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# Standard of English proficiency of first-year university students - Special reference to Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University, Sri Lanka

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R. Joel Jairus<sup>1</sup>, A. Angela<sup>2</sup>, I. Nasooha<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Languages & Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka. +94757042516, [joeljairus77@gmail.com](mailto:joeljairus77@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Languages & Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka. +94720822092, [angelanathan2020@gmail.com](mailto:angelanathan2020@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Languages & Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka. +94717007492 [nasuhajanu@gmail.com](mailto:nasuhajanu@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*The English language is one of the global languages spoken internationally. Trincomalee campus is an affiliated institute of Eastern University, Sri Lanka has 4 major departments and a unit. The research examined the standard of English proficiency of the first-year students of Trincomalee campus and the challenges faced by the first-year students to follow the degree in English medium. Survey methodology was employed to carry out the objectives of the research. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire with hundred samples. The research found out that, the standard of English proficiency of first-year students of Trincomalee campus is average. The students have given priority to the English language at the Ordinary level and they have not given priority to Advance level English as they have other three main subjects to focus on for the final examination. As the majority of the students have finished their school studies in their mother tongue, most of them face difficulties to follow their studies in English at the campus. Though the students used to discuss in English in the classroom, they are afraid to interact with the lecturer or answer questions in English as they make grammatical mistakes. Most of the students are guessing or partially only understand the lectures in English. Grammatical errors, terms are new in English from their mother tongue, not able to complete the sentence fully in English, fear of making mistakes, writing assignments in English, unable to understand few vocabularies, and pronunciation difficulties are the challenges faced by most of the first-year students. The majority of the students are trying to enhance their English knowledge by translating the notes into their mother tongues, trying to discuss in English with friends, watching English movies with subtitles, and reading English books. The study recommends that the campus should form an English club for the students, especially first-years to involve them in speaking and other activities in English to enhance their knowledge of English.*

**Keywords—** Trincomalee campus, English, Survey method.

## 1. Introduction

The English language is one of the global languages which means the language is spoken internationally and it was spread by the British people at first from the 1600s to the 1900s. In the 20s century, the English language has become the global of the world. In the contemporary society, English is predominant for students as it broadens their

knowledge, develops emotional skills, and provides job opportunities. Furthermore, English language is a bridge that helps to interact people with other countries.

Underpinning policy to develop a bilingual professional class of English-speaking locals in the colonial hierarchy Canagarajah (2005) to reduce the financial burden of bringing staff from Britain to per-form more mundane,

lower echelon administrative tasks (Baldsing, 2013). In Sri Lanka after the invasion of British in 1976 English language was introduced and it was limited to the urban population. Since the 1950s English has been the teaching as a second language in schools. Coperahewa (2009) stated that 1946 reforms aimed to upraise the status of local vernaculars and strengthen their teaching and it was compulsory for all schools in their curriculum. Balakrishnar & Thanaraj (2015) stated that after independence in 1948, English language education policy became progressively engrossed in ethnic conflict. English was planned to remain the official language only until its phasing out by 1956, but it became clear English proficiency was continuing to act as the gatekeeper to employment in government and business (Balakrishnar & Thanaraj, 2015).

Advanced Level General English was introduced after twenty years, this demand has not been translated into learner outcomes, at least not in the government schools attended by more than 95 percent (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka Statistics Branch, 2018) of Sri Lanka's school students. According to the survey of Department of Examination (2018), English as a compulsory subject for the university admission. In 2018 almost 94% of candidates sat the General English examination, but 60% of candidates failed, and among them half of the students got the lowest passing grade.

According to the survey which is conducted by the government in 2009, found there were nearly 21,000 untrained English teachers in primary and secondary schools (Lim, 2013). Research conducted by the World bank in 2009 stated that the lack of English communications skills affects the securing employment of undergraduates and graduates. Siger (2009) stated that the lack of English communication skills has also been identified as a factor that has limited the capacity to perform at a higher level and share higher job responsibilities.

## 2. Objective and Research Questions

The objective of the present paper is to inquire into the standard of English proficiency of first-year university students at Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

It is proposed to address the following research questions through the study;

- (a) What is the standard of English proficiency of the first-year students of Trincomalee campus?

- (b) What are the challenges faced by the first-year students to follow a degree in English medium?

## 3. Methodology

Research Methodology is the specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select process, and analyze information about a topic. (Research guide, University of Witwatersrand).

### 3.1 Survey Methodology

A systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) individuals for the purposes of describing the attributes of the larger population of which the individuals are members. • The attributes attempt to describe basic characteristics or experiences of large and small populations in our world. (Enanoria, 2005)

In this research, the data was collected as mentioned below:

- 50 Tamil respondents
- 50 Sinhala respondents

The questionnaire instrument consisted of three parts, personal information of the respondents, mode of information resources, and type of information received. Non-Random sampling is a sampling technique where the samples are gathered in a process that does not give all the individuals in the population equal chances of being selected. This study was conducted with

10 Tamil respondents from the Department of Languages and Communication studies, 10 Sinhala respondents from the Department of Languages and Communication studies, 10 Tamil respondents from the Department of Business and management studies, 10 Sinhala respondents from the Department of Business and management studies, 10 Tamil respondents from Department of Computer science, 10 Sinhala respondents from Department of Computer science, 10 Tamil respondents from Department of Physical science, 10 Sinhala respondents from Department of Physical science, 10 Tamil respondents from Unit of Siddha medicine, 10 Sinhala respondents from Unit of Siddha medicine.

## 4. Results and Discussion

According to this study, there were 62 female and 38 male respondents. 50% of the respondents use Sinhala, 47% of the respondents use Tamil and 3% of the respondents use English to interact with their family members.

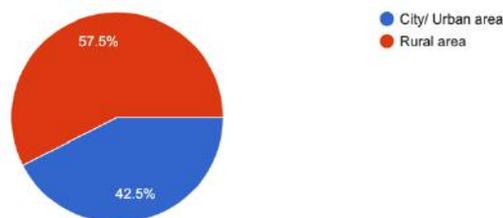


Fig.1: The place where respondents live

57.5% of the respondents live in rural areas and the rest of the respondents live in city/urban areas. Among the 3% of the respondents who use the English language to interact with their family, two respondents are living in urban areas and the respondent lives in a rural area. Further, the study

states about the school medium that 41.1% of the respondents studied in Tamil medium, 53.3% in Sinhala medium, and 5.6% in English medium. 41.7% of the students have followed Sinhala medium in their primary

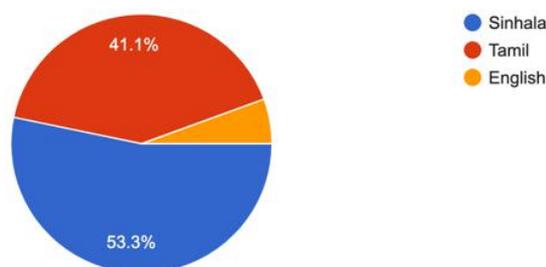


Fig.2: The medium respondents have studied at school

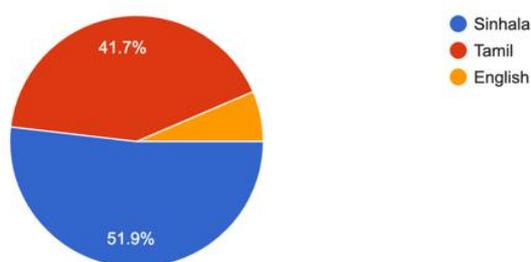


Fig.3: The medium respondents have studied at primary school

The study further stated that 23% of the respondent got "A" passes in ordinary level examinations whereas 21% got "B", 38% got "C", 14% got "S" and 4% got "F" passes in the ordinary examination. Further in Advance level examination only 9.3% of the respondents got "A" passes, 6.5% got "B", 28.7% got "C", 35.2% got "S" and 20% of the

respondents got "F" (Fail). Most numbers of the respondents who have passed the O/L English examination have failed in A/L English examination. It clearly shows that the students gave priority to O/L English examination and not to the A/L English examination as students were keen on passing the main subjects in Advance level except English.

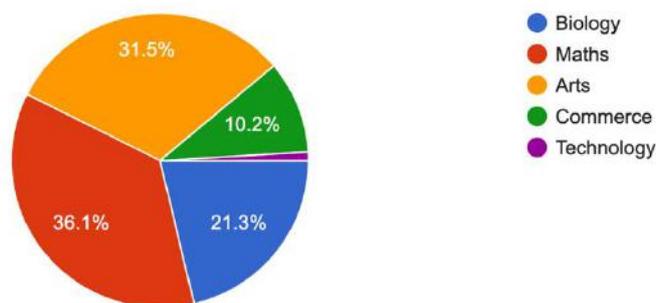


Fig.4: The stream the respondents have studied in Advance Level

As per the study, most of the respondents study Science and Maths stream meanwhile 31.5 % of the respondents studied Arts, 10.2% Commerce and 1% studied Technology stream. Among the total respondents, 4% have studied English literature at their advanced level. The study further stated that 66.7 % of the respondents have not followed any

certificate courses or diploma courses in English during their school days. 90% of the respondents have not participated in the English examinations held by universities during their school time. But 70% of the students stated that they have participated in the English day and English-related programs at school.

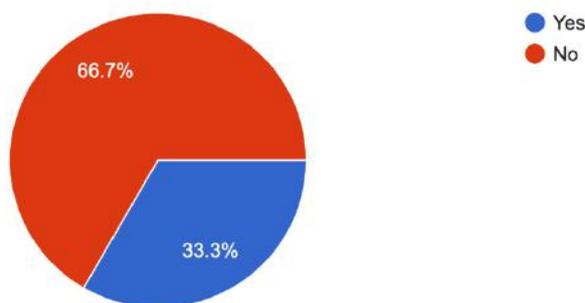


Fig.5: The respondents who followed Certificate/ Diploma courses in English during their school days

Most of the students (65.6%) agreed that their school English teachers encouraged them to talk in English in their classroom. 24 % of the students stated that their English teacher rarely comes to the classroom to teach English meanwhile 57% disagreed with the above statement.

Though 57.9% of the students have followed certificate/diploma / higher national diploma courses in English after their advanced level, 35.3 % of the respondent stated that they were afraid to follow a degree in English after being selected for university.

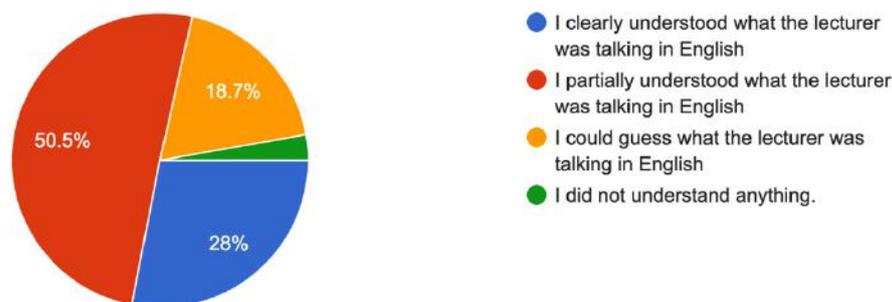


Fig.6: Students' understanding of English during the first class at university

The research found that 50.5% of the students partially understood what the lecturer was talking in English on the first day of the university class. 28% of the students stated that they clearly understood what the lecturer was talking in English, 18.7% of the students said that they were able to guess what the lecturer was talking in English, and the rest of the students said they didn't understand anything that the lecturer was talking in English.

99% of respondents have agreed they have English subjects in the first semester and one percent of the respondent has said that there is no English subject in the first year.

62% of the students stated that it is difficult to write assignments in English and the rest of the students stated that it is not difficult.

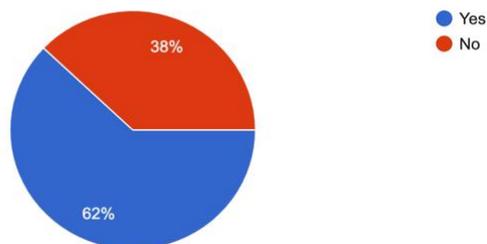


Fig.7: Is it difficult to do assignments in English?

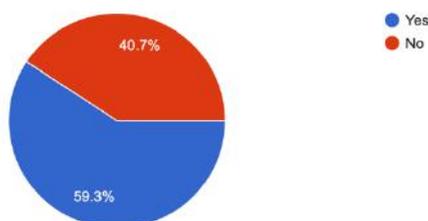


Fig.8: Is it difficult to answer a question in English in the classroom?

The majority of the students (59.3%) stated that it is difficult to answer a question in English in the classroom and the rest of them stated that it is not. 37.4 % of the students stated that they are afraid that they will make mistakes while talking in English. 52% of the students use the English

language to discuss with other students. As the classroom has Multilanguage students, the students use English to communicate with others who don't understand native languages like Sinhala and Tamil.

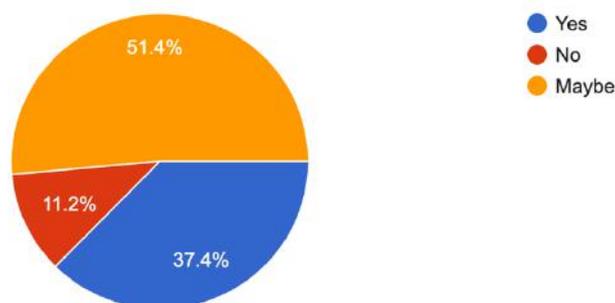


Fig.9: Are you afraid that you would make mistakes while talking in English?

As most of the students are afraid of making mistakes in English majority of them find it difficult to talk to lectures in English.

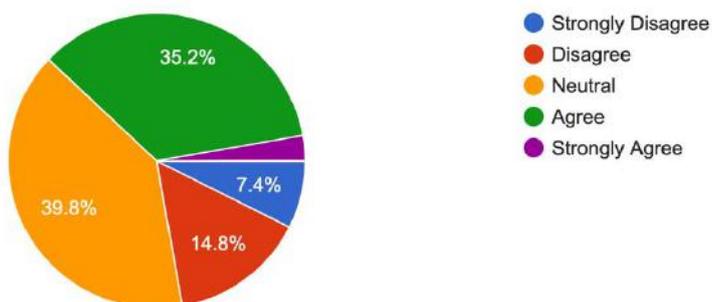


Fig.10: The respondents find difficult to talk to lecturers in English

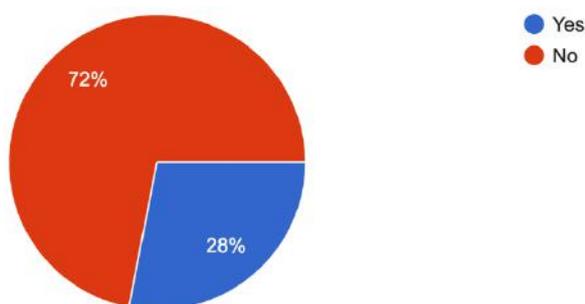


Fig.11: Is it difficult to complete the degree in English medium?

72% of the respondents believed that completing a degree in English is difficult. The majority of the respondents watch movies and read books in English. The respondents use English subtitles to understand the movies clearly. The majority of the students stated that they translate the notes into their own language to understand them clearly. It shows that most of the students are involved in studies though they are not able to understand the language a hundred percent. Reading English books, watching movies in English with subtitles, and trying to discuss with friends in English express that the students are adapting their selves into an environment that is not surrounded by the people who talk in their mother tongue as Trincomalee campus consists multi-cultural and languages students.

The students expressed the following points as their difficulties during their first-year studies in the English medium.

- Grammar mistakes while talking
- Finding difficult to complete the sentences in English as they have been speaking in their mother tongue at their home
- Some words are difficult to understand
- As the majority of the students have completed their advanced level examinations in their mother tongue. There are huge differences in the terms. it

takes some time to be familiar with the new terms with what they have studied previously.

- Fear of making mistakes
- No English clubs at the campus

The study expresses that the students have not taken much interest in A/L English as they have taken in the O/L period. As most of the family members of the respondents talk in their mother tongue at their home, the students are in need to polish up and study a new language English. The students who have been studying English at the beginning from school are not facing many difficulties in studying in English at the campus during their first years. The students who have not given priority to English during their school days are facing difficulties during the first years. But they are also trying to enhance their knowledge in English with a few methods.

## 5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the standard of English proficiency of first-year students of Trincomalee campus is average. The students have given priority to the English language in the Ordinary level and they have not given priority to Advance level English as they have other three main subjects to focus for the final examination. The

students from urban and rural area are same in the knowledge of English and the English examination results.

As majority of the students have finished their school studies in their mother tongue, most of them face difficulties to follow their studies in English at the campus. During the school time, most of the students have not followed any courses related to English and they had chances to complete the courses in English only after their Advance level. That duration is not good enough to learn a language thoroughly. Most of the students are afraid that they will not be able to complete the degree in the English medium. Though the students used to discuss in English in the classroom, they are afraid to interact with the lecturer or answer questions in English as they make grammatical mistakes. Most of the students are guessing or partially only understand the lectures in English. Grammatical errors, terms are new in English from their mother tongue, not able to complete the sentence fully in English, fear of making mistakes, writing assignments in English, unable to understand few vocabularies, and pronunciation difficulties are the challenges faced by most of the first-year students. The majority of the students are trying to enhance their English knowledge by translating the notes into their mother tongues, trying to discuss in English with friends, watching English movies with subtitles, and reading English books.

## 6. Recommendation

The study recommends that, the campus should form an English club for the students, specially first years to involve them in speaking and other activities in English to enhance their knowledge in English.

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