

# Sri Lankan university students' and English lecturers' acceptance of selected Sri Lankan English prepositional verbs: pedagogical implications

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**Abstract—** One of the characteristic features of Sri Lankan English (SLE) is the use of verb-preposition combinations which do not exist in British Standard English (BSE). Such verb formations, which could be classified as prepositional verbs, are used in abundance in SLE newspapers. This research focuses on the levels of acceptance displayed by Sri Lankan university lecturers of the English Language and Sri Lankan university students currently following English courses at the English Language Teaching Units (ELTUs) of their respective universities. The results obtained through an acceptability test firstly point to high levels of acceptance of these verb formations among university students and English lecturers of Sri Lankan universities. Secondly, the findings show that the acceptance levels displayed by the university students is higher than those displayed by English lecturers. Finally, the results reveal that, out of three SLE prepositional verbs, 'discuss about' is the verb that has received the highest level of acceptance where the university students are concerned. On the contrary, with regard to the English lecturers, 'comprise of' has received the highest level of acceptance. This paper highlights some implications that these acceptance levels displayed by Sri Lankan undergraduates and English lecturers have on the teaching of these verb formations in particular, and the pedagogy, in general, of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords—** prepositional verbs, World Englishes, British Standard English, Sri Lankan English, acceptance, English as a Second Language

## I. INTRODUCTION

Among the many features of SLE highlighted in Meyler's (2007) *A Dictionary of Sri Lankan English*, variations with regard to verb-preposition combinations are of particular interest. Such variations involve the addition, the exclusion or the replacement of a preposition after a verb. These practices have given rise to the usage of prepositional verbs which are not characteristic of BSE but are used by Sri Lankan users of English [10], (pp.xvi-xvii). Verb formations of this nature, according to famous English dictionaries, would have to be considered as 'errors.'

The verb formations "discuss about" (DA), "comprise of" (CO) and "consider about" (CA) are examples of when users of SLE add prepositions after verbs which, in BSE, are not required to be followed by prepositions. The Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary (2008) warns users of English to "[r]emember that 'consider' is never followed by a preposition. Do not say *consider about* something. Say 'consider something'". This dictionary mentions the same about 'discuss'- it is not followed by 'about.' The Heinemann English Dictionary (2001) says "[n]ote [...] that the use of *comprise* followed by *of* is incorrect." Regardless of how the use of these verbs is codified, the verb formations DA, CO and CA, can be found in abundance in SLE newspapers. In addition, the use of both DA and CO have been attested in the written component of the International Corpus of English – Sri Lanka (ICE-SL) and the Sri Lankan component of the South Asian Varieties of English (SAVE) corpus.

There are diverse ways in which this grammatical phenomenon can be interpreted. If seen in terms of Selinker's interlanguage (IL) theory (Jenkins, 2006) according to which "a second language speaker's competence lies on an *interlanguage continuum* at some point between their first language (L1) and their second language (L2), in this case, English," this deviant use in SLE newspapers of these particular verbs would be errors which have reached the stage of *fossilization*. A critic of the IL theory would cite this as an example which proves that "outer circle English speakers are not attempting to identify with inner circle speakers or to produce the norms of an exonormative variety of English grounded in an inner circle experience." These verb formations can also be construed as "forms" produced by "learners" which reflect the "sociolinguistic reality of their English use, whatever their circle, far better than either British or American norms are able to" [4], (pp. 167-168). One could also argue that this 'incorrect' use of 'discuss', 'comprise' and 'consider' are similar to what [15], (p. 220), identifies as the insertion of "redundant prepositions," which is considered to be one of the potential features of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) lexicogrammar.

This range of possible reactions to the way in which DA, CA and CO are used in some Sri Lankan print media gives rise to the central questions of this research – to what extent are these verb formations considered acceptable by Sri Lankan users of English who read them in print and is there a difference in how various groups of users of English in Sri Lanka react to these ‘inaccurate’ verb formations? If yes, how should this issue be addressed in the process of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) or should this particular phenomenon be considered an issue at all? Writing about teaching in theory and practice, [4] mentions that most of the research conducted in WEs “stand out in their significance for the teaching of English” and that these “relate to challenges to interlanguage theory and to work exposing and resisting linguistic imperialism.” Although many linguists have considered the “teaching and learning of English in relation to the realities of the language’s current spread and use” and challenged the IL theory and prescriptive approaches to the English language and its pedagogy, it has not “so far led to noticeable changes in English teaching and teacher education policy.” Also, the literature on teaching English still “regularly contains advice for teachers in both outer and expanding circles on how to reduce IL errors and how to reduce fossilization, while the testing of English remains wholly predicated on the concept” (pp. 158-169). If this is the case, are teachers supposed to look at the usage of DA, CA and CO as caused by L1 interference/transfer and advocate the ‘standard’ use of these verbs? Or are these verb formations to be used as expressions with which to resist native speaker standards?

Before attempting to answer these questions, it will be useful to situate the use of DA, CA and CO within WEs and SLE. Following this discussion, Sections 2 and 3 of this paper focus on the research questions, and methods and methodology of this research, respectively. Sections 4 and 5 present the results and discussion based on the findings of this research; a discussion which includes the implications of the findings of this research on the pedagogy of the English Language in Sri Lanka.

#### *A. World Englishes and Sri Lankan English*

Within the term ‘World Englishes’ is the acknowledgement of the fact that, as opposed to a single form of English, a variety of Englishes are being used all over the world. WEs can be used as an “umbrella term” which covers “all varieties of English worldwide and the different approaches used to describe and analyse them” [4], (p.139). The English language, following its contact with other languages after the advent of the colonial era, was subjected to a process of change caused by speakers of English as a second or foreign language who flavoured the language with features of their own native tongue. This caused the emergence of many varieties of English, such as

American English, Nigerian English and Sri Lankan English. In addition to highlighting the plurality of the English language, WEs theory asserts that each of these Englishes should be considered as being on par with the other. This claim has resulted in the attempt to blur the distinction between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers and suggests that each variety of English deserves equal status.

[5], (p.137) attempts to explain the emergence of WEs that took place in three different phases – the initial contact of the English language with the other languages spoken on the British Isles, the second stage which saw the passage of the English language to North America and Oceania and finally the “Raj phase” during which the English language was introduced to South and South-Eastern Asia, South, West and East Africa, and the Philippines. The different Englishes that have resulted from other languages coming into contact with English have been categorized in Kachru’s Three Concentric Circles model under the headings Inner Circle (norm- providing), Outer Circle (norm-developing) and the Expanding Circle (norm-dependent) [5], (p.136-138).

The initial steps towards describing a Sri Lankan variety of English were taken by Passe in 1955. He describes Ceylon English as “a form of English with a distinct flavor of its own in regard to pronunciation and intonation, and in the case of most people, idiom, grammar, and vocabulary as well.” Such features have been described as having been more evident in the spoken form than in the written context (p.13). As a result of this distinctiveness of [12] from Standard English, teachers of the English language are described as having faced the issue regarding

how to keep the local form of English as near to the Standard as possible without altogether depriving it of its warmth, colour and liveliness which some of the literal translations from the local languages contribute, especially to the colloquial idiom [12], (p.14).

What is interesting to note in the above excerpt is Passe’s attitude towards Ceylon English and his belief that teachers of the language should not altogether dismiss this variety of English but strive to keep the variety close to the Standard without depriving it of its defining features.

In more recent times, SLE has been defined as “the language used by Sri Lankans who choose to use English for whatever purpose in Sri Lanka” [3], (p. 11), and “as the language spoken and understood by those Sri Lankans who speak English as their first language, and/ or who are bilingual in English and Sinhala or Tamil” [10], (p. xi). Through these definitions, one can come to the conclusion that SLE is the variety of English spoken in Sri Lanka; a variety which has emerged and stands distinct from other

varieties of English due to the changes wrought in it by speakers of Sinhala and/or Tamil languages.

### B. Prepositional verbs in World Englishes

SLE is characterized by verb- preposition collocations which do not exist in BSE. Such verb formations can be termed prepositional verbs, a category of verbs which is distinct from phrasal verbs. While phrasal verbs, which, according to [7], constitute a grammar area that has come to the attention of researchers and language teachers, are described as “verb-particle combinations which are frequently not semantically transparent at all and strongly idiomatic,” prepositional verbs are verbs in which “the prepositional functions of the second constituent are still preserved more strongly” [14], (p.230). Schneider also states that a “[...] possible diagnostic to distinguish between the two types is the possibility of placing an adverb between the verb and the particle or preposition: prepositional verbs allow this possibility, phrasal verbs do not” (2007, p. 231). Since the verb formations DA, CA and CO are not idiomatic and allow the meaningful inclusion of an adverb in between the two particles (eg: discuss *rapidly* about, comprise *sometimes* of, consider *always* about), they can be categorized as prepositional verbs.

According to [11], (p. 175), DA and CO are prepositional verbs which are “attested in the one million Indian component of the International Corpus of English (ICE), but not in the British component of the ICE.” This assertion makes this seemingly inaccurate usage of these verbs features of Indian English. In addition, DA is also used in West African, Singaporean and South African Indian Englishes [9], (p.72). Furthermore, [16], (p. 85) writes that as a result of direct translation, prepositions are inserted in Nepali English where no preposition would be found in BSE. As an example of this phenomenon, Verma cites the use of ‘discuss about.’

### C. Possible reasons for these verb formations

[9], (p. 72) state that DA is a prepositional verb which is an example of when verbs “retain the same preposition associated with their corresponding nouns: discuss about (cf. discussion about).” In the light of this observation, the use of the verb CA too can be explained with regard to verbs which retain the preposition usually associated with their corresponding noun. Since the noun ‘consideration’ can be followed by ‘about’, the verb ‘consider’, arguably, is made to do the same.

Another motivation for such verb formations is what is called analogy. An example of analogy is the verb formation ‘voice out’ which may have been formed following the pattern of the phrasal verb ‘speak out’ [9], (p. 72). Similarly, the verb formation CO seems to follow the pattern of the verb ‘consist of’.

## II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The consideration of the prepositional verbs DA, CA and CO as features of other varieties of English inevitably leads to the question regarding their levels of acceptance where Sri Lankan users of English are concerned. This research looks at, firstly, whether a disparity exists between the degrees to which Sri Lankan university lecturers of English Language and Sri Lankan university students of English as a Second Language (ESL) are prepared to consider these verb formations as acceptable in written form. Would the English lecturers, due to their awareness of the grammar rules that govern the use of these verbs, consider the ‘unusual’ inclusion of prepositions after these verbs as inaccurate? Would students, on the other hand, due to the currency of these prepositional verbs within a local context, have internalized these ‘unusual’ verb structures and consider them ‘correct’. If a disparity does exist between the lecturers’ attitude and the students’ attitude towards these verbs, how should it be dealt with in teaching ESL and EAP in Sri Lanka? This research seeks to answer these questions.

## III. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to gauge the acceptance levels displayed by Sri Lankan university lecturers of the English language and Sri Lankan university students towards DA, CO and CA, an acceptability test was conducted. 24 sentences (8 sentences per each verb formation this research focuses on) were extracted from four local English newspapers – the DailyMirror, The Island, CeylonToday and Daily News.

A questionnaire consisting 16 sentences from the above-mentioned collection of sentences was formulated. This questionnaire had 5 sentences for each prepositional verb, and a distracter. It was administered to 20 undergraduate students studying English as a Second Language at English Language Teaching Units (ELTUs) of government and private universities. The second group of informants were English Language lecturers working in ELTUs in a variety of Sri Lankan universities, both government and private.

The respondents were requested to state if they accepted these sentences as grammatically correct or not. The questionnaire also allowed room for respondents to suggest ways in which the sentences they considered grammatically incorrect could be revised.

## IV. RESULTS

According to the results (illustrated in Table 1) of this research, the three SLE prepositional verbs this research deals with have received high levels of acceptance from both the university students as well as university lecturers of English.

The university students have displayed a higher level of acceptance towards these verbs in comparison to the university lecturers.

Within the students' group, the verb that has received the highest level of acceptance is DA, followed immediately by CO and CA. On the contrary, the lecturers consider CO more acceptable than DA and CA. Overall, the verb formation that has received the highest level of acceptance is CO.

TABLE 1 ACCEPTANCE LEVELS OF DA, CA AND CO BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND ENGLISH LECTURERS

Prepositional verb	Acceptance level		
	University students	English Lecturers	Overall
Discuss about (DA)	95%	50%	72.5%
Consider about (CA)	85%	50%	67.5%
Comprise of (CO)	90%	70%	80%

It is interesting to note that more than half the number of student respondents consider these verb formations as accurate while 10 out of the 20 English lecturers consider DA and CA as accurate, indicating that half the number of informants of the latter group, despite the grammar rules, consider them acceptable verb formations. Two of the lecturers who had rated CO as accurate had also mentioned that both formations i.e. 'comprise' and CO are acceptable and that a user of English would have the choice as to which verb formation to use.

### V. DISCUSSION

The results obtained through this research pose two issues. Firstly, if these seemingly incorrect use of English verb-preposition combinations found in Sri Lankan English newspapers has been found acceptable, although to varying degrees, by students and English lecturers of Sri Lankan universities, how should the use of these verbs be taught in a Sri Lankan context? In addition, although this research has not focused on the acceptance of the use of DA, CO and CA specifically in academic writing, it does the raise the question regarding how these verbs should be used in academic contexts in Sri Lanka. Secondly, are the two verbs DA and CO, which have received varying levels of acceptance by the two groups of informants, to be considered as errors or features of SLE?

The levels of acceptance displayed by both the groups of informants where these prepositional verbs are concerned, if seen in relation to Selinker's IL theory, indeed form an example of 'fossilization'. Or, if looked at from the perspective of WEs, it could be said that these prepositional verbs can be considered as features of SLE. This would be especially true with regard to CO, which has received a high level of acceptance by both the students and the lecturers. Where the lecturers' responses to DA and CA are concerned no categorical statement about the 'fossilization' of these verbs can be made since only half the number of informants has rated it accurate. Due to the overall picture however, the question remains as to how the use of these verbs should be taught to Sri Lankan students of ESL and EAP. As opposed to placing these verb formations along Selinker's language continuum, I suggest that we consider them in terms of what describes as appropriation of language by local communities and use them to suit our "social practices to resist the colonizing thrust of English" [1], (p. 588). Moreover, these 'errors' seem to resemble what Seidlhofer, quoted by [4], (p. 170), considers to be "errors" that most English teachers would consider in urgent need of correction and remediation" but yet "appear to be generally unproblematic and no obstacle to communicative success."

#### A. The classroom/ lecture hall context

As [1], (p. 587) rightfully states, the classroom is a "powerful site of policy negotiation" because "pedagogies practiced, and texts produced in the classroom can reconstruct policies ground up." Therefore, the classroom /lecture hall is the very site through which a prescriptive approach to the English language could be either advanced or challenged. Before looking at how these 'errors' can be construed as features of SLE, it would be useful to focus on how Sri Lankan textbooks on the English Language serve to reinforce 'native speaker' standards.

In Samaranayake's book *Practical English* for instance, there is an entire chapter dedicated to 'Ceylonisms'. This chapter comprises a list of 'errors' made by Sri Lankan speakers of English and it includes the following sentence – "We **discussed about** the European situation. (Omit **about**)" [13], (p.133). The book was first published in 1940, so the categorization of DA as an error is not a surprise. More interestingly though, in *GCE English Language: A study and revision course for O Level*, a textbook for students hoping to sit the London Ordinary Level Examinations, [2], (p.176), while acknowledging the existence of 'New Englishers' which, to them, seem only to include the varieties of English spoken only in the United States, Canada and Australia, stress that "[f]or the purposes of GCE examinations, standard British English will be most relevant." The above-mentioned textbooks substantiate [1], (p. 588) statement that despite nativization and resistance,

even in postcolonial communities like Sri Lanka, “it is either ‘standard American’ or ‘standard British’ English that is treated as the target for conversational and literate purposes in educational institutions.” Foreign and local textbooks alike advocate the use of BSE.

This situation calls for solutions similar to code-meshing, which refers to the practice of bringing together different varieties of English in a given context both to successfully communicate in the given situation and also to challenge the hierarchy of the varieties of English in the present world. That teachers should encourage the accommodation of diverse varieties of English in academic writing and make students aware of the possibility of code-meshing in academic writing is expressed by [1]. Code-meshing, [1], (pp. 593-599) writes, is advantageous as, through doing so, minority students get to see their own variety of English in academic texts. To enable students to strive for a “repertoire of codes and discourses” and to “*shuttle* between communities in contextually relevant ways” rather than “*joining* a speech community” would, no doubt, be of more use to Sri Lankan students of ESL than the knowledge of only the dominant variety/ varieties of English.

On a similar note, with reference to what they term as an “issue of power,” [6], (p. 373) write that as long as the dominant varieties prevail in public perception and teaching material, it is the duty of the teachers to make these resources available to the students allowing the student to appropriate them, *if they so choose* (emphasis mine). The teaching of the dominant discourses should be simultaneous to the teaching of the nondominant forms and functions because to “overlook the alternative uses of English can actually work against the goal of helping students develop an accurate understanding of how the English language works and how it changes over time” (p.372). In such a state of affairs, in the process of teaching the use of the prepositional verbs DA, CA and CO, the students should be taught the ‘dominant discourse’ surrounding the use of these verbs as well as the ‘alternative’ one i.e., the use of these verbs with prepositions, and make the students aware of the contexts in which they would be accepted or rejected.

But the use of a nondominant variety in academic writing would only be useful and successful provided that the students are preparing to face a local examination which would be assessed by examiners who are aware that the students have been allowed to use SLE in academic writing. But, the question arises as to what dialects of SLE would be accepted in academic writing. Also, a doubt arises as to whether the inclusion of SLE in academic writing submitted to a foreign university as part of a postgraduate course would be received by foreign examiners. If students are to be encouraged to use their own variety of English in

academic writing, the examiners too should be willing to accommodate these variations in academic writing.

[8], (pp. 12-13) writes that, since developments in “research, scholarship and academy” now point to the fact that the “hegemony of British and American English as the universal language varieties of research and publication” should be reconsidered, writers, regardless of whether they are junior or senior researchers, graduate or undergraduate students, or academics must be “willing to take a risk in using localized varieties and forms of English and to continue to do so even in the face of possible rejection.” This statement brings forth the idea that, instead of hoping for changes to be made in the academic writing norms, Sri Lankan academics should initiate those changes in attitudes towards the inclusion of features of non-dominant varieties of English in academic writing.

## V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this acceptance study attest to the fact that there is a high level of acceptance of these verb formations both on the part of university students of ESL and university lecturers of the same. As opposed to considering them to be ‘errors’ and correcting their usage in classroom/lecture hall contexts, they could be seen as emerging features of SLE. In such a context, students of ESL can be made aware of the fact that the local variety is not inferior to the dominant varieties of the English language. Instead, students should be encouraged to accept both varieties as equal and use them as appropriate in their writing.

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