher, Northern Province). One renowned school even offers online and offline classes for languages such as Chinese, French, German and Hindi, which are not part of the compulsory general curriculum,

funded by the Past Pupils Association (SN21, Teacher, Northern Province). This is an exceptional case limited to popular urban schools. They manage to address the issue of teacher shortages by utilizing the available support systems. At the same time, a large majority of semi-urban and rural schools face a shortage of human resources for language education, as they do not have financial support systems to hire teachers independently.

On the other hand, many teachers tend to seek appointments or transfers to urban and resourced schools due to various benefits, exacerbating teacher shortages in the majority of semi-urban and rural schools. Sinhala as a 2NL teacher stated, "I am the only teacher now; the other teachers went to Colombo" (SN22, Teacher, Northern Province). Another issue is the assignment of untrained teachers to 2NL instruction in response to shortages (SN33, Teacher, Central Province), despite the requirement of proficiency in both Sinhala and Tamil, regardless of which of the two national languages is taught. The teacher stated: "I have not received training to teach 2 NL. But I am proficient in Sinhala, so as there are no teachers, I was asked to teach Sinhala." Given these circumstances, a lack of initiative to increase the number of trained 2NL teachers, as well as ineffective distribution and management of resources, are evident.

However, the data (see Table 1) indicate that, despite a decrease in overall teacher-student ratios in government schools, the number of students opting to continue 2NL studies in grades 10 and 11 remains relatively low but has increased over time. The student-teacher ratio appears to have declined from 21 in 2002 to 19 in 2007 and further to 17 in 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2007, 2021). Despite the declining teacher-student ratio, the increase in students studying 2NLs can be attributed to either a growing demand for or readiness in 2NL learning, as well as to an increase in external learning opportunities and resources, such as online platforms and private tuition classes. Data also shows that, in contrast to the stated existence of linguistic prejudices among Sinhalese against the Tamil language, the number of students taking Tamil as a 2NL has increased by 2022.

Nevertheless, issues related to language learning materials and textbooks, such as limiting the focus on reading and writing skills, were reported during the interviews. This hinders students' ability to develop their speaking skills. Furthermore, allocating only two periods (45 minutes per period) for grades 6–9 and three periods for grades 10–11 per week was found to be insufficient for effective language instruction (SN18, Teacher, Western Province).

### *Institutional framework*

Although Sinhala and Tamil are the official and national languages, English has emerged as a *de facto* official language in Sri Lanka, thereby intensifying linguistic tensions. Interviewees highlighted the increasing prevalence of English-only policies and practices in higher education institutions, banks and hospitals, which discriminate against non-English speakers. A researcher shared a personal experience of receiving a consent form for an investigation solely in English at a private hospital (SN4, Scholar, Western Province):

> My wife and daughter suffered from Dengue fever, and my wife's situation was not good. The doctor asked for consent to admit the wife to the ICU. The consent involved giving consent to conduct any investigation and to pay any amount. This was in English, and no translations were available.

**Table 1.** Number/percentage of students sitting for O/L 2NL subject (first attempt)

| Year | Total number of students who sat for the O/L exam | Students sat for Sinhala as a 2NL | Students sat for Tamil as a 2NL |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2011 | 270,032 | 6,456 (2.4%) | 2,392 (0.9%) |
| 2022 | 317,326 | 17,142 (5.4%) | 25,379 (8%) |

**Source(s):** Department of Examination (2011, 2022)

A government employee revealed that, while the plan was to make at least 72 of the 300 Divisional Secretariats bilingual, only 41 currently provide services in both local languages (SN6, Government employee, Central Province), which means that only 14% of the Divisional Secretariats are capable of providing services in both Sinhala and Tamil. This underscores the importance of monitoring policy implementation in both the public and private sectors. Despite limited political support, many of the initially designated 41 bilingual Divisional Secretariats continue to function under official language policies and conduct reconciliation projects through the efforts of previously appointed "national integrated officers" and grassroots-level organizations, such as "reconciliation societies" or "harmony centers," which attract additional funds from non-governmental organizations (SN6, Government employee, Central Province).

While past research has emphasized the lack of political will as a primary reason for the failure of language policy implementation, the data suggest that hierarchical institutional frameworks with poor communication and cooperation are a critical issue, as these factors are not always directly influenced by changes in political power, policies, or political will. Because this is about implementing polices that are already in place, therefore, institutes exercising their agency and working effectively, even with minimal continuous support from the central government, can be expected.

For instance, Sri Lankan school curricula, developed by the National Institute of Education (NIE), are used by all government and some private schools. Textbooks are compiled by the Education Publications Department (EPD), which operates under the Ministry of Education. Interviewees highlighted a lack of coordination and cooperation between the NIE, EPD, the Official Language Department and the National Institute of Language Education and Training, resulting in poor integration between curricula and textbooks and subpar translations (SN10, Government employee, Western Province, SN17, Government employee, Western Province, SN2, Director, Western Province). Issues related to textbook quality and translation have been discussed in previous studies (NEC, 2016; Irshad, 2018) but persist to this day. The data suggests that poor resource management among government institutes working on language education is a key reason for these issues to remain unresolved, rather than a lack of resources.

*Attitudes towards language: language as a problem?*

One of the disturbing findings of the research was the increasing pressure on school students to master English, often at the expense of their cultural identity. This pressure, stemming from parental expectations and societal norms, is exacerbated by the intensely competitive nature of the education system. This is due to the high demand for English in employment and higher education (Perera & Canagarajah, 2010). An educator noted, "Top-level meetings are conducted only in English, and English speakers mistreat non-English speakers. Language has replaced caste" (SN1, Director, Western Province). A teacher echoes this sentiment:

> In some areas in Colombo, Tamils consider it shameful to speak Tamil. They use English to maintain their desired social class. Some speak only English (even with limited proficiency) at home. Because of this, students do not know English as well as Tamil (SN16, Teacher, Northern Province).

This romanticization of English as a solution to many problems is particularly prevalent in urban and semi-urban communities. Additionally, many students, anticipating future migration, perceive local languages, including their mother tongue, as less valuable (SN20, Scholar, Northern Province and SN19, Teacher, Western Province). While interviews with teachers, government officials and students suggest a rise in interest in learning other languages, the potential for respondents to have offered socially desirable answers in the context of social cohesion efforts must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the data presented above, along with the increasing number of government officials acquiring 2NL proficiency, indicate a positive trend. This can be attributed to the 2007 mandate of 2NL proficiency for government officials. However, some interviewees showed a genuine interest. This genuine

shift in attitude is often accompanied by increased empathy and understanding between ethnic groups. A teacher remarked, "During the war, Sinhalese and Tamils were afraid of each other. But as I learned Sinhala, I became friends with Sinhalese and feel comfortable working anywhere in Sri Lanka" (SN22, Teacher, Northern Province).

However, challenges related to language rights, ethnicity and recognition persist. Some interviewees expressed concerns about the perceived inequality between Sinhala and Tamil:

> Most of Tamil students do not feel that two languages enjoy parity of status; they feel secondary (SN20, Scholar, Northern Province)

> They (referring to government officials) only do language proficiency exams to get their promotions and do not do their part to ensure language rights of people (SN9, Scholar, Western Province)

> Sinhala people do not want to learn Tamil as they do not face difficulties not knowing Tamil (SN25, Scholar, Northern Province)

To bridge the communication gap between the Sinhala and Tamil communities, some advocate for English as a lingua franca. In contrast, others emphasize the importance of direct communication in Sinhala and Tamil. A teacher suggested, "Rather than using English, it is better to communicate in Sinhala and Tamil, as these are the languages that truly connect us to our hearts, and as they are our native languages" (SN22, Teacher, Northern Province). This demonstrates that local languages are deeply connected to people and their identities. Hence, it highlights the consequences of promoting English as a lingua franca, which may compromise social harmony, rather than promoting plurilingualism.

*Political issues and hidden agendas*

Language has always been a politically charged issue, dating back to the colonial era and intensified by the Sinhala Only Act of 1956. Historically, people were more willing to learn each other's languages, as indicated by the interviewees. A Tamil interviewee from Jaffna stated, "I stopped learning Sinhala with the introduction of the Sinhala Only Act" (SN36, Politician, Northern Province), highlighting the sensitivity of language-related issues and their potential for political manipulation.

Underscoring another aspect of such manipulations, an interviewee criticized the misuse of language rights for political propaganda, stating, "Tamil and Sinhala politicians use attractive slogans like 'Make Tamil a national language' (even though it already is), "Rightful place to Sinhala language" during political campaigns" (SN7, member of a Nongovernmental Organization, Central Province). This strategy exploits public ignorance about the official language status of Sinhala and Tamil. As discussed earlier, a substantial segment of the general public remains unaware of the Official Languages Act and the equal recognition afforded to both Sinhala and Tamil under the Sri Lankan constitution.

Furthermore, the fieldwork revealed attempts by individuals and small groups to manipulate larger institutions, thereby limiting opportunities for students from diverse ethnic groups. An interviewee mentioned that some universities in Tamil-dominant areas are attempting to avoid offering English-medium degrees to discourage Sinhalese students from enrolling (SN20, Scholar, Northern Province). He stated: "Some people here oppose welcoming Sinhala students to the University, but those people want their children to go to the Universities in Sinhala-dominant areas". Similarly, some popular schools in Sinhala-dominant areas have ethnic restrictions on admissions. This suggests that, despite challenges at the macro level of policy implementation, actors at the meso and micro levels often function as gatekeepers, further hindering effective implementation. Additionally, the government's trilingual policy, ostensibly aimed at promoting multilingualism, has been criticized for prioritizing English over Sinhala and Tamil from the outset of policy making (SN17, Government employee/policy maker, Western Province).

To address these complex language issues, it is essential to depoliticize the language policymaking process and promote a plurilingual vision that fosters intercultural exchange (Vaughan, 2022). However, it is crucial to recognize that language is just one of many factors contributing to ethnic conflict. Addressing land issues, religious tensions, political prisoners and disappearances is equally important in achieving reconciliation and mutual respect between Sinhala and Tamil communities (SN20, Scholar, Northern Province).

## Conclusion

The inefficiency of numerous language policies, including the trilingual policy, can be attributed to a disconnect between national objectives, language policy and their implementation in the education system (Vaughan, 2022). The government has consistently fallen short of its stated goals for language education. For instance, the bilingual education policy, intended to provide all students with equal opportunities regardless of their background or location and to promote social harmony, has primarily benefited a small number of elite schools for over twenty years (Jayasooriya & Vickers, 2025). The findings of this study emphasize that the trilingual policy has not entirely failed, but it has not achieved its declared objectives. This highlights the importance of robust institutional frameworks and their interconnectedness in supporting policy implementation, alongside political will and top-down guidance.

The findings of the study further indicate that policy shortcomings are primarily attributable to a lack of resources and the unequal distribution of available resources. While urban schools are often able to secure support from both governmental and non-governmental sources, many semi-urban and rural schools continue to face significant challenges due to insufficient physical and human resources. As the results suggest, this disparity is partly the consequence of ineffective educational administration, particularly in the regulation of teacher training institutions, appointments and transfers. Moreover, the mismanagement of available resources can be attributed mainly to inadequate communication and coordination both within and between government bodies, whether under the purview of public administration or the Ministry of Education. For future policy reforms and ongoing evaluations to be effective, it is essential to conduct further research to identify underlying reasons for these inefficiencies and to take informed actions to enhance the functionality and interconnectivity of institutional frameworks, ensuring successful policy delivery and implementation.

Another key finding of the study is the growing tendency to prioritize English over local languages, often accompanied by the romanticized perception of English as a panacea for challenges related to education, economic advancement and social mobility. At the same time, it is undeniable that English functions as a valuable resource for accessing opportunities in higher education and the global job market; however, it is equally important to recognize the deep connection between local languages and individuals' identities. As such, the role of local languages in fostering social cohesion and contributing to reconciliation efforts should not be overlooked. The results reveal issues with attitudes towards languages, favoring those with cultural capital. However, the study also reveals the importance of using local languages to bring together hostile groups rather than using English as a link language. Therefore, call attention to the need to design educational reforms with care to avoid unintended consequences. The emerging class and identity issues associated with English language acquisition must be addressed by democratizing access to English education without resorting to assimilationist approaches that undermine local languages and cultures. Notably, the increasing demand for English-medium education, particularly following countries like Singapore, should also be considered in contexts such as the Caribbean Island nation of Jamaica, which grapples with conflicting linguistic identities and poor academic performance among Creole-speaking communities (Nero, 2018). Suppressing linguistic diversity can lead to issues similar to those in Aotearoa, New Zealand, where speakers of te reo Māori, the Indigenous Māori language, face challenges stemming from linguistic racism (May, 2023).

The notion that the spread of English is a natural and inevitable process should be critically examined to underscore the importance of valuing and preserving local languages. Therefore, promoting additive bilingualism and plurilingualism among students is crucial, without violating linguistic human rights or suppressing local linguistic identities. Careful consideration is necessary to strike a balance between the benefits of English language proficiency and the preservation and valuing of local languages, as well as the social and individual identities associated with them.

To implement inclusive education policies, it is essential to train an adequate number of teachers to teach 2NLs and to develop all other necessary educational infrastructure. A deep understanding of societal language ideologies is necessary for policymakers to develop inclusive approaches that promote plurilingualism without reinforcing dominant worldviews. As Skutnabb-Kangas (2009) proposes, languages are the DNA of cultures. Similarly, the identities of people from those cultures are influenced by the languages they use and value. Therefore, it is essential not to replace the languages of different ethnic groups with a dominant lingua franca that hegemonizes the language hierarchy and education system.

While language policy reforms are important, they are not sufficient to address ethnic conflicts. Curricular reforms in subjects such as history and civics are essential for fostering an egalitarian society and reducing ethnolinguistic divisions (Jayasooriya, Vickers, and Schumacher, forthcoming). Only by adopting a holistic approach to addressing these multifaceted issues can Sri Lanka work towards achieving social cohesion and reconciliation. Future education policies may benefit from engaging with and adopting recommendations for multicultural, multilingual and sustainable education put forward by international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO's recent report, Languages Matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education (2025), provides practical frameworks for developing more inclusive approaches to language education. Meanwhile, UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2021; 2017) advocates for a redefinition of education that promotes peace, human rights and sustainability. Additionally, education policy should aim to cultivate global citizens with local roots and global values.

However, further ethnographic research is necessary to develop a more nuanced understanding of policy formation and implementation. As Sri Lanka prepares for anticipated educational reforms, it is crucial to investigate how these reforms address existing challenges and identify further policy changes.

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**Note**

1. Indian Tamils (up-country/hill-country Tamils), constituting 4.1% of the population, primarily reside in the upcountry regions, and were not involved in the civil war. This group of Tamils is descended from South Indians who migrated to Sri Lanka during British colonial rule to work on tea plantations.

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