

Challenges Faced by Sri Lankan Undergraduates in English-Medium Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Most students in Sri Lanka receive their elementary and secondary education in Sinhala or Tamil, although English-Medium Instruction (EMI) is becoming increasingly prevalent in higher education worldwide. This qualitative systematic review examines the difficulties Sri Lankan undergraduates encounter when transitioning to EMI at public universities. Using thematic content analysis of peer-reviewed literature and empirical studies, augmented by student and lecturer testimonies, the study identifies socioeconomic and geographic disparities, cultural factors, language anxiety, a lack of institutional support, and language competency deficits as the primary obstacles. The findings indicate that students from arts faculties and those from rural areas face greater challenges due to limited prior exposure to English. The study also highlights the effects of faculty language proficiency, peer pressure (ragging culture), and inadequate pre-university English language instruction. Recommendations include enhancing university-level English-language support, targeting interventions for underprivileged students, and providing EMI lecturers with professional development. The research advances understanding of EMI challenges in post-colonial and multilingual contexts.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction, EMI, Sri Lanka, Undergraduates, Language Barrier, Higher Education, Language Anxiety, Post-colonial Education

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka presents a distinctive case study in post-colonial language policy. Following British colonisation in 1802 and the Colebrook-Cameron Reform of 1833, which established English as the language of governance, English dominated education at all levels through independence in 1948. The pivotal shift came with the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which replaced English with Sinhala as the sole official language, triggering significant ethnic tensions and fundamentally altering the educational landscape. Tamil was later granted official status alongside Sinhala in the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (1987). Consequently, from the 1960s onwards, Sinhala or Tamil became the primary language of instruction across primary, secondary, and most university faculties (Kennedy, 2017).

The resurgence of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Sri Lankan higher education in the twenty-first century has created a critical transition crisis. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka has been actively endorsing EMI, driven by the perception that it raises graduate employability and aligns with global internationalisation trends. According to the Annual School Census of Sri Lanka (2020), the majority of students enrol in universities after completing their studies in either Tamil (19.4%) or Sinhala (78.4%). This means that a significant majority of undergraduates must abruptly shift to studying entirely in English - a language in which they have received limited and often inadequate preparation (Mahawatta & Rassool, 2023).

Sri Lanka's English proficiency indicators underscore the severity of this challenge. According to the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) English Proficiency Index, Sri Lanka scores just 46.58%, ranking very low in Asia compared to Singapore's 63.52%. Despite English being taught as a compulsory second language from Grade 3, only approximately 50% of candidates pass the GCE Ordinary Level English examination (Jayathilake et al., 2021). The structural gap between school-level L1 instruction and university-level EMI constitutes the central problem this study addresses.

Aims and Research Questions

This study aims to systematically investigate the difficulties faced by Sri Lankan undergraduates enrolled in EMI programmes at state universities, whose medium of instruction at the school level was their first language (L1). The following research questions guide the inquiry:

RQ1: What are the challenges faced by students receiving EMI at Sri Lankan state universities?

RQ2: How does the language barrier affect undergraduates' overall academic performance?

RQ3: What solutions can be implemented to overcome the language barrier faced by undergraduate students?

BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka: A Brief Overview

Located in the Indian Ocean to the southeast of India, Sri Lanka is an island nation formally known as the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, which gained independence from Britain on February 4, 1948. The country comprises several cultures, languages, and ethnic groups: the Sinhalese majority, significant Tamil and Sri Lankan Moor minorities. The issue of minority rights, particularly those of the Tamil population, dominated modern Sri Lankan politics through the 1983–2009 civil war (CRS Report, 2017).

Language Use and Policy in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's linguistic history spans over two thousand years and includes local vernaculars, introduced languages, and colonial imprints. Three languages are central to the current language education policy: Sinhala (spoken by approximately 75% of the population, closely tied to Sinhalese ethnic identity and Buddhism), Tamil (spoken by roughly 12% as an ethnic group, and by a broader community across different ethnicities and religions), and English, the colonial legacy and contemporary lingua franca of globalisation (Liyanage, 2019).

According to the Department of Census and Statistics (2014), Sri Lanka has two national languages, Tamil and Sinhala, while English serves as the link language. Only approximately 13% of the population can speak English, and only about 17% can read and write it (Jayathilake et al., 2021). These figures reflect the outcome of deliberate language policy decisions made following independence.

The Swabasha Movement and Its Educational Legacy

After Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the country grappled with the role of English in relation to indigenous languages. The Swabasha (self-language) movement, which sought to promote Sinhala as the primary national language and medium of instruction, gained momentum during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Although proposals advocating the expanded use of Sinhala were raised in the 1940s, English remained the official language until the passage of the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956, commonly known as the Sinhala Only Act. This legislation established Sinhala as the sole official language of the state and contributed to ethnic tensions and sociolinguistic divisions. The subsequent shift toward vernacular-medium education, while expanding access to schooling, also laid the structural foundations for the contemporary English Medium Instruction (EMI) transition challenges faced by undergraduates (Madhavee & Ariyaratne, 2020).

Structure of the University System

Sri Lankan children begin a 13-year general education curriculum at age five. Admission to state universities is highly competitive, determined by Z-scores on the GCE Advanced Level Examination, with merit-based selections (40%), district quotas (55%), and provisions for educationally underprivileged districts (5%). There are currently 17 state universities accountable to the UGC, offering programmes across five main disciplines: science, technology, management and commerce, mathematics, and the arts (Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2018).

Under Sri Lanka's 'free education' policy, undergraduate education at state institutions is government-funded, with admission numbers restricted and determined by Z-scores and district quotas. The University Act grants

the Minister of Higher Education authority over the medium of instruction, though universities retain autonomy in EMI implementation (Jayathilake et al., 2021). This study focuses exclusively on the challenges within state university contexts.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

English as a Global Language

English has become a global lingua franca, increasingly used as the medium through which knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed internationally. The globalisation of English, through colonial expansion and globalised commerce, has made it the dominant language in multinational advertising, trade, business, government, and academia (King et al., 2017). In Sri Lanka's competitive labour market, English proficiency is strongly associated with social mobility and economic opportunity, creating immense pressure on universities to produce graduates with English competence (Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021).

Within the global language constellation, English holds a unique prestige. Parents across South Asia widely seek English-medium education for their children. Speakers of minority languages, including those from non-English-speaking nations, face growing social pressure to acquire English as a prerequisite for participation in the global knowledge economy (Gorter et al., 2014). This global dynamic shapes the institutional decision to implement EMI at Sri Lankan universities, even when student populations are not linguistically prepared for it. This tension between nationalist language policy and global economic integration reflects what Wright (2016) describes as the shift from language-as-identity to language-as-resource in post-colonial states.

Language Anxiety in Second Language Acquisition

Language anxiety is a well-documented psychological phenomenon in second language acquisition (SLA) research. It refers to the apprehension, nervousness, and inhibition learners experience when using a language other than their first. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." In the context of Sri Lankan EMI, language anxiety manifests through three intersecting dimensions: trait anxiety (an individual's innate tendency to feel anxious), operational anxiety (situational apprehension triggered by public speaking or examination), and evaluative anxiety (fear of negative social judgment regarding one's English) (Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021).

For Sri Lankan undergraduates who have completed 13 years of schooling in Sinhala or Tamil, the sudden immersion in English-medium instruction at university constitutes a high-anxiety transition. Students arrive with social recognition earned through competitive A/L examinations conducted in their L1; the language demands of EMI then threaten this self-concept and academic identity. Research consistently shows that language anxiety reduces participation, impairs academic writing, limits library use, and suppresses critical thinking, all of which compound the already disadvantaged position of students from rural and low-income backgrounds (Mahawatta & Rassool, 2023).

English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Sri Lanka

EMI at Sri Lankan universities was historically confined to science, engineering, and medical faculties. Since the early 2000s, EMI has expanded into the humanities and social sciences under UGC encouragement. Despite this expansion, school-level preparation for EMI remains critically inadequate: although English is taught as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 to Grade 13, less than 3% of students sit their GCE Ordinary Level examination through EMI, and less than 1% pursue Advanced Level through EMI. Moreover, students who choose EMI at the school level receive no preferential treatment in university admissions or government employment, removing any systemic incentive to pursue EMI pathways (Kennedy, 2017).

First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), and Bilingualism

A person's mother tongue, native language, or home language, defined as the language they (a) acquired first, (b) identify with most strongly, (c) know best, and/or (d) use most frequently, is referred to as L1. A second

language (L2) is generally understood to be a language that a learner is compelled to study or use, but which is not their native tongue (Benson & Kosonen, 2013).

Bilingual education was introduced to Sri Lanka in 2001, offering English-medium instruction in selected subjects (computer literacy, science, mathematics, and social sciences) for Grades 6–11. Students in these bilingual programmes are expected to develop proficiency in both their L1 (Sinhala or Tamil) and English. However, verbal English communication, particularly for academic purposes, remains a significant challenge for most bilingual programme graduates, and the programme lacks sufficient resources and qualified teachers to achieve its objectives (Mahawattha, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative systematic review methodology to examine the challenges faced by Sri Lankan undergraduates enrolled in EMI programmes at state universities. The qualitative design is appropriate given that the research seeks to understand lived experiences, institutional processes, and sociocultural dynamics rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses. As a systematic review, the study synthesises existing peer-reviewed scholarship, government reports, and empirical studies rather than collecting primary data directly, a delimitation necessitated by time and resource constraints, a limitation acknowledged by the study.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and empirical studies focusing on EMI in Sri Lankan state universities published between 2010 and 2024 formed the primary corpus. Studies from comparable post-colonial, multilingual contexts (notably Pakistan) were included to enable analytical triangulation. Inclusion criteria required that sources address at least one of the following: English language proficiency challenges in higher education, EMI transition from L1-medium schooling, institutional support for EMI, or language anxiety in tertiary students. Sources focused exclusively on primary or secondary education, or on irrelevant national contexts, were excluded.

Analytical Approach

Thematic content analysis was used to examine the gathered data. This involved identifying recurrent themes and codes pertaining to language barriers, socioeconomic factors, institutional support, cultural difficulties, and language anxiety. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories to synthesise findings across sources. The lived experiences of students and lecturers are foregrounded through direct

quotations from testimonies reported in primary empirical studies, specifically Mahawatta and Rassool (2023) and Siddiqui et al. (2021), to ground the thematic analysis in authentic participant perspectives. All sources are appropriately cited in accordance with APA conventions to address ethical obligations regarding attribution.

Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on existing literature rather than primary data collection, the absence of interviews or surveys conducted directly by the researcher, and its restriction to state universities in Sri Lanka. Future research should employ mixed-methods designs incorporating structured interviews, surveys, and classroom observation to provide richer empirical grounding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings organised around the major thematic categories identified through the systematic review: English language proficiency deficits, language anxiety, socioeconomic and geographic disparities, peer and cultural influences, institutional inadequacies, and lecturer language competence.

English Language Proficiency (ELP) Deficits as the Primary Barrier

The most consistently reported challenge across the reviewed literature is a foundational deficit in English

Language Proficiency (ELP). The shift from L1-medium secondary schooling to university-level EMI represents a structural discontinuity with severe academic consequences. Sriyalatha (2016, as cited in Mahawatta & Rassool, 2023) found that low ELP was the most significant determinant of poor academic performance at the university level. Students who achieved high Z-scores in competitive examinations conducted entirely in Sinhala or Tamil arrive at university without the linguistic capital to access their curriculum, write examination responses, or engage critically with academic texts.

EMI was historically restricted to science, engineering, and medical faculties. Since the early twenty-first century, it has expanded to the humanities and social sciences the faculties with the highest proportions of students from rural, low-income, and L1-dominant backgrounds. The divergence between institutional policy and student linguistic readiness is most acute in these faculties (Mahawatta & Rassool, 2023). Students are unable to express analytical thinking, apply theory, or demonstrate higher-order reasoning in examination answers, competencies expected particularly in the third and fourth years of study (Perera, 2013).

Language Anxiety: Psychological Dimensions

Language anxiety is a significant mediating factor between ELP deficits and academic outcomes. The transition to EMI does not merely challenge students cognitively; it threatens their academic identity. Students who were admitted to university after highly competitive examinations, earning significant social recognition, suddenly face public failure and embarrassment in an unfamiliar language. This produces trait and evaluative anxiety that compounds learning difficulties (Pabodha & Abeywickrama, 2021).

The following testimony from Mahawatta and Rassool's (2023) study illustrates the intersection of language anxiety, inadequate schooling, and feelings of helplessness:

"This low English proficiency . . . in this regard we are totally helpless . . . we came to the university with huge pride . . . but . . . since we don't have sound English knowledge, we face a lot of difficulties . . . we are embarrassed . . . it's our fault . . . that means from the beginning we didn't get a good foundation in English from teacher, we have never got a proper English teacher in our school, right? You can't know fix it at once in the university . . . now we are in real trouble..." (Student A, as cited in Mahawatta & Rassool, 2023, p.303)

This testimony reveals several layers of language anxiety simultaneously: the shock of institutional transition, internalised attribution of failure to personal inadequacy, grief over lost social status, and recognition of systemic failure in school-level English provision. The self-blame expressed ("it's our fault") is particularly revealing of how structural inequity becomes individualised in the absence of adequate institutional support.

A second testimony highlights how the absence of institutional bridging measures exacerbates anxiety at the transition point:

"I thought we would be given an English course once we were enrolled, but we were not . . . at least in our orientation, we thought we would have a three-month English course . . . I have one friend in Wayamba; they had a three- or four-month English course at a stretch. . . Even in Ruhuna, they had, but we didn't. I thought . . . I personally thought we would too get one at our university... We couldn't go to an English course after A/Ls due to our economic problems at home . . . our parents can't afford . . ." (Student B, as cited in Mahawatta & Rassool, 2023, p.303)

This account illustrates how uneven institutional provision across universities creates intra-systemic inequality, and how socioeconomic barriers to afford private English courses during the post-A/L period intersect with language anxiety to leave students doubly disadvantaged upon university entry.

Socioeconomic and Geographic Disparities

Students from rural areas face compounding disadvantages. Arts faculty students who are disproportionately from rural backgrounds consistently demonstrate lower ELP than their peers from urban and higher-income families. The absence of qualified English teachers in rural schools, the lack of English-speaking social environments, and the prohibitive cost of private English tuition collectively ensure that geographic and

economic disadvantage translates directly into linguistic disadvantage at university (Navaz, 2016, as cited in Perera & Peter, 2024).

Conversely, students from higher occupational and socioeconomic backgrounds whose families are integrated into English-speaking social networks enter university with substantially stronger ELP and benefit from self-reinforcing social capital (Perera & Peter, 2024). This socioeconomic bifurcation within university cohorts means that EMI, without targeted support, functions as a mechanism of educational inequality rather than a tool for equity.

Resource access is another dimension of this disparity. Library use is essential for academic development, yet it is disproportionately low among students with limited English proficiency, given that the vast majority of academic texts are published in English. This further widens the knowledge and performance gap between linguistically advantaged and disadvantaged students (Perera, 2013).

Peer and Cultural Influences: The Ragging Culture

One of the most structurally corrosive influences on EMI engagement in Sri Lankan universities is the ragging (bullying) culture, particularly prevalent in the first semester. Ragging is defined as any act which causes or is likely to cause physical or psychological injury, fear, or mental pain to an undergraduate. Critically, ragging actively suppresses English use, as students who speak English are targeted for social exclusion and ridicule. The following testimony from a lecturer illustrates the academic impact:

“Because in the first semester, especially with the ragging, they are totally screwed up. And that culture does not allow them to learn a single word of English. Even . . . those who know English are not allowed to talk in English . . . So, English is a tool that you’ve got to be using . . . Otherwise, it fades off. They are not allowed to use English for an entire semester; their only exposure is when we talk to them. So even at that time, they are in a transition state; they don’t [understand] anything we talk about. So, you see, the first semester, being ragged [leads to a state of turmoil]... we are teaching them in English, but nothing goes through. It’s an utter failure...” (Lecturer A, as cited in Mahawatta & Rassool, 2023, p.304)

This testimony reveals how a social-cultural practice systematically undermines the critical initial semester of the EMI transition, during which linguistic foundation-setting is most important. The absence of an English-speaking culture, especially in non-science faculties, further suppresses organic language development (University of Colombo scholars, 2016).

Institutional Inadequacies

Institutional support structures are inconsistent and insufficient across Sri Lankan state universities. The English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU), established to improve academic English proficiency, offers courses that incorporate audio, visual, storytelling, role-plays, presentations, discussions, debates, and computer-based assessments. However, the availability, quality, and scope of ELTU provision vary markedly between institutions (Perera & Peter, 2024).

Rameez (2019, as cited in Perera & Peter, 2024) identified several systemic institutional failures: lack of learner-centred teaching methodology, insufficient physical resources, including visual aids, and inexperienced teaching panels. Critically, some students are unable to access ELTU support due to economic constraints, and are unable to afford private supplementary English courses during the post-A/L period before university enrolment.

Lecturer Language Competence

An underexplored yet significant dimension of the EMI challenge is the English-language proficiency of lecturers themselves. The literature reviewed indicates that younger lecturers, while often competent in their subject areas, frequently lack adequate English-language proficiency for effective EMI delivery. Appropriate mechanisms must be established to ensure that lecturers in EMI programmes, particularly recently appointed staff, possess sufficient English proficiency (Kennedy, 2017).

Comparative Context: Pakistan

The Sri Lankan experience is mirrored in other post-colonial South Asian higher education systems. A case study from Sukkur University in Pakistan, which also has school instruction in the national language (Urdu) while universities operate in English, similarly found that students faced challenges with technical academic vocabulary, instructor English competence, and the cognitive demands of simultaneous note-taking and comprehension. Student testimonies included: “The difference between business English vocabulary and common English vocabulary is difficult to understand” and “Sometimes it isn’t easy to attend EMI courses because some instructors are not good at speaking English” (Siddiqui et al., 2021, pp.15–17). This comparative evidence strengthens the generalisability of the findings and suggests that the EMI transition challenge is structural and systemic across post-colonial South Asian higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the thematic analysis presented above, the following evidence-based policy recommendations are directed specifically at the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka and university administrations:

Recommendations for the University Grants Commission (UGC)

First, the UGC should mandate a minimum three-month EMI bridging programme as a non-negotiable component of the first semester at all state universities. Currently, such a bridging provision exists at some universities. Given that EMI bridging provision is now operational at most state universities, the UGC’s policy priority must shift from establishment to quality assurance and systemic accountability. First, the UGC should introduce a national EMI outcomes framework that moves beyond input measures (such as programme duration or contact hours) toward measurable learning outcomes. This framework should mandate that universities report annually on students’ pre- and post-programme English proficiency gains, disaggregated by faculty, district of origin, and school type. Such data would enable the UGC to identify persistent equity gaps and hold underperforming institutions to account, rather than permitting the current disparity in provision quality to persist beneath a veneer of structural compliance.

Second, the UGC should formally reconstitute English Language Teaching Units as Academic English Development Centres with independent departmental status, dedicated research budgets, and promotion pathways for academic staff. The current marginalisation of ELTU personnel within university hierarchies undermines staff retention and instructional quality; elevating the institutional standing of these units is a prerequisite for sustained improvement. Third, the UGC should establish a national EMI readiness index, updated biennially, that benchmarks each state university against standardised indicators of student English proficiency at the point of entry, mid-programme, and graduation. Publicly available benchmarking of this kind would create accountability incentives, facilitate inter-institutional learning, and provide an evidence base for targeted resource allocation.

Recommendations for University Administrations

Universities should establish mandatory academic English proficiency assessments upon student enrolment, with results used to stream students into appropriate levels of ELTU support. Students from rural and lower-income backgrounds, as well as those from arts faculties, should be identified as priority groups for targeted intervention. Universities should also implement peer support and English language mentoring programmes, carefully structured to counteract the negative peer pressure of ragging culture rather than reinforcing it. Furthermore, CPD (Continuing Professional Development) in English language pedagogy must be made mandatory for all newly appointed EMI lecturers, and English language competency should be included as a criterion in the recruitment of EMI-stream academic staff.

Recommendations for Schools and Pre-University Policy

The Ministry of Education should urgently address the shortage of qualified English teachers in rural schools, which the reviewed literature identifies as the root cause of the ELP deficit that universities are subsequently

required to remediate. Targeted teacher training and deployment policies that prioritise rural areas are essential. The GCE Advanced Level examination system should incorporate an EMI pathway that encourages school-level EMI engagement by granting EMI candidates preferential weighting in university admissions.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative systematic review has identified a structural crisis at the intersection of Sri Lanka's language policy history and its contemporary higher education system. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956 and subsequent language policy shifts produced a generation of undergraduates schooled entirely in Sinhala or Tamil, who are then required to pursue university degrees in English, a language for which most have received inadequate preparation. The challenges are not merely linguistic but deeply socioeconomic, geographic, psychological (through language anxiety), cultural (through ragging), and institutional.

Arts faculty students and those from rural backgrounds bear a disproportionate burden of these challenges, reflecting broader patterns of educational inequity that EMI policy without adequate support structures risks exacerbating rather than addressing. The study's comparative analysis confirms that these dynamics are not unique to Sri Lanka but are characteristic of post-colonial EMI transitions across South Asia.

The recommendations presented target specific, actionable reforms for the UGC, university administrations, and school-level policy. Most critically, the UGC must standardise EMI bridging provision nationally, link EMI expansion at the university level to demonstrable improvement in school-level English preparation, and treat English language support not as a supplementary service but as a core component of the undergraduate academic experience. Without these interventions, EMI risks functioning as an engine of inequality rather than a pathway to the internationalised, employable graduate workforce that policy seeks to produce.

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