

Study of English Language Skills of the First Year KDU Undergraduates with Special Reference to Faculty of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities

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Abstract— *English language has already become knowledgebase of the twenty-first century. According to Examinations Department of Sri Lanka 2013, the highest number of fail grades among school students was for the English Language. It has specified that 52.14 % of school candidates have failed the English Language Examination. As per the latest updates of Sri Lankan education system, according to the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination syllabus, apart from the three main subjects and the Common General Test, candidates may apply for the subject, "General English" too. KDU, being a unique university in Sri Lanka, is striving to achieve international standards having recognized the importance of English for its undergraduates. Despite the fact that, achieving the proficiency of four skills is important for a language learner, achieving competent language skills is a prime necessity for undergraduates who are seeking to be compatible future professionals in the current society in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is highly essential for all the undergraduates of KDU as their medium of instruction for the bachelor studies is English. Thus, this study determined to identify whether the undergraduates of KDU of the Faculty of Management Social Sciences and Humanities possess the expected language skills benchmarks according to national international standards. The study was carried out, selecting the sample of 30 undergraduates from each of the three departments of the FMSH of KDU, following convenience sampling method. The results of the study showed that 63% of the undergraduates, had not possessed the expected language competency levels at the beginning of the semester but they have showed a significance improvement within the first semester language learning improvements and 87% have achieved UTEL band 5 towards the end of the first semester. Thus, it proves that the FMSH of KDU is qualifying the undergraduates for national and international standards of English language.*

Keywords—*English language skills, National and international standards*

I. INTRODUCTION

English language has become the medium of instruction in most of the Sri Lankan higher educational institutes. Thus, KDU (General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University) is not an exception. Since 2011, KDU has expanded opportunities to continue higher education for civil students to carry out their undergraduate studies parallel to the undergraduate studies of officer cadets who belong to tri-forces of military in Sri Lanka. English language is used as the medium of instruction in every discipline of KDU study programmes. Especially, considering the Faculty of Management Social Sciences and Humanities of KDU (FMSH), the undergraduates need to be highly skilled and have to master the language skill to be conversant and competent due to the essentiality of explanations and elaborations in their academic requirements in the discipline. The curriculum for English language teaching at FMSH -KDU determines to fulfil the timely requirements of the undergraduates who would seek future professional opportunities in this highly dynamic local and international career. On the other hand it is required to keep on observing the student performance and their level of language competencies according to an accepted measurement. Therefore, locally accepted-internationally compatible benchmark for measuring English language competencies (Kulasingham, 2014), University Test for English Language (UTEL) has been utilised to gauge and evaluate English language skills of KDU undergraduates of FMSH.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *English Language Teaching at Sri Lankan Universities*

English language is taught in Sri Lankan schools as a compulsory second language and further the medium of instruction in most of the university courses is also English (McCaslin, 2009). English language competency has become instrumental in university education today because unlike the early decades of university education, today undergraduates are expected to be trained to be employers replacing the expectation of early decades to "broaden the minds of graduates or to engage in the discourse of contemporary issues" (Gunasekara, 2013).

Moreover, Gunsekera (2013) noted that today the needs have morphed into a mix of English for academic purposes, English for professional purposes, and English for social purposes, including upward mobility. Thus, importance of learning a second language in a multi lingual setting has been broadened with number of other timely requirements. Having considered all these factors, English Language Teaching (ELT) in universities cannot be considered as a requirement of fulfilling the academic tasks of the young undergraduates of Sri Lanka, it is almost their life-time skill that determines their future life expectations as educated citizens of the country.

B. ELT Tests for Sri Lankan Universities

Language proficiency types vary according to the purpose and language usage in the context. Cummins (2001) introduces Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic language Proficiency (CALP). On the other hand, relevant to tertiary education level English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) includes academic reading and writing, reference skills, listening and note taking/making abilities with other interactive association skills of language (Jordan in Raheem, 2012). With much consideration of language skill measuring tools and the complexities of Sri Lankan university system due to several reasons, a local benchmark has been created by the English Language (ELTU) Development project with the sponsorship of the British Council and the Ministry of Higher Education in collaboration with the Higher Education for 21st century project (HETC) considering the local and international aspects. The designed concept is based on Common European Framework- facilitated by John Slaght of the Centre for Applied Linguistics and Language Studies, University of Reading, United Kingdom. Thereby, it established the University Tests of English Language - Academic Purposes (UTEL-A).

Today, UTEL is being practiced in several national universities of Sri Lanka and a national test conducted by the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka (UGC) and the Ministry of Higher Education, providing opportunities for undergraduates to obtain a certificate for their English language skills. According to the standards prescribed in UTEL-A benchmark table, it determines “to address the needs of the employability skills in local graduates” (Kulasingham et al. 2011) and provides three levels of evaluating English language skills beginning from the minimum level 4 to the level 7.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out as a longitudinal study of eighteen weeks commencing from January 2015 and

further the study will be continued for another eighteen weeks till November 2015. A sample of thirty undergraduates from each of the three department of FMSH was selected using convenience sample selection and evaluated the progress of their four language skills at the end of every sixth week according to the Intended Learning Outcome (ILO) or the predefined benchmark ability. Both primary and secondary data have been used in this study. Primary data has been collected from the selected sample of FMSH (one of the faculties) of KDU, in the year 2015. The collected data was analysed manually. To evaluate the progress of the achieved language skills, the sample was given language testes representing reading, writing, speaking and listening areas, containing similar level of language performances in activities included in the tests. Simultaneously, the English language teaching lessons were also designed according to the UTEL- A benchmark bands level 5.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sample of the undergraduates who had participated the research had already taken the competitive test of English language at the KDU entrance examination. Thereby, it is different from other state universities, the undergraduates of KDU at least process language skills that are considered as the basic English language skills at the initial level. Thus, the first test that they had faced was in line with the UTEL- A benchmark band 4. Those who barely achieved the level 4 was given an intensive emersion English course of 100 hours before they begin the academic studies at the university. There were 07 students in the sample of 30, who had successfully completed the English language course. Therefore, the course materials developed to meet the terms of the UTEL-A benchmark band 5.

Table 1. Language performance of reading skills

Performed Skill	Marks at the 6 th week	Marks at the 12 th week	Marks at the 18 th week
Ability to identify and understand the general meaning of a short text	62%	74%	87%
Ability to understand the function and meaning of selected punctuationmarks	69%	80%	86%
Ability to answer simple questions based on a text	59%	68%	87%

Table 2. Language performance of writing skills

Performed Skill	Marks at the 6 th week	Marks at the 12 th week	Marks at the 18 th week
Ability to link ideas using basic conjunctions	52%	65%	74%
Ability to write short descriptions on personal/familiar topics using simple sentences and basic punctuation	67%	74%	80%
Ability to compose and send an email	71%	78%	82%

The sample of the undergraduates was able to perform better in every attempt of the evaluation tests. Thus, it is progressive and satisfactory as the initial stage records every language skill performance more than 50%. Considering the four language skills, speaking skill is identified as the best performed skill with the performance average of 90% towards the end of the 18th week. The sample of the students was able to perform individual tasks, pair work and group work successfully at the given tasks such as to collect information/personal detail on a classmate (including interests) using the given question structures and introduce a classmate and also to talk about a person (eg. mother, teacher, a famous or any admirable person). Moreover, the students were given the task of speaking for about 5-10 minutes on a given topic.

Least satisfactory performed skill is writing skill (78%). When the students were given the tasks of constructing sentences using the information given on a chart or a table with conjunctions and also to join two simple sentences using the conjunction and/but/or, they were unable to write them with the expected level. Further, the similar mistakes were identified in writing a short description on personal or familiar topics using simple sentences and basic punctuation. The undergraduates have made mistakes of using accurate verb forms in tenses and mistakes in using appropriate word classes accordingly. Many mistakes have been identified in the sentence structure and using correct spelling.

As writing skill is identified as a weak skill, further attention was paid to improve writing skill and successfully reduced the frequency of error occurrences in writings. But writing skill is identified as an area that further attention to be paid in ELT.

According to the study carried out, KDU undergraduates of FMSH have successfully performed reading skills (87%) and listening skills (80%) in achieving the expected ILOs in UTEL-A benchmark 5.

Table 3. Language performance of listening skills

Performed Skill	Marks at the 6 th week	Marks at the 12 th week	Marks at the 18 th week
Ability to comprehend simple instructions and ability to understand simple directions	72%	79%	81%
Ability to understand a spoken text with the help of sequence markers	67%	72%	79%
Ability to understand and respond to 'wh' questions relating to past or future time and ability to formulate and answer those questions	57%	62%	69%
Ability to understand the essence of a simple speech and ability to comprehend the general meaning	53%	59%	73%

Table 4. Language performance of speaking skills

Performed Skill	Marks at the 6 th week	Marks at the 12 th week	Marks at the 18 th week
Ability to communicate information on personal / familiar topics and ability to state simple numerical Data	78%	86%	91%
Ability to produce a few meaningful statements and communicate information	79%	88%	90%

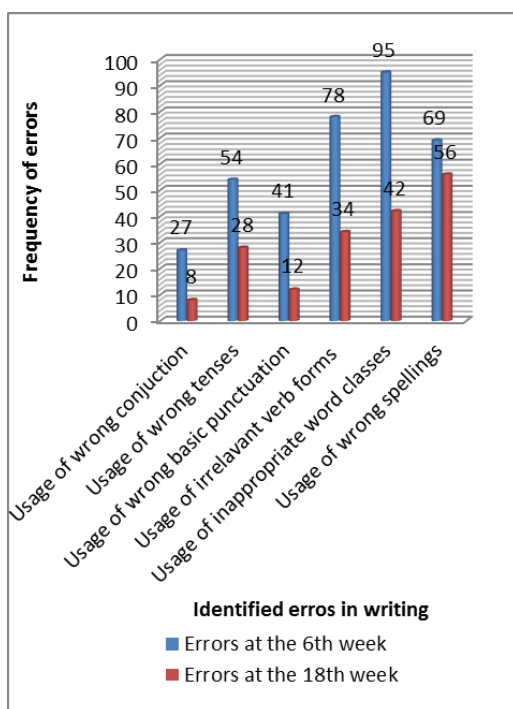


Figure1. Identified mistakes in writing performance of the undergraduates

V. CONCLUSION

The results of the study showed that only 63% of the undergraduates had possessed the expected language competency levels; at least to achieve above 75% from each language skill evaluation, at the beginning of the semester. But they have showed a significance improvement within the 18 weeks of the first semester and recorded considerable improvement in language skill performances. Out of four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, every assessment conducted at the end of every 6th week resulted in showing a progressive improvement while the assessment marks of all four skills rise above 75%, although writing skill is identified as the weak skill when it compares with the other language skill performance of the undergraduates.

It is important to find out that although UTEL-A expect the minimum level of UTEL-A benchmark band 5 to be achieved by the end of the second year of the undergraduates, KDU undergraduates of FMSH have been able to score one step above the expected level of UTEL-A benchmark bands. This study reveals that, at the end of the first semester of first year, 87% of the sample was able to achieve UTEL-A benchmark band 5 and the undergraduates' language skill performance throughout the rest of the 18 weeks is needed to be investigated.

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