



THE IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN A SRI LANKAN STATE UNIVERSITY: A STUDY CONDUCTED IN THE FACULTY OF VETERINARY MEDICINE AND ANIMAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

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With the proliferation of degree programmes offered in the English medium across the world, endowing students with the linguistic assistance required to follow these degree programmes successfully, has been given paramount importance in the higher education sector. The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya conducts its Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) degree programme exclusively in the English medium and thus, improving the veterinary undergraduates' academic literacy in English has become a primary concern. The responsibility of teaching English as a second language to undergraduates studying Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science falls under the purview of the English Language Teaching Unit of the Faculty. This study aims to critically explore the implications of teaching English as a second language to undergraduates and how they affect the delivery and the outcomes of the English Language Teaching Programme at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science at political, social, epistemological and pedagogical levels. This research was qualitative in nature. The data was generated from 15 students from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science's 1st, 2nd and 3rd years, selected through random convenience sampling and the members of the English language teaching committee and the English teachers of the faculty selected through purposive sampling. The data generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions was transcribed, tabulated and coded. Recurring codes were identified as themes. The data under those themes were then analysed using critical content analysis. The findings of the study emphasized the significance of learning English to meet the requirements of the BVSc programme. It was also discovered that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as opposed to English for General Purposes (EGP) was considered the preferred model in designing and delivering language lessons and the teaching approach used to deliver ESP courses should be Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) where subject-specific content and language are integrated. Nevertheless, utilizing the CLIL approach presents a series of challenges, especially to English language teachers and has various socio-political implications. Thus, research-based and pedagogical recommendations must be introduced to address these challenges and enhance the language teaching-learning practices at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Academic Literacy

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INTRODUCTION

English in Sri Lanka has always been associated with issues of socio-politics, power and class (Gunasekera, 2005; Parakrama, 2012) and has always been linked with the twin issues of employment and education (Ratwatte & Raheem, 2010). English in Sri Lanka goes back to the British colonial period in the 19th century and despite the country gaining independence in 1948, “English continued to function as the country’s *de facto* official language until 1956 when Sinhala became the sole official language under the terms of the Official Language Act No. 33” (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2012, p. 181). Official recognition was given to English as a link language in 1987 with the 13th amendment to the constitution. However, as Mendis and Rambukwella (2012) point out:

[i]n terms of use and functions, however, English in Sri Lanka is far more than a mere ‘link’. It is still pervasive in many areas of officialdom, it is the language used in Sri Lanka’s Supreme Court, it has a strong presence in the media and in advertising, it is making a comeback in the country’s education system, and it is the undisputed language of choice in the private business and commercial sectors. In other words, its hegemonic grip on the country is still very evident. (p. 182)

Therefore, as Gunasekera (2005) states:

In 21st century Sri Lanka, access to English is akin to being born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth. It is the language of upward mobility, and the privileged in society are those whose home language is English. Without English, to some extent, wealth and power are meaningless in Sri Lankan society. (p.13)

Hence, English in Sri Lanka, as Bourdieu (1991) states, possesses cultural and linguistic capital which has the power to allow the entry of individuals into a habitus that ~~are~~ is considered powerful. Those who possess this particular language skill then gain access to “economic, social, cultural and political power and status in local and global society” (Craith, 2007, p.2). Due to the power attributed to English, it is called *kaduwa* i.e., a sword (Kandiah, 1984/2010) as it has the ability to cut down people who do not have access to English. Thus, within Sri Lanka, advantages and opportunities are granted to speakers of English as opposed to those who do not speak English. Therefore, due to these socio-politics, and the hegemonic grip of English over the social fabric in Sri Lanka, teaching and learning English is accorded much prominence and has turned into a lucrative business opportunity.

English is informally taught to students from Grade 1, and from Grade 3 to Grade 13, it is formally taught as a subject. Despite this being the government policy, English language teaching within Sri Lanka, especially within the school sector is plagued by a deficit narrative where it is shown that unequal distribution of resources (like properly trained teachers) along with other issues affect the teaching and learning of English. This deficit narrative especially becomes a problem when students enter the University because most of the undergraduate programmes are offered in the English medium. This is especially true when it comes to Faculties teaching STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). Thus, students and English teachers face various difficulties in making this sudden switch between



languages the moment students enter the University because most students are said to have minimal competency in the language (Authors' Field Notes, 2022)

When one looks at English language teaching and learning within the university context, it “has remained inextricably linked to the democratization of higher education in Sri Lanka, ever since the universities belatedly opened their doors to swabasha-educated students in 1960” (Parakrama, 2012, p. 198). Jayasooriya (2018) points out that by 1970, those who entered the universities were given the option of studying in their preferred national language excluding the faculties of medicine and engineering. Similarly, faculties such as agriculture and veterinary medicine and animal science too did not change their medium of instruction from English. Therefore, as Jayasooriya (2018) points out, the students were in reality, pressured “from the day of admission to switch to the English medium” (p. 66).

This responsibility of teaching English and correcting this age-old historical inequality ailing most undergraduates entering state universities falls on the English Language Teaching Units (ELTUs) or the Departments of English Language Teaching (DELT). The DELTs or the ELTUs, despite being centrally governed entities, carry individual differences when having to cater to different faculties which then brings about a varied set of politically charged implications. Hence, this research was carried out within one such ELTU sub-unit namely the ELTU sub-unit established at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya to understand and uncover the various implications of teaching English as a second language to undergraduates and understand how they affect the delivery and the outcomes of the English Language Teaching Programme (ELTP).

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative in nature and primarily situated within the post-structural paradigm. This study aims to critically explore the implications of teaching English as a second language to undergraduates and how they affect the delivery and the outcomes of the English Language Teaching Programme (ELTP) at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science at political, social, epistemological and pedagogical levels. To address the above aim, the researchers' ontological stance here would be aligned with the notion that reality is not fixed but mediated through language. Likewise, as our ontological stance is such, the ensuing epistemological stance would be social constructivism. As the researchers will be dealing with human subjects, their thoughts, values and beliefs in my study, the most suitable approaches would be the above paradigms. Within social constructivism, the qualitative approach is followed as it would yield non-statistical data which can be analysed through non-statistical means because this method will allow multiple stories to emerge without reducing the findings to numerical data (Dornyei, 2011). Likewise, as Selinger and Shohamy (1989) further state, qualitative research attempts to study “human behaviour within the context in which that behaviour would occur naturally and in which the role of the researcher would not affect the normal behaviour of subjects” (p. 118).

The data was generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The data was generated from 15 students from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science's 1st, 2nd and 3rd years. These students were selected through random convenience sampling. Furthermore, all the members of the Faculty English Language Teaching Committee (8 members) and the English teachers at the ELTU, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science (6 teachers) were interviewed. Prior to the interviews and focus group discussions, a consent form and an information sheet were provided to the participants in all three languages. In addition, interviews and discussions were conducted in all three languages and since the researchers were not fluent in Tamil, a translator (English -Tamil and Tamil-English) was used when and where necessary. The generated data was transcribed, tabulated, and coded. Recurring codes were identified as themes. The data under these themes were then analysed using critical content analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three data-driven themes were generated after analysing the data gathered through the above-mentioned methodology. They are:

1. The purpose of learning English
2. The type of English: The dilemma between EGP vs ESP
3. Improving the Academic Literacy of Veterinary Undergraduates through Content and Language Integrated Learning

1. The Purpose of Learning English

One of the recurring themes was about the purpose of learning English. The teachers mainly pointed out that the immediate requirement for the students to learn English was to follow the degree programme in English. As Teacher C pointed out, “They need English to perform well in the course and the content they use in the course is given in English. So, I think [learning English] is important to them”. Teacher B also iterated the same idea and pointed out that “this is a course conducted completely in English...and learning English is a must” (Field Interviews, 2022). Teachers A, B and C also pointed out that there are no textbooks written for Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science in Sinhala and that most of the technical terms are also in English or Latin. Similarly, emphasizing the student requirements of learning English, it was also pointed out by Teacher B that “now there is a kind of a trend. They go seek jobs overseas. So, for that purpose, learning English is really important” (Field Interviews, 2022). The general idea of the students was the same. As Student A pointed out, “It is easy to learn the subject matter in English because all the texts books are in English” (Field Interviews, 2022). The students also pointed out that English is the global language, and that the knowledge of English is necessary to move forward in education as well as in the world of work. In addition to these, Student H stated that a knowledge of English in a country like Sri Lanka acts as a marker of social class. Student H stated that “people consider those who know English as posh people so people like us try to learn English. In our country, if we want to connect with anyone else, if we talk in Sinhala or Tamil, they consider that we are coming from a rural place” (Field Interviews, 2022).

But despite the course being in English, Teacher B pointed out that “when the students start practising in their professions, they are dealing mostly with Sinhala or Tamil speaking people” (Field Interviews, 2022) and this implies that English is not necessary for them to function within Sri Lanka unless the students migrate or start practising in an urban veterinary clinic. Student A also stated that: “But when we start working at the clinic, they always use Sinhala words, like for mastitis they say *kiri burula pradhahaya*. Though we learn in English, when we go out, mostly everything takes place in Sinhala” (Field Interviews, 2022). But eventually, the respondents all agreed that learning English would help them follow the BVSc course “effectively”. In addition to following the BVSc course, student C stated that “once we get caught in a job, English becomes necessary” (Field Interviews, 2022). Student J also stated that “if we learn these in Sinhala, we can’t learn more or study further in other countries. For our future education also, it would be great” (Field Interviews, 2022). Student I also pointed out that “if we complete our degree in English, we can reach for more opportunities [...] and we can work anywhere” (Field Interviews, 2022).

From the above responses, the main purpose of learning English was to complete the degree programme in English medium and secure a good employment position. Despite the employability of veterinary graduates being 100% in Sri Lanka, most of the students aspire to migrate either for higher studies or employment and settle ~~there~~ abroad. Thus, teaching and learning English then becomes akin to a market transaction and Canagarajah (2000 [2010]) in this regard states that:



[In] product-oriented, philological approach to English, simply to claim a working knowledge of English [...] while distancing themselves from the texts and values that came with the language while overlooking the politics associated with the language. They separated the abstract sign system from the ideological constructs that came with it. (p. 69)

These requirements are direct determinants of the neo-liberal market forces where learning a language is reduced to a utilitarian purpose and is not carried out on the grounds and belief that another language will open various pathways to alternatively look at the world and its reality. Therefore, teaching English as a language to students becomes a limited activity where the teachers are required to cater to the above needs.

This catering to the above needs becomes a difficult task due to the issues surrounding the English competence of students. It has been well established that the English competence of the majority of the students who enter the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science is poor and this complaint goes back in time. The faculty approached this problem in two ways out of which the first means was mainly through implementing curriculum changes in the years 1993, 2000 and 2019. Both in 1993 and 2000, the hours allocated to teach English and the number of semesters in which English should be taught increased considerably. However, this was again reduced in the new five-year curriculum approved in 2019 to two semesters on the grounds that students should be given more time for clinical exposure.

The second means to overcome this problem, which has been a historical issue at the faculty, was to select the type of English that should be taught to help students learn the language to pass the BVSc degree programme and secure employment.

2. The type of English: The dilemma between EGP vs ESP

One of the major implications of teaching English at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science revolves around the discourse related to the type of English that needs to be taught to the students. Student satisfaction surveys and subject reviews conducted in 2021 and 2022 revealed that students prefer English language lessons based on their subject-specific content as opposed to lessons based on literature. As Teacher C pointed out, “After coming to the faculty, their focus is to learn the course content. So, I think it is good to focus on subject-specific English through this course” (Field Interviews, 2022). According to Teacher A:

An initial idea or knowledge of technical terms is important [...] and therefore in the English language teaching process, taking real examples from the textbooks recommended for undergraduates is very much helpful for them to improve and come to a standard where they can do the learning in English. That is important actually. (Field Interviews, 2022)

With regard to the students, Student J stated that “90% of the subject content in English classrooms should be based on the academic content and 10% should be based on literature” (Field Interviews, 2022). Student I pointed out that, “70% of teaching in language classrooms can be dedicated to subject-related language teaching and little more than 30% can be devoted to the discussion of poetry and short stories” (Field Interviews, 2022). Student B stated the following:

Those who have done A/Ls in English will know all the terms and other content in English even before they enter the campus. If we do a course where the bent is towards literature, people like us will not know anything and we will have trouble from the day we start lectures. We will lose our morals and get fed up with campus too because we do not know anything. So, if the course is 75% academic oriented and 25% literature oriented that would be good because then it will help us face academics easily. (Field Interviews, 2022)



Therefore, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) appears to be the preferred model on which the lesson materials must be prepared. Furthermore, the teaching approach used to deliver ESP courses to improve academic literacy should be Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). As a language teaching approach, CLIL integrates subject-specific content and language targeting the development of both language and content aspects (Darn, 2006).

3. Improving the Academic Literacy of Veterinary Undergraduates through Content and Language Integrated Learning

Academic Literacy (AL) surpasses the narrow and conventional idea of literacy which is the ability to read and write. Academic Literacy is not simply the ability to read and write in a target language within a given academic context, but obtaining the license to fully integrate into a particular professional or academic disciplinary community by mastering its discipline-specific practices and values (Jacobs, 2007). Thus, according to Jacobs (2006), academic literacy is “the fluent control and mastery of the discipline-specific norms, values and conventions for reading and writing as a means of exploring and constructing knowledge in higher education” (p. 1).

The process of learning has been understood as a contextualized process by many researchers all around the world (Barton, 1994; Goodman, 1992). In the field of learning English as a second language, English educators promoting English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are now focusing more on improving the academic skills of language learners with the intention of successfully assimilating them to the disciplinary requirements of a particular academic community rather than teaching surface-level language structures and isolated language skills. Many scholars engaged in research on academic literacy also have emphasized the significance of understanding academic literacy as a contextualized practice. In order to make the learning of a language more situated, a teaching approach used worldwide is content and language-integrated learning (CLIL).

In the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya where this study was conducted, the Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) Degree Programme is exclusively offered in the English medium and thus, improving the veterinary undergraduates’ academic literacy has become a primary concern. As a measure taken to improve academic literacy, the unwritten faculty language policy has been remapped to utilize Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in teaching English as a second language for undergraduates. This is because of the widely circulating belief among the subject lecturers in the faculty that the students are unable to transfer the language skills learned through a general English course when they are called upon to produce content within their specific course of study (Field Interviews, 2022). The argument behind using CLIL when preparing material and delivering them would be to ensure that the students reach the required competency and achieve academic literacy within a minimum time period so that the transition from Sinhala/Tamil medium to English medium would be smooth and to ensure that the English competency reaches a certain level so that the students can sit through lectures and comprehend, at least, the basic elements of lectures.

However, using CLIL to improve the academic literacy of undergraduates has given rise to multiple socio-political and identity-related issues. In the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science where the teaching approach, Content and Language Integrated Learning is promoted as a language learning mechanism, English as a second language is taught basically by teachers whose first degree is from the Faculty of Arts and fundamentally trained in humanities and social sciences. Thus, almost all of them pointed out that their identities as English educators are at a critical juncture due to them having to use subject-specific content when designing and delivering English lessons (Field Interviews, 2022). The findings also indicated that while some language teachers perceived incorporating subject-specific knowledge in the English language teaching context as a step towards their career advancement, others resisted the very notion stating that CLIL demands positioning themselves in the academic context to perform a mere subservient role undermining their agency as ESL educators. Teacher E working as an Instructor in English at the ELTU of the faculty stated:



I consider teaching subject-specific content in English a challenge because it feels like detaching myself from the teaching context. It's not always English-related issues that students have questions about; sometimes, they ask questions about the content itself. Then, we have to constantly keep reminding the students that we do not have expertise in their veterinary field. This in a way directly affects our confidence as teachers. Furthermore, when teaching grammar or explaining a specific language point, I find it challenging to provide examples from subject-specific content. I worry that this alienation of us as teachers could impact the comprehensibility of our students. (Field Interviews, 2022)

For the relationship between language and content to be meaningful, a balance should be maintained between language and content without over-emphasizing either of the factors and a meaningful collaboration should exist between content and language lecturers (Wijayadharmadasa, 2011). Hence, it was identified in this study that undergraduates' academic literacy is best achieved through a teaching-learning process in which content and language lecturers work collaboratively.

CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) degree offered by the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya is exclusively conducted in English medium and thus, improving the veterinary undergraduates' academic literacy in English has become a primary concern. The responsibility of providing linguistic assistance required to follow the degree programme falls under the purview of the ELTU of the faculty. One noticeable feature of the ESL programmes followed by the faculty is that it is specifically designed in a goal-oriented manner to provide students with the necessary language skills to comprehend and master their disciplinary subjects, thus ensuring their smooth transition from "a novice into an accepted member of their disciplinary discourse community" (Swales 1990), i.e., the veterinary science discourse community. To achieve this, the English programmes at the faculty are aligned with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as opposed to English for General Purposes (EGP) and the teaching approach used extensively is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). However, despite the promotion of CLIL as the language teaching-learning mechanism, this has given rise to a multitude of epistemological, institutional and identity-related issues, especially for the ELT educators of the faculty. This study intends to critically explore such socio-political issues and challenges and suggest research-based and pedagogical recommendations to overcome these challenges and enhance the English language teaching-learning practices of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science. In order to make the language teaching-learning process meaningful, a collaborative partnership should be created between language and content lecturers. Furthermore, the requirements of teachers who are engaged in content and language-integrated teaching should be clearly identified and proper training should be provided to them in order for them to facilitate the teaching-learning process of language effectively.

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