

GFS SRI LANKA
THE GFS WORLD PROJECT
ENGLISH FOR EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS (EEP)

Description

To equip girls and women with English language skills to enhance their employment prospects and to grow the GFS in Sri Lanka.

Project Proposal from Sri Lanka

The basic idea of this project originated from Rt. Rev. Dhiloraj Canagasabey, then Bishop of Colombo. GFS Sri Lanka developed it and submitted a proposal on the benefits of teaching English, at the World Council in Perth, Australia in 2017. It was well accepted for its professionalism, timeliness and focus on a vital need.

Background

Sri Lanka boasts one of the highest literacy rates in Asia and the highest in South Asia, with recent 2026 data indicating a record-high overall literacy rate of 97.4%, due to free education provided by the Government. However, the country's English proficiency rate ranks very low in South Asia at only 46.58%. Only about 22% of the population over 15 are literate in English.

This substantial and somewhat shocking decline is the result of an educational policy made some decades ago to teach children in their ethnic languages i.e. Sinhalese and Tamil. This proved to be one of the country's biggest downfalls.

Although English was considered to be the most important skill requirement, Sri Lankans were denied opportunities to learn the language. This lack of English proficiency is the major constraint affecting employability, however qualified someone could be.

This project addresses this need, with particular emphasis on women.

Especially in South Asia, women are among the worst affected by poverty. They are vulnerable in the community. Due to social & economic restrictions & cultural traditions, women also find it much harder to find and make use of opportunities.

It is only thru education and perhaps specifically the study of English, that women can be freed from traditional roles and allowed to grow and blossom. The GFS was not slow in addressing this need to empower women by providing them with opportunities to learn English. This is how the English for Employment Prospects project was born.

The Constitution of the GFS of Sri Lanka states as one of its objectives: *"To advance education, culture & any other charitable purpose for the benefit of women & girls"*. It was therefore necessary, as a part of our ministry, to assist girls - particularly girls from our own parishes - to find suitable employment thus ensuring their well-being and continuity of spiritual life.

This is linked to the subsidized hostel project through which, for the past 60 years, GFS Sri Lanka has been providing a safe haven to thousands of girls who came to the city for the first time for new employment. Efforts are being made to expand this facility due to the demand for such accommodation.

Objectives

1. Primary objective: English for Employment Prospects (EEP)

To provide English language skills to unemployed / unsuitably employed less-privileged girls of local parishes.

To give them access to information, knowledge and skills and enhance their self-esteem.

To shape and mold them into confident young women with the ability to choose and obtain suitable, well-paid employment.

2. Secondary objective: Grow GFS

To encourage participants to become active members of GFS which hopefully will lead to new branches

1. EEP

Course Provider

The American College of Higher Education (ACHE), Colombo, was selected as the course provider after reviewing other prospective providers, such as The British Council. ACHE was chosen because of its flexibility and willingness to accommodate our requests. The College would issue certificates to students who successfully completed the course.

Selection process

Applications were called for and authenticated by the parish priest.

A team travelled from GFS Colombo to an identified location where would-be students were interviewed.

Once selected, their names were sent to the American College.

The American College then conducted an entrance test to gauge their knowledge of English and reported back to the GFS.

Successful students were admitted to the Course.

The Course

The Course was tailor-made to match the English proficiency levels of the students, and apart from grammar and speech training, included effective communication, report writing, facing interviews, role plays, power point presentations, IT skills etc. Visiting lecturers was a special feature.

Classes were conducted once a week. Interim speech and written tests were held.

The final exam was held at the end of the Course at which students were marked and graded.

Attendance was taken into consideration when passing students.

Successful students were awarded their Certificates at a special ceremony.

Additional programmes

“The Total Woman” - In addition, in an effort to address the needs of the whole woman, the GFS organized motivational programmes, personality development training and speech contests. Health and beauty demonstrations based on You are ‘wonderfully made’ (Psalm 139:14) proved popular.

Assistance

Providing girls with suitable clothes to attend an interview, if necessary.
Travelling costs, according to necessity.
Establishing a “job bank” to assist girls to find employment.

Publicity

Brochures and flyers about the EEP with a message from the then Bishop, were printed in 3 languages and posted / hand delivered to almost every church in the 2 Dioceses of Colombo and Kurunegala. This increased GFS’s visibility within the Anglican Church of Sri Lanka.

Batches & Locations

5 batches consisted of approx. 20 girls each.
Courses were conducted in 5 different locations island-wide -
western, eastern, central, southern & north-western provinces.

They were conducted in the two Anglican Dioceses of Sri Lanka - Colombo & Kurunegala.

1. Colombo Diocese – The Course was conducted in 4 Archdeaconries (out of 5) - Colombo, Eastern, Upcountry and Southern.
2. Kurunegala Diocese – The Course was conducted in its only Archdeaconry of Kurunegala.

Venues

1. Colombo – 2018, at the American College, Dehiwela, Colombo
2. Batticaloa – 2019, at the Anglican Centre, Batticaloa
3. Dickoya – 2019, at GFS Regional Office, Dickoya
4. Galle – 2019, at American College, Galle
5. Kurunegala - 2025 at American College, Kurunegala

Award Ceremonies

The prestigious Certificate of the American College was presented to the successful students at colourful ceremonies.

1. Award Ceremony of Colombo & Batticaloa batches - GFS Hall, Colombo.
Chief Guest - Rt. Rev. Dhiloraj Canagasabey, Bishop of Colombo
2. Award Ceremony of Dickoya batch - 2020 at Christ Church, Dickoya parish hall
Chief Guest - Ven. D. K. Balakrishnan, Archdeacon of Nuwara Eliya
3. Award Ceremony of Galle batch - 2020 All Saints’ Church, Galle
Chief Guest - Ven. Sunil Fernando, Archdeacon of Galle
4. Award Ceremony of Kurunegala batch - 2026 at the Cathedral of Christ the King, Kurunegala
Chief Guest - Rt. Rev. Nishantha Fernando, Bishop of Kurunegala

Setbacks

On April 21, 2019, a series of devastating, coordinated suicide bombings targeted churches and luxury hotels across Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. Nationwide curfew was imposed.

The first island-wide corona lockdown and police-enforced curfew in Sri Lanka began on March 20, 2020 and a second major, extended nationwide lockdown on August 20, 2021.

The EEP Course came to a standstill for several years, especially due to the pandemic, as it was not possible to conduct physical classes and virtual classes was not an option.

The last Course was held in the Diocese of Kurunegala and took time to get off the ground.

Did the Course meet the needs?

Several positive reports were received from the girls – that they are more confident because they could now use the English language more effectively, had found employment, and achieved higher positions in their jobs.

2. Grow GFS

Objective

The expansion of the GFS in Sri Lanka.

Implementation

Branches were opened, Regional offices were opened, area coordinators and development officers recruited to upgrade the GFS.

Method of operation

Churches were informed about the EEP Course. This generated interest as they recognized EEP as a valuable project for the girls of their parishes.

It was explained that a GFS branch needed to be set up first.

GFS branches were opened through the parish priest and members were offered the EEP Course.

Interesting programmes such as motivational and good grooming programmes, cake making, vegetable projects, sewing classes etc. were conducted.

All these initiatives were well received.

Result

In this manner, new branches were systematically established in several parishes, resulting in the addition of new members. This, in turn, led to programmes that benefited women and increased community service in the region, publicizing the name of the GFS far and wide.

During the Pandemic, Colombo Headquarters and branches kept in touch virtually, encouraging the branches and not letting them die. It was a fruitful time of sharing through videos and messages on WhatsApp.

Conclusion

The EEP project can be considered a success as it definitely met its two objectives of empowering girls thru the teaching of the English language and increasing membership of the GFS.

Added Value of this Project

It opened the door to acceptance by the Anglican Church.

For the first time in many years, the Anglican Church and clergy viewed the GFS with renewed respect.

The GFS was recognized as an organization of good repute, capable of carrying out meaningful projects.

There was only one headquarters branch in Colombo, but following the implementation of the World Project, the number of branches increased to over 20 with correspondingly increased membership.

Our gratitude

To GFS World for their faith and trust in awarding GFS Sri Lanka the World Project.

To all countries that sent us funds so that we could carry out this project successfully.

To God, for the incredible and miraculous expansion and growth of the GFS in Sri Lanka.

Jeanne Withanage

(Project Chairman)

June 2026