

English Language Competency of the Post Advanced Level Students in Comparison with their Ordinary Level and Advanced Level English Examination Results

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Abstract-*This paper intends to discuss on the contradiction of the competency of the English knowledge of the post.Advance Level students with the results that they have obtained for the subject of English in G.C.E Advance Level (G.C.E A/L) Examination and G.C.E Ordinary Level (G.C.E O/L) examination. It is evident that more than 75% of the post A/L students have a drastic diminution in the competency of English after the O/L Examination. The problems that this paper intends to inquire are: does competency of English Language of the post A/L students contrasts with their results that they have obtained for English Language examinations: the reasons that results in the diminution of English Language competency after O/L Examination and A/L Examination, and, the impact that it has on the higher education and career life. It is the objective of this research paper to discuss on the above stated problems and find remedies that can be done in order to overcome these problems. To achieve the objectives of this research, it was adopted the quantitative research methodology and data were analysed using mathematically based methods. Data were based mostly on the statistics on the results of English Examination, and analysis of English examination results by the National Institute of Education. Questionnaires were also used to collect data. Further structured interviews were conducted amongst a selected sample of people. The result that was attained from this research was that the students pay less attention on the subject of English during the A/L examination period and pay more attention on their main subjects. Therefore their knowledge on the English Language weakens. Furthermore since the usage and the interest on English lessen, students do not pay attention on the language and thus further diminishes the fluency of English. It is proposed in relation to the results that was obtained from this research, English should be made a main subject for the Advance Level Examination. Thus the fluency of English could be elevated.*

Keywords: *Fluency of English, English results, Post A/L Students.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka which is a multinational country, is the home for people who converse in many languages. Sinhala and Tamil being the native languages, English is taught and learnt as a second language.

English is used as the official language of more than 50 countries around the world and where around 400 million converses in English. In Sri Lanka, even though English is considered as a second language, it is an essential skill when it comes to the employment. Mostly rather than in government sector for an employment in the private sector if a person has mastered English language skills, it always is an added qualification. Employers, mostly in the field of Banks, seeks for candidates who are skilled in English and the opportunities are high for people who are skilled in English Language.

The Sri Lankan education system teaches English starting from Grade 3 till Advance level examination. But the problem is whether the school leavers are really skilled in English, as the system expects. As per Mr. Sunimal Fernando, the former presidential advisor and the coordinator and the convenor of the Presidential Task Force, even though a person learns English from Grade 3 till Grade 13, average child leaves school without being able to speak in English. Nevertheless, a considerable number of students' passes at least obtaining a simple pass for English in Ordinary Level Examination where as in Advance Level Examination the results obtained by the students is very low.

This study highlights on the point that the school leavers show a less competency in English even though they have passed the English examinations. Further, it will also be discussed on whether the attention of the students on English at secondary level education lessens and thus whether they obtain a low results for A/L General English Examination. It will also discuss on the reasons as to why school leavers have a less competency in English language and the impacts that it would have in their

future. Finally based on the study, it will propose suggestions to overcome the problem at hand.

II. METHODOLOGY

Methodology that was adopted in conducting this study is mainly the quantitative methodology where numerical data was gathered.

In order to evaluate results that were obtained to G.C.E O/L English language and G.C.E A/L general English result, statistics on the results of the subjects were collected from the Department of Examination in Sri Lanka. O/L English Language results were obtained in the years of 2005-2007 whereas A/L General English results were obtained from the years of 2008-2010 where it covers the A/L results of the same sample of students who sat for O/L in 2005-2007.

Examination results were carefully studied and compared in the course of the study to calculate whether there is a diminution of passes in the General English examination than in English examination.

A sample of school leavers in the age of 23-25 years of age were randomly selected and distributed an English language paper drafted with vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing and grammar questions. The data collected from the question paper were used to evaluate competency of them in reading and writing skills.

A random sample of 50 school leavers of the same age category were interviewed in order to evaluate listening and speaking competency.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Evaluation on the Results Obtained for English In G.C.E O/L And G.C.E. A/L Examinations

English is taught in the Sri Lankan school education curriculum starting from grade 3 till a student passes out from the school. As per the education department, the subject of English is taught in the schools with the objectives of creating the need to learn English as a second Language, to achieve competencies in a link language, to teach a language that can build ethnic harmony, to use in employment purposes and empower the learner to communicate confidently, fluently and effectively in the English Language.

This section of the study intends to evaluate the results that are obtained by the students for the subject English Language in G.C.E O/L and General English in G.C.E A/L examination. Further, it will also examine whether there is a contrast between the results obtained for the subject

English Language in G.C.E O/L and G.C.E A/L examinations.

Lastly, the reasons that results in less attention on subject General English during the G.C.E A/L period will also be discussed in this section.

1) Evaluation on results obtained for English Language in G.C.E Ordinary Level Examination:

Table 1. Number of candidate sat for the G.C.E O/L English Language examination in the years of 2005-2007

Year	2005	2006	2007
No.of candidates	416,520	406,500	421,736

Source: Statistics handbook 2005-2007, Department of Examination, 2011

Table 2. Passes and failures by number and percentage of G.CE O/L English Language examination in the years of 2005-2007

Year	Passes	%	Failures	%
2005	169,962	40.81	246,558	59.19
2006	164,025	40.35	242,476	59.65
2007	180,292	42.75	241,444	57.25

Source: Statistics handbook 2005-2007, Department of Examination, 2011

The above two tables indicates the number of candidates sat for the G.C.E O/L English Language examination and the number of students that passed the examination and the students that failed the examination. Accordingly, even though the objectives of teaching English Language is to make students competent in an international language, the rate of passes are less than the rate of failure. More than 55% of candidates fail in the English language while only around 40% of the students get through from the English Language examination.

The reason that the students get low results or fails in English Language examination is because of the less attention that the students pay on the subject. Also, the least requirement to qualify for G.C.E A/L is to pass 6 subjects out of 9 subjects. Further, it is not a must for a student to pass English to be qualified to do A/L. Thus, students tend to pay more attention in the other subjects rather than to English Language.

Thus, the students show a less competency in the English Language examination since it is not a necessary factor to be qualified for G.C.E A/L.

2) Evaluation on results obtained for General English in G.C.E Advanced Level Examination:

Table 3. Number of candidate sat for the G.C.E A/L General English examination in the years of 2008-2010

Year	2008	2009	2010
No. of candidates	188,716	184,772	207,150

Source: Statistics handbook 2008-2010, Department of Examination, 2011

Table 4. Passes and failures by number and percentage of G.CE A/L General English examination in the years of 2008-2010

Year	Passes	%	Failures	%
2008	54,907	29.10	133,809	70.90
2009	53,907	29.17	130,865	70.83
2010	64,011	30.90	143,139	69.10

Source: Statistics handbook 2008-2010, Department of Examination, 2011

The above two tables indicate the candidates sat for the G.C.E A/L General English Examination and the passes rate and the failures rate. According to the above results it is evident that the failure rate of the General English subject is rather high than the Failure rate in the English Language examination in G.C.E O/L. More than 69% of the Candidates sat for General English have failed while only around 30% of candidates got through the subject. It should also be noted that even out of the passes around 15% of the results that is obtained are Simple passes (Department of Examination 2011) which shows that most of the students who have passed the exam have only obtained around 35% of marks out of 100.

According to the interviews conducted among the teachers that teach General English for the A/L students, the main reason that the students get low results for the subject since the students pay more attention to the main subjects in their respective streams and does not pay attention to General English. Also, since General English is not being counted for Zscore, students does not see much of an interest in studying General English. Thus the results that the students have obtained for General English shows that the school leavers leave the school with a very low competency of the English language.

3) Comparison of the results obtained for G.C.E O/L English Language examination and G.C.E A/L General English examination:

When the table 2 and the table 4 is compared, it can be observed that there is a drastic diminution in the passes of the subject General English. As per the table 2, the passes are around more than 40% while the failures are around more than 55%. To be exact, in the years of 2005, 2006 and 2007, the pass rate is 40.81%, 40.35%, 42.75 and the failure rate is 59.19%, 50.65% and 57.25% respectively. But, according to table 4 where the results of the A/L general English results are being elaborated, where the same group of students who sat for O/L during the years of 2005-2007, there can be seen a drastic increase of failures and less number of passes. To be exact, during the years of 2008, 2009 and 2010 a 70.90%, 70.83% and 69.10% respectively, have failed the subject. There is an increase of 11.71%, 11.18% and 11.85% respectively.

The English teachers and the In-service advisors (ISA) English-Matale zone and Anuradhapura zone, who were interviewed said that the main problem to have such an increase of failures in the General English subject is because English is not a main and a compulsory subject where its achievement is added to the Zscore, and thus the students rather pay more attention to the three main subjects and pay a less attention to General English or rather, pay no attention at all. Also, students do not have an idea on the importance of learning English and being competent in the language. Further, the class rooms are whole classes which are congested and where teachers would not get the chance of paying much attention on each and every single student. Thus there is a possibility of weak students being neglected. Furthermore, there is a belief among the students that they would rather learn English in an institute while awaiting for the A/L results to be passed, rather than learning it at school. Nevertheless, there is a less recognition for the certificate courses on English whereas passing English in O/L and A/L examinations have more recognition.

Thus, due to the above discussed factors performance in the A/L General English examination is rather low than O/L English examination.

B. English Competency Of School Leavers

For a person to be regarded as competent in a language there are four skills that a person should be skilled with; they are, reading, writing, listening and speaking. Listening and reading are known as 'receptive' skills while speaking and writing are known as 'productive' skills (4 Important Skills in Language Learning 2014). But it is

questionable whether the Sri Lankan Education System helps in developing all four skills in English Language.

According to former Presidential Advisor Sunimal Fernando, 'children from Sinhala and Tamil speaking homes are taught English in the way that dead languages like Pali, Sanskrit, Latin and Greek are taught to students, only to read and write and never to speak' (Ministry of Education 2010: ix). He further points out it as a point why an average student who leaves school without being able to speak, even though there are more than 23,000 English teachers teaching in 9500 schools. (*ibid*: ix). The statistics on results obtained for the subjects of English Language and General English also shows that there is a less competency in English language. Thus it is obvious that the school leavers have a rather less competency in English language.

1) *Evaluation on English language competency of school leavers:*

In order to evaluate the English competency of the school leavers an English paper which was designed with vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehensions and writing questions were distributed amongst a selected sample of 200 within the age limit of 23 years to 25 years of age. Since the Sri Lankan education system has aimed in teaching the students to enhance reading and writing skills, the paper that was compiled to evaluate the school leavers' English competency was also mainly based on evaluating their reading and writing skills along with vocabulary and grammar. The following graph indicates the marks obtained for each question along with the percentages.

1.a) Vocabulary:

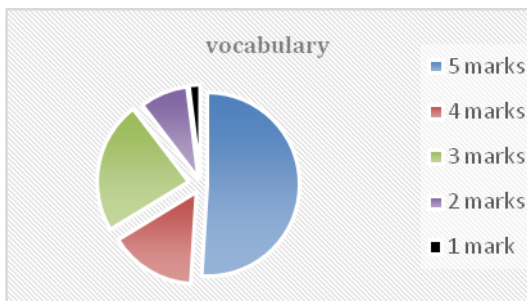


Figure 1. Percentage of marks obtained for Vocabulary question

According to the paper that was distributed, the answers that were given to the vocabulary question was fairly good. More than a 50% of people scored full marks while more than 90% scored more than 3 marks, which is average.

1.b) Reading Comprehension

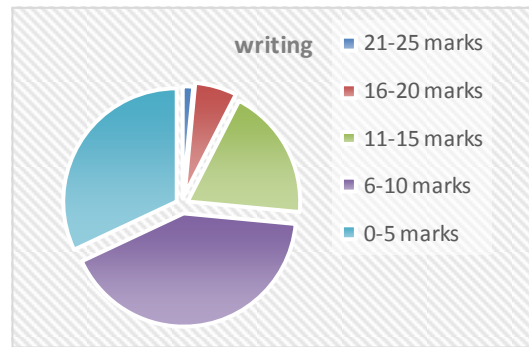


Figure 2. Percentage of marks obtained for reading comprehension question

Achievement in reading comprehension is fairly satisfactory as 65% of sample achieved more than 6 marks out of 15 marks. But 34% scored less than 5 marks. The attempt is only fairly satisfactory. None education of scanning and skimming methods to the students have resulted mostly in not attempting reading comprehensions.

1.c) Writing

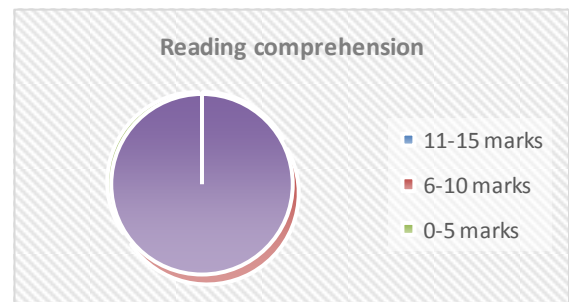


Figure 3. Percentage of marks obtained for writing question

The writing question is the most poorly attempted question. Out of a sample of 200, only 15 scored more than 16 marks out of 25. Very less amount of the sample showed ability of constructing sentences without grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors. Most of the writings showed less competency in writing skills.

1.d) Grammar

The attempt on the grammar question is fairly satisfactory. But the points scored by more than a 50% out of the sample is 4-7. It is only satisfactory.

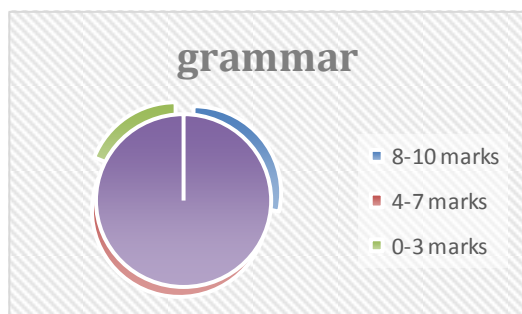


Figure 4. Percentage of marks obtained for grammar question

2) *Evaluation on the competency level in the above four criteria:*

Out of the four questions that were in the question paper the question that have scored less is the writing question where it was required to write an essay. The question that has scored highest marks is the vocabulary question where it was required to fill in the blanks by selecting the words given in the brackets. In the reading question where it was required to read the text and fill in the blanks and answer the questions given, most have answered well on the former rather than the latter, where some have not even have attempted on doing the latter. Nevertheless, grammar question was fairly well answered.

The conclusion that can be obtained is the, writing skill is less where people think even writing a letter in English to be difficult. Even in instances where you can read, writing is rather neglected or omitted. It is mainly because of the less exposure to the language and less use of the language.

Where a language is not used, language competency fades away.

3) *Competency in listening and speaking:*

For any person before learning to read and write a language, the first thing one would do is to listen to what someone says. That is the first step in learning a language. Then one would learn to speak in that language based on what he/she heard. We learnt to speak in our mother tongue by listening what our elders say and no one ever teaches you all the words in a language. Listening and reading are always the best ways that one could

develop language skills. And speaking in that language always help in developing good communication skills as well as be confident.

But, in the Sri Lankan Education system has omitted listening and speaking from the system and only pays attention on reading and writing skill. Since it is less encouraged to speak in English or no listening activity is done none of the skills of listening and speaking is developed.

A randomly selected sample of 50 was interviewed in English where about 87% had troubles with speaking in English. The most prominent problem that they had was the inability to express what they had in mind, in words. Speaking was thus problematic since less fluency in expressions. The next problem was that lack of vocabulary. Therefore, most of the people struggled in expressing their thoughts. Further, the fear that some had that they would be embarrassed if they make any mistake was another problem that prevented from speaking in English.

Out of the 13% of the sample who conversed well in English were either from a family with an English speaking background or have studied in English medium. Rarely there were people who were interested in learning English and thus have developed language skills by reading.

Nevertheless, there is a very poor competency in English language in listening and speaking skills.

C. *Reasons That Results In Less Competency In English Language*

"The primary purpose of language is communication - grammar is important, but there's a bigger picture. Language is no longer seen as being learnt through mechanical exercises, it's developed through students interacting and engaging."(Williams 2013). Do the Sri Lankan education system cater to the need of communication, by teaching a language?

Sri Lankan system of education have designed the English language curriculum as in a way that a dead language is taught; read and to write. It has ignored the fact that today English is and international language where more than 50 countries use English as the official language. Thus it should be taught with more attention to speaking skillfor a person to be competent and confident in the language. But in our schools more attention is paid to reading, writing and grammar rather than speaking and listening which are equally important. Further learning English is rather exam oriented where one study the

subject just to get a good grade in the examination but not to be skilled in the language. This is more evident in the O/L English syllabus where the question paper is totally based on the text book that is distributed and there are no questions that the candidates have to think and write. The teachers also train the child to write to the exam paper rather than guiding the child to use the language in practical situation. Furthermore, Grade 3 is where English language is taught as a subject in the school curriculum. But the best age to teach a language is even before that since a child around the age of 5 years tend to learn languages faster than in later ages. Thus the teaching methods in the school is only exam oriented which ultimately passes out with a less competency in an international language.

In the Sri Lankan society there are several categories of people where the family background is either Sinhala/Tamil spoken or English spoken. People who come from the latter are mostly skilled in writing and speaking abilities. There is a wrongful belief in the society English is spoken by the elite society and the English that one speak should be perfect 'British English'. This is only a myth that the society have come up with where there is no truth at all. People fear to speak in English because they think that it would be a embarrassment. There is no necessity to speak in 100% grammatically correct English since English is only a second language which opens the gateway to several paths.

None education of Dictionary skills and phonetics, ones competency of English language lessen.

Last but not least, the less necessity of competency of English during while schooling results in less competency in English. Since one could get qualified to A/L class even without English, there is a tendency of paying less attention on the subject. During the A/L period not much attention is paid to English since expect for several courses in Universities, it does not request to have a credit for English. Also it does not add to Z score and thus students pay much attention on the main three subjects.

D. Impacts Of Less Fluency Of English

It is a known fact that the private sector today has more employment opportunities rather than the Government sector. When an applicant applies or goes for an interview in the private sector, if the applicant has not fulfilled the requirement of competency of English language, he/she could be in trouble. Thus the vital negative impact is on the employment. Most of the private sector employments require at least a credit for English. And fluency in speaking and writing is always an added qualification. Most of the candidates who are ideal

for an employment loses the opportunity because of the simple fact of less fluency in English.

Less fluency in English could also be a problem in higher education. Today, most of the courses in the Universities are taught in English. Where a student is less competent in English, especially in listening and writing skills, he/she might lag behind.

Further, English is one of the universal languages where almost 3/4th of the world population could speak in English. In such a situation, lack of English fluency could be a barrier for communication.

E. What Could Be Done To Overcom Incompetency Of English

'English is not a crown; but a pair of shoes to travel the world' (Esala, cite in Ministry of Education 2011). English in the modern world, as stated by Fernando (2011), is a skill for employment, a vehicle for reaching out to the external world and a tool of communication. To overcome the problem of incompetency in English Language, firstly a revised syllabus for English should be proposed with activities to improve listening and speaking skills. Further, attention should be paid on the phonetics and dictionary skills as well. First step towards an English competent society will be with a changed education system. The system should cater to both students who come from families of English speaking background and Sinhala or Tamil speaking backgrounds.

English language should be added to the curriculum not only starting from Grade 3 but even before that; from kindergarten.

Languages cannot be taught, they can only be learnt. (Williams 2013). Thus students should be encouraged to read and listen to more English articles as listening and reading will enhance the knowledge on English.

Thinking in English should be encouraged. And speaking in English should also be encouraged. When the learners make mistakes while speaking they should not be embarrassed or discouraged but should be encouraged to speak more, which would lead them to improve the speaking skill.

Necessity of the language, for their future, should be taught to the students from the small age so that they would pay more attention on the English language.

It should be made compulsory to apply for any course in the University at least a credit pass for General English.

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