

Influence of English language proficiency on tertiary level education

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Abstract: English is an international language, which is essential for interpersonal communication across the world. It is considered to be a common language in the field of education, business, trade, and commerce. It is found from the research studies that imparting proficiency in the English language should begin right from the school level education. Thus, the present study was carried out to assess the influence of English language proficiency on tertiary-level education in a target undergraduate student population (second year in biological sciences) at the Faculty of Science, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. Collected data were analyzed by Excel software (Windows 10.0) to assess the significant influence of English language proficiency in tertiary education. In the current study, the sex ratio (male and female) was nearly 2:1 (63% and 37%) respectively. The national

school students showed a more successful rate for university entrance than provincial school. Further, the highest frequent usage of English than their mother tongue was noticed among university teachers (84%) when compared with school teachers (40%). Furthermore, the analysis showed that the majority of the students are using the English language in the university (87%), then school (40%). Most of the students were highly engaged in writing (94%), listening (83%), and reading rather than speaking skills (53%). Usage of the English language was higher (100%) in university education than in schools. Hence, the pass rate of English language proficiency was high at the tertiary level than the secondary level. Thus, this study recommends that school teachers should frequently use English in order to communicate with students while teaching.

Keywords: English, Tertiary level education, Graduate

I. INTRODUCTION

In the current globalized world, English is most common and primary language at international level and also it plays a critical role in many academic disciplines including Science, Engineering, Economics, International Relations & higher education. In the case of higher education English is the most important area, because other than Art subjects, English has been used as the medium of instruction.

Even though, English is a second language in Sri Lanka, it is inevitably helpful to higher education, accessing modern knowledge, developing scientific research, global communication livelihood in myriad ways. However, English is considered compulsory to get a job after graduation especially in private sectors. Further, English is the basic requirements to follow certain courses of study as well as for

scholarship purposes (postgraduate degrees) in international universities due to its high quality and reliability.

Shiromi Fernando (1977) stated that it is essential to learn an international language in a globalized world for international communication and also it is predominantly useful for promoting national harmony in Sri Lanka and interaction among different races and people.

In our country, most employers seek employees who can communicate competently in English. Unfortunately, the standard of English among today's graduates is disappointing. It is needed to seek particular job, instead of focusing on being able to speak as well.

In most of the disciplines, the ability of conversation in English is mandatory to compete in the job market, because graduates or students who are fluent in English are successfully attaining the Job and Degrees. Currently, employers or Head of the Institution are offering jobs to skillful graduates rather than knowledge graduates.

It is essential to learn, read, speak and write in English. Hence, the main problem assessed in the present study is "Does English language proficiency influence in their higher education of university students?"

According to Radhika De Silva and Dinali Devendra (Department of English Language Study, The Open University of Sri Lanka) they had explained, in the current situation of a study which explores English is the second language in the institutions or high education but also English is conducted at the beginning of the academic purpose for the student's carrier.

In 1992, a study on student perceptions, problems in second languages lectures, concluded that the students who have started studying in the medium of English at tertiary levels, the ability to understand academic lectures has been a challenge for those students (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992).

However, the continuing globalization and competitive job market made the courses at tertiary level to be offered in English in Sri Lanka. Middle of the 19th century, Sri Lanka started to introduce "English" as a medium of instruction into their academic programme at both secondary and tertiary levels as those countries in 2009, the World Bank reported, even though English is taught as a subject at schools from elementary to GCE Advanced Level, several reasons affect the successful learning of English at schools including insufficient resources

and lack of motivation among the students towards the language. In 2015, Ministry of Education voiced only 1% of the students followed GCE A/L in English medium in all Sri Lanka schools. Even though, several private schools and some of the public schools are started the instructions in English medium, English has not been made a criterion for consideration for university entrance (University Grants Commission).

Henry Whitehead, Bishop of Madras (2010) who states that most of the university students are struggling to learn because the more burden of mastering their subjects and thinking in a foreign language compare to the students whose native language being English is far too great a strain on them.

There are various factors influencing students' performance and English is one of the important the factors that determines their academic achievement. Thus, the objective of the study is to assess the influence of the English language on university-level education.

II. METHODOLOGY

The current study was carried out among both Tamil and Sinhala language-speaking second-year students of the Faculty of Science, Eastern University, Sri Lanka in 2019. About 60 students were chosen for this study randomly.

Data was collected through the structured questionnaire and face to face interview to gather all information regarding the English language. The major questions had been included based on gender, provincial and school details, grades of general English language in ordinary and advanced levels, medium of instructions in secondary education, frequency of using mother tongue by the lecturers and teachers, opportunities provided by the school and frequency of English usage during the school period, proficiency of O/L, A/L and University, overall skills at the university premises, interactive techniques used in teaching and learning. Collected data were analyzed with Excel (Windows 10.0).

III. DISCUSSION

Gender is taken in different level in tertiary level education. It was noticed that 63% of the population was female and 37% was male. Moreover, most of the students had entered into university from National schools when compared with Provincial schools.

Among the Provincial and National Schools majority of students entered from the national schools. It revealed 63% of the pupil has got eligibility from national school meanwhile 37% entered from the provincial school. Hence, it shows that national schools provide more facilities for the students education and their extra curricular activities

The medium during school period data revealed that language of instruction was Tamil and Sinhala at school level education. Almost 100% of the students stated that they used mother language as a medium of instruction at tertiary level of education. But more interestingly medium of instruction was changed in English at university level, it showed 100%.

The teachers chiefly used much mother tongue while teaching English at school than the university. They used Tamil or Sinhala as medium of instructions rather than English in the case of same race of students at school level. They use it as techniques of effective teaching.

On the other hand, majority of the student agreed that Lectures always used English, at lecture halls and they never used mother tongue as a medium of instruction during lecture period

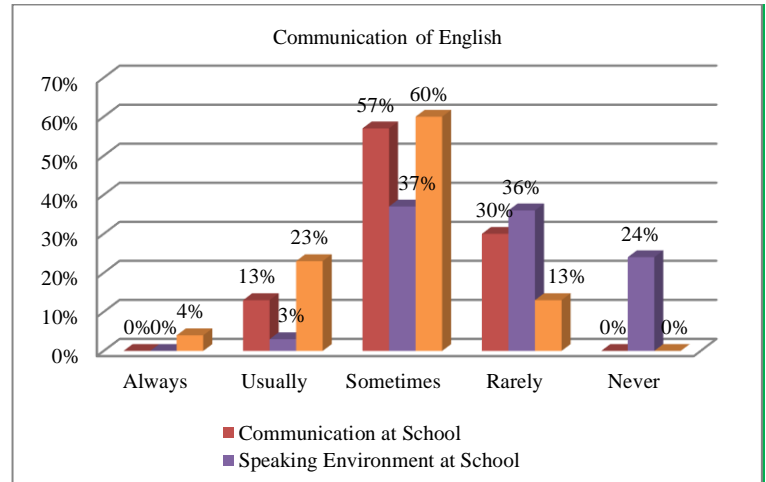


Fig 3.1 - Communication of English at different environment

During school period, students are learning secondary language in their English lesson period only. Nevertheless, if the schools provide more opportunities to learn English, that will be advantages to learn English for Students. Above flow chart indicated that the schools providing the feasible environment to learn English was approximately 50% which is revealed as follows; communication at school was 57%, speaking environment at school 37% and speaking with fellow students at University was 60%.

Some students (24%) mentioned that speaking environment was not provided at their secondary education. In addition, University premises provided a platform to develop the language by speaking with their batch mates in English due to different language speaking communities.

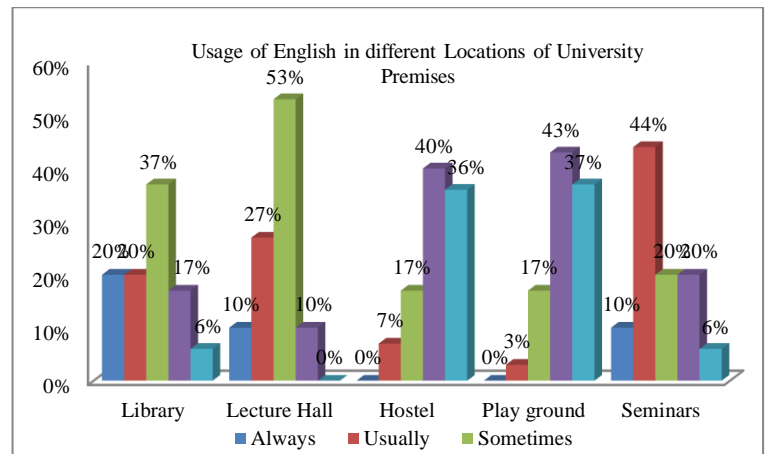


Fig.3.2:- Usage of English in different Locations of University Premises

In University, students are listening and learning English for whole day especially in lecture halls, seminars and communication with fellow students. Hence, it influences their usage of English. It was clearly indicated by the above data. Lectures, seminars and library environment were provided more opportunistic environment.

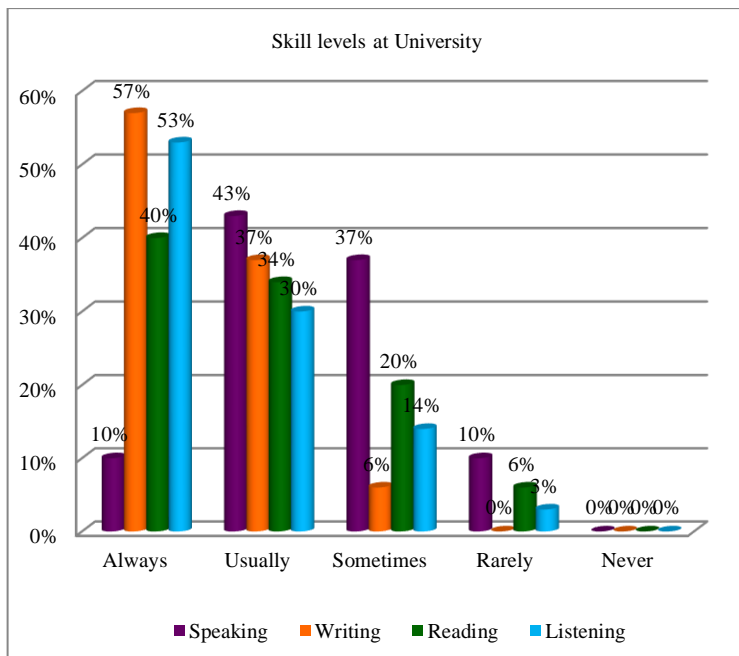


Fig. 3.3: - Overall skills of English at University

In University system, students stated that writing and listening skills are frequently used rather than speaking and reading skills and also students are getting less chances to communicate with lecturers in English during lecturing hours to improve their verbal skills (personal communication with students). Science degree programme provides more opportunities to learn writing and listening skills due to their more written assessment methods, attending lectures and seminars.

Most of the students are strongly agreed that English is significant in career development and also acts as better medium of instruction than Tamil and Sinhala language.

Main language barriers mentioned by students are anxiety to speak in front of audience, lack of communication skills, less confidence and concern about grammars during communication. Further, they recommended that English must be implemented as principal medium of instructions at school

level and introduction of English competencies, usage of English visual aids, team work among multiethnic communities.

In the present study, second year science students have been chosen as a target group, because of the adaptability to university environment, enough time for improving their skills. First year students were not selected due to less adaptations to the new environment, lack of undergraduate English results for the comparison, less time for language development, fully engagement with lectures and practicals.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study revealed that national school students showed more successful rate for University entrance than provincial school, frequent usage (100%) of English language of instructions, communication of English were higher in University than schools. In addition, usage of English was higher in lecture halls and seminars in the form of writing and listening skills than other locations including library, playground and hostels. At the mean time, usage of mother language was higher in school than University. Further study will be needed for extensive survey by including whole population of second and third year students with providing more information in the questionnaire.

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APPENDIX

01) Please tick your gender:

Male

Female

02)a. Whether parents are employed:

If employed: (please tick) yes

No

Parents	Self Employed	Government	Private	Others
Father				
Mother				

b. Please specify the employments:.....

As a school student:

Please state the name of your school:

03) Please tick the province where you attended school

No.	Province	O/Level	A/Level
01.	Eastern province		
02.	North central province		
03.	North western province		
04.	Northern province		
05.	Uva province		
06.	Southern province		
07.	Central province		
08.	Western province		
09.	Sabaragamuwa province		

04) Please tick the type of school that you attended to:

Grade	Type of School	
	National	Provincial
O/L		
A/L		

05) Please tick your O/L & A/L Grades in English:

i.O/L

ii.. A/L

A	B	C	S	W

A	B	C	S	W

06) Please tick the subjects that you offered at A/L:

Subject	
Chemistry	
Physics	
Biology	
Mathematics	
Others please state:	

07) Medium of Instructions: please tick,

Medium Instructions	O/L	A/L
Only Tamil		
Only Sinhala		
Only English		
Bilingual		

08) Techniques used to teach English: please tick,

Method	
Pair Work	
Group Work	
Individual work	
Others please state:	

09) Opportunities were provided to communicate in English at School: please tick,

	O/L	A/L
Always (100%)		
Usually (90%)		
Sometimes (50%)		
Rarely (5%)		
Never (0%)		

10) How often did your teacher use mother tongue while teaching English?

	O/L	A/L
Always (100%)		
Usually (90%)		
Sometimes (50%)		
Rarely (5%)		
Never (0%)		

11) My School had English Speaking environment? If yes mention the percentage.

Yes

No

Always (100%)	
Usually (90%)	
Sometimes (50%)	
Rarely (5%)	
Never (0%)	

12) Interactive techniques were used in your teaching and learning activities: please tick,

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

As an undergraduate:

13) What is the Grade that you have obtained for English in the 1st year?

A	B	C	D	E

14) During English lessons, all the instructions are given only in English:

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

15) English is better medium of instruction than mother tongue in the university education:

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

16) Audio Visual aids are used for the teaching of English:

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

17) State the teaching method of English at university:

Method	
Teacher Centered method	
Student centered method	
Audio Visual	
Others please state :	

18) How often your lecturer uses mother tongue while lecturing the subject?

Always (100%)	
Usually (90%)	
Sometimes (50%)	
Rarely (5%)	
Never (0%)	

19) Do you speak in English with fellow students? If yes mention the percentage

Yes

No

Always (100%)	
Usually (90%)	
Sometimes (50%)	
Rarely (5%)	
Never (0%)	

20) How often you use English at the following locations:

Place	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Library					
Lecturer Hall					
Hostel					
Play ground					
Seminars					

21) How often do you use other materials for the improvement of English?

Always (100%)	
Usually (90%)	
Sometimes (50%)	
Rarely (5%)	
Never (0%)	

Please mention the materials:

.....

22) How often do you use the skill in English your daily activities?

	Always	Usually	Some Times	Rarely	Never
Speaking					
Writing					
Reading					
Listening					
Others please state					

Personal Options:

23) Competency in communication in English is very necessary:

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

24) English is better medium of instructions than Tamil/Sinhala:

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

25) Other materials are used for the improvement of speaking skill?

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

26) a. Have you completed any English courses to improve your English language before university entrance?

Yes

No

b. If so, please mention the courses or diploma you followed in English:

.....
.....

27) Barriers that you face use to apply in English in general:

.....
.....
.....
.....

28) Any suggestions to improve English language at Schools & Universities. Please mention.

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Thank you. Your participation in this survey is much appreciated!