Online English distance learning, our only option?
By Jagdish Hathiramani

What's your next step after you kick off your career with an MBA from New York University's prestigious Stern Business School followed by consulting with Internet start-ups during the first pre-2001 Internet boom and ultimately end up teaching English in Rome? You start up your own online English distance learning services beginning by teaching English to Italians and then extending it to teach English to Sinhala speakers (in July 2011) and then Tamil speakers (in April 2012); of course. At least, that's what you do if you are Anura Saparamadu. And, so far, business is booming.

www.ingrisi.com, a website geared for Sinhala speakers, was initially introduced in 2008 but, following a poor response, was re-designed and re-launched again last year. It has since signed up more than 20,000 users, as well as also having led to this month's launch of www.angilam.com. To date, from his start in 2005 with just Italian, Mr. Saparamadu's online offerings now include sites for speakers of Tamil, Sinhala, Arabic, Hindi and Mandarin with a further six, namely Spanish, Portuguese and other Asian languages, to be added by the end of the year.

And, he is quick to point out, offering English online means that costs are kept low. Says Mr. Saparamadu; "The cost of a 50-lesson course is Rs. 2,000 which is Rs. 40 per lesson which is the cheapest option available out there. Even English tutories you find in almost every street corner charges around Rs. 250 per lesson but they don't have 10% of what we offer".

He further notes that the "curriculum was designed by Oxford and Cambridge Universities and Trinity College of Dublin. It is the exact same European Union Framework curriculum which is used by EU countries to teach English as a second language to their students. Furthermore, our course material has been checked and approved by the University of Colombo... In addition, we offer talking dictionaries where you click on a word and see the meaning in English and Sinhala/Tamil as well as listen to an mp3 [files] that teaches you how to pronounce the word properly. We have customer support where students can contact for help regarding any lessons they do not understand. There are also educational games designed to improve your knowledge of English, chat rooms, forums and message boards for students to interact."

He said, "We are now developing a voice recognition software program whereby the students can talk with the computer. This removes the fear of making mistakes as the students will be talking to a computer and enables them to practice basic conversations in the privacy of their homes without anybody laughing at their mistakes. This programme will be introduced within the next four months". Regarding his future plans, Mr. Saparamadu adds: "We are now completely focused on offering our English courses to every school and educational institute in the

country. We have also begun to offer our services to the corporate sector. Since every company in Sri Lanka is in need of English training, we believe there is a huge demand for our courses. For corporate clients, we are able to customise our courses and add course materials that are specific to an industry sector such as banking, apparel industry, tourism, etc. We also offer back-end services to corporate clients where the human resources managers can keep track of their employees' progress through dedicated tracking pages we provide them".

Elaborating on why teach English, especially considering his extensive experience with online ventures, Mr. Saparamadu, who is a grandson of famous Sri Lankan author Martin Wickremasinghe, comments: "We believe that the lack of English is one of the biggest reasons why most people find it difficult to find a good job... Our market research showed that the biggest issue in Sri Lanka is the lack of teachers. Most schools do not have qualified English teachers and students are unable to learn because of it. The only viable method of offering English courses to the masses is via the Internet. This way we are able to spread our costs amongst a large user base and offer students a high quality English learning experience at a price that is affordable. If we were to hire qualified teachers and have a series of schools, we would never be able to offer such a comprehensive product at such a low price".