

ESL Teacher-Trainees' Reading and Writing Competence: An Empirical Study

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Abstract - National Colleges of Education (NCoE), being the pioneering teacher-trainers in Sri Lanka are responsible for producing prospective ESL practitioners through meaningful pre-service training. The aim of this study is to examine to which extent the ESL teacher-trainees achieve the expected reading and writing skills at the end of their pre-service training. To this end, a purposive sample of eighty prospective teachers of English in four NCoEs were tested on reading and writing skills through a standardized test, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), in order to identify their reading and writing levels. The findings indicate that 47.5% of the total sample obtained less than 40 marks for the TOEFL writing while 41.3% of participants' TOEFL reading results were also significantly very low. Notably, there was a positive correlation between the external final examination marks for reading and writing conducted at the NCoEs and the TOEFL test results where the correlation-coefficient value was 0.65 in reading and 0.62 in writing. This validates that the teacher trainees in the NCoEs have not achieved the required reading and writing competence in English. Thus, their capability for strengthening the English language teaching and learning in the primary and secondary education system in Sri Lanka is a question. However, the findings ensured that by standardizing the English curriculum at the NCoEs, learner outcomes can effectively be enhanced, and thereby the NCoEs may produce qualified English teachers with accepted professional standards. The study has implications for all the stake holders involved in designing and delivery of English teacher education programmes at the NCoEs.

Key words - pre-service, teacher education, reading, writing, standardized test

I. INTRODUCTION

English language education in Sri Lanka traces back to 1815 when the British took over the sovereignty of the entire country. Subsequently, the emphasis on English education was made possible by opening the Civil Service to Sri Lankans which eventually created the Westernized elite. Especially, the Colebrook Cameron Commission in 1833 emphasized the need of standardization of the educational curriculum and the importance of the substitution of English for local languages (Coperahewa, 2011). Thus, local English schools were established and the missionary schools which were previously taught in the vernacular also adopted English (Ross & Savenda, 1988). Since then, English Language has undergone many changes.

In 1991, National Education Commission (NEC) was established to recommend a new policy covering all the aspects of education in the country. The NEC identified nine

national goals under the educational policy and set out basic competencies that should be achieved by each student through general education. Accordingly, oral English (Activity Based Oral English - ABO) was introduced to the primary stage (Grade 1 & 2) for communication, and formal English was taught from Grade 3 onwards. In the senior stage, English language was identified as a core subject. In addition, six subjects: First language (Sinhala/Tamil), Religion (Buddhism/Hindu/ Islam/ Christianity), English, Mathematics, Science and History were introduced as core subjects to junior secondary stage under the new curriculum reforms in 2007 (Nawastheen, 2019). Accordingly, each subject was designed based on the basic competencies introduced by the NEC. It ensured that core subjects provide a firm and broad educational base for the students. In order to employ these coherent educational reforms and policies comprehensively and effectively, National Colleges of Education (NCoEs) were established under the Act no.30 of Colleges of Education (1986). Significantly, they are the most prominent teacher training institutions that offer pre-service teacher training for different subjects, under the supervision of Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2016). Furthermore, according to the Act no. 28 of National Institute of Education (NIE) (1985), NIE was established for the curriculum design, academic supervision, assessment and evaluation, and awarding of certification in the NCoEs. Currently, the NCoEs award a three year National Diploma in teaching which is recognized as a professional qualification for teaching at the primary and secondary levels (from grade 1 to 11) in Sri Lanka.

The standard of the primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka can be measured through the performance of students who sit for the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (G.C.E. O/L) and the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) examinations. Both these examinations are accepted as important for progressing with higher education and for entering the world of work. In particular, as the 1997 educational reforms highlighted, English language at the G.C.E. O/L largely contributes to the total personality development of the students, while at the G.C.E. A/L to enhance their ability to effectively engage in the academic work. Besides, the National Policy in 1977 included a separate section under the title, 'Strengthening of English Teaching Programmes' in order to prioritize the place of English language in the country. This indicates the Government understands that the education system must

provide its output with an adequate degree of competence in the use of the English language in the world of work and in the technological and international environment of the 21st century (Nawastheen, 2019).

Although English has become a competitive edge in every possible sector in Sri Lanka and the English proficiency has become a major requirement, especially in the employment market, still students' English skills are at unsatisfactory levels. The foundation for English proficiency is laid by the schools and the results obtained by the students for the G.C.E.O/L English language is the most accepted basic qualification. However, the review of the school candidates' results for the English language at the O/L examination (first attempt) during the past five years clearly indicates an average of nearly 50% of failures. As Walisundara and Hettiarachchi (2015) claim, unsystematic English education in schools is the key reason for the unsatisfactory English language competency of the school students in the country.

As argued by Hamre and Pianta (2005), teacher-student interactions and collaboration in the classroom, largely contribute to students' success. It is a distinctive fact that there is a correlation between teachers' classroom practices and student performance (Abeywickrama, 2020a, 2020b). This means that teachers are the most powerful influence on student achievement (Babu & Mendro, 2003). Undoubtedly, correlation between teacher performance and student attainment has a special implication for the NCoEs. This is mainly because the NCoEs are capable of mediating at this juncture as their English curriculum has specifically been designed to cater for the English language requirements of the primary and secondary level students (grade 1-11) in the country. Currently, of nineteen NCoEs, four colleges namely, Peradeniya, Mahaweli, Pasdunrata and Jaffna, are producing English student - teachers to serve the primary and secondary education. Given this background, it is a must to gain a thorough understanding of the English - student teachers' capability for heightening their learner performance upon the completion of the three year Diploma.

As such, the main aim of this study is to examine to which extent English - student teachers of the NCoEs achieve the expected skills at the end of their training programme. To achieve this overarching objective, the research is directed by two main questions: (a) Do the student - teachers achieve the expected skills in reading and writing? and (b) What does the correlation between the student - teachers' external final examination marks and the TOEFL test results indicate? Moreover, the findings of the study have current significance with the decision made by the government to upgrade, the NCoEs to university faculties, providing an opportunity for trainee- teachers to become qualified graduates. This can be considered a turning point in the education policies of Sri Lanka due to the gravity it creates in the means of strengthening the bridge between teacher and student through a quality delivery of knowledge, attitudes and skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. English Language Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka witnessed a number of changes in language policy and practice after gaining independence from British rule in 1948. Most importantly, English was regarded as the official language in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) after 1948 (Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, 2015). In 1956, Sinhala was declared as the only official language and English was overthrown. In 1956 and 1958, the language riots developed in the country claiming the exclusive administration in Sinhala. In accordance with the 1972 constitution, Sinhala was once again reiterated as the official language while Tamil as the national language. Furthermore, in 1978 both Sinhala and Tamil were declared as national languages. Indo - Sri Lanka Accord in 1987 proclaimed Sinhala, Tamil and English as official languages of Sri Lanka (Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, 2015). In addition, in 1987, English was declared as the link language and Sinhala and Tamil as the official languages (Abeywickrama, 2011) with the thirteenth amendment to the constitution. English was first introduced in a constitutional base to grade one students with the educational reforms in 1997. Meanwhile, English medium of instruction was allowed from grade five onwards and General English was introduced to the G.C.E. A/L syllabus in year 2001.

Most importantly, the bilingual education was introduced to the primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka in 2003 with the aim of "providing an enabling environment to ensure that all students, irrespective of socio-economic and/or regional disparities, have the opportunity to acquire the level of English proficiency adequate for higher education and career advancement" (National Education Commission, 2003, p. 176). A remarkable change was brought forth in 2008 by "English as a Life Skill", the Presidential Initiative Programme (Fernando, 2013). The main purpose of this programme was to establish Sri Lankan English as a standard and a spoken variety within the country where the approved and formal written form is the International Standard English (Fernando, 2013). This programme was initiated with teaching communication English to twenty two thousand and five hundred (22500) teachers who represented 60% of the total teacher population in Sri Lanka. As Fernando (2013), claim this programme could make a remarkable standpoint in terms of developing communicative English education in Sri Lanka.

Walisundara and Hettiarachchi (2015), bring forth further policies adhered in 2009 for developing English language education. For instance, teacher professional development was incorporated in to a Master trainer training programme for hundred and twenty master trainers at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad, India. The programme was implemented with the broad objective of deconstructing the notion of handling English exclusively by the elite, through familiarizing English to a larger audience of Sri Lankans. Therefore, the materials and methods for teaching spoken English were designed in a manner they

support for achieving this objective. The importance of teacher professional development to achieve this outcome, has been emphasized by Abeywickrama and Ariyaratne (2020); their study concludes that ESL teachers' knowledge-oriented goals, can broadly support them to re-orient their perceptions and behavior.

As indicated various measures have been implemented by the government for developing the English language education in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, as Walisundara and Hettiarachchi (2015), argue, Sri Lanka still faces conflicts because the existing language policy is very much similar to the policies of post-colonial countries across the world. Although the strategies taken by the government and the policy makers for the success of English education can be much appreciated yet the proficiency in English language seems to be limited to urban majority. Therefore, issues still remain at large despite the state involvement and implementation of numerous programmes to heighten English language education in the country (Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, 2015).

B. Pre-service Teacher Education

UNESCO defines pre-service teacher training as “recognized and organized, private and public educational programmes designed to train future teachers to formally enter the profession at a specified level of education”. Teachers who have not officially met the recognized training standards and those who are pursuing a teacher training programmes to gain accreditation parallel to their work, are not regarded as pre-service training (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, n.d.)

As indicated by UNESCO (2015), improving the pre-service teacher education standards is possible through the implementation of eligibility requirements and continuous certification procedures. Accordingly, UNESCO (2015) explained the various strategies that are implemented in various global contexts. Ethiopia, for instance, has introduced a ‘General Education Quality Improvement Package’ for teachers. This ensures that teachers have a period of one year diploma and a pedagogical training prior to recruiting as teaches. France 2010 made a master or degree level qualification as a compulsory requirement for recruiting as a teacher. With this new implementation, France expects to improve and qualify the teacher trainees. According to UNESCO, some countries have also introduced certification procedures as a strategy to assure the standards of the pre-service teacher education. The best example is witnessed in Georgia, where the gradual salary increase of a teacher is connected to the process of certification. Thereby, an additional payment is allowed for the teachers who qualify in the subjects, English and Information Technology. Chile, has implemented the programme, *Inicia* in order to enhance the pre-service teacher training strategies. This programme which is carried out in the teacher training institutions, compulsorily evaluates the accreditation of teacher training courses with the motive of enhancing the quality of teacher education. Moreover, Cyprus, has introduced to pre- service teacher evaluation procedure which is largely based on objective

criteria. Iran has also paid attention to teachers' capability of vocational skills: knowledge, conduct and performance (UNESCO, 2015).

As the Ministry of Education (2001), states in the “*Vidyapeeta Sangraha*”, pre-service teacher education is primarily conducted by the NCoEs in Sri Lanka. According to the new educational policies, the NCoEs provide teacher -trainees with a three year full time pre-service training, prior to recruiting them to the education system. During this training, they are responsible for developing potential to face the challenges of modern technological trends in education as to prepare the future citizens of the country. However, as claimed by the National Education Commission (2016), in Sri Lanka, the pre-service teacher education is situated in a backward position in comparison with the global context given the number of unresolved issues in the pre-service education in the country, for instance, lack of concern for the professional qualifications in recruiting teacher trainees, limited standards in the pre-service teacher training, insufficient annual output of student - teachers, and inadequacy of the qualified teacher- educators and scarcity of the physical resources that are essential for successful training in the field of teacher education.

In particular, the National Education Commission revealed the existing strengths and weaknesses of the NCoEs pre-service teacher training (National Education Commission, 2016). One of the identified potential of the NCoEs curriculum is that it was designed as per the requirements of the school curriculum covering the scope of education practice such as “observing children, studying school profiles, block teaching, school and community projects” (NEC, 2016, p.20). This demonstrates the equal contribution of theoretical and practical foundation of the curriculum. In addition, the professional and special components of the curriculum ensure that the student - teachers are well-equipped with the sufficient competencies as primary and secondary teachers. Moreover, the “internship period, action research, curricular and extra- curricular activities” (NEC, 2016, p.20) have assured the standards of the training programme. However, amidst these potentialities, some weaknesses are also noted. For instance, the enrollment procedure to the NCoEs has a flaw because it admits fifty percent from the merit basis and the other fifty percent from difficult district basis. This is especially emphasized as this kind of admission procedure may have a critical impact as far as the subjects like English is concerned. In particular, the quality of teachers produced by the NCoEs may negatively be affected. In addition, the male student - teachers' enrolment is identified as numerically less than five percent which is also called into attention. Apart from that, as revealed by the National Education Commission (2016), there is a considerable shortage of qualified teacher educators to cater for the newly introduced subjects in the NCoEs.

C. Importance of Reading and Writing Skills

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019), in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) defines, reading literacy as

“understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (p.27). This definition assures reading as a major means of opening the pathway to the pool of knowledge. This means that developing teachers’ reading competence and the levels of standards achieved in reading proficiency have a great impact on enhancing the students’ learning outcomes. More specifically, if teachers are provided with the opportunity to understand the way they can manage the issues in reading tasks during the teacher training period itself they can effectively heighten their self- efficacy and professionalism.

Felipe and Barrios (2015), examined the student- teachers’ perceptions vs. performance through a reading competency test. The participants of the study had a higher degree of evaluation for their own reading competence. Critically, it was not proved by their performance in the reading test that was employed in this study. The importance of their low performance needs to be emphasized and concerned, as this test was taken by the English student - teachers. Based on the results, the study recommended more focused training and development for the teacher- trainees as they are accountable for the reading proficiency of future students. Allan and Mackenzie (2019), claim that English teachers in the secondary stage, treat skills of speaking, listening and writing equally, with reading given a notable and the lowest priority. Teachers are likely to believe reading as their strongest skill area because of the way in which reading in English is taught in schools. But, this self-evaluation is proven incorrect as per the scores attained by them for each skill. Surprisingly, listening registers as the strongest overall skill followed by writing, speaking and reading (Allan and Mackenzie, 2019).

Moreover, according to Arslan (2013), pre-service teacher training is multi - dimensional in nature, however, now it is a context where student - teachers do not truly attain the basic knowledge and also do not effectively engage in writing tasks. Notably, years ago, writing was regarded as a skill inseparable from grammar (Onozawa, 2010). Moreover, as Jahin (2012), conceptualize, when a writing task involves peer review, many aspects can be discussed and feedback will ultimately support practitioners to perform better in writing activities. Many investigations have also indicated the positive impacts of peer reviewing on the writing process and the final product, and subsequently, how it not only enhance the specific skills but also their personality and other character traits (Jahin, 2012).

A study undertaken by Angel and Garcia (2017) for identifying the English writing skills of pre-service teacher trainees in the University of Colombia, establish that the standards of a college - level writing skills can be ensured by providing them the basic grammatical knowledge and syntactic awareness required for their academic and advanced writing. This study ensured higher results for the pre-service teacher trainees by the implementation of a unique module, multi-faceted academic writing in the first two semesters, and also

adhering to meaningful assessment strategies. Especially, this finding has a remarkable implication for English pre-service teacher training in Sri Lanka as those programmes also intend to enhance language learners’ academic writing.

The importance of prioritizing both reading and writing skills in a curriculum is explicitly stated by Rathnasena et al. (2013), especially, in a context where the English text books are based on the communicative approach. However, the final examinations in the primary and secondary education levels in Sri Lanka only evaluate the students’ reading and writing skills, not listening or speaking skills.

D. G.C.E. Ordinary Level Performance

The G. C. E. (O/L) is the “first national level assessment of English language proficiency in the local school system” in Sri Lanka (Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, 2015, p. 28). Although, it must generally assess all the four skills of English as a summative assessment, it measures only the students’ reading, writing skills and competence in grammar as it is a written examination. Even though the result or grade that the students obtain for the English paper is not considered a qualification to enter the senior secondary level in the school context, this feedback is an authentic indicator for the policy planners and other stakeholders to recognize the divergence between the real application and the policy planning that hinders students’ achievement of the expected outcomes.

Walisundara and Hettiarachchi (2015), revealed the importance of this matter in a detailed report which analyzed the candidates’ responding percentage to each skill in the G. C. E. (O/L) English language papers, I and II, gathering the data from the Research & Development Branch of the National Evaluation and Testing Service in 2010. According to these statistical reports, over 50% of the students have responded to the vocabulary section while a 30%, a moderate number, of the candidates have answered the grammar activities. Of the total candidates, the reading activities have been responded by around 40%. Critically, the lowest percentage has been recorded for the writing activities in the test paper II. This report ultimately exposes a key issue in the English language teaching and learning in the primary and secondary education which points to the need of providing adequate consideration for the two principle skills, reading and writing (Walisundara & Hettiarachchi, 2015).

E. Teacher Performance and Student Attainment

As indicated previously, students English language proficiency that is visible throughout their academic career entirely depends on the experiences that they attain in specific classrooms with specific teachers (Hanushek, 2002; Nye, Kostanopoulous, & Hedges, 2004). A research carried out in Korea identified three principles areas: “English language proficiency”, “pedagogical knowledge” and “socio-affective skills” (Park & Lee, 2006, p. 236) that need to be considered in determining the qualities of an effective teacher of English. According to the, a majority of teachers confirmed the need of

English language proficiency whereas the pedagogical knowledge was prioritized by the most students. After carefully examining the findings authors finally recommended that the existing education programme must focus on developing the teachers' English language proficiency. Another research undertaken by Shishavan and Sadeghi (2009) in the education institutions of Iran also examined the characteristics of an effective English language teacher. The qualitative responses of teachers highlighted that the expertise in English language proficiency is the most required aspect while the students reported that the personality traits of a teacher is much pivotal in order to become a successful teacher. In addition, Chin and Lin (2009), also emphasized that an effective English teacher must be able to demonstrate a standard command in English, however, for Arikani (2010), 'content knowledge' of the particular language is an essential requirement to be an effective practitioner. As many researchers claim, a better and successful learning of English is always possible if teacher competence and fluency in language are assured (Mallawa, 2003; Karunarathne, 2009; Wijerathna, 2002).

Although researchers argue that by applying the communicative language teaching approach for classroom practices teachers can develop fluency and thereby students can gain quality outcomes (Arikani, 2010), English teachers in the primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka mostly use the prescribed text book so as to strategically quit the opportunity for applying the communicative approach for the lesson (Fernando, 2013). On the other hand, as the exam-oriented learning system only demands the improvement of students' reading and writing skills teachers are highly unlikely to use the communicative approach in the classroom. Eventually, the students may not receive any quality input from their teachers for heightening their communicative skills, thus, they tend to develop their speaking skills on their own. If this is the case, all the stake holders in the industry need to have a through awareness of this phenomenon and create meaningful opportunities to develop English teachers' communicative competence as they have inadequate exposure at present. In addition, as revealed by Aloysius (2015), currently, an inconsiderable number of students choose the G. C. E. (A/L) English (73) subject given the lack of qualified and competent English teachers to deliver the syllabus. As such, the opportunities need to be provided with the English student-teachers to specialize in English that may enable them to become experts in English and thereby, catering for the needs of the students in the country. In general, it also is important to note that English teachers' quality and the standards must be given special attention as most English practitioners are non-native speakers of English.

F. Use of a Standardized Test

According to the threshold hypothesis, an English language learner's attained level of proficiency which is usually measured based on the prior constructed standards of the English language can be well-exhibited through the relevant

academic works in the target language (Grisso, 2018). Furthermore, as conceptualized by Grisso (2018), those who are below the constructed benchmark might be capable of engaging in the academic task but not necessarily achieve the confidence and proficiency to successfully perform in the target language.

According to the Washback Concept of Bailey, 1999, test results can affect students' attitudes and the standardized tests have the capacity to influence both teaching and learning entities (Angel & Garcia, 2017). While this argument was strongly supported by the researchers (Green, 2007; Soleimani & Maahdavipour, 2014), they claim that this outcome can only be achieved if students are provided with high standard and focused language tests to evaluate their knowledge and skills. Hence, by engaging continuously in standard language proficiency tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) an applicant can contribute him/herself to widen the scope of knowledge of the target language. As Hosseini, Taghizadeh, Abedin and Naseri (2003) argue, language learners must compulsorily gain the experience of standardized tests in order to demonstrate the acquired knowledge, in other words, completion of the assigned academic tasks is not adequate for a language learner to enrich the skills. Interestingly, the previous research indicate that both students and teachers have positive perceptions for standardized tests (Read & Hayes, 2003). This means that standardized test carries much recognition, and therefore, by constructing the atmosphere for conducting these tests appropriately in the language teaching classroom learner outcomes can effectively be evaluated and enhanced.

III. METHODOLOGY

The researcher applied purposive sampling method to select eighty English- student teachers from the four NCoEs: Peradeniya, Mahaweli, Pasdunrata and Jaffna, as participants for this study. This method allowed the researcher to gain a holistic idea of the pre-service English teacher training in Sri Lanka. The study exclusively used the quantitative data and employed standardized tests as the main research instrument for data collection. First, the TOEFL reading and writing tests were employed. As indicated earlier, the TOEFL was selected because it is one of the most internationally-recognized standardized tests. The second test used for gathering data is the NCoEs' English reading and writing external final examination.

As indicated previously, the objectives of the study are twofold. The first objective is to examine the existing English reading and writing levels of the selected group of participants. To this end, the TOEFL reading and writing test marks were analyzed separately as two skills. The second objective of the research, examining the correlation between the marks obtained by the selected participants for reading and writing in the NCoEs external final examination and the scores obtained for TOEFL reading and writing test, is

achieved through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). As Marczyk et al. (2005) claim, correlation is where a researcher investigates a relationship between two variables allowing to make predictions about one of the variable upon the other. Although a correlation is not compulsorily equal the causation, the researcher is able to arrive at predictions about the corresponding variable when there is strong correlation between variables.

IV. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The student-teachers' existing reading and writing levels were measured through the TOEFL reading and writing tests. The scores were awarded according to the scoring rubrics. Both TOEFL reading and writing tests scores are presented out of hundred, and the achieved scores were shown in the subsequent sections.

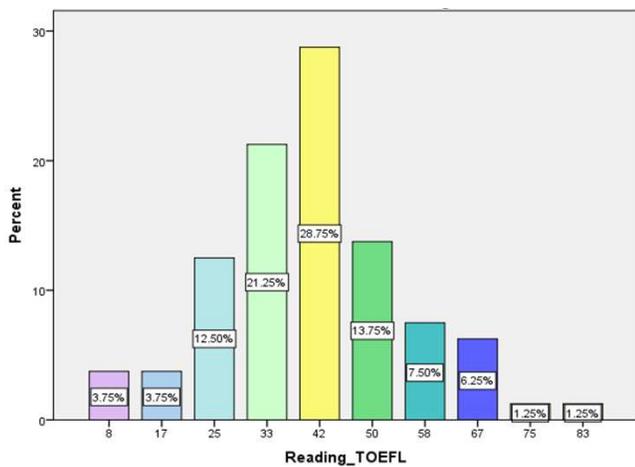


Fig. 1. TOEFL reading test score distribution

As illustrated in Fig. 1, it is very much evident that 70% of the participants have obtained less than 42 marks for the TOEFL reading test. In other words, more than half of the student-teachers have not attained at least 50% of the total score.

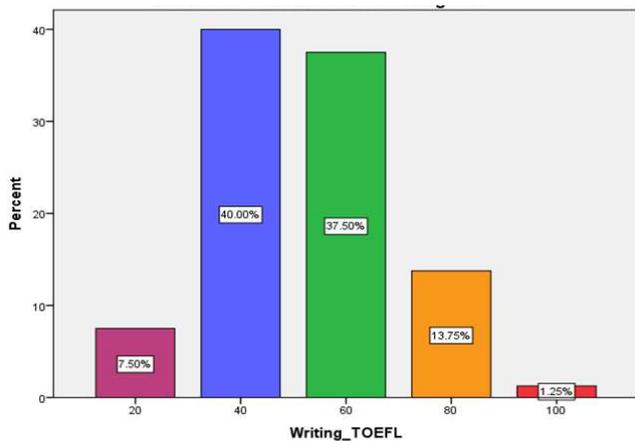


Fig. 2. TOEFL writing test score distribution

As presented in Fig. 2, 47.5% of the participants have gained less than 40 marks for the TOEFL writing test. More

specifically, half of the participants have not achieved at least 50% of the total score for writing. These findings demonstrate the participants' inability to achieve at least 50% marks in both TOEFL reading and writing tests. Thus, the results of the standardized tests of reading and writing, proves the fact that the English - student teachers' existing reading and writing levels are not in a satisfactory level.

The second objective of the study is to examine the correlation between the marks obtained by the participants for the external final examination and TOEFL reading and writing tests. Table I and Table II illustrate the results attained through SPSS.

Table I: Correlation of Reading Marks

Correlations			
		Reading	TOEFL_Reading
Reading	Pearson Correlation	1	.651**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	80	80
TOEFL_Reading	Pearson Correlation	.651**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	80	80

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Accordingly, the correlation-coefficient value between the marks of the NCoE external final examination and the TOEFL reading test is 0.65 which reveals a positive correlation between the two tests.

Table II: Correlation of Writing Marks

Correlations			
		RMarks	EMarks
RMarks	Pearson Correlation	1	.616**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	303	303
EMarks	Pearson Correlation	.616**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	303	310

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table II presents the correlation-coefficient value between the NCoE external final examination marks and the TOEFL scores of writing tests. As indicated in the table, the value 0.62 also indicates the positive correlation between the tests.

According to the TOEFL reading test scores, it is certain that the student - teachers have demonstrated very low performance in the reading skill. Obtaining less than 42 marks by 70% of total participants, clearly establishes that the student - teachers have not even inculcated the basic reading skills. As indicated in the previous literature, the current study also exposes the contradiction between student-teachers' perceptions; self-evaluation of their reading competence, vs performance; what they exactly achieved. Allan and Mackenzie (2019) revealed a similar result through their study

where participants could obtain low marks for reading in comparison with other three skills. The test which was administered in the current study is an important measuring tool to assess the authentic and realistic reading level of the student - teachers in the NCoEs. The result is highly valid and credible as the test was an internationally - accredited standardized language proficiency test. It is worth mentioning that these trainees - teachers' unsatisfactory reading proficiency may have a negative impact on the learners reading skills in the future.

As per the TOEFL writing test scores, the student - teachers' writing level was also recorded low. Critically, half of the participants could not gain at least 50% of the total score for the TOEFL writing test. As indicated in the TOEFL writing test score distribution, only twelve participants have obtained a mark above 80. This score is emphasized as it is the most suitable means for assessing the particular level of these trainees. Their existing standard and proficiency should be broadly discussed because the teacher competency is increasingly becoming an influential factor in determining student performance. According to Nye, Kostanopoulous, and Hedges (2004), students' academic career is entirely dependent on the experiences attained by them in specific classrooms with specific teachers. Thus, student - teachers in the NCoEs must have a thorough understanding of this phenomenon and attempt to fulfill their academic and professional qualifications that are essential for knowledge dissemination and, on the other hand, for heightening their professional growth and development.

According to the findings of the second research question, the correlation-coefficient value between the reading skills in the external final examination and the perceived proficiency level of the TOEFL reading test demonstrated a positive relationship. The positive correlation of reading marks illustrates that the external final NCoE reading test has positive associations with the TOEFL reading test, and it also demonstrates the existence of a reasonable statistical correspondence between the scores. This positive correspondence also emphasizes the reliability and validity of the external final NCoE reading test. Thereby, the reading test instrument which is designed by the Department of Education for the evaluation of the NCoEs' student- teachers' reading skills suggests a satisfactory standard. Hence, at this juncture, what really matters is, in order to perform well in a valid and a reliable test instrument, the student - teachers must achieve the required degree of standard. Notably, the correlation - coefficient value between the external final examination and the TOEFL writing test also demonstrates a positive correlation. This means that the external final NCoE writing test paper ensures the validity and credibility as the test scores are statistically correspondent to the scores of the TOEFL writing test. Although, the NCoE external final writing test has all the necessary standards of an accredited test instrument such as the TOEFL writing test, the test takers are not competent enough to attain higher scores.

Overall, the findings of the study establish that both testing instruments: the NCoE external final examination and the TOEFL reading and writing tests, are valid and credible given the positive correlations between them. However, the student-teachers' low performance in both reading and writing, questions their professional standards and competence in English language skills. As researchers argue, a better and successful learning of English is always possible if teacher competence and fluency in language are assured (Fernando & Mallawa, 2003; Karunaratne, 2009). Especially, in the Sri Lankan context, as most English teachers serving in the schools are not native, they are responsible for upgrading their knowledge and skills in order to perform well in the language classroom, and through that the students can acquire the required outcomes effectively. Otherwise, the entire primary and secondary English education in Sri Lanka will negatively be affected.

V. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION and FUTURE RESEARCH

The student - teachers' low competence for reading and writing levels is clearly indicated through the TOEFL reading and writing test scores. There were significant positive correlations between the scores of reading and writing in the external final examination and the TOEFL test. These positive correlations assure the validity and credibility of the reading and writing test papers of the NCoEs' external final examination. Although the test is valid as per the statistical correspondence with the TOEFL test scores, the revelation of positive correlations proves that the student - teachers could perform better in the NCoE external final examination, if they are provided with the required skills and knowledge.

This point to the need of paying special consideration to the student teachers' reading and writing skills must be paid special consideration as these two competencies mostly matter in assessing students' performance in the examinations, especially in the Sri Lankan context. If this is indeed the case, developing reading and writing skills of the teacher- trainees in the NCoEs is highly recommended. Only this kind of approach can support them to heighten their future classroom practices and enhance the English knowledge and performance of the students in the primary and secondary education in the country. To achieve these outcomes, first, the study highly recommends the need of revising the NCoEs existing writing and reading syllabus. However, this must be carried out after a thorough need analysis. Especially, the policy makers and curriculum developers of the pre-service teacher education such as the NIE and Ministry of Education have a prime accountability for revisiting the NCoEs' reading and writing curriculum. Moreover, prescribed reading and writing materials should be added to the syllabus as annexures for assuring the uniformity of the taught content and the standard of the materials and activities. Another vital policy recommendation is the implementation of a proficiency test for the new entrants to the NCoEs. This manifests a filtering process and thereby, the applicants of a certain standard will

be enrolled. Furthermore, it may create a competitive student-teacher classroom where a collaborative teaching/ learning environment will develop. Moreover, the teacher-educators' professional development is also strongly recommended. In this regard, the respective authorities must provide productive and meaningful PD opportunities for teacher- trainees to enhance their quality and standards.

The study also has several limitations. Mainly, this investigation limited the target group to the government English student -teachers who have completed a two year residential academic programme. In addition, the research mostly focused on the student teachers' skills but not the competency levels. Furthermore, the study has delimited to two skills, conversely, it is impractical to cover all the four skills of a language through this nature of study. Further studies can be undertaken to examine the student-teachers' competence in terms of other two skills: listening and speaking. The existing curriculum of the NCoE is also a potential area for future research, specifically; the content must be extensively analyzed in terms of the relevance and standards. Another salient aspect which must be compulsorily subjected to the further studies is the testing and evaluation methods carried out in pre-service teacher training in Sri Lanka.

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