

Tertiary English Education: Are we Producing Lifelong Learners?

UD Senaratne¹, IK Weerakoon²

^{1,2} Department of English Language Teaching, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

¹dishanisenaratne@yahoo.com, ²iromi1984@gmail.com

Abstract—Given the importance of the English language as a pre-eminent international language today, the competency in the English language, maintaining continuous passion to learn English, and acquiring the skills associated with lifelong learning of English have now become essential. Thus, most Sri Lankan universities have also acknowledged the need to offer an English course for all the undergraduates and it is vital that the undergraduates should develop into lifelong learners of English who retain a passion for learning English even after the completion of formal examinations. Thus, this paper attempts to explore whether the undergraduates in Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages (FSSL) of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL) have the inclination to become lifelong learners (LLL) of English after completing their Core English Language (CEL) course and whether there is any association between their gender and their tendency to become lifelong learners of English.

Using the simple random sampling 130 students of SUSL were selected for this study. In addition to semi structured interviews and class room observations, data were collected mainly by questionnaires designed on a five-point Likert-scale adopting items from Macaskill & Taylor's questionnaires (2010). Mean Comparison, Crosstabs and Pearson Chi-square were computed for the purposes of analysis.

The study revealed that over 80% second-year undergraduates of FSSL in SUSL had the propensity for lifelong learning of English whereas 19% undergraduates were not lifelong learners. Moreover, no significant association could be seen between their gender and the tendency to become lifelong learners. Hence, as they have the most required propensity to become lifelong learners of English irrespective of their gender, the lecturers, and the administrators should take every possible step to make them enjoy learning English, get the maximum benefit out of the CEL course, and help

them to sustain and develop the skills associated with lifelong learning.

Keywords— Lifelong learners, Gender, Tertiary English Education

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of lifelong education was originated in the seminal UNESCO Report *Learning to Be* (1972) written by Edgar Faure et al. This report underpinned that lifelong education is based on four principles: vertical integration, horizontal integration, democratization of knowledge and learning society. Faure's report paved the way for the emergence of lifelong education which gave prominence to the learner in the processes of teaching/learning, as opposed to the conventional views of the time. After two decades, lifelong education was replaced by lifelong learning in the UNESCO's report *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996) which pointed out the need to rethink and update the concept of lifelong education in order to reconcile three forces: competition, which provides incentives; co-operation which gives strength; and solidarity, which unites. This paradigm shift was indeed a significant milestone as it made a drastic change pertaining to the spectrum of lifelong learning. The contemporary definitions of lifelong learning reiterate the enhancement of the lifelong learners' characteristics. Accordingly, learners with self-directed learning, autonomous learning, motivation to learn, and perceived competence are considered lifelong learners. (Kirby et al., 2010; Macaskill & Taylor, 2010). Weert and Kendall (2004) also pointed out several characteristics of lifelong learning such as self-motivation, forms of progression and personal achievements, learner-centred and maintenance of portfolio of personal achievements.

Given the importance of English as the most widely spread international language, the importance of having competency in it and maintaining continuous passion to learn it, and acquiring the skills

associated with lifelong learning of English have now become inevitable. Today the significance of learning English is highly emphasized and Sri Lankan government proposes and implements new programs to improve the English language skills of the students almost every year. As a result, Sri Lankan school students learn English as a compulsory subject from grade three and in 1999 it was made a compulsory subject for the Advanced Level students. Also, in 2002, the government restarted English medium education in public schools under the Amity Schools Project. In addition most of the higher education institutes and universities have introduced English as a subject and some of them conduct their study programs in English medium. The University Grants Commission (UGC) advocated and made it compulsory that the undergraduates pass the English language paper for the completion of the degree. In universities, many steps were taken to improve the English language competency of the graduates. English Language Teaching Units (ELTU) were established in almost all the universities to facilitate a three or six months intensive English course which commences right at the beginning of the students' university career.

Most Sri Lankan graduates, however, are constantly criticized for their deficiency in English despite having learnt it for many years. In this scenario, the undergraduates should focus on their English language competencies to counteract this recurrent claim in order to gain academic, professional and personal success. Accordingly, the undergraduates should develop into lifelong learners of English who retain a passion for learning even after the completion of formal examinations.

However, there has not been adequate research conducted regarding the facets of lifelong learning in Sri Lankan universities. This paper attempts to explore whether the undergraduates of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL) have the inclination to become lifelong learners of English after following their Core English Language course (CEL) course. It also attempts to investigate whether there is any association between the students' gender and their tendency to become lifelong learners of English.

II. METHODOLOGY

The Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages (FSSL) of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL), has the first Department of English Language Teaching

(DELT) in the Sri Lankan university system and it was founded in 2004 as an umbrella department in order to enhance the English language and communicative competence of the undergraduates. The English Language is taught in the first two years as a compulsory credit course and the requirement in this area must be satisfied if the students are to obtain the degree. Using the simple random sampling 130 second year students of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka were selected for this study. 92 of these participants were female students while 33 students were male while 5 of the students have not mentioned their gender. All of the participants had been studying Core English Language for the last 4 semesters: first year, first semester; first year, second semester; second year, first semester and second year, second semester.

The survey used for the purpose of collecting data was a partial replication of the survey developed by Macaskill & Taylor (2010). It was a partial replication in which the Autonomous Learner Scale (ALS) of Macaskill & Taylor were unchanged, except very few additions to make the statements more comprehensible for the students. The survey includes 12 items designed on a five-point Likert-scale. The first seven questions were formed to identify the students' independence of learning while the remaining five questions in the survey examined the students' study habits.

Informal interviews were conducted both with the second year students and the staff of the Department of English Language Teaching to get an idea about their tendency to become lifelong learners of English. As the two researchers are lecturers in the Department of English Language Teaching, observing students has become easier and reliable method for collecting data.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to analyze the data SPSS and MINITAB were used. In order to analyze FSSL second-year undergraduates' propensity towards learning English, mean comparison was computed using one-sample T distribution. Here, the survey is made using a five-point Likert-scale and assigned values from 1 to 5 to each alternative (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) respectively. Hence, the test mean was taken as 3.

$H_0: \mu \leq 3$ Students are not lifelong learners
 $H_1: \mu > 3$ Students are lifelong learners
 $(\mu = \text{Mu})$

Here, the H_1 was taken as mean greater than 3. Thus, those who ticked only 4 (Agree) or 5 (Strongly Agree) for all the 12 statements were taken as lifelong learners. Those who ticked 3 (Neutral) were not taken as lifelong learners.

Table 1: The undergraduates' grades for CEL211 and their tendency to become lifelong learners of English

CEL 211											
*Final	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D	E	Total
SD (%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6.2	0	0	1.1
D (%)	0	0	0	0	0	3.6	0	6.2	50	0	3.4
N (%)	0	20	12.5	7.1	11.1	14.3	66.7	12.5	0	100	14.9
A (%)	100	80	75	92.9	77.8	75	33.3	68.8	50	0	74.7
SA(%)	0	0	12.5	0	11.1	7.1	0	6.2	0	0	5.7
Total(%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Final- each respondent's mean of all the 12 answers.

The mean calculated by MINITAB from the sample was 3.76190. Since the mean is higher than 3, it rejects H_0 ($\mu \leq 3$ Students are not lifelong learners) which clearly indicates that all the undergraduates are lifelong learners of English.

Moreover, crosstabs were calculated and the results were categorized according to the grades the students obtained for the last examination they faced.

According to table 1, only 19.4% undergraduates were not lifelong learners whereas 80.4% were lifelong learners. Thus, it is evident that most of the undergraduates of FSSL are lifelong learners of English.

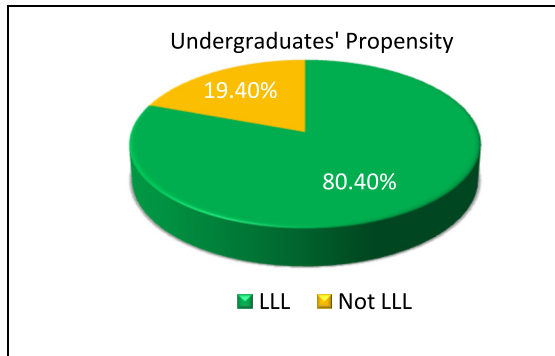


Figure 1. The Undergraduates' Propensity to Become Lifelong Learners of English (measured according to grades)

Table 2: The association between the undergraduates' gender and their tendency to become lifelong learners of English

Count	Gender		Total	
	Male	Female		
final	SD	0	1	1
	D	1	1	2
	N	4	10	14
	A	16	61	77
	SA	2	5	7
Total	23	78	101	

According to table 2, 22% of male undergraduates and 15% female undergraduates were not lifelong learners whereas 78% of male undergraduates and 85% female undergraduates were lifelong learners. Thus, it is proven again that most of the undergraduates of FSSL are lifelong learners of English.

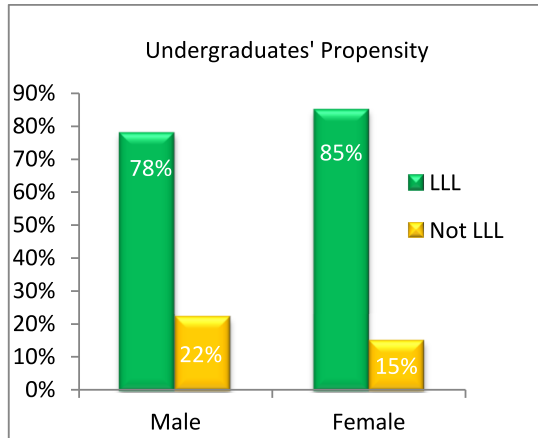


Figure 2. The Undergraduates' Propensity to Become Lifelong Learners of English (measured according to gender)

Table 3: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.713 ^a	4	.788
Likelihood Ratio	1.779	4	.776
Linear-by-Linear Association	.103	1	.748
N of Valid Cases	101		

a. 6 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .23.

Moreover, it is clear that no association can be found between the gender of the undergraduates and their inclination to become lifelong learners of English. This is further proved by the Chi-Square Test (Refer table 3) in which the probability is higher(.788) than the conventional 5% ($P > 0.05$) indicating statistically insignificant correlation coefficient.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that over 80% second-year undergraduates of FSSL in SUSL had the propensity for lifelong learning of English whereas 19% undergraduates were not lifelong learners. Moreover, in terms of gender, 78% male undergraduates and 85% female undergraduates were lifelong learners. In addition, no significant association could be seen between their gender and tendency to become lifelong learners. Hence, as they have the most required propensity to

become lifelong learners of English, the lecturers, and the administrators should take every possible step to make them enjoy learning English, get the maximum benefit out of the CEL course, and make them successful lifelong learners of English. Therefore, the findings of this study will enlighten the lecturers of the fact that SUSL undergraduates have the necessary inclination towards lifelong learning of English ; however, as lecturers, we need to help the undergraduates to sustain and develop skills associated with lifelong learning.

The findings of this study may provide insights into the assumption of the lecturers at the University of Sabaragamuwa that SUSL students are unsuccessful in learning English and there is a high level of absenteeism because they lack continuous passion to learn English, which turned out to have no scientific value since the findings of the present research revealed that only 19 percent of the participants did not have the inclination towards lifelong learning of English. The findings of the study also revealed that there was no significant correlation between students' gender and their propensity to become lifelong learners which again go against the opinion of the majority of academic staff that female students are more enthusiastic and in a continuous pursuit of knowledge than the male students. Thus, if the students get absent very often and perform poorly in the examinations whilst the majority of students do have the propensity to become lifelong learners, then the university authorities should be self-analytical about the teaching/learning environment of the university, especially with regard to English. Hence, a considerable attention should be paid for the content of the CEL course, lecturers, teaching methods, the materials used. This could suggest that there is a requirement for a needs analysis which helps to identify students' needs so that the necessary steps could be taken to remedy the situation including developing materials that can better meet the students' needs and can increase students' attendance in the lectures and success rates in English lessons

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BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHORS

¹Author is a lecturer of English of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. Her research interests include Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics.

²Author is a lecturer of English of University of Sabaragamuwa, Sri Lanka. Her research interests include English language teaching and Psycholinguistics.