

Despondency of English Language Teaching Departments: Factors Impinging upon the Struggle to Enhance English Language Skills of Undergraduates

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Abstract— In a context where the increasingly competitive labour market demands individuals to captivate significant skills in the English Language, the role played by the ELTDs in Universities is challenged. A university is a cross-section of a larger society that consists of undergraduates from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, English language skills possessed by this diverse group vary at the entry and exit. Even though the responsibility of propagating the English Language proficiency of undergraduates lies in the hands of ELTDs, relevant literature suggests that ELTDs of the Sri Lankan government universities are lagging behind in achieving the set goals. Besides, this study meticulously explored the factors behind this failure in order to recommend remedial measures to be taken. The sample consisted of 112 third-year students out of 226 of the Faculty of Science, University of Ruhuna. A convenient sampling method was used to determine the sample and a questionnaire comprising open-ended questions was administered to accumulate data. Moreover, to derive a better understanding of the phenomena, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 lecturers of the DELT. It was particularly evident that low proficiency of English at the entry, absenteeism, passive involvement in learning, ragging, and subculture, preconceived notions of students towards English, priority given to core-course units, lack of intrinsic motivation, compartmentalization, the mismatch between the lesson materials and students' desires, make teaching English a struggle at university. Thus, it is argued that the role of ELTDs should be re-conceptualized to equip the undergraduates with the required English language proficiency by introducing innovative teaching methods and incorporating technology, which will in return

help to create a conducive English language learning environment.

Keywords— *challenges, English language proficiency, ELTDs*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, the place and value held by English are unquestionable since it is considered to be the key that makes ones' life a success. Wijesekera (2012) citing Samarakkody (2000) highlights that, even in contemporary Sri Lanka, English is considered as a significant 'Basic Life Skill' than a second/foreign language. The English language has unleashed its power over tertiary level education in Sri Lanka playing a crucial role in the employability of undergraduates. Thus, it has become essential for the undergraduates, who are considered to be the power and spirit of future development, to capture a significant competency in the English language. Unfortunately, as Perera (2013) has stressed, inadequate knowledge in English is reckoned to be a significant issue that hampered university students from receiving the best out of their university life and it is a serious issue prevailing in almost all the Universities of Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the ultimate result is a set of low-quality graduates who are incompetent to compete themselves with the international developments and standards (Atapaththu, 2013). It is also apparent that even though the ELTDs which comprise skilled academics have implemented a variety of programmes with the intention of enhancing the English Language skills of the undergraduates the achievement of language teaching outcomes in state universities in Sri Lanka, in general, remains unsuccessful (Wijesekera, 2012). Consequently, it has become a challenge for all most all the English Language Teaching Departments in Sri Lankan Universities to uplift the language proficiency of the undergraduates. The Editorial, Daily News, (Sri Lanka, Nov.6, 2010) claims that "the fault lies in the

system of teaching English language. It is impossible to accept the fact that the cream of the country's intelligentsia is unable to handle English properly. The university academics will have to accept a great share of the blame as they have failed to equip the students with the expected English language proficiency."

Nevertheless, as several factors have an impact on this struggle of English teaching and learning, the analysis intends to answer the following research questions;

- What are the factors affecting the failure of ELTDs in Sri Lankan State Universities?
- What are the possible strategies that ELTDs can implement to create an innovative teaching and learning atmosphere?

Dealing with the problem of the research it appears essential to address the constant failure experienced by ELTDs in case of inspiring students to learn English. When the students have less capacity to handle the language, the ELTD has to endure all the criticisms moderately or unreasonably. Considering the Faculty of Arts the majority of the students fail or remain in a low standard of language competence. Students rarely attend language classes (Chandradasa, 2015). Ultimately the students struggle just to pass their language paper, whereas the language teaching body of the university also struggles to convert those retrograde language learners into an enthusiastic group of students who can handle the language in passion and style (Wijesinghe, 2015).

Since there was no end to this struggle the research intended to address it with the objective of finding out the reasons behind this momentous decline of ELTDs which makes the English Language Teaching a struggle at a university and to suggest possible innovative teaching and learning strategies to change the existing negative atmosphere.

II. METHODOLOGY

As the study was qualitative in nature a descriptive model of analysis which followed an inductive approach was employed to open up a range of dimensions pertaining to the research problems. The sample consisted of 112 third-year students out of 226 of the Faculty of Science, the University of Ruhuna, selected by convenient sampling method, and a questionnaire comprised of 12 open-ended questions was administered to accumulate data. The

questionnaire included two questions to elicit information about their gender and locality and 10 questions designed by the researchers based on the existing literature related to the study. Further, to get a better insight, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 lecturers attached to the DELT of the University of Ruhuna. The results of the interviews were then coded and analyzed in detail. Further, to carry out a comprehensive analysis secondary data extracted from relevant literature was employed. Moreover, to arrive at the defined target, English language classrooms were observed for a period of 15 weeks during the class hours.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Low proficiency of English at Entry*

Poor knowledge of English at entry was a major obstacle confronted by the English language lecturers in teaching English. The majority who came from rural areas did not possess sufficient knowledge of English. Essentially, this fact was also identified by Ferooqui (2014) as he pointed out that students' low proficiency in English obstructs teachers from using English as the only medium of instruction. As it was revealed, the students intended to learn the language from the basics, which is difficult. Since the students found it problematic to deal only in English the teachers had to switch between the mother tongue and target language in language classes. Rasheed, Zeeshan & Zaidi were also on the view that teaching English is challenging when the students lack prior knowledge, resulting in excessive code-switching inside the classroom, which is considered to be ineffective.

B. *Absenteeism*

Low attendance and lack of enthusiasm of the students were recorded to be few other issues experienced by the faculty for an extended period. As discovered by the interviews, students, except the first-year students, hardly attend English language lectures, since 80% attendance is not a compulsory pre-requisite for them to sit for the final examination. This was found to be a usual practice, whereas the lecturers had to repeat the same lesson once they met a totally new set of students in each session. The lecturers were dissatisfied with the students' level of motivation to learn English and further stated that such practices of students have a negative impact on their efficiency as well. A similar idea was germinated from a study conducted by Faren (2010), who states that de-motivated language learners were one of the

major issues which blocked the language learning programmes in delivering the intended outcomes.

C. Passive Learners

Interviews shed light on the fact that teaching English has become one of the biggest challenges as the students did not respond and engage properly in learning activities inside the classroom, despite the strategies utilized by the lecturers. It was further revealed that the students remained to be passive listeners making the constant efforts of the language lecturers futile. Thus, the lecturers were in a persistent struggle to achieve the expected results from a lesson. Responses provided by the students divulged that they hardly speak owing to the fear of negative evaluation and incompetency of handling the language properly. Azeera, Nisla, and Kareema (2016) investigating the drawbacks encountered in learning English among the undergraduates of the Eastern Province emphasized that students learn English with the objective of passing the exam but are not determined at improving their language skills.

D. Influence of the Subculture

The Influence of ragging and university subculture were also some reasons which obstructed the smooth language learning and teaching atmosphere. Despite first-year students, it was found that others hardly attend classes during the rag season. As per the rules and orders of the second-year students, during the rag season, it was prohibited to use English inside the university for any purpose. As Rathnayake identified the students' politics also seemed to be vital because during the rag season almost all the students are brainwashed instigating a strong unnecessary dislike towards English. Many of the students have lost their passion for learning English due to such pessimism and lagged behind the expected goals of language learning. To console themselves they usually hung on false beliefs such as learning English is just passing the examinations and they can simply get through the exams even without attending classes (2013). The lecturers revealed that every year they experience a drastic change in the second-year students who were very friendly and active in the intensive period.

E. Lack of Uniformity of Proficiency Levels of the Students

Lack of uniformity of proficiency levels was identified as one of the prevalent issues that hindered the smoothness of the teaching and learning process. It was discovered as a fact that discouraged lecturers as

well as the students. As it was found there were students who were very good at English as well as who were less capable to use the language properly. Consequently, it has become a challenge for teachers in balancing a certain lesson in a way that it fits both parties. Even Perera (2010) has identified that teachers often face difficulties in teaching English when the students of the same class exhibit a diverse range of proficiency and experience.

F. English Being a Non-credit Course

It was perceptible that the students strived hard to obtain good grades for their major course units, neglecting the crucial role played by the English language in their lives. Their major objective was to complete the degree programme with a high GPA, thus the priority was given to degree subjects. English being a non-credit subject, less or no time was allocated to enhance English language skills. Many students were on the opinion that it is a waste to attend the English language lectures given the possibility of copying the note to pass the exam. Moreover, they believed that taking down notes would assist them in improving their English language skills without realizing the fallacy behind the rationale. Wijethunga (1989) also in his study has highlighted that the students still believe that they can learn English by taking down notes and simply memorizing things which is an erroneous notion because language learning differs from content learning since it is a skill that demands perpetual practice.

G. Preconceived Notions of the Students Towards English

Students' preconceived notions towards English were discerned as a hindrance to the smooth run of the teaching-learning process. It was revealed that English was considered as a requirement to obtain the degree than a life skill and still the colonial remnants of English have not been erased from the mindsets of the students. It cannot be forgotten that English embraces strong socio-linguistic clarifications when it comes to the Asian context. Being a colony of Britain for a long time, English is considered a weapon, an ornament that belongs to colonizers, a threat to Sri Lankan culture, and a jewel of the upper social class (Karunaratne, 2014). Within the university subculture, English is labelled as 'kaduawa' (Hemantha, 2005). Accordingly, English is something more than just learning a second language (Widyalankara, 2009). Thus in this regard, it was evident that the preconceived notions of students

regarding English had a negative impact on the English language learning approaches making it challenging for the lecturers to disseminate English language skills.

H. *Compartmentalization*

Compartmentalization was identified as another deterrent that obstructed the teaching and learning process. As disclosed by the interviews the interaction between the DELT and other faculties remained to be low resulting in having a blind eye to the requirements of the faculties. Thus, it was evident that this mismatch between the perceptions resulted in creating lesson materials that do not address the needs of the students.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it could be mentioned that teaching English at the university has become a struggle than a challenge. It was fundamentally true even as Wijesekera (2012) pointed out that English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka is a failure. Low proficiency of English of the students at the entry, absenteeism, passive learners, university subculture, preconceived notions of students towards English, lack of intrinsic motivation of the students, lack of uniformity of language learners, and compartmentalization were identified as the major factors, which obstructed the learning-teaching process, eventually resulting in the English language proficiency of the students. As evident, in a context where English has become a deciding factor of the employability of the undergraduates, faults of the students, as well as the weaknesses of the strategies implemented by the ELTDs, make teaching English at the tertiary level a struggle. Thus it is high time for the ELTDs to reconceptualize and redefine their roles integrating novel approaches to the teaching-learning process. Further, an attitudinal change of the students is essential in order to achieve the set target of creating competent undergraduates, who possess English language skills. ELTDs should frequently communicate with the students and other faculties and identify their needs when designing the curriculum so that it would create a conducive learning environment for the students which will assist them in enhancing the English language skills demanded by the fast-moving world.

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