

Kennedy, J., 2017

Volume 3 Issue 1, pp. 554 - 566

Date of Publication: 22nd March, 2017

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2017.s31.554566>

This paper can be cited as: J, K. (2017). *Students vs. Language: Challenges Faced by the Undergraduates Offering English Medium Instruction in Sri Lanka*. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 3(1), 554-566.

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## **STUDENTS VS. LANGUAGE: CHALLENGES FACED BY THE UNDERGRADUATES OFFERING ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN SRI LANKA**

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### **Abstract**

*This study verifies the challenges faced by the undergraduate students who offer English Medium Instruction (EMI) whose mother tongue is other than English where the English language is taught as second language. After the independence, Sri Lanka continued with the same system to its educational sector until the late 1950's in the school level. But in the tertiary level, the natural science based subjects continued to confine to the English Medium Instruction. This trend has been expanded to other field of studies in the tertiary level such as social sciences and humanities. Currently, as in the case of other countries – especially the Asian countries, Sri Lanka also switched to EMI not only in the tertiary level but also in the secondary level of education as well. Concerning the tertiary level of education, a higher level of language proficiency is expected for a successful academic study in the EMI where this would be a platform for the language development. This study was conducted among a group of weaker students in English language skills those who failed in the General English courses in the first year of study in their under graduation who are at present in their second year of study. This study reveals that more than 70% of the students would like to switch on again to have their course of study to L1 though they realize the importance of the English language.*

## **Keywords**

English Medium Instruction, Proficiency, Language Learning, Tertiary Level, Language Development.

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## **1. Introduction**

Many Asian countries who were the British colonies had switched to English Medium of Instruction (EMI) in their educational sectors in all levels. When the British were the ruler of those countries, they had introduced English Medium Instruction for their own purpose. After gaining independence from the British during 1940s and 50s, many of those colonized countries did not know what to do with this language of education – whether to continue the “colonial language” or go back to their “local languages.” That too, countries that have more than one language got this confusion still further. The elite had their “British education” and became the successful successors of the British and their “obedient servants”, took control of the countries. They were somehow in their mid of the “colonial hangover” thought that the English language would give higher social status. Sri Lanka too had been caught up in this trap and the rulers of the then independent Sri Lanka continued the English Medium of Education to all levels – right from the school level to the tertiary level. But during the late 1950s, Sri Lanka had to switch on to its medium of instruction from English to the local official languages of the country. This system continued till the “globalization boom” came into existence.

Further, the term “globalization” brought many changes into the globe and this had a tremendous effect on the developing and developed Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, etc. The effect had made much ways in the field of education, especially switching on the medium of instruction to English. Flowerdew and Miller indicate that more and more students like to get into English medium of education in the tertiary level; the ability to compete the academic lectures becomes a challenge to them (1992). These types of challenges become prominence in the field of English Medium of Instruction. This need not be confined to the students alone; it has to be extended to the teachers who are newly switched on to the same medium of instruction where they are unable to coop with the speed of the students since students had already acquired the required proficiency in the English language in the secondary level of their education.

In the case of Sri Lanka, English became an inevitable language for the medium of instruction in the tertiary level of education except in the fields of social sciences and humanities. But the above said

two fields of study also have adopted more than 50% the English medium of instruction due to the competitive job market and a part of globalization process. To coop with the EMI in the tertiary level, the school level education in the EMI does not support adequately. Though General English is taught for more than ten years in the school system (from Grade 3 to Grade 13) and bilingual mode of education is also encouraged in the schools. This EMI in schools and the General English language teaching do not have adequate resources and suitable teaching-learning environment. This led the students' lack of motivation in the English language. Also it is noteworthy that less than 3% of the school students offer EMI for their studies before their General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level, and less than 1% follow EMI in their General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level. Further there are no favorable or special consideration in the government sector of employment or tertiary level of education for the students for those who follow EMI in the school level.

Even in the European context, following EMI is very difficult, other than England. For instance, the research by Hellekjær (2010) shows that among the students in Norway and Germany who had EMI indicates that many students faced difficulties in following their lecture other than L1. Vinkie et al.'s (1998) study also found that EMI has brought difficulties not only to the students, but also to the lecturers, where students had to face linguistic difficulties whilst lecturers had to put additional effort for preparing EMI lectures, which in turn cause more energy in their lecture delivery.

The same difficulties exist in the Asian context as well. Domingo's study (2015) on the Filipino students says that Filipino and English or Code Mixing is well received in the classroom secessions which is also suitable in the other Asian countries. Graddol's study (2010) reveals that in India students face difficulties because of "the double burden of mastering their subject" (p101). Also Jusuf Ibrahim investigates in his study among the students in Indonesian universities (2001) that EMI has its own difficulties among the university students due to "its classroom-based nature" and he further goes one step and says "there is a great possibility that EMI will not improve the four language skills equally for both students and teachers" (p 135). This is the view of Silalahi Wolter Parlindungan and Sitorus Friska RIA (2015) who say "Teaching English as a foreign language is a challenging. Since English is as a foreign language in Taiwan. Every student has some problems and also every teacher has his/her own ways to deal with.(p 1154)" The same case exists in the Sri Lankan context because Sri Lanka also has the same Asian background as Ibrahim indicates "traditional teaching methods do not allow students and teachers opportunity for a maximum second language acquisition and literacy" (p135).

At this point, this study traces the difficulties faced by the students who have EMI in the undergraduate level, whose medium of instruction was L1 at the school level. Sudden change in the medium of instruction affects not only their level of learning the “main” or “core” subject, but also limits their language proficiency as well.

## **2. Objectives**

The objectives of this study is to find out the challenges faced by the Commerce and Management undergraduates from the Second Year of study who have EMI, and to find out whether there are any improvement in their English language proficiency level by following EMI in their course of study.

## **3. Methodology**

For this study 50 students have been selected who had scored below 40% in their First Year of study in the General English examination at the end of their first semester. Below 40% in the examination is generally considered “fail” by the university system in Sri Lanka, and those who score this marks has to repeat the examination in the forthcoming and subsequent semester. The total population of the class is 166. A questionnaire was distributed to them for data collection and group discussion and individual interviews had been conducted to ensure the collected data through the questionnaire. Further, 10% of the rest of the samples from the same batch of students were also interviewed to check the impact on EMI on the English Proficiency Level.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Background of the Students**

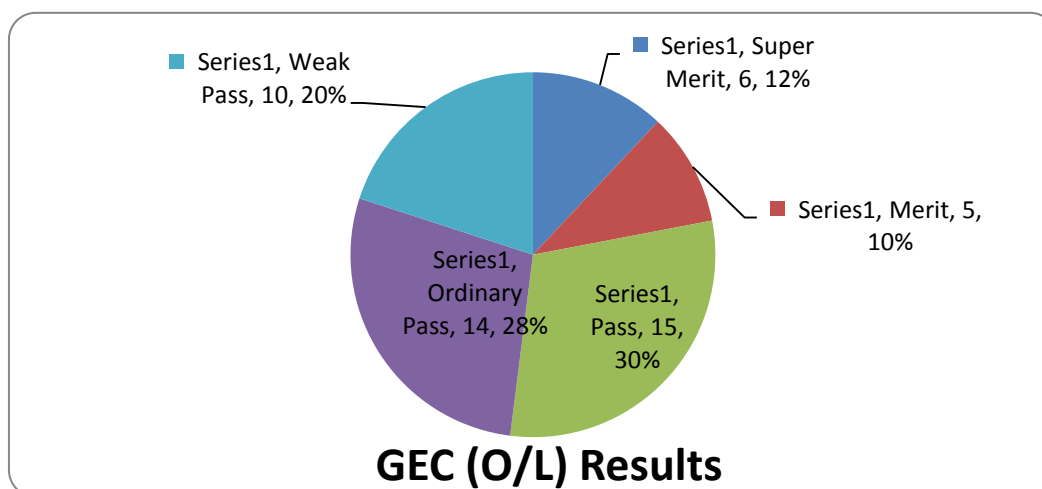
23 samples are Tamil and 27 samples are Sinhala as their L1. Most of the students come from the rural areas (73%) and the rest are from the urban/semi urban (27%) and all them studied in their mother tongue and none of them studied in EMI at the secondary (school) level.

### **4.2 Performance in the School Level**

The following tables show their pass levels in their General Certificate of Examination (Ordinary Level) and General Certificate of Examination (Advanced Level) which are generally denoted as GCE (O/L) and GCE (A/L) in Sri Lanka:

**Table 1:** Results in GCE (O/L)

Grade	A	B	C	S	W	Total
Number	6	5	15	14	10	50
Percentage	12	10	30	28	20	100



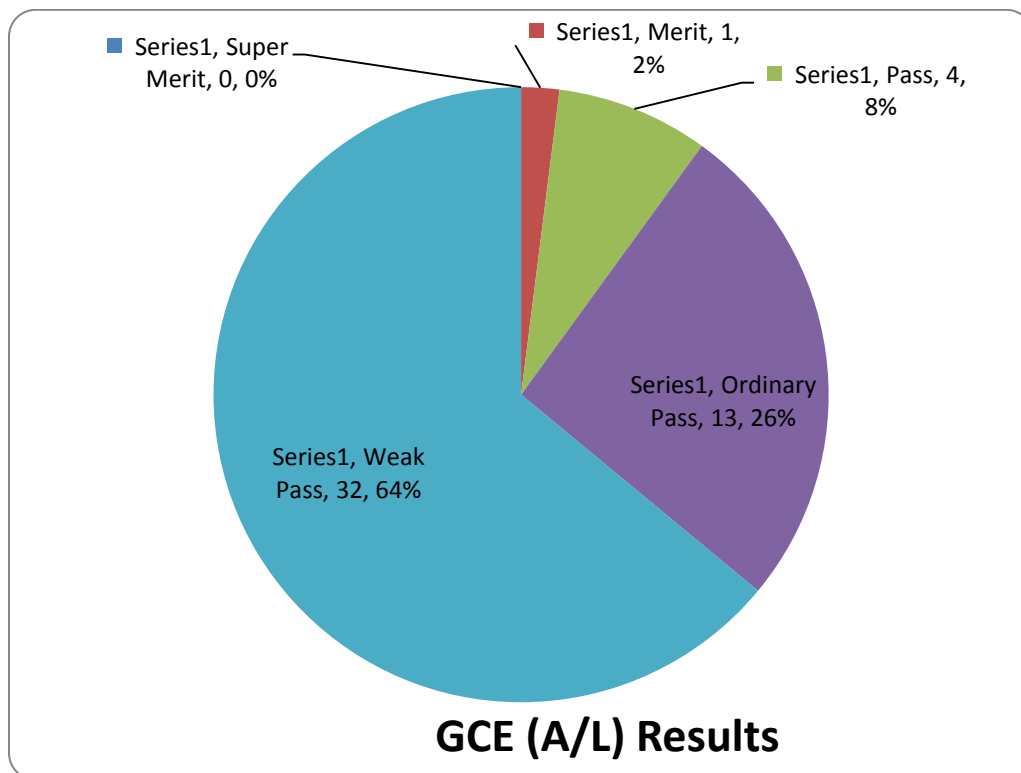
**Figure 1:** Passing Rate in the General Certificate of Examination (Ordinary Level)

This result shows that the ordinary pass (C) is in the highest percentage (30%). The lowest is the merit pass (B) (10%). Interestingly the super merit pass (A) is higher than the merit pass (B). This indicates that the students who failed in their degree level General English examination passed in their General Certificate of Examination (Ordinary Level). That is, they took keen interest in their General English five years earlier and the learning interest has been reduced subsequently.

Further, the school students' main aim in the General Certificate of Examination (Ordinary Level) period is to get into the General Certificate of Examination (Advanced Level) entry which is the key educational entity in the Sri Lankan education system. But for entering into the job market, the English proficiency level expected by the employers is generally a minimum "C" pass in the General Certificate of Examination (Ordinary Level).

**Table 2: Results in GCE (A/L)**

Grade	A	B	C	S	W	Total
Number	0	1	4	13	32	50
Percentage	0	2	8	26	64	100



**Figure 2: Passing Rate in the General Certificate of Examination (Advanced Level)**

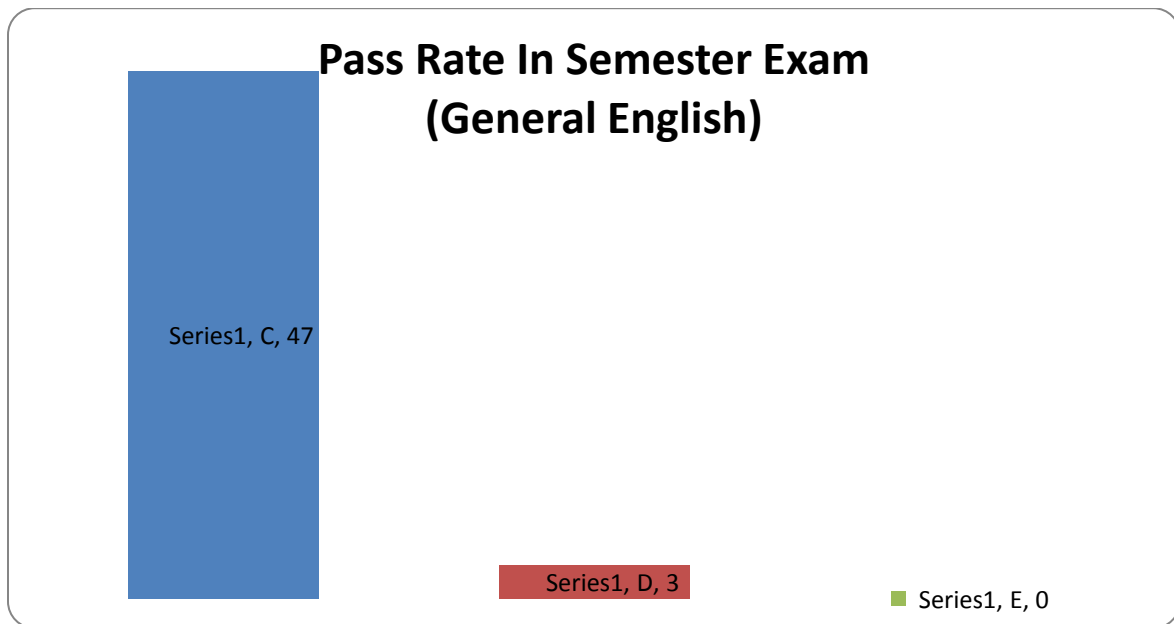
Figure 2 clearly indicates that there are more weak passes (64%) and 0% of super merit pass. This is because the students had concentrated on their main subject rather than General English, because a pass in the General English examination is not counted for the university entrance in Sri Lanka.

Whilst checking their results in their General English (named as Business Communication – I) examination conducted at the end of the First Year First Semester, the following results were obtained:

**Table 3:** Results in General English in Year I Semester I

Grade	C	D	E	Total
Number	47	3	0	50
Percentage	94	6	0	100

### 4.3 Performance in the University

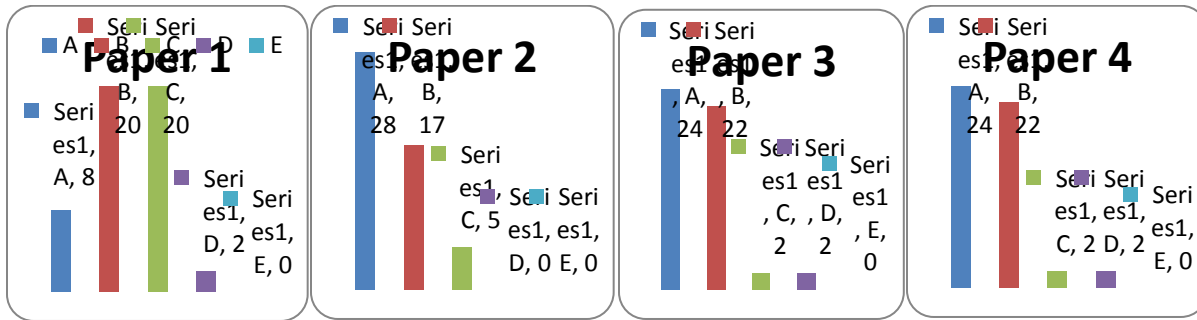


**Figure 3:** Passing Rate in the General English (Semester – I)

They do not have General English in their First Year Second Semester course of study. Instead they have General English in their Second Year First Semester (named as Business Communication – II). This indicates that 94% had scored C pass and 6% got D pass (between 29 and 19 marks) and none got E pass (below 18 marks).

#### 4.4 Performance in the Main Subjects

The following charts show their results in their main/core subjects in the First Year First Semester and First Year Second Semester examinations:



**Figure 4:** Results in their main papers (Year I Semester I)

The above chart says that the students got fairly good results in their main subjects irrespective of the medium of instruction which is English. These particular results from the charts clearly indicate that there are no direct impact on the Language proficiency and the medium of instruction. Therefore, the samples are further tested with their proficiency level of the English Language before and after the university entrance.

Also it is revealed whilst looking at the results of the main subject of the other students who had scored more than the selected samples, their average passing rate is almost the same with this students. That is, both the samples and non-samples have the same type of result in their main subjects.

Whilst having a focal group discussion and personal interviews with the samples and randomly selected non-samples, they all said that they study their main subjects with the help of their fellow students or their senior students. The above “helping” process is done through L1. This further makes us decide that though the students have EMI, they need L1 for further clarifications for their examination purpose, not through their teachers, but through their fellow students. That is, there is no or very rare impact on EMI on their level of English Proficiency.

#### 4.5 English Language Proficiency Level before and after the University Entrance

Based on the questionnaire and the interviews taken with the samples (individual and group), the following results have been received:



**Table 4: Prificiency in the English Language before Joining the University**

<b>Skill/ Level</b>	<b>Very Poor</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Avarage</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Very Good</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Reading /</b>	5	10	19	13	3	50
<b>Percentage</b>	10	20	38	26	6	100%
<b>Writing /</b>	4	15	23	7	1	50
<b>Percentage</b>	8	30	46	14	2	100%
<b>Listening /</b>	1	17	17	14	1	50
<b>Percentage</b>	2	34	34	28	2	100%
<b>Speaking /</b>	20	19	10	1	0	50
<b>Percentage</b>	40	38	20	2	0	100%

The results from the above table clearly indicates the following regarding their English Language Proficiency prior to joining the University:

- i. their reading skill is 10%, 20%, 38%, 26%, and 6% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that prior to the joining to the University their reading skill is average and good,
- ii. their writing skill is 8%, 30%, 46%, 14%, and 2% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that prior to the joining to the University their writing skill is poor or average,
- iii. their listening skill is 2%, 34%, 34%, 28%, and 2% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that prior to the joining to the University their listening skill is between poor and good,
- iv. their speaking skill is 40%, 38%, 20%, 2%, and 0% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that prior to joining the University their reading skill is

between very poor and average; which again says that they are very poor (40%) or poor (38%) in speaking rather good or very good.

**Table 5: Proficiency in the English Language after Joining the University**

<b>Skill/ Level</b>	<b>Very Poor</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Very Good</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Reading /</b>	0	0	12	25	13	50
<b>Percentage</b>	0	0	24	50	26	100%
<b>Writing /</b>	0	3	18	23	6	50
<b>Percentage</b>	0	6	36	46	12	100%
<b>Listening /</b>	0	2	15	18	15	50
<b>Percentage</b>	0	4	30	36	30	100%
<b>Speaking /</b>	5	12	23	10	0	50
<b>Percentage</b>	10	24	46	20	0	100%

The results from the above table clearly indicates the following regarding their English Language Proficiency after joining the University:

- i. their reading skill is 0%, 0%, 24%, 50%, and 26% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that after joining the University their reading skill is average and very good; further half of the samples say that they are on the ‘good’ side which again indicates that they have improved in their reading skills within one year period,
- ii. their writing skill is 0%, 6%, 36%, 46%, and 12% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that after joining the University their writing skill is improved (36% - 12%) in the said one year period,
- iii. their listening skill is 0%, 4%, 30%, 36%, and 30% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that after joining the University their listening skill is

between average and very good, which further informs that they are good in listening skill, and finally

- iv. their speaking skill is 10%, 24%, 46%, 20%, and 0% as very poor, poor, average, good, and very good respectively, which indicates that after the University admission their reading skill is again between very poor and average; though it has a slight drop in the percentage wise. Also it is noticeable here is that again no one is very good in their speaking skill.

From the results of their main subject and General English, we can come to a conclusion that the EMI does not affect their proficiency level in English Language. It is clearly shown that through they failed in their General English (because all the samples had failed in their General English), they passed in their main subjects.

But, whilst looking at their General English proficiency level of all four skills, there is a considerable amount of growth. This is clearly indicated in the tables 4 and 5. That is, they are able to pick up their English Language Proficiency through their General English classes, not through their main subjects which is in EMI.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the study, the students in EMI classes have difficulties in learning their language which does not have much effect on their main subjects. The same is applicable on both the students' groups – who had above “C” pass and below or “C” pass in their General English examination. But the students have more difficulties in their English Language Proficiency before joining the University and after joining the University, that is prior to the First Semester and after the First Semester of their study programme.

Further, whilst looking at their English Language proficiency in all four skills, they were almost lack in all. But after the English Language training, they are better except in speaking skill. As in Flowerdew et al.'s study (2000) reveals with the Hong Kong Chinese students of the BA classes, they were reluctant to ask and answer questions which were posed verbally on them. The same is applicable to this study that they are a bit reluctant to reply verbally, but they are ready to answer if the same question is given in written form. This may be due to their shyness in speaking in the classroom among other students.

Their lower proficiency in English Language skills may be due to their school background where all 100% samples are from the rural areas. But with the help of the other students they are able to do

better with the main subjects. The other batch of students (both their parallel and senior batch of students) were in a position to discuss and explain the main subjects in their mother tongue (L1), whereas the English Language is not of this sort as it is L2 for all of them. This further gives another detail that most of the students also study their main subjects through L1 – directly or indirectly. Then they translate them into English while at the examination. A random interviews with the other students reveal this.

It is also observed in Rogier's (2012) research that institutions whose target is to increase English Language proficiency through EMI must have separate and comprehensible instructions with the support of the teachers. Also it must be supported with pre-academic programmes which could be conducted after the lecture hours for the weaker students.

Also it is noticeable in the EMI lectures that the teachers, especially the young teachers, also do not have proper English language command, but they are good in their field of study. This case is very rare among the senior staff, that is they are good in both. So proper mechanisms must be created to give good language proficiency to the young teachers of the main subjects in the EMI set up, especially to those who are newly appointed and deal with the fresh batch of students.

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