

## FEASIBILITY OF INTRODUCING SOLE ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

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**Abstract**-English as a medium of instruction in Social Sciences has long been a subject of debate in the education system of Sri Lanka. It is extremely significant to link the University education to employment. As a direct cause for the increase in unemployment and underemployment mainly among the graduates in the Arts stream. The aim of the study was to explore the potential possibilities of implementing English as a medium of instruction in Social Sciences. The study is on qualitative and quantitative data. This study found that students are indeed generally in favour of using English exclusively in this setting, and their preference is positively related to their own English proficiency. Overall, most of the students did not show negative attitudes towards the courses even though they generally did not think that they had a high level of English Language proficiency. Moreover, the respondents emphasized that, indeed the effects of English-medium instruction on the learning of subject content remain unclear; most of the students surveyed agreed that English instruction will help them improve their English language proficiency. The results also revealed that the Core English courses ought to concentrate on providing English for Academic Purposes rather than general purposes. Finally through this study it was observed that there is a possibility for sole English medium instruction in Social Sciences. And through such a transformation it will bloom the undergraduates' future career.

**Keywords:** English medium Instruction, Core English courses, English for Academic Purposes

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalised world, English has become the unrivalled lingua franca. In the present socio-economic-political culture it is believed that enhancing the quality of English may facilitate the process of poverty reduction, promote social equality and establish the much desired ethnic harmony for a country devastated not only by its war of terror but also by the scattered debris of Tsunami.

In Social Sciences the authorities have made the medium optional, those who wish to learn their subjects in English medium continue their education in English medium. Yet it is the undergraduates who chose their vernacular who face

the major crisis in their future career. While there is a constant demand for English medium graduates from the job market the authorities definitely need to pay attention for the use of English as a **sole medium instruction** in Social Sciences.

In most Universities of Sri Lanka, the undergraduates in the Faculty of Social Sciences follow their courses for the Social Sciences degree either in Sinhala, English or Tamil media. This too requires more human resources as well. Studies have shown that lack of proficiency in English has handicapped the performance of students who have been educated in their mother tongue that is either Sinhala or Tamil. (Kottahachchi, 1992). Gunawardene (1993) has also identified the insufficient knowledge of English as one of the major factors that hinder the students' performance at University examinations when the medium of instruction is English.

At the University of Sabaragamuwa the foundation courses for the Social Sciences degree programme mainly target to improve the knowledge of English among the students. However, even after, there is a tendency for the students to drop English medium and follow their courses in Sinhala medium. It is questionable whether the foundation courses do not provide sufficient knowledge to improve the English knowledge of the students. Therefore most of the students follow their social sciences disciplines in Sinhala medium. These subjects include Economics, Statistics, Sociology, Political Science, and Geography.

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### A. *English Medium Instruction is a growing phenomenon locally.*

English medium instruction in higher education includes policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions to cope with the global academic environment. The motivations include, student mobility, commercial advantage, enhancing the curriculum with international content, knowledge and language acquisition, diversified sources of faculty and students, international student recruitment and diversified income generation. Specific initiatives for instance, programmes for international students, establishing English medium degrees

and programmes, cross-border collaborative arrangements have been put into place as a part of internationalization.

A survey conducted by T.K Hewapathirana, Department of Statistics and Computer Science, University of Kelaniya, regarding the impact the medium of instruction on the performance of the undergraduates in university examinations, revealed that, there is no significant effect on the performance of undergraduates in university examinations. In 2000, the Faculty board of the Faculty of Science of the University of Kelaniya decided to adapt English as a medium of instruction in conducting the courses for the B.Sc. General Degree programme. During the first semester, teaching would be done in the bilingual mode (Anon, 2003) and from the second semester onwards, the medium of instruction was changed from Sinhala to English in all course units conducted by the Departments of Botany, Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics, Statistics & Computer Science and Zoology.

Hence, the results of this survey suggest that there is no impact on the performance of the undergraduate students in university examinations due to a change in the medium of instruction from Sinhala to English as evident in University of Kelaniya.

#### *B. English medium instruction in European Universities.*

The Conspiracy Theory and Grassroots Theory offer to explain the worldwide spread of EMI at present. The Conspiracy theory states that, it is an effort by the British and American agencies to assert the dominance of English and to persuade other countries to accept English as a superior language. Whereas, the Grassroots theory claims that English as an economic role to play in the world that induces its spread independently of the political and cultural hegemony of nations.

The Bologna Process has immensely contributed to encourage the universities across Europe to standardize their degree offerings so that it allows the students to undertake their degree in different universities. The main reason that such an opportunity arose was since English was used as a common medium of instruction which enables both students and the staff to move between different universities.

According to Kirkpatrick (2014) EMI has enhanced the student mobility and broaden their knowledge as evident in the University of Basque Country. In addition, the EMI at a Dutch university has increased comparatively to the past. Dutch initially applied the Bologna process in 2002. The reasons for the development of the English medium courses

were to encourage "student mobility and diploma portability". He further argues that English medium courses have further increased vastly in the recent years.

#### *C. English medium instruction in Asian Universities.*

According to Andy Kirkpatrick (2014), he brings out the facts and discusses the adoption of EMI among selected universities in Asia.

The nations that focus in this survey are, China, Japan, South Korea along with ten countries that comprise the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) namely Brunei, Bruma, Cambodi, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam have introduced English medium instruction in primary, secondary and tertiary education. (Kirkpatrick, 2014)

Further he elaborates that the key motivation for Hong Kong Universities on desire for EMI was to reach high international ranking. Simultaneously the Hong Kong government inclines to make Hong Kong an education hub. International education was one of the government's six pillars.

#### 111.METHODOLOGY

The study was based on primary data. The first method was the use of interviews; my study was limited to Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. Since my research was based on a policy survey interviews were held with, the Dean and 04 heads of each Social Sciences departments. In addition, the Head of English Language Teaching Department was interviewed.

The second method was the use questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered on 100 second year undergraduates following the B.A Social Science degree programmes in English and Sinhala medium.

#### 1V.RESULTS

##### Perceptions of the Academia.

#### *A. Views on introducing sole English medium instruction in Social Sciences.*

The first question led an approach to the discussion about the views of whether there is a possibility of introducing sole English medium instruction in Social Sciences. About 90% of the interviewees hold a positive response for such a conversion in Social Sciences. Majority of the interviewed proponents hold the opinion that such an innovative step ought to be implemented rapidly. The practical difficulties should be gradually solved. However, it requires some compensatory steps and modifications in the school

educational system as well as in Universities. Faced with social-economic pressure, universities, policy makers and educators have been more influenced in shaping decisions over the medium of instruction and are making the change to English medium which is regarded as the most prominent language of global communication as the language for pursuing a career in the internationally oriented business worlds and for prospect of educational advancement. In addition, according to the responses it becomes apparent that many students who have little or no exposure to English outside the classroom experience considerable benefits in following an English medium academic curriculum.

**B. Benefits of the conversion.**

Majority of the proponents agreed that there are no shortcomings. Since it will immensely benefit the graduates and lecturers will also bestow them the opportunity to advance their level of English. Furthermore it will generate high career opportunities both locally and internationally. This will also answer the constant demand from the job market for English medium scholars. At present since this degree program is entailed to be accomplished in Sinhala, English and Tamil media, adaptation of sole English medium instruction would minimize the government expenditure on remuneration payments as well. Postgraduate studies are conducted in English medium. It will therefore assist graduates with an intention to continue further studies either in Sri Lanka or abroad. The positive oriented perceptions of students perceive English proficiency as a language of superiority, power, wealth increase, social prestige and success. English-medium instruction places an advantage over peers educated solely in vernacular and support students' employment prospects in addition enhance English communication skills. Positive perceptions of English are largely fostered by academics and business leaders to maintain its position for academic advancement.

**C. Prerequisite of foundation to be laid to improve the level of English.**

A number of studies have been conducted to show the reasons why students fail to improve students' skills in English and IT to fit them for graduate academics studies. Some identified that the biggest challenge facing higher education is the low level of the English language of school students. Some criticized the existing teaching methodology while others criticized the contents of courses are the main cause of failure of foundation courses. Almost all academic researchers agreed that the school education provided to the student is very weak to fit them for higher education. Resultantly a gap exists between school education and university education. Therefore, foundation courses have been started in all Universities to fill the gap. However, limiting to foundation courses will not improve students' skill

in English despite good contents, appropriate teaching methodology and well qualified faculty. In addition the Higher education faculties in Universities including Postgraduates, diplomas should be conducted in English medium. And strong English modules should be introduced in the first year which focuses on writing skills with special emphasis on grammar, and reading and speaking. Thus, the prominent required skill including English is one of the barriers in the way of acquisition of knowledge and skill in sole English medium conversion.

**1V. FINDINGS**

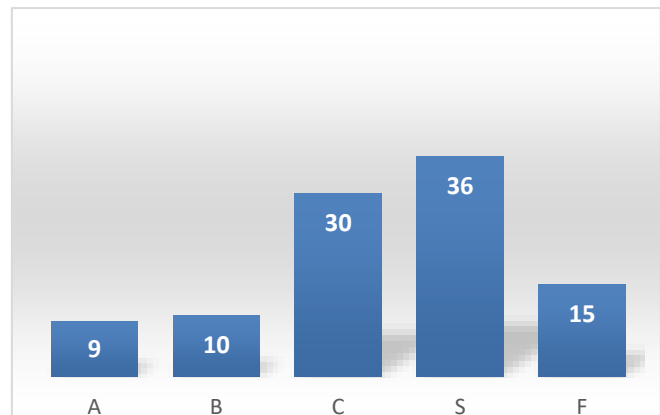


Figure 1V.1: G.C.E A/L General English results

The above figure highlights the results obtained by the respondents for A/L General English. Accordingly, 49 have achieved good passes 36 respondents have obtained "S" passes. And 15 have failed the exam. Special English courses ought to be carried out for the weak students. This depiction illustrates that the undergraduates' English level stands at an intermediate level. In this foundation there is no scepticism that an undergraduate cannot withstand the variation.

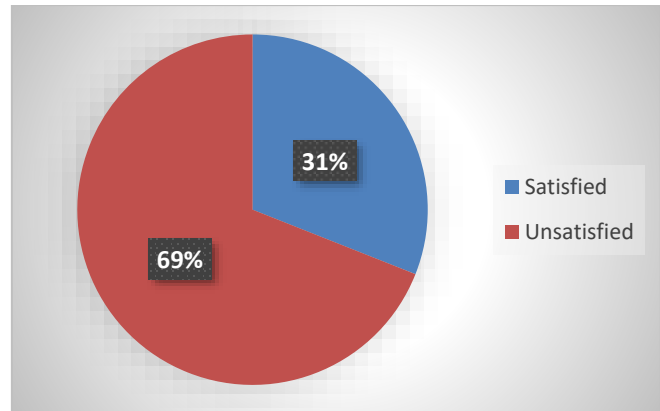


Figure 1V.11 Satisfaction of the foundation courses

The overall results highlight that the majority of respondents have accepted that “the foundation courses are insufficient to improve the English proficiency. In Sabaragamuwa University, English is taught as a Second Language. That is, English for general purposes. Core English Language is conducted only in first and second years. It incorporates 10 credits. Hence, it is insufficient for scholars who study Social Sciences subjects. They struggle to inscribe their dissertations and reports. Reason is the lack of English knowledge. Therefore it is vital to have a course unit for “English for special purposes” or “English for academic purposes”.

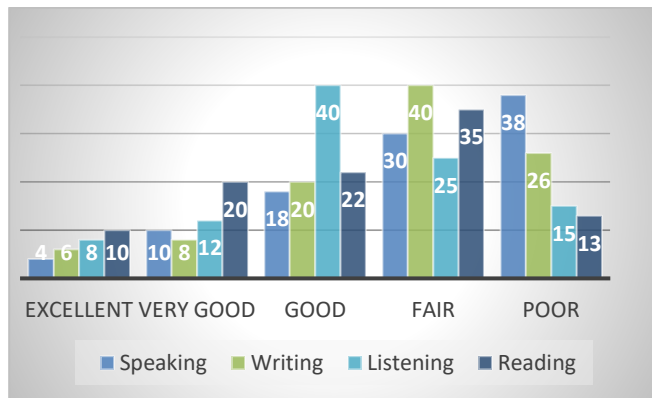


Figure 1V.111: Level of competence in English skills

Majority of the students are capable in English language proficiency. Yet, it can be observed that, almost all students are weak in spoken skills. Hence the University should concentrate on special English Language programmes which focus on improving the speaking ability. Considering the overall results it is apparent that there is a feasibility to introduce sole English medium instruction. Majority of students have a fair knowledge in English. It depicts a positive indicator. The findings are in contrast to the perspectives of the interviewees’ since they strongly advocate the fact that the undergraduates selected to the Arts stream are less competent in English proficiency. However it is evident that according to the results students’ knowledge in English stands at an intermediate level. The less capable scholars ought to be provided a special English program to develop English language proficiency.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Both lecturers and students do not have a negative attitude towards the transformation. As indicated in Figure 1V.111 majority of the respondents are competent in English Language proficiency. It is an origin of a positive indicator. However it is evident that the students’ knowledge in English

stands at an intermediate level. The less capable scholars ought to be provided a special English program to develop English language proficiency.

The issue of whether English should be the sole medium of instruction has long been a controversy. This study found that students are indeed generally in favour of using English exclusively in this setting, and their preference is positively related to their own English proficiency. Overall, most of the students did not show negative attitudes towards the courses even though they generally did not think that they had a high level of English Language proficiency. Moreover, the respondents emphasized that, indeed the effects of English-medium instruction on the learning of subject content remain unclear, most of the students surveyed agreed that English medium instruction will help them improve their English language proficiency, especially in terms of listening. Given these findings, and similar findings reported in Hsieh and Kang (2007) and Wu (2006), suggest that EMI subject courses could be regarded as extra opportunities to improve the English language proficiency of undergraduate students. These courses provide students with opportunities to learn English through receiving and producing authentic English language in real communicative contexts (Ashcraft, 2006).

The incentive for employing EMI is to produce a future labour force which is sufficiently qualified in terms of professional knowledge and foreign-language competence to meet the requirements demanded of human resources in the current epoch. For the successful implementation of EMI, policy makers, educational administrators, and curriculum developers ought to pay attention to the current requirements of employers’ in order to produce employable graduates, so that university students will be better equipped to acquire English language proficiency and learn in their EMI courses. Finally the findings revealed that there is a possibility for sole English medium instruction in Social Sciences.

#### VI. RECOMMENDATION

Caution should still be called since the level of English lecture comprehension is influenced by students’ current English language proficiency and that a great majority of students did report that their difficulties in EMI courses can be partly attributed to difficulties they had with the English language. In order to achieve a better overall quality of student learning in EMI courses, universities implementing an EMI policy in Social Sciences should increase resources to support their students’ English language learning.

However, although universities have recognized the importance of English ability and have tried to increase the

number of English language courses in their institutions, most of the courses offered are still restricted to general English skills especially in the Faculty of Social Sciences. As evident in Figure 1V.11, most of the students are dissatisfied with the current Core English Language (CEL) courses because the skills trained and content taught in these courses often cannot meet their real English for Academic Purposes (EAP) needs. The undergraduate students not only require more language support at their universities, but, this support should be oriented towards academic rather than general English. More EAP language courses, especially content-based EAP courses should be offered to equip students with appropriate language skills to survive in their EMI courses.

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