

## **TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE VS ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE AMAPARA DISTRICT OF SRI LANKA: WHAT FACTORS IMPINGE UPON THE SUCCESS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING?**

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### **Abstract**

Introduced in colonial period in Sri Lanka, English language is taught to students from Grade 3 to Advanced Level at schools. Despite the heavy expenditure and efforts taken by the government, the outcome of teaching English language has not been satisfactory as revealed in the public examinations. In contrast, the teaching of English literature at GCE O/L and GCE A/L has become a success with a high performance rate. Nevertheless, the number of students who offer this subject has been only a fraction of those students who follow English language. Lack of motivation has been an influential factor in deciding the successfulness of learning of English. It is generally perceived that those students who offer English literature are highly motivated and proficient, compared to the other cohort. But there may be some other reasons too, more importantly the availability of English teachers and their qualification and commitments. This study identifies the reasons behind the success or failure of teaching English literature and language at two selected schools in the Ampara district from both urban and rural areas. In the urban school the reasons for success and the issues of student enrollment into literature courses were found, while in the rural school the reasons for poor performance in language tests were found. The students on the Literature course seem to be happy with the teaching and learning, especially, English medium students show much interest towards English literature. On the other hand, others who did not enroll on literature courses gave several reasons for not enrolling such as their fear of failing the subject, lack of basic knowledge of literature, lack of interest and unawareness about the value of the subject. In the rural school so many reasons were put forward for their difficulties in learning English. Mainly it was found that students' poor language proficiency from primary classes affected learning. The outcome of the study would shed light into the policy decisions concerning English language teaching.

*Keywords: English language, English literature, motivation, teaching, learning*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Introduced in the colonial era English has so far been regarded as a prestigious language in Sri Lanka. Despite the agitation against the use of English as the medium of correspondence for official purposes and as a medium of instruction in education, it has survived and sustained a place. Successive government in the post-independence era has taken several steps to encourage the teaching and learning of English

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language at schools. Some improvement has been made but the situation remains the same in rural schools due to various reasons, such as lack of teachers, lack of motivation and poor environmental support.

In Sri Lankan schools, English is a compulsory subject from grade 3 to advanced level. In schools, at all levels (primary, junior secondary and senior secondary) English is taught as a subject for five periods. At primary level each period lasts for 30 minutes duration, while in the upper levels the duration is 40 minutes. Usually there are two term tests (1<sup>st</sup> term and 2<sup>nd</sup> term), followed by a year-end examination in an academic year. The first national level examination for the students including English language is held at the GCE O/L (General Certificate in English Ordinary Level).<sup>3</sup> In addition to English Language examinations, limited numbers of students, who are already somewhat fluent in the English language, take an English literature examination also at the GCE O/L. This English literature examination is offered in the GCE A/L (General Certificate in English Advanced Level) too.

Educationalists consider that the introduction of English Literature to the school curriculum in 1992 is a progressive step to promote the English education in Sri Lanka. However, only the schools in the metropolitan areas prepare the students for this examination along with the schools in a few urban areas in the island. Even though only a few students sit for this examination the performance of these candidates at both GCE O/L and A/L is higher. In 2016, only 8848 candidates sat for the GCE O/L literature and of them 93% passed the exam with all grades (A, B, C and D), more importantly 44% got A and B passes. Similarly in 2016, at GCE A/L, 1350 candidates sat the English literature exam and 62% passed it with all grades (Research and Development Branch, National Evaluation and Testing Service, Department of Examinations, 2016). This scenario indicates that only those students who are proficient in English language sit for the literature examination.

If we compare this situation with the performance of General English examination which is a common examination for all the candidates irrespective of their A/L streams, such as Arts, Commerce, or Biology, the performance is poor. For example, of the total of 250114 candidates who sat for the General English subject in 2016 GCE A/L, only 40% passed the examination. Despite the fact that there are so many issues with regard to the teaching and learning of General English, within the scope of the paper we are not going to pay attention to those issues connected. Rather this paper focuses on the teaching and learning of English language and literature, mainly at GCE O/L.

At the backdrop of this context this study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What factors do influence the teaching of English language at GCE O/L?

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<sup>3</sup> The school education is divided into three phases: primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary. Students join schools in grade 1 when they complete five years of age and follow the primary education for five years. At the completion of primary education students enter the junior secondary level and it lasts for four years (grade 6 – 9). This is followed by senior secondary level for another four years. Senior secondary level is made of two cycles: GCE O/L (General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level) (Grade 10 & 11) and GCE A/L (General Certificate in Education Advanced Level), for two years. These two cycles have the national level exit examinations for the school students.

## 2. What factors do influence the teaching of English Literature at GCE O/L?

Hence, before we proceed with the methodology we would like to give a glimpse of the Sri Lankan education sector with a focus on English education in order to give an overview for the readers.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### ***2.1 Education in pre-colonial Sri Lanka***

In the past education was provided by religious schools. There were three kinds of school system in ancient Sri Lanka (Sharma, 1976). These systems were developed in conjunction with the religious affinity of the ethnic groups. The Sinhalese, who practised Buddhism, established village schools, 'Pansalas' (temple schools) and 'Privenas' (colleges). The education in these schools was based on religious principles and was deemed to have adopted the models from the 'ancient elite lineage of Taksashila and Nalanda universities in ancient India, which were recognized as (sic) foremost learning institutions in human history' (Dhammaratna, 2009: 7).

The Tamils also followed a similar pattern based on their religion, Hinduism. One of the castes, the Brahman caste, was responsible for teaching and learning. The Hindu scriptures formed their subject matter. The Sri Lanka Moors (Muslims), who settled from Arabian countries during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>4</sup> and practised Islamic principles, established their own religious schools. Their religious schools were housed adjoining the mosques where they performed their religious observances. However, there is little evidence to show what percentage of students attended the vernacular schools in the past before the colonial rulers invaded the country.

### ***2.2 Education in colonial Sri Lanka***

Ruberu (1962) suggests that with the arrival of western rulers from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the indigenous system of education started to disintegrate. After the invasion by the Portuguese, the first western school was established in the island in 1505 (Sharma, 1976). At a later stage, the Dutch and the British were interested in establishing mission schools on the island. The mission schools established by the British provided education through the medium of English, while the missionaries who managed these mission schools had another function of propagating Christianity too.

The Sri Lankan education system reflected mainly the British model. In Britain there were two types of schools at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One was the charity and village schools, which catered to the poor working masses. The other was grammar and public schools. Of these latter group public schools served poor children, while the grammar schools accommodated academically bright students from the working and middle classes. It is the latter type of school that was promoted on the island by the British. Also, it was claimed that the overall objective of establishing western schools was to teach Christianity (Sharma, 1976).

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<sup>4</sup> Some indicate their presence from the 7<sup>th</sup> century

During the latter stages of British rule three types of schools emerged: English schools (or private schools), Anglo-vernacular schools and vernacular schools (Warnasuriya, 1969). English schools were run mainly by the Christian missionary societies and they were private and fee levying. Children from the upper middle class were educated in these schools. These schools taught a curriculum similar to that of the public schools of England and prepared students for Cambridge Junior and Senior certificates (ibid). The subjects included Religion (Christianity), English Language and Literature along with History and Geography (of England). The Anglo-vernacular schools or bilingual schools were established to serve the officials working in the government sector. These schools provided instruction in local languages at lower level and English at higher level (Raheem and Devendra, 2007) and prepared their students for the local examinations. The vernacular schools conducted the entire education in the mother tongue and provided only elementary education for the poor rural people.

In the early 1900s, realizing the problems of the rural population in gaining education, the government promoted vernacular schools. Brutt-Griffler (2002) estimates that there were around 4,000 vernacular schools from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the end of the colonial period. As a result, students attended these schools en masse and the literacy rate also rose. Even though private schools were also set up to provide English medium education for the middle class and urban elites, by the 1950s English was not taught to these students at primary level (Raheem and Devendra, 2007). In addition, in the 1940s, the number of students attending the English schools was very low (around 7% of the school going population), while the number of English schools (state owned) witnessed minimal growth – from 124 in 1889 to 255 in 1927 (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). In the same period, several other changes took place in favour of vernacular education. In 1939, the education ordinance act was established. In 1943, a special committee recommended that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction instead of English. In 1945, the then minister of Education, C. W. W. Kannangara, passed a bill in the state assembly to provide free education for all (Raheem and Devendra, 2007). As a result, students were given access to education in the vernacular languages: Sinhala and Tamil, and the importance given to English medium education waned at the time of independence in 1948.

### ***2.3 Education in post-independence Sri Lanka: From Sinhala towards English as a medium of education***

In post-independence Sri Lanka the government tried in several ways to diminish the role played by the English language and to give the Sinhala language a firm root. One such measure was making Sinhala the official language of Sri Lanka in 1956. For political reasons, the then government, through the Official Language Act No 33 of 1956, made Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka. This policy enhanced the importance given to the teaching and learning through the Sinhala medium, which affected not only English medium education but also the use of Tamil too (Canagarajah, 2005; Samarakkody and Braine, 2005; Perera and Canagarajah, 2010). Following the introduction of this act, the government systematically discouraged the establishment and running of English private schools. Raheem and Devendara (2007) describe the following: A large number of private schools which had been supported by grants from the government had perforce to join the state system, which also required that teaching in the English medium be abandoned in favour of local language instruction. (P. 189)

Though the medium of instruction in the tertiary sector was English at the beginning, the free education policy of the government and the promotion of mother tongue instruction at secondary level had a major impact on the medium of instruction at the universities also. The national policy changes in the secondary education sector were immediately realized in the tertiary sector. In the 1960s, the University of Ceylon started to teach the students in the mother tongue (Raheem and Devendra, 2007). But, this teaching was confined to courses in the Arts and related fields, whereas courses in Science, Medicine, Engineering and science related subjects continued to be taught in English.

Even though successive governments in power neglected the importance of English medium education, they could not isolate the English language from society because of the importance it has as a global language. Canagarajah (2005) explains this phenomenon in detail: Even though Sinhala became the official language of administration, and both vernaculars took over primary and secondary education (with English taught as a second language), it was difficult to dislodge English from many other domains. English remained the language of higher education, commerce, communication, technology and travel. In this sense, English was still a working official language in many institutional domains. Added to this was the power English derived from being an international language, which still assured it a prestigious position in the Sri Lankan society. (p. 423)

It is, therefore, understood that the attempt to develop the vernacular languages, mainly Sinhala over English, has not been as successful as expected. Canagarajah (2005) further explains that people, especially Tamils, continued to learn English, as they believed that '[...] English was still associated with certain material advantages, both within the island and outside' (p. 424). Raheem and Ratwatte (2004) also explain the firm role English had taken in society after independence. They argue that there was a contradiction between government policies and the practices on the ground. Though English had lost its status as an official language, it continued to be used in international trade and higher education institutes, etc. The teaching of Science and Medicine at tertiary level institutes continued in English, as mentioned above.

The government, realizing the need for the development of the English language, took several steps at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A National Education Commission was established under the National Education Commission act No. 19 of 1991. The function of this commission was to make recommendations to the President on educational policy and practice. The formation of the commission was followed by the formation of the Presidential Task Force on General Education. This committee comprising of eminent educationists and university academics studied the status of secondary education of the country and submitted its recommendations, known as the General Educational Reforms 1997. One of the important recommendations pertaining to English education was the introduction of a subject called 'GCE A/L General English' from 1998. GCE A/L is the final stage of school education.

Previously English was taught as a subject up to the GCE O/L only. Later students learnt English formally when they entered the universities, leaving a gap at the GCE A/L level, except for a few who followed Lit. In order to fill this gap the General English course was introduced in 1998 and the first batch of students sat the examination in 2000, but the pass rate of this subject had not been satisfactory

(around 25% at National level) (personal communication with an official of the department of examination<sup>5</sup>, March 2010). The department of examinations is yet to publish the statistics on this.

The reforms also suggested introducing Activity Based Oral English (ABOE) at grade 1 and 2, the first two years in primary school. Previously the formal teaching of English language was commenced from grade 3 only. This new initiative provided class teachers with a set of vocabulary and they were supposed to develop students' oral skills based on these words associated with their immediate environment, but the successful implementation of this is also an interesting question as the teaching of ABOE is dependent on class teachers who are trained in subjects other than English. Atugoda (2007) has pointed out in connection to this, that '[T]he drawback that has been there up to now was that all these Grade 1 & 2 teachers have not undergone adequate training to learn methodologies to be used in introducing English at these grades' (2007: n.p).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted in two selected schools in the Kalmunai education zone. In the Ampara district there are 5 five education zones. Two of the schools were selected from urban and rural areas, one from each. The identity of the schools is not revealed as agreed with the principals. The urban school is a national school and conducts bilingual (Tamil and English) classes too, whereas the rural school is a 1C type of school and only recently started the GCE A/L Arts classes. From the urban school 35 students from a GCE O/L English medium class and three English teachers were selected. 40 students and a single English teacher were involved from the rural school for this study. The urban school has been conducting English literature classes at the GCE O/L for several years, while the other school does not. Of the 35 from urban school, 20 students follow GCE O/L literature subject, while the rest do not. In the district only less than ten schools conduct GCE O/L English Literature classes. The students who follow the GCE O/L English Literature subject (hereinafter referred to as Lit) and those who do not follow were interviewed separately. Students were interviewed in their classes using questionnaires.

### **4. FINDINGS**

#### ***4.1 English Literature***

***4.1.1 The findings from the students who did not offer Lit:*** They were asked to answer a few questions, which is immediately followed by a discussion with the students.

#### **Why don't you like to study English literature?**

Of the 35 English medium students, only 15 of them did not follow Lit. The students' responses for why they were so reluctant to come forward in studying Lit in their ordinary level revealed some very important reasons. The most prominent reason for the students' negative attitude was that they felt Lit was a difficult subject when compared to other subjects. Almost all the students had expressed the idea of

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communications are not included in the reference list as the respondents did not want them to be identified.

difficulty of the subject. In addition, students feared that they may lose an 'A' grade at the GCE O/L examination if they offer Lit. Poor language proficiency also seems to influence their preference in offering Lit. Students believed that they should have good language proficiency with high vocabulary power.

Motivation also plays a role in students' preference to follow Lit. Many students expressed that they lacked advice and encouragement from the teachers and parents towards studying this subject. In contrary, students were discouraged by their other subject teachers, parents and senior students. The students reported that they were made to believe that Lit is a difficult subject and they might not cope with the studies throughout once they selected this subject. This kind of negative advice has discouraged the students from selecting Lit.

External support has been another factor to decide the subject choice. Though some students preferred to follow Lit considering its benefits such as language improvement, mainly writing improvement and vocabulary enrichment, they became reluctant to follow because there is no any assistance they could obtain from.

Lack of teachers and resources at schools too became a reason for their dispassion of the subject. Not only these reasons, some Tamil medium students have set their mind to the notion that only the English medium students could be able to manage to take the subject and pass the exam.

Further, the unavailability of the subject at some schools in Kalmunai Zone has also led the students to the state of not taking Lit in their Ordinary level. Some students were not even aware that this subject has been a component of their basket subjects due to its unavailability.

**4.1.2 The findings from students who studied Lit.** They were asked to answer a few questions, and followed by a discussion with the students. There were 20 students who followed Lit in the class. Hence, all of them were female students from English medium.

Those students who followed Lit showed a great deal of interest in the subject as they were able to obtain very good results in the examinations. Further, the obtained results of the students during the last five years were also evident that the students have got As and Bs in the final examination and have improved a lot with the subject.

#### **4.1.3 Reasons for following literature?**

When it was asked what/ who motivated them to offer Lit in their O/L, the responses included family, friends, teachers, senior students, own interest and worthiness of the subject. Though the aforementioned factors were their motivations towards their choice of this subject, the students' own interest played a prominent place in prioritizing Lit. over the other subjects. 15 out of 20 students had mentioned the idea of their own interest. Worthiness of the subject has been the second important factor for their preference while the influences from family members, friends, teachers and senior students had taken minor roles in the selection of the subject.

**Table 1: Factors that motivated the learning of English literature**

| <b>Factors</b>                    | <b>Number of students responded (Out of 20)</b> |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Own interest                      | 15  |
| Consider the subject is important | 12  |
| Family                            | 05  |
| Senior students                   | 02  |
| Friends                           | 01  |
| Teachers                          | 01  |

According to the students, it is understood that the school too had taken extra effort in conducting special classes for the students of Lit in order to uplift the students' knowledge, and all 20 students were very much satisfied with the learning of the subject. Further, only 2 students of the 20 had expressed that they went to extra classes outside the school in order to complete the syllabi.

#### **4.1.4 Available facilities / resources**

In addition to classroom teaching, students had access to books from the library where there are plenty of books on English literature available. This indicates that the school has been providing handsome library facilities by giving related literature books to assist the students. Further, the students stated that audio and video lessons connected to Lit were also conducted to make the subject easy for the students as audio and video lessons could assist them to keep the lessons in mind effectively. Nevertheless, the students also said that the school had no internet facility to help them with the learning of Lit.

#### **4.1.5 Performance of the students**

It is evidenced that the performance of the students of Lit in the classroom and exams conducted by the school are very high and satisfactory since all the students except one had said that they were able to obtain good results in their term exams. The following table indicates the marks obtained by the students as they mentioned.

**Table 2: Results of the term test 2017**

| <b>Marks Range</b> | <b>No of students</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 100-80             | 6                     |
| 80-60              | 8                     |
| 60-40              | 6                     |
| Below 40           | 0                     |

As shown in the table all the students were able to take above 40 marks and the majority of the students' marks varied between 80-60. Furthermore, there is also a rapid improvement in the passing rate of the students of Lit in the public examinations (GCE O/L) conducted by the government during the last six



years as the following table indicates. Except the year 2012 in all the other years students have performed well.

**Table 3: Performance of students of Lit for the last 5 years at GCE O/L**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>No of Students Sat</b> | <b>No of Students Passed</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| 2011        | 21                        | 21                           | 100%              |
| 2012        | 47                        | 30                           | 64%               |
| 2013        | 29                        | 28                           | 97%               |
| 2014        | 44                        | 42                           | 95%               |
| 2015        | 23                        | 23                           | 100%              |
| 2016        | 26                        | 25                           | 96%               |

#### **4.1.6 Difficulties and challenges**

Though the students are enthusiastic in following the subject, there are some challenges or difficulties they come up with their learning process. According to the students, they had difficulties coping with the subject at the beginning when the subject was first introduced to them. It is also challenging to them to study the subject amidst many difficulties and demotivation from the people around. Students reported that they were not motivated to study Lit by their friends, parents or other teachers. Instead, they were told that Lit was a difficult subject and required very high language proficiency. In reality also, in order to study this subject, students should be fluent in English and have good errors. Hence, they face difficulties in being perfect in their writing as they are supposed to lose marks through such mistakes.

#### **4.1.7 Teachers' view**

The students feel difficulties in understanding the text and appreciating the novel and poems as the language has been very tough, and they need to spend more time to read again and again in order to understand the concept and meaning. The students also become confused with the questions in the examinations, as the questions are sometimes not direct. When the questions are not comprehended properly, they have to lose entire marks for the questions which lead to get lower performance in the exams. As the marking too has become tough unlike other subjects, they undergo difficulties. The scarcity of the teachers and resources at schools has become a challenging environment to them as well.

### **4.2 English Language**

Teachers and students in the urban and the rural schools were asked a few questions about their teaching and learning of English language at GCE O/L. The students in the urban school were very positive in English language and seem to have less problems. Therefore, the problems faced by the rural students are given below.

#### **4.2.1 Lack of motivation**

It was revealed in the study that students do not show interest in learning English language. Among the interviewed students only a few stated that they liked the English subject and the English teachers. Many

of them see English as a burden and a difficult subject. Teachers also reported that students did not consider English subject as important and they did not concentrate on lessons or take real effort to learn English. Many students stated that they feared of the English subject. This fear is not only connected to learning the subject but also there is a fear of failing the subject. They also worry about getting a fail grade or lower grade in the final examination.

#### ***4.2.2 Family background***

Students also mentioned about lack of support from their parents and relatives. Most of these students from the rural area come from backward families and their parents are either farmers or daily workers. Hence, these children did not get any support from their environment in their early ages. As a result, they claim that they are still struggling to get basic knowledge in language skills.

#### ***4.2.3 Lack of resources at schools***

The teachers and students reported that in the school English teachers were not appointed for a longer time and only during the last three years English teachers are available at the school. A well trained teacher is a great asset to students in enhancing their language knowledge by way of giving guidance, awareness, encouragement and good teaching.

Moreover, the learning aids such as internet facilities, books, audio, video players etc. are not available in the school. Teachers mostly depend on the text books which are also very difficult to be taught for these students. These students did not have any basic knowledge in English and therefore teaching the GCE O/L textbook has been a challenging task for the teachers. They don't like the content and they have difficulties in understanding the vocabulary. Students reported that when the teacher compels them to study the textbook they find extremely difficult and have no other option than developing a resentment for the subject.

Teachers, on the other hand, stressed the importance of sticking to the prescribed textbook because they wanted to ensure that they teach the lessons according to the lesson plan otherwise they will be blamed by the In-service Advisors or the other officers from the Department of Education. Nevertheless, teachers have understood the difficulties students have. They preferred to arrange extra classes but students do not show the same interest in studying English that they take for other subjects like maths and science. Tables 4 & 5 reveal the performance of students GCE O/L English language exams.

***Table 4: Performance of students at GCE O/L English Language: Urban school***

| <b>Year</b> | <b>No of Students Sat</b> | <b>No of Students Passed</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| 2011        | 263                       | 185                          | 70%               |
| 2012        | 265                       | 202                          | 76%               |
| 2013        | 282                       | 204                          | 72%               |
| 2014        | 275                       | 210                          | 76%               |
| 2015        | 303                       | 194                          | 64%               |
| 2016        | 362                       | 264                          | 73%               |

As indicated in table 4, the performance was much satisfactory in the urban school compared to the rural areas.

**Table 5: Performance of students at GCE O/L English Language: rural school**

| Year | No. Sat | No. passed<br>(includes all<br>grades) | %   |
|------|---------|--|-----|
| 2015 | 36      | 6                                      | 17% |
| 2016 | 35      | 2                                      | 6%  |

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Following Lit at GCE O/L has many advantages for the students. It enriches their knowledge as well as language skills. Despite the advantages, students fear of the subject. There is an alleged fear that the subject is extremely difficult. Hence, this fear should be alleviated by the teachers and administration. Therefore, if the students are given awareness about the worthiness, easiness and present passing rate of the subject, they can be directed to a positive mindset about offering the subject in O/L without having a second thought. Lots of motivation, encouragement and awareness should be given to those who are hesitant in order to make them value and offer the subject.

In terms of GCE O/L English language subject there are so many problems at the rural school and this situation can be generalized to other schools in this region too. Shortage of qualified English teachers has been a problem. Even though English teachers are appointed to schools, their level of English proficiency and ability to impart instruction appropriately to the students may not be satisfactory. The students in the rural areas come to school without any foundation knowledge in English and are compelled to learn a textbook prescribed to them. In this case, those textbooks are above their level of language proficiency.

The government should pay more attention when recruiting English teachers, especially their language proficiency and the ability to teach. Those schools in the rural areas should put more concentrated effort to develop the language proficiency of the students and also make wider awareness of importance of English. Also, students should be motivated to learn English and parents should be requested to offer opportunities for their children to learn English. Hence, previously introduced activity based oral English (ABOE) should be paid attention at schools.

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