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"A smooth transition or a giant leap?" The challenges posed by the transition from secondary education to higher education in relation to EMI in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Although bilingual education has been offered in some schools of Sri Lanka since 2001, primary and secondary school education has been conducted mainly in the first language (L1), that is, Sinhala/Tamil. As a result, most students sit for the General Certificate of Education – Advanced Level (GCE (A/L) examination, which determines university entry, in their L1. Thus, the majority of students entering state universities do so after receiving their entire education in their L1. At the tertiary level, where many (if not most) degree programs are conducted in the English medium, students struggle to make the transition from Sinhala/Tamil medium instruction to English medium instruction (EMI).[1] This study examines the challenges faced by students and lecturers in three selected state universities due to this language transition. It employs a qualitative research design. Data were collected through official documents and semi-structured interviews with forty academics. Three focus group interviews were conducted with thirty undergraduates. In addition, eighteen non-

[1] This term is used to identify classes in specific subject disciplines, as opposed to language support classes.

participant lectures were observed in mainstream[2] classrooms. The findings indicate several structural, institutional, and linguistic challenges on the way to a successful implementation of EMI in state universities and demonstrate that the transition from GCE (A/L) to EMI in universities is a challenging experience for both students and lecturers. We propose that the concept of academic literacies be used as a productive means of supporting undergraduates through their transition to EMI.

Keywords: challenges; English medium instruction; higher education; school education; Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Research into English medium instruction (EMI) has consistently demonstrated that globally there has been an increase in the phenomenon in higher education, and Sri Lanka has followed this trend. Although English was the medium of instruction when the university system was first introduced into Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1942,[3] the medium of instruction in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and the performing arts was changed to the vernaculars of Sinhala or Tamil in the 1960s. However, in more recent years, the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka has been promoting EMI due to the belief that it will improve the level of employability of graduates as well as the contemporary trend of internationalization.

Most students enter university after completing their studies in one of the vernaculars – Sinhala (78.4%) or Tamil (19.4%) (Annual School Census of Sri Lanka, 2020, p. 11). Therefore, most of those who enter state universities start their academic careers with a potential handicap: Despite all studies at school level being in the Sinhala/Tamil medium, as undergraduates, they are expected to transition to English as their medium of instruction with, presumably, inadequate support from the system.

Based on over 35 years of combined experience as providers of English language support in the state university system, the researchers had observed that despite the increase in the number of English medium degree programs (EMDPs) and the powerful discourse surrounding the need for English in the world of work, it appeared that undergraduates were not being provided with the support they needed to make the transition to EMI. Therefore, the present authors

[2] This term is used to identify classes in specific subject disciplines, as opposed to language support classes.

[3] The precursor to the University of Ceylon was the Ceylon University College, which was established in Colombo in 1921 "to prepare students for the external degree examinations of the University of London" (de Silva, 2021, p. 3). This establishment was absorbed into the University of Ceylon in 1942.

felt it necessary to investigate more rigorously such challenges and possible ways of supporting the various stakeholders.

Delving into the literature on this issue, the researchers realized that the concept of academic literacies[4] could be a productive means of supporting the transition from secondary to tertiary education. Therefore, they undertook this study to explore the challenges faced by undergraduates as they transition from instruction in the first language (L1) to EMI and the potential of using the concept of academic literacies to minimize these challenges. Our study adopted Macaro's (2018) definition of English medium instruction (EMI)[5] as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English" (p. 19).

2. Literature review

The aims of this section are twofold: (i) to present the theoretical perspectives that inform this study, and (ii) to review the global and Sri Lankan literature on this area of research. As regards the first of the two aims, this study is informed by the theoretical perspective of new literacy studies (NLS). The field of NLS paved the way for the development of the notion of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006), which is a particularly useful construct when addressing the challenges of EMI. Lea and Street (2006) further present three models: study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies as valuable means of examining issues of students' at higher education level. These three models are summarized below, with an emphasis on the academic literacies model as it is directly relevant to this study:

- The study skills model aims to address students' language/literacy inaccuracies and different language skills which are taught independently of the mainstream curriculum (Muhirwe, 2012).
- The academic socialization model directs students to study how the members of an academic community speak, write, think, and use literacy and how to replicate these practices themselves. However, this model is criticized on the grounds that it presumes that the academy is a relatively homogeneous culture (Muhirwe, 2012).

[4] The term "academic literacies" implies that two or more literacies that are interrelated operate together to ensure academic success. Acknowledging the multi-faceted nature of the concept, the researchers consistently use this term throughout this paper except when they are referring to the work of other authors who have used the term in its singular form.

[5] In this paper, we use the acronyms EMI (following Macaro, 2018) and EMDP (English medium degree program) interchangeably to refer to degree programs that include subject content that is taught through the English medium.

– The academic literacies model views the notion of academic literacies from a wider perspective. It is concerned with "meaning making, identity, power and authority" and highlights the "institutional nature of what 'counts' as knowledge in any particular academic context" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 227). This model views the process of acquiring the requisite skills as "more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes including power relations among people and institutions, and social identities" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 228).

These three models provide this study with a strong theoretical framework which enables one to understand the nature of students' learning (in terms of both the mainstream and English support programs) in EMI in second language higher education (SLHE).

When it comes to EMI challenges identified at a global level, Aizawa and Rose (2020) explored language-related ones faced by students entering a Japanese university where the medium of instruction (MOI) is English after studying in high schools where the MOI was the L1. The findings indicate that even a "soft EMI" school experience may facilitate a smooth transition. Siddiqui et al. (2021) explored the perspectives of undergraduates on EMI in a public university in Pakistan, identified the challenges faced by them, and proposed strategies to overcome these challenges. Using semi-structured interviews, they found that students viewed EMI as advantageous for "higher education, jobs and progressive thought" (p. 10). Lecturers' "English competence, code switching, vocabulary, and receptive and productive abilities" (p. 10) were identified as challenges. Further, the participants proposed that "English-skilled teachers, constant English use, and university language support" (p. 10) were necessary to overcome such challenges. The views of lecturers regarding the challenges posed by EMI were investigated by Tang (2020) in an international college in Thailand. The interview data revealed four types of challenges: "linguistic, cultural, structural, and identity-related (institutional)" (p. 97). Further, this study emphasizes the importance of four aspects in EMI implementation: "language improvement, subject matter learning, career prospects, and internationalization strategy" (p. 97).

In many contexts, having studied in the English medium is seen by university managers as adequate preparation for teaching in English, whereas receiving pedagogical training is not viewed as a necessity (Chapple, 2015). However, Barnard (2014) claims that merely possessing "the ability to read widely and write at length in a second language does not necessarily transfer to effectively explaining key concepts to students in such a way as to make the lectures comprehensible" (p. 13). This observation suggests that lecturers would benefit from continuous professional development (CPD) that focuses on teaching in

EMI. Academics would benefit from CPD that focuses on discipline-specific content (Jeschke et al., 2021) and effective integration of discipline-specific content and the medium of instruction (Uys et al., 2007).

Jacobs (2006) and McKenna (2004) point to the importance of developing academic literacies in EMI. Their findings are vital when identifying transitional challenges in EMI because they address the issue through a holistic approach. They discuss the challenges from two different perspectives – curriculum and pedagogy – and state that both perspectives are equally important to attain proficiency in academic literacies. McKenna (2004) presents three curriculum cycles: (i) English as a second language (ESL), (ii) English for academic purposes (EAP), and (iii) academic literacy (AL) as a means of providing English language support in EMI in universities, and asserts that the third curriculum cycle (i.e., AL) is the most beneficial as it gives "overt instruction . . . in the norms and expectations of the discipline" (p. 67) and helps students write their assignments, projects, or essays with continuous and clear feedback on their writing.

The studies conducted in the Sri Lankan context reveal that the lack of basic English language proficiency (ELP) at the entry-level of EMI is a major transitional challenge. In addition, they discuss the perceived link between EMI and employment among both undergraduates and employers.

Studies on the transitional challenges faced by undergraduates in Sri Lanka identify the lack of basic ELP as their root cause. For instance, Sriyalatha (2016) examined the factors affecting academic performance in a study conducted in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, one of the Sri Lankan state universities, and asserted that the low level of ELP of undergraduates is one of the most critical factors which affects academic performance at the university level. Navaz (2016) also points out that the many undergraduates in EMI whose ELP is low at the entry-level find it hard to continue their studies in state universities. In this regard, Mahawattha and Rassool (2021) emphasize the importance of systematic, additive, and gradual support for undergraduates to progress from general English, EAP/English for specific purposes (ESP) to academic literacies to overcome the transitional challenges in SLHE.

A report from the National Education Commission (NEC, 2009) has identified ELP as an essential graduate attribute but has not specified what this means in the EMI context. The Graduand Employment Census (GEC) (Ramanayake, 2012) documents the obstacles faced by graduands and the recommendations made by them and claims that the labor market needs of the country "encourage students to study in English medium" (Ramanayake et al., 2013, p. 55). Undergraduates are faced with two pressures as they seek to complete a degree in order to enter the world of work: on the one hand, they are pressured into obtaining a "class" (first- or second-class honors) in their degree programs and, on the other, they are told that

they need to improve their ELP. Those who choose to focus on the former – obtaining a class – sometimes choose the safer option of following the degree in the first language in order to ensure the class. However, according to this report, "graduands said they did regret the fact that they decided to study in Sinhala medium" (Ramanayake, et al., 2013, p. 57). The possible reason for this regret is that when they start seeking jobs, they find themselves at a disadvantage due to their lack of academic literacies in English and other job-related English skills.

The World Bank report also recommends the expansion of EMDPs in universities (Aturupane et al., 2009, p. 35). Further, this report points out that not only students but also lecturers face ELP-related issues with respect to EMI when they are not properly trained for the purpose. In this regard, the report states that "Vice-Chancellors could request all academic staff to strengthen their English and include it as a key criterion in staff selection and appointment . . ." (Aturupane et al., 2009, p. 35). The importance of revising the existing English curricula and developing new curricula was another focus of this report. This recommendation is significant because the Departments of English Language Teaching (DELTs) of Sri Lankan state universities generally offer the same English support programs for undergraduates of all the degree courses regardless of their MOI. However, the literature on supporting EMI states that mainstreamed and contextualized English support courses which focus on developing academic literacies are necessary to ensure success in EMDPs rather than offering ELP development-oriented courses or decontextualized study skills programs (McKenna, 2004; Wingate, 2006).

There is a dearth of studies related to AL in EMI in Sri Lanka. However, Mahawattha and Rassool (2021) identified the lack of AL-oriented practices in EMI as the major transitional issue for students at state universities. In particular, they found that the following aspects were lacking in the Sri Lankan system: (a) understanding regarding academic literacies, (b) collaboration between the content lecturers and the language lecturers, (c) support from the system for provision of the necessary language support for EMI at the entry-level.

This review of the theoretical and empirical literature has highlighted that a departure from the conventional approach to English language enhancement, which takes the form of general English or EAP/ESP courses, is necessary to minimize the transitional challenges faced by undergraduates. The literature also recommends academic literacies as an approach that can lead to positive outcomes during this transition. Thus, it is evident that there is a gap between this recommended practice and the prevailing situation in the state universities of Sri Lanka – a research gap which, as stated earlier, this paper attempts to fill. To reach the above aims the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the perceived language/medium of instruction-related challenges faced by stakeholders in transitioning from secondary to tertiary education?
2. What solutions are considered as possible for minimizing these challenges?

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

The data for this study were collected from ten faculties (3 faculties of management, 3 faculties of science, 1 faculty of humanities, 1 faculty of social sciences, 1 faculty of social sciences and humanities and 1 faculty of social sciences and languages) of three state universities. All the students in these faculties were enrolled in EMDPs from the first year onward.

The selection of the three universities for this study was based on the need to access as varied a sample as possible. Thus, two of the most established, older, urban universities (University 1 and University 2) and a newer, regional university (University 3) were chosen.

3.2. Data collection

This study used a qualitative approach to arrive at nuanced responses to the research questions. Therefore, data collection was done through interviews with lecturers, focus groups with students, lecture observations, questionnaires, field notes, and the study of selected official documentation on SLHE.

3.3. Participants

Forty lecturers and thirty undergraduates from the three selected state universities were the participants in this study. All the participants were informed of the aims and other details of the study and their informed consent was sought and received prior to the commencement of the data collection process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the lecturers who were selected using a purposive sampling method, thus ensuring a range of disciplinary areas and teaching experience. The average length of an interview was 22.21 minutes. In some instances, these interviews were followed by shorter follow-up interviews. Of these forty interviews, nineteen were with academics who held administrative positions in universities: deans of faculties and heads of departments. We interviewed ten deans[6] from three universities who were all PhD qualified and of whom

[6] In one university, under the arts stream, there were two separate faculties (Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Humanities), whereas in other cases, there was just one faculty:

five were professors. We also conducted interviews with nine heads of departments. All of them were senior lecturers and six had completed their doctorates at the time we interviewed them. Our interviews with these academics in administrative positions focused on their views of the administrative challenges in the system.

Among the forty interviews, thirty-seven were conducted with disciplinary experts. All were senior lecturers and fourteen had PhDs, while the rest possessed masters' degrees. We also interviewed three language experts who had completed their masters' degrees, but none had doctoral degrees. All these academics had over ten years' experience in higher education. Our questions in the case of the disciplinary experts focused on the teaching-learning process in EMI and our discussion with them focused on their teaching experience when they were teaching in the English language support courses offered for EMI (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of the demographic information about the academics

Site	Faculty	No. of academics	Age range in years	Gender (M/F)	Highest qualification
University 1	Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce Faculty of Applied Sciences Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies	13	34-61	M: 8 F: 5	11 PhDs 2 Masters
University 2	Faculty of Science Faculty of Humanities Faculty of Social Sciences	14	37-66	M: 9 F: 5	11 PhDs 3 Masters
University 3	Faculty of Management Studies Faculty of Applied Sciences Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages	13	35-55	M: 10 F: 3	8 PhDs 5 Masters

Table 2 Summary of the demographic information about the undergraduates

Site	No. of undergraduates	Age range in years	Gender (M/F)	Faculty	Academic year
University 1	10	21-25	M: 7 F: 3	Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce Faculty of Applied Sciences Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	First year – 2 Second year – 3 Third year – 4 Fourth year – 1
University 2	10	21-25	M: 6 F: 4	Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies Faculty of Science Faculty of Humanities Faculty of Social Sciences	First year – 2 Second year – 4 Third year – 2 Fourth year – 2
University 3	10	21-25	M: 4 F: 6	Faculty of Management Studies Faculty of Applied Sciences Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages	First year – 3 Second year – 3 Third year – 3 Fourth year – 1

Additionally, three focus group interviews were conducted with students. Each group comprised ten students from different academic years ranging from

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities/Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages. Therefore, we interviewed two deans in the former case.

first year to third year. The members of these groups were randomly selected, and therefore comprised varying numbers of males and females. They were at different levels of fluency both in their mother tongue, that is, Sinhala, and English. They expressed themselves either in Sinhala, English, or bilingually. The average length of a focus group interview was 26.33 minutes (see Table 2).

3.4. Lecture observations

We also observed eighteen lectures from various departments of the three selected universities. The main purpose of observing lectures was to understand the teaching process of disciplinary lecturers engaged in teaching in EMDPs. Of the eighteen lectures observed, seventeen were conducted for two hours and the duration of the remaining one was one hour (see Table 3).

Table 3 Summary of the lecture observations

Site	Faculty	Subject area	Designation and highest qualification of academic
University 1	Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce	Marketing	Senior Lecturer (PhD)
	Faculty of Applied Sciences	Marketing	Senior Lecturer (PhD)
		Food Science	Senior Professor (PhD)
		Economics	Senior Lecturer (PhD)
	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Information Systems	Senior Lecturer (Masters)
		Economics	Senior Lecturer (PhD)
University 2	Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies	Marketing	Senior Lecturer (Masters)
		Accounting	Senior Lecturer (PhD)
	Faculty of Science	Statistical Physics	Senior Professor (PhD)
		Zoology	Senior Professor (PhD)
	Faculty of Humanities	Economics	Senior Professor (PhD)
	Faculty of Social Sciences	Geography	Senior Lecturer (Masters)
University 3	Faculty of Management Studies	Management	Senior Lecturer (Masters)
		Macro Economics	Senior Lecturer (Masters)
	Faculty of Applied Sciences	Sports Sciences	Senior Lecturer (Masters)
		Biochemistry	Senior Lecturer (PhD)
	Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages	Statistics	Senior Lecturer (PhD)
		Economics	Senior Lecturer (PhD)

We also collected data from official documentation related to SLHE to understand how EMI has been understood, defined, and described in higher education. We found that there was no evidence to indicate the existence of a common policy on EMI in SLHE. At each university, EMI operates independently and varies based on the ideologies of the academic staff of that institution and the available resources. Further, we studied the section on language of the constitution of Sri Lanka (Chapter IV), the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF) prepared by the Quality Assurance Council (QAC), circulars/acts regarding the

pedagogical training of lecturers, subject benchmarks, the University Test of the English Language (UTEL) (General) benchmarks, UTEL-A (Academic) benchmarks, university action plans, faculty prospectuses and department curricula to examine how policy-makers and administrators have articulated their expectations of EMDPs, especially in terms of academic literacy as a final outcome.

3.5. Data analysis

The data collected through the above means were triangulated and analyzed through qualitative content analysis and the major themes were identified. The data were analyzed on the basis of the framework suggested by Biggam (2008) (see Figure 1).

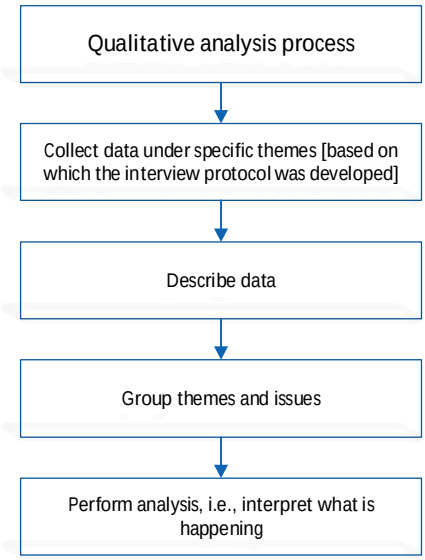

Figure 1 Qualitative data analysis framework (Biggam, 2008, p. 118)

This study applied qualitative content analysis (QCA) as the primary means of analyzing the data. While mainly focusing on applying summative QCA, this study also applied conventional and directed QCA (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Most of the lecturer interviews were in English but some of the lecturers and students in focus group interviews were bilingual in their responses (Sinhala and English). Two lecturer interviews were entirely conducted in Sinhala. In such instances, the sections in Sinhala were translated into English by the researchers. The coding process began after the interviews had been translated into English. In the case of the interviews and focus group discussions which were conducted in English, they had been transcribed verbatim and triangulated before the coding process was embarked on. The initial coding was done based on the literature survey (theoretical

and empirical) and then the recurring themes were identified. Table 4 provides an example of the coding process and the identification of themes.

Table 4 An example of the coding process and the identification of themes

Transcript	Implication/Latent view	Theme
This low English proficiency . . . in this regard we are totally helpless . . . that means, we are selected to the campus and we came to the university with a huge pride . . . but . . . since we don't have sound English knowledge, we face a lot of difficulties . . .	Low English language proficiency is a barrier to studying in EMI. The inability to succeed with academic work due to low English language proficiency affects their ego (because they have received university entrance after facing a highly competitive examination which has already given them huge recognition in society. They faced this exam in their first language).	The gap between school education and university education in terms of medium of instruction is a barrier for students to succeed with EMI in the university.

4. Results

4.1. The sudden transition from L1 instruction to EMI

The undergraduates' sudden transition from the secondary to the tertiary education system and the accompanying change in the medium of instruction is identified by all study participants as an enormous challenge:

> Student 2 (Focus Group 1)
>
> *This low English proficiency . . . in this regard we are totally helpless . . . we came to the university with huge pride . . . but . . . since we don't have sound English knowledge, we face a lot of difficulties . . . we are embarrassed . . . it's our fault . . . that means from the beginning we didn't get a good foundation in English from a teacher, we have never got a proper English teacher in our school, right? You can't now fix it at once in the university . . . now we are in real trouble . . .*

> Student 6 (Focus Group 1)
>
> *I thought we would be given an English course once we were enrolled, but we were not . . . at least in our orientation, we thought we would have a three-month English course . . . I have one friend in Wayamba,[7] they had three- or four-month English course at a stretch . . . Even in Ruhuna[8] they had, but we didn't. I thought . . . I personally thought we too would get one in our university . . . We couldn't go to an English course after A/Ls due to our economic problems at home . . . our parents can't afford . . . .*

[7] One of the state universities located in the north-western province.
[8] Another of the state universities located in the southern province.

In addition to the absence of a proper intermediary support system, the lack of coordination and collaboration between the various state agents responsible for education was also identified as a structural challenge in the transition from the school system to the tertiary system:

> Lecturer 21
>
> *. . . we don't see even collaboration between higher education ministry and education ministry as well as with the department of examination . . . and also NIE [National Institute of Education]. These are institutes who are handling education, so no collaboration at all with any. So . . . there now, prepare syllabuses . . . . Then examination branch… education department they teach their subject separately …. Then finally when it comes to evaluation, [the department of] examination takes some other examiner and prepares the papers . . . so totally different things are going on.*

It was pointed out that the lack of coordination among the state agents of education is not only a problem in the school education system but also within the networks of higher education. A comment made by a lecturer regarding the courses offered by DELT emphasizes the issue (see Mahawattha & Rassool, 2021):

> Lecturer 19
>
> *. . . they cater for the common needs. Because we have some unique . . . areas. We have some subject specific needs. If the lecturers are attached to our faculty, then we can discuss and then . . . we have some authority to . . . amend [the curriculum and pedagogy]. But when the ELTU[9] handle then they will come and teach only the grammar and general English.*

A few academics explained that the existing "sub-cultural," political and social situation does not allow undergraduates to make progress in English. Moreover, fluent speakers find it difficult to continue with their ELP mainly due to "ragging" from some fellow-students. Ragging is defined as "any act which causes or is likely to cause physical or psychological injury, fear or mental pain in an undergraduate . . ." (University of Colombo, 2016). One of the lecturers stated the following:

> Lecturer 6
>
> *Because the first semester, especially with the ragging, they are totally screwed up. And that culture does not allow them to learn a single word of English. Even . . . those who know English are not allowed to talk in English . . . So, English is a tool that you've got to be using . . . Otherwise, it fades off. They are not allowed to use English for one whole semester, the only exposure they get is when we talk to them. So even at that time they are in a transition state, they don't [understand] anything we talk. So, you see, the first semester, being ragged [leads to a state of turmoil] . . . we are teaching them in English, nothing goes through. It's an utter failure.*

[9] English language teaching unit. DELT was identified earlier as ELTU.

4.2. Unawareness of academic literacies oriented practices

This study found that none of the lecturers interviewed was aware of the concept of academic literacies and that therefore they perceived content and language as two different components that operate independently. For instance, Lecturer 10 stated the following (see Mahawattha & Rassool, 2021):

> Lecturer 10
>
> *. . . they should have some knowledge in the grammar and but beyond that in higher level I believe that they should have a good level in logical writing and how academically they fit it into the writing they should learn . . .*

The struggle experienced by the students is summed up by one of them:

> Student 4 (Focus Group 2)
>
> *The problem I have is, I find writing in the exam in English extremely difficult. Even though I understand the lecture, I don't have any confidence that I can write the exam in English and score marks. I thought when I come to university my English will be fine, but it takes such a long time. We take time and get late when we write in the exam . . .*

The importance of lecturers receiving training in effective pedagogy for the delivery of EMI was identified only by a few lecturers. One of these lecturers, who belonged to a management faculty, stated:

> Lecturer 9
>
> *. . . I was teaching in Australia, I was teaching there five and a half years to English speaking set of native speakers . . . I have . . . I have my own way of delivering because I keep experimenting things and I did these teaching methodology course at Colombo University and also the SEDA[10] qualification, again it was the broader qualification of pedagogical approaches we can adopt and in light of those theories and concepts broader teaching and learning, I experiment things and you know identify things that work, identify things that do not work in the classroom, it's a continuous reflecting process that I adopt from which I learn . . .*

4.3. The impact of institute-specific policies

The major problem with regard to the low level of English language proficiency was viewed by students from different angles. As pointed out by Student 3 (Focus Group

[10] SEDA refers to the Staff and Educational Development Association which operates under the supervision of the Education Development Service (EDS) of Birmingham City University in the UK. It provides services in selected universities all over the world.

1), some students have left the university because they were not proficient in English and could not cope with the demands of EMI:

> Student 3 (Focus Group 1)
>
> *Because of English, some give up the degree, there are such students, you know . . . a few of our friends they do give up, that means they already left . . . English is the problem . . . can't carry on anymore . . .*

Student 7 from Focus Group 1 also stated that he had transitioned from EMI back to L1 instruction due to his low level of ELP and fear that he would not be able to get a first or second class degree. Yet, he was disappointed because most of the reading materials were available in English and because the scores of his mandatory English language courses also counted toward his Grade Point Average (GPA). Therefore, unfortunately, he thought that he would not be able to obtain first or second class honors in his Sinhala medium degree either:

> Student 7 (Focus Group1)
>
> *Now, even though they say by the fourth-year things will improve, a student who can obtain a class will lose the class because of the system. We selected Sinhala medium since we don't know English, . . . we may lose the class as CELL [English support program] course results are also counted for the GPA . . . .*

Student 9 (Focus Group 2) also pointed to a similar issue, as seen below:

> Student 9 (Focus Group 2)
>
> *. . . We are in the dark . . . our GPA is anyway getting lower due to this English problem and our workload is too much, have to get English things translated . . .*

5. Discussion

In the following subsections, we discuss the above findings and relate them to previous literature.

5.1. The sudden transition from L1 instruction to EMI

The views of Student 2 (Focus Group 1) exemplify how the lack of ELP has led to a low level of self-esteem in a student who should be celebrating the fact that she is one of the few selected to a state university. There is self-blame for a situation that is not of her making. School-level English language teaching is undermined by several structural problems and is considered by some to be largely unsuccessful (Gunawardana & Karunarathna, 2017). The sense of hopelessness she feels as a new

undergraduate indicates that she does not have much faith in the university system either. Students feel unprepared to embark on their EMDP. Further, they highlight an inability to attend private tuition classes to improve their English – a common phenomenon in Sri Lanka – due to their family's economic situation.

In addition to the macro and micro level sociocultural factors that determine access to English, economic circumstances play a crucial role in determining a person's ability to access the English language in Sri Lanka (de Silva & Palihakkara, 2020). In fact, referring to the nexus between economic situation and language choice, Tollefson (1991, p. 14) states: "in general economic disadvantage is associated with constrained linguistic choices . . . ."

Several students declared to be dissatisfied with the level of support they receive to improve their ELP. The Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) of each state university is tasked with supporting undergraduates to transition to EMI. However, for a wide variety of reasons,[11] this support has been patchy. In the 1990s, a program called General English Language Training (GELT) was implemented at provincial/district level for all the students selected for university entry from that province or district, and it was generally considered a success, but it was a short-lived experiment. Since then, the only support provided to new entrants is an "Intensive Course in English" which is conducted by the DELTs of the various universities.[12] These courses vary in duration, content, approach, and quality.

Further, Lecturer 21's views indicate that there are concerns regarding the lack of coordination and collaboration between the various state agents responsible for education (the Ministry of Higher Education which handles tertiary level education, the Ministry of Education which oversees school education, the National Institute of Education which handles teacher training, curriculum, syllabus, and materials design, the Department of Examination which oversees testing and evaluation at school level), which has also been identified as a structural challenge in the transition from the school system to the tertiary system. This results in a gap between secondary and tertiary education, not only in terms of English language learning but in every other respect too. One of the major drawbacks in the system is the absence of a proper mechanism to bridge this gap.

As stated earlier, English support programs for the degree programs in universities are most often offered by the DELTs of the various universities. Most DELTs provide this support in the form of generic ELP courses. Although a few do offer ESP and EAP courses, the content is only distantly related to the EMI course contents and, as

[11] These reasons include inadequacy of academics, lack of training for academics, and lack of understanding of the differences between improving general English proficiency and focusing on specific forms of support for EMDPs.

[12] A new UGC-funded initiative called the Pre-University English Course has been designed as an online self-access course for students selected for university entry, but it is still at the trial stage.

we have seen, lecturers highlighted this as a shortcoming. There is a similar sense of frustration among lecturers with the general approach of the DELT, with some academics feeling the need for a subject-specific approach to English language teaching. Further, some feel it important for students to have their own English language lecturer with whom they can discuss their unique issues and who can be dedicated to addressing their specific language-related needs in their own discipline.

Students face many social, economic, and cultural challenges as they transition from the secondary education system to the tertiary education system. Of these, the most traumatic is the practice of "ragging" which exists in all state universities. This practice is treated as an essential part of initiating the new students (called "freshers") into the university "sub-culture" and often results in trauma which is caused by physical and mental abuse. The main reason for the prevalence of this practice is imbalance in social class (Gamage, 2017). Since the majority of students who enter the state university system are from lower socioeconomic classes, there is "class jealousy" that results in them viewing the undergraduates from "well to do families and urban schools or with western outlooks [as seen] in [their] behaviour, i.e., dress, hair style, English language ability, social contacts, etc. as class enemies who needed to be tamed and put in their place" (Gamage, 2017, p. 37). As signaled by Gamage (2017), the lack of English language proficiency (ELP) of students from lower socioeconomic classes and the perception that therefore they cannot access positions of wealth, influence, or social prestige results in discouraging the widespread use of English on university premises and subjecting those who challenge this "sub-culture" to severe ragging. From the very outset, the senior students brainwash the "freshers" into not speaking in English, and, because of the power imbalance, there is little possibility of challenging this ideology. This has negative consequences for freshers' attempts to learn English at university and even more dire ramifications for students who have to transition from Sinhala/Tamil medium in school to EMI at university.

5.2. Unawareness of academic literacies oriented practices

The lack of awareness of the concept of academic literacies leads to the perception that content and language are two different components that operate independently. However, according to the theorists who view academic literacies as a social approach, these two factors are inextricable (Gee, 1992; Jacobs, 2006; McKenna, 2004; Volbrecht, 2003). This study shows that the entry-level ELP is needed to function in EMI (Jacobs, 2006; McKenna, 2004; Volbrecht, 2003); however, to excel in it, students need to go beyond mere ELP and gain proficiency in academic literacies (Jacobs, 2006; McKenna, 2004). Not only the content lecturers but also the language lecturers interviewed in this study overemphasize the importance of the development of ELP in EMI instead of the development of academic literacies. This overemphasis on ELP rather than academic

literacies is seen in the South African EMI context as well (McKenna, 2004). Due to this issue, there is a lack of focus on academic literacies-oriented practices.

It is clear from the views of Lecturer 10 that he expects students to develop logical answers that demonstrate that they are members of that particular academic community – in his case, the management studies-related community. Such expectations or the faculty or individual lecturers' practices are not clearly articulated to students, especially at the time they enrol in the study program. Perhaps such norms are never discussed overtly by the subject lecturers (McKenna, 2004), although they expect the students to adhere to them.

Further, as is evident from the views of Student 4 (Focus Group 2), students' academic difficulties are also not clearly communicated to lecturers. This gap between the two groups is possibly due to the power dynamics between them (McKenna, 2004). This is especially evident in the Sri Lankan culture where, like in most South Asian contexts, the lecturers are held in high esteem. As a result, students generally do not complain overtly or even mention academic difficulties directly to their lecturers. Perhaps, towards the end of the program, students may gradually become familiar with the individual lecturer's expectations, but it might be too late to overcome their academic difficulties and obtain a high GPA by the time they reach the fourth year.

Our findings underscore the importance of pedagogical training for lecturers. Among the eighteen lectures we observed, there were two who demonstrated strategies which were effective for the EMI context, and they both had previous teaching experience in Australia and the USA. As pointed out by Lecturer 9, his teaching experience overseas helped him improve his teaching in EMI.

As stated in the literature review, there is a need for a two-pronged approach to the pedagogical training that is required for lecturers in EMI – one which focuses on teaching content and another which focuses on teaching content *in English* (Uys et al., 2007). However, when the subject lecturers were asked about any pedagogical training that they may have already obtained, they were emphatic that they had not received any such training. The only pedagogy-related training they had received was the Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education (CTHE) which is a compulsory prerequisite for academics in Sri Lankan state universities to be confirmed in their permanent positions. However, the CTHE is general pedagogical training that does not prepare academics for the challenges of teaching undergraduates in a language that is not the L1 of the teacher or the student.

5.3. The impact of institute-specific policies

The case of Student 7 (Focus Group 7) is typical of many others. This student thinks he is disadvantaged at all levels. He has chosen to study in the Sinhala

medium due to his perceived lack of ELP and the importance he has ascribed to securing a "class" in his degree, but the fact that English is mandatory and that the marks secured in the English language courses count toward his GPA cause him grave concerns. Student 9 (Focus Group 2) reported a similar issue.

Such perspectives are linked to Aizawa and Rose's view (2020) that students who have been exposed to English during school education face a smoother transition to EMI than those who have not. Unfortunately, in the Sri Lankan system, the approach seems to be "sink or swim" and most students seem to be sinking, at least during the early period of their studies in EMI.

Several students mentioned the lack of support for those who struggle due to the shift of medium of instruction in the system and the absence of long-term plans to overcome such difficulties. Most academics and students in this study viewed low English language proficiency as a major obstacle to performing optimally in EMI. Therefore, some lecturers highlighted the importance of re-introducing the GELT program conducted by DELTs, which, as stated earlier, is viewed as a successful intervention preparing students to embark on their tertiary education in EMI.

Table 5 Communication standards of SLQF – Level 5/6 (SLQF, 2015, p. 26)

Categories of Learning Outcomes	SLQF – Level 5 Bachelor's Degree	SLQF – Level 6 Bachelors Honors Degree
3. Communication	Present information, ideas, and concepts efficiently and effectively	Present information, ideas, and concepts efficiently and effectively Demonstrate awareness of the current developments in the area of study

The constitution of Sri Lanka, in its section on language (Chapter IV), states that SLHE institutions may use a language other than a national language for the dissemination of knowledge (Chapter IV, Parliament Secretariat, 2000). However, the researchers found few explicitly defined official statements or reference points that provide details concerning the level of language proficiency that is expected from a graduate at the end of an English medium degree program. The SLQF describes (see Table 5) the standard of English language proficiency that is expected from a graduate at the end of their degree (SLQF – Level 5/6).

Thus, although the SLQF indicates the generic communication skills expected from a graduate, it does not provide any specific information regarding the expectations. Based on these standards, the QAC of the UGC of Sri Lanka has prepared subject benchmarks which "aimed at improving the capacity of subject communities to regulate their academic standards" (QAC, 2015). These statements provide more detailed guidelines for each degree program. However, even the subject benchmark statements of the various degree programs do not articulate the explicit linguistic expectations of graduates of a particular field of

study. This indicates that in the absence of clear articulation of the linguistic expectations of each discipline, most of the academics implement their degree programs at their own discretion. In many disciplines the "Communication" mentioned in the SLQF is understood as general English language proficiency and therefore instructors in those fields do not focus on academic communication.

The only exception to this observation was from the field of food science and technology where the subject benchmarks stated the following:

> "*Communication skills (with special emphasis on scientific communication);*
> - receiving, evaluating and responding to a variety of information sources (e.g., electronic, textual, numerical, verbal, graphical);
> - communicating accurately, clearly, concisely, confidently, and appropriately to a variety of audiences in written, verbal, and graphical forms;
> - contributing constructively to group discussions;
> - listening to, appreciating and evaluating the views of others."
>
> (The subject benchmark statement for Food Science and Technology Degree Program, 2010, p. 8).

Our research is not without its limitations. One of the major limitations is that we have considered only three universities out of the seventeen in the state system. Within these three universities, we only focused on three faculties (faculties of science, management studies, and arts).

5. Conclusion

Using extensive data gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, and policy documents related to the issue, this study identified major structural, institutional, and linguistic challenges that need to be overcome before undergraduates can proceed to achieve their potential in their EMDPs. The data reveal that student responses to these challenges range from decline in self-esteem, disappointment that their expectation of adequate and meaningful English language support is not provided in the first year of undergraduate study to, in extreme cases, actually dropping out of university. The challenges of the subject lecturers include frustration that they have to deal with the results of the perceived lack of coordination and communication that is seen in the institutions that handle school education, lack of satisfaction with the DELT's approach which they perceive as unsuccessful in its attempts to support EMI, and the low level of AL displayed by the undergraduates. An examination of the documents related to policy on EMI at tertiary level reveals that there are no policies, guidelines, or reference points regarding the level of ELP expected of students in EMI.

This is another major drawback of the system as it means that mechanisms are established in an ad-hoc manner.

This study suggests that the frequently witnessed overdependence on generic English language enhancement courses which focus on general English or EAP/ESP (generally seen in the teaching approaches adopted by the DELTs) is inadequate to prepare students for EMI and, citing evidence from the literature on AL, we argue that the concept of academic literacies provides an alternative approach that may yield more positive results.

The major sociocultural barrier to EMI is the "sub-culture" of ragging that prevails in the universities. The pressure exerted by this outdated and extreme practice results in students being discouraged and actually afraid to use the English they know and being unable to seek the support that is provided by the DELTs during their first year. It also results in stress and anxiety first-year students who do not have the peace of mind and positive environment to focus on English (or anything else for that matter). This, coupled with the other factors such as lack of self-esteem, self-blame, frustration, and disappointment with the lecturers and the system, leads to students being demotivated and broken in spirit during at least the first three months of their first year, when ragging is at its worst. Therefore, it is evident that there is much work to be done at structural, institutional, and linguistic levels before students can overcome their transitional challenges and perform to their full potential.

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