

PERSPECTIVE

Scenes from the launch of the 'Kathakaramu' app on Sunday (22) at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute auditorium
PHOTOS KRISHAN KARIYAWASAM



Join the conversation with 'Kathakaramu'

In conversation with E.A.S.E. Foundation Co-Founder/Co-President Anoja Rajapatirana

BY DIMITHRI WIJESINGHE

E.A.S.E. Foundation in collaboration with a dedicated group of software developers from Yaala Labs has created a Sinhala language communication app titled 'Kathakaramu,' with the potential to transform the lives of non-speaking individuals.

The app, which has been made available free of charge, was launched on Sunday (22) at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute auditorium at an event held from 5-7 p.m.

E.A.S.E. Foundation, which instigated this project, was established in 2007 by Chandima Rajapatirana, a person with non-speaking autism, and his family. The foundation has been working to enable people with disabilities to lead stimulating and productive lives.

Speaking to *Brunch*, E.A.S.E. Foundation Co-Founder/Co-President Anoja Rajapatirana shared that an app such as 'Kathakaramu,' which facilitated communication access to non-speakers, fit right into their mission.



The students of the E.A.S.E. Foundation had been using this version for 15 years. With the entry of Yaala Labs, it has been developed into a communication app for phones and tabs with voice output. It has now been expanded to help a variety of others, including deaf/mute persons who use sign language to communicate

Anoja revealed that the app had originally been created for the non-speaking students of the E.A.S.E. Foundation who communicated by pointing to letters on a letter board. She shared that they had utilised a streamlined version of the Sinhala alphabet, noting that this had been something she had prepared years ago.

According to her, they had made an arrangement of the vast number of letters in the Sinhala alphabet so that it would fit on a 9"x5" board which she herself had developed so that her son Chandima, a non-speaking person with autism, could converse in Sinhala, as he had done for years in English.



Yaala Labs Senior Tech Lead Dhananjaya Rajasinghe

"The students of the E.A.S.E. Foundation had been using this version for 15 years. With the entry of Yaala Labs, it has been developed into a communication app for phones and tabs with voice output. It has now been expanded to help a variety of others, including deaf/mute persons who use sign language to communicate," she added.

Anoja noted that while they had followed this method all these years, with the onset of the pandemic they had become aware that many non-speaking persons lacked access to learning language and communicating. "A deaf mute person who is used to reading lips is unable to do so because of the masks. This had never occurred to me before and that is why we included this function of speech to text. You can also enter the text and the app will read out the text on the screen."

The origin story

She shared that the origins of the cornerstone of this project, which was the streamlined Sinhala alphabet, had begun all the way back in the 1980s.

"When my husband and I lived in the US back in the 1980s, I was recruited to teach Sinhala to a group of students who were coming to Sri Lanka for summer – not conversational Sinhala, but to read it. At first I was incredibly sceptical, telling them that there were hundreds of letters and that it was very difficult to do and so on. But they continued to insist so I laid it out – all the vowels ('svara') on top and the consonants ('vyanjana') along the graph.

"I realised then that while it definitely appeared to be complex, there was a beautiful pattern which was consistent, constant, and predictable. I put in the associated English sounds and the students taught themselves with a little help from me," she recounted, adding: "Then I taught my children the same and when I returned to Sri



E.A.S.E. Foundation Trustee Shahera Omar

Lanka I compressed that original chart into this 9"x5" board and you can spell virtually any word in Sinhala using that combination."

Anoja noted that the entire project had really come to life around the end of 2006, when she returned to Sri Lanka with her son Chandimal, who had written 'Traveler's Tales: My Journey with Autism,' which was shortlisted for the Gratiaen Prize as well. As their objective had been to spread the word, they had the book translated into Sinhala and published. When they came to Sri Lanka and Chandimal had to communicate in Sinhala as a non-speaking person, he utilised this system she had developed.

"Finally, the wonderful people at Yaala Labs, who saw how we had been communicating using a piece of paper, volunteered to develop the system into an application, and now with just two keystrokes, you can get a Sinhala character out," she said, noting that when it came to typing, you typically had to have access to two languages, but that this app was accessible to those who only spoke Sinhala.



I ask people, 'What do you think about being mute? All of you who can speak have this enormous gift, but how often do you think about that? Never, right? How often do you think a person who cannot speak thinks about this?'

Giving everyone a voice

Anoja noted that while non-speaking persons were often considered incapable of learning a

language, the students of E.A.S.E., using its simple approach to teaching language, had repeatedly demonstrated this idea to be obsolete. "Each student represents a story of triumph over daunting challenges. Their language skills have enabled them to become included in their community and in their own families as thinking, understanding beings," she said, adding that they were also able to move beyond simple communication, creating art, writing poetry, and utilising the potential of language.

She addressed the condition of being mute, noting that her son had written extensively on this topic: "He talks about what it is like. I ask people, 'What do you think about being mute? All of you who can speak have this enormous gift, but how often do you think about that? Never, right? How often do you think a person who cannot speak thinks about this?' The answer is, every time they want to drink water, have a headache, feel hurt or lonely, every time they want to join the conversation – every time, a thousand times a day. People do not think about what a loss it is to not have a voice, they are not aware of what they have," she said.

"Chandima is surrounded by love and absolute comfort, as he himself says. But he says that before 18, before he started this way of communicating, life had been a wasteland and he had lived in a silent abyss," Anoja shared, adding that her son was the heart that drove this initiative.

Accessibility

The 'Kathakaramu' app is currently only available in Android, with Anoja noting that a majority in Sri Lanka tended to own Android phones. However, the volunteers at Yaala Labs who are dedicating their time for this project are looking to



E.A.S.E. Foundation Co-Founder Anoja Rajapatirana

continue to develop and expand the project in any manner they can.

Noting that it would be great to have the same access in Tamil, she shared that there had already been a discussion on adapting it to the Tamil language: "We all have the same concern about streamlining our vast alphabets and any phonetic language can be arranged in this way. I have Indian friends who also want to adapt this, because we have thousands of letters in our alphabets, but we can compress it all into this easy-to-use set of characters."



They are looking at creating a more complex version for writers. While this is ideal for communication and day-to-day conversation, there is a need for more letters in literature

Anoja further noted that the developers were also looking to create a more complex version of this current application: "They are looking at creating a more complex version for writers. While this is ideal for communication and day-to-day conversation, there is a need for more letters in literature. In Sinhala, there are different uses for different characters and combined characters and such, so they are looking at developing such a version as well."

She especially noted that when it came to communicating and teaching students challenged by disabilities, educators had a responsibility to teach them language and to not shy away from providing them this access. "We have a long and complex road ahead when it comes to teaching language. However, we must not shy away from it simply because it may be difficult – everyone deserves a voice and equal access to join the conversation," she said.

Learn more about the remarkable services provided by the E.A.S.E. Foundation to the most vulnerable and marginalised people in Sri Lanka at:

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