

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Teaching of English to Undergraduates in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has paralysed the world for almost two years, has had disastrous effects on many sectors of society. Across the globe the educational system has plummeted due to the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. In Sri Lanka, a large population comprising school going children and university undergraduates are facing disruption to their studies due to the devastating effects in the education systems brought about by of the pandemic. The hasty transition from the traditional face-to-face classroom methodology adopted in the teaching of English to undergraduates into online learning and blended learning modes has created a plethora of problems ranging from internet connectivity issues to inability to possess devices for learning due to economic crises. Teaching English to undergraduates entails equipping them with the four language skills, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, the online teaching method has to some extent curtailed the freedom that the face-to-face language classroom provides. This paper attempts to briefly explore the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges faced, on the teaching of English to undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

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Introduction

Pandemics have a disruptive nature, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic which has swept through the world has resulted in drastic and abrupt changes in every sector of life, including education, and this includes the area of English language teaching (ELT) [2]. In order to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the government of Sri Lanka ordered all educational institutions to be closed from 12 March 2020, including higher education institutions - 15 state universities and about 40 other state and non-state tertiary education institutions and in-person instruction in all educational institutions ceased [3, 2]. Face-to-face classes in both the education and higher education sectors were suspended, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made a considerable dent in the education sector in Sri Lanka, owing to its wide-angled impact on schools and universities [1]. Especially in countries such as Sri Lanka, such disruptions to the tertiary education sector by COVID-19 could delay the creation of the leaders and skilled workforce the country needs towards a successful transition to upper- middle-income status [3]. Education is a determining factor that plays a major role in identifying whether a country is moving towards development, and in Sri Lanka, one factor that plays a pivotal role, especially in the service industry, is the competency of English, especially the spoken and written skills in facilitating the employability of graduates into both the private and public sectors [4].

The temporary closure of educational institutions during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has abruptly transformed the global education landscape in favor of distance

learning [5]. This radical shift saw a surge in the use of various digital platforms and applications, including digital learning management systems, collaboration platforms for live-video communication, massive open online courses and tools for creating learning content [6]. The teaching and learning process suddenly turned the direction into online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic globally [3]. With universities being closed in Sri Lanka from March 2020, learning from home and online lectures were developed to continue the higher education uninterrupted [7].

English Language Teaching Amidst a Pandemic

English is learned as a second language in Sri Lanka, which is a multiethnic society. With language being defined as the single most powerful form of communication among different groups of individuals in the world, the English language has served a useful role in Sri Lanka, as an important unifying factor in the country [8]. Good English language proficiency amongst graduates enhances their employability and is a gateway to the world of work-readiness which will attract the attention of prospective employers [4].

As a result of the virus being declared a pandemic, many countries decided to implement the stay-at-home movement as a way to minimize the spread of the virus [9]. The teaching and learning process is an ongoing process for all ages be it formally or informally, physically or virtually [10]. Due to the pandemic, the teaching and learning process was interrupted when it took a sudden switch from face-to-face to online learning in most countries affected by Covid-19.

Like all other disciplines, English language teaching in the tertiary education sector in Sri Lanka has been adversely affected due to the pandemic, where undergraduates who learnt the language skills

through the face-to-face mode have now been forced to learn the skills online. With the closure of universities, undergraduates were given an extended holiday, and were deprived of input including English language education skills for almost six months [2]. The English language courses were taught online, but faced severe obstacles due to connectivity problems and an imbalance in technology devices among undergraduates. The inability of undergraduates to attend face-to-face lectures in English posed a severe challenge to the learning of the language skills with the lecturing pendulum swinging in the direction of the online mode of lecture delivery. This posed challenges for most English language courses taught at tertiary level in Sri Lankan universities, as courses were originally designed for face-to-face instruction, and there was a necessity for lecturers to make suitable changes to these courses, in a short span of time, in order to adapt them to be appropriate and acceptable for online delivery [7]. Courses that could provide online instruction to impart and improve English language skills, had to be designed to suit the needs of a population that was facing severe technology and pedagogical challenges whilst wading through a phase of mounting concerns [2].

The online lectures which were in the form of recorded videos that comprised of explanations by the lecturer, power point slides, course material and short video clips, were uploaded to the Learning Management System (LMS) in order to enable communication out-of-class. However, although the online option was explored, there were many hurdles that were impediments to the successful implementation of these lectures via the online platform. Live lessons through video conferencing or Zoom were not delivered, as some undergraduates had problems with internet connections, and were unable to access the internet from their homes situated in remote areas in the country; hence, there was a chance of dwindling numbers in attendance due to a plethora of reasons [7].

Using the Online Platform

An online teaching methodology was adopted in conducting lectures in Sri Lankan universities owing to the inability of undergraduates to follow lectures due to the closure of the university [7]. However, there were many instances where this proved unsuccessful owing to many reasons. Group and whole-class discussions were characterized by longer silences and shorter undergraduate responses, which was brought about by the large class size and undergraduates turning their cameras off due to privacy concerns and limiting paralinguistic communication. Some undergraduates were unable to access computers and IT equipment such as mobile phones in their homes, as this equipment is in heavy demand from parents, children and relatives who have to work from home [11]. It was also learnt that there were undergraduates from poverty-stricken backgrounds who did not have access to laptops or other equipment to engage in online lectures. Especially, countries that have limited technologies, also have problems in schools and universities, and are not ready for the complete implementation of the countrywide online education [12]. Results of different studies indicate that the virtual teaching environments can be successfully implemented in schools or higher education institutes, where there is appropriate technical environment and support.

Online teaching excludes students who do not have the economic wherewithal to purchase the equipment necessary to connect with their peers and teachers, due to financial constraints, and those who experience electricity connection problems and undisrupted internet connectivity. Most working-class and low income families in Sri Lanka are struggling to find money to feed themselves, with many losing their jobs due to the COVID-19 lockdown, and, purchasing internet data for education is considered a luxury, which

is termed as an extravagance [1]. Additionally most undergraduates do not have a learning environment within their homes that is free of disturbance from other members of their families, and amidst these challenges, shifting to online education without putting the proper infrastructure in place may not be conducive for the learning process to take place [13].

With these problems hindering 'online education,' undergraduates were given the option to download lesson material and videos related to the English language course module which were uploaded on LMS (Learning Management System) by lecturers, which is accessible to undergraduates, whenever they were able to gain access to internet connectivity, and at a time convenient to them, as, the quality of online education is a critical issue that needs proper attention [7, 11]. This, it is hoped, would reduce the anxiety and create a positive attitude in the minds of undergraduates, with regard to online education.

Challenges Faced by Teachers and Learners

ESL teachers and learners face many challenges as education is undergoing changes in terms of how to manage content that is in line with remote learning to facilitate learning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic [10]. The challenges mentioned for teachers are psychological, teaching and learning content design, lack of facilities, and learners' language skills [15-17]. As for learners, the challenges faced are psychological [14], learning methods, lack of facilities, learners' language skills and lack of digital literacy which eventually lead to lack of motivation, financial challenges and lack of awareness. Providing the required technology needs and the necessary support and training for the teachers and learners will lead to a higher quality and success rate of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning amidst the pandemic.

Considering the time constraints in remote learning, the teaching practices of some aspects of the English language should be designed to focus on only a selected aspect of the language. Notably, the goal of each English language remote learning session is to create higher levels of engagement and foster learners' autonomy [15]. For instance, focusing on teaching speaking skills and pronunciation and motivating a sense of writing among undergraduates lead towards the intended goal [18]. Teachers and learners both play vital roles in achieving a successful teaching and learning process during the pandemic as no doubt autonomous learners are able to learn by themselves and be independent, but they are dependent on teachers to be excellent facilitators [19]. The sudden change in the teaching and learning process amidst the global pandemic contributes to a number of challenges faced by English language teachers and learners. Stated that the shift from real to virtual itself is a new stressor among English language learners and teachers living in the United States. In addition, they found that the transition is more challenging for the learners than the teacher [14].

The English proficiency level of learners and the lack of facilities are significant challenges that have to be addressed in this post-pandemic era. This is congruent with the findings of who predicted that English as a second language learners in Malaysia faced challenges in terms of their level of proficiency. This is supported by as they highlighted that some Malaysian learners are excellent while some are working hard to break the barrier of their English Language proficiency [20]. Enunciate that teaching methods, psychological factors and language skills are some of the other challenges faced by learners in Malaysia. Another significant challenge faced by learners of English is the lack of digital literacy, which leads to low motivation among learners resulting in the obstruction of the teaching and learning process. The findings of a study done by

revealed that low motivation of learners leads to and brings about a new stressor among teachers. Thus, adequate exposure must be provided to both teachers and learners to ensure effective digital learning. [15-17]. Also discovered that other challenges faced by learners included financial challenges whereby they were not able to afford smartphones and internet quota, laziness and lack of awareness. A study conducted in Sri Lanka by [7] revealed that a majority of undergraduates did not have a suitable device and/or internet connection at home to follow lectures online, although they preferred the online method of lecture delivery. Thus they were unable to access lecture notes, and upload videos, as part of their method of study. The lack of suitable technological facilities was an impediment to some towards the furtherance of their education, online. Internet connectivity is a crucial requirement for online learning; however, students who lived in remote parts of the country faced severe connectivity issues and problems with network coverage. Accessing well-equipped telecommunication equipment for students in poverty is challenging, and a lack of a suitable device such as a laptop, desktop, tablet or smartphone becomes a hindrance to students who have no option but to continue their education online [21]. Therefore, it is important to take adequate measures to overcome the challenges in order to improve the English language teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

This review has attempted to highlight the challenges faced by teachers and learners of the English language in Sri Lankan universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges need to be addressed to set forth a future where teachers and learners can be supported digitally and psychologically, while continuously monitoring the quality of the teaching and learning design and delivery method, so as to make changes to smoothen the process of English Language Teaching and Learning during the pandemic [22]. The policy makers and the National Curriculum Development Divisions will be able to enhance the way their respective countries respond to the pandemic by looking at other countries' worldwide response. Besides, the various digital platforms and English language learners' view of the platforms and online application revealed will give English language teachers an opportunity to identify which one is better to increase the engagement of learners and to promote learners' autonomy [10]. This review will also help administrators of educational institutions to identify the importance of the training given to English language teachers and trainees for better teaching and learning processes [10]. This will enable teachers to train their learners and increase their level of digital literacy for a more successful engagement in a challenging 'new normal' environment.

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