

Attitudes of Sri Lankan Medical Students Towards the Medium of Instruction

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Abstract

This study explores the attitudes of medical undergraduates at a Sri Lankan state university towards English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) within the framework of Sri Lanka's higher education language policy. It examines how EMI impacts students' academic engagement, performance, and language development. A mixed methods approach was employed, using Google-based questionnaires completed by 50 students and in-depth interviews with five second-year undergraduates. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in student attitudes, while qualitative interview responses were thematically analyzed to highlight recurring challenges, coping strategies, and language preferences. Findings reveal that while students acknowledge the global relevance of English in medicine and higher education, many face challenges in comprehension and communication due to limited prior exposure and inadequate language proficiency. A notable number expressed a preference for flexible or bilingual instruction, particularly in the early stages of their academic journey. Interviews highlighted that students often refrain from participating in class discussions due to language-related anxieties and fear of negative peer judgment. These difficulties stem from both internal factors, such as low confidence and motivation, as well as external factors, including poor English instruction at school and limited access to language resources. The study concludes that EMI, when implemented without sufficient preparatory support, can hinder academic progress. It advocates for a more inclusive and adaptable language policy at the university level, particularly in demanding professional disciplines like medicine. Key recommendations include conducting needs assessments, incorporating bilingual instruction, and providing staff training to support equitable, linguistically inclusive education.

Keywords: Bilingual; Higher education; Language proficiency; Language policy; English as the Medium of Instruction

Introduction

Language policy deals with the decisions and rules about the status, use, domains, and territories of the languages in a country. Those decisions are made formally by legislation or informally by scholars or community leaders. These decisions influence 'the right to use and maintain languages, affect language status and determine which languages are nurtured' (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2015). Sri Lanka, as a multilingual country, faces several issues when defining a language for major purposes such as education. According to the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka (1987), Sinhala and Tamil have been defined as the official languages, while English is the link language. When considering the Sri Lanka's language

policy in education, the constitution states that a person is entitled to be educated through the medium of either of the national languages (Sinhala or Tamil). However, it stipulates ‘provisions of this paragraph shall not apply to an institution of higher education where the medium of instruction is a language other than a National Language’ (Parliament Secretariat, 2015). This clause sanctions English medium instruction in universities. The medium of instruction in many universities has been English, especially for science, engineering and medicine. The world has become increasingly globalized in recent years, and English has become the international language, which enables people from different countries to interact easily. This has led most formerly British colonized countries, including Sri Lanka, to assign English a major role in their academic curricula by introducing it as a medium of instruction into their academic programs at both secondary and tertiary levels. The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Jaywardenepura uses only English as its medium of instruction.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to examine the attitudes of medical students at the University of Sri Jaywardenepura towards the medium of instruction and to identify how these attitudes could be used to improve the effectiveness of language planning and policy related to the medium of instruction in higher education. Furthermore, this study addresses two key research questions. First, it seeks to examine the attitudes of medical students at the University of Sri Jaywardenepura towards English as the medium of instruction. Second, it explores how these students’ attitudes can inform and enhance the effectiveness of language planning and policy decisions related to the medium of instruction in higher education.

Learning subject matter, rather than the target language directly, has been shown to be more effective in second language acquisition. Accordingly, when language is learned through subjects like history or science, it is considered more effective for second language acquisition than direct instruction of the target language alone. By focusing on meaningful communication to comprehend subject matter, learners are exposed to the language in a natural, contextualized way, leading to deeper understanding and acquisition (Littlewood & Yu, 2009). This is attributed to the fact that since “school subjects are what children need to talk about in school”, learning content in the target language medium “provides the motivation and opportunity for meaningful communication” (Medawattegedera, 2015). Conventional ‘English as a second language’ instruction on the other hand tends to create artificial situations and unreal contexts which do not provide the same degree of motivation for meaningful communication. The concept of learning subject matter in a language that is not one’s own, to learn both the subject and another language, can be traced back many centuries. However, the contemporary notion of Bilingual Education – which has come to be understood as synonymous with English medium instruction is often viewed as being controversial because of the political implications of which language is chosen as a medium of instruction and the tensions it creates (Al-Asal & Smadi, 2011). Rubin (1983) defines the decision as to what language to use as a medium of instruction as a “language problem” which “organizations, given a mandate to fulfil the purposes of language planning, need to solve by deciding “which variety/language will be used by certain sectors of the polity” (p.4). The current Bilingual Education Policy has its official origins in a Ministry of Education (MoE) circular dated February 2001 which made GCE Advanced Level science stream courses available to students in the English medium. The first reference to Bilingual Education appears in Circular 2001/05, titled ‘Teaching of A/L Science Subjects in the English Medium’. The circular directs principals to start teaching A/L Science Subjects in English for the following reasons: i) The growing importance of English as the language of global communication, ii) The need to facilitate the transfer of students to either the world of work or to higher education in the sciences. By introducing these initiatives in government schools and universities, it was assumed that all would have equal access to linguistic capital, thus improving equity. In Sri Lankan universities, most degree programs are conducted in the English medium with the aim of improving English language proficiency among students as well as enhancing their learning and achievement levels to meet globally accepted employment competencies. The rationale for continuing to teach medicine in English focuses on the fact that English has been accepted since the twentieth century as the international language of science and medicine, and much of the scientific, technological. and academic information in the world is expressed in English. Moreover, medical students or doctors attending

international conferences, courses, or clerkships abroad need to be proficient in the English language. The entire curriculum of medical education is in English, with many terms in Greek and Latin. This dominance of English has also paved the way for the emergence of a new ESP branch (English for specific purposes), namely EMP (English for medical purposes). A large number of students who enter medical colleges in Sri Lanka have had their primary and secondary school education in a medium other than English. This sudden change in the language of instruction comes as a shock to many of them, and they find it difficult to cope with this transition and grasp subjects such as anatomy, physiology and biochemistry with ease, as compared to their peer group who have had their school education in English medium. Furthermore, this abrupt change in the medium of language, along with the introduction of terminologies, can become a potential barrier to the academic success of some students who struggle with English being the medium of instruction (Hellekjær, 2010).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore medical undergraduates' perceptions of English as the medium of instruction (EMI), to gain a comprehensive understanding of how EMI affects students' academic experience, engagement and language development within the context of Sri Lanka's higher education system. A total of 50 medical undergraduates were selected using random sampling from across the five academic years at the Faculty of Medicine to ensure representation across different stages of academic progression. Accordingly, a structured Google Form questionnaire titled "How English being the medium of instruction exerts influence on the medical students of the Faculty of Medicine in Sri Jayewardenepura University" was distributed to the selected 50 students. The questionnaire was designed to collect both demographic and perceptual data, and included questions such as mother tongue, second language, medium of education prior to university, medium of instruction in lectures, difficulty in adapting to EMI, perceived effectiveness of English-only instruction, impact of EMI on academic performance (grades), student recommendations for improving language support and preferred medium of instruction in medical education. Responses were collected anonymously and compiled for quantitative analysis. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in student attitudes and experiences. Additionally, five second-year students were selected at random for in-depth follow-up interviews to provide deeper qualitative insights. In this mixed-methods design, the survey served as the primary source of data, while the interview component was intended to support and enrich the questionnaire findings. Accordingly, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with second-year students to provide illustrative depth, clarify patterns observed in the quantitative data, and highlight personal experiences that might not surface in survey responses. Second-year students were chosen for the interview strand because they represent a critical transitional stage in medical education. Having completed their first year, they had sufficient exposure to EMI lectures and assessments to reflect meaningfully on challenges, while not yet fully adapted to the medium as senior students might be. This makes their perspectives particularly valuable for identifying early-stage adjustment issues and the forms of language support needed during the shift from school-based learning to university-level professional education. The interviews aimed to explore students' personal experiences with EMI, including challenges in comprehension, classroom participation and coping mechanisms. Regarding data analysis, the questionnaire survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics, which are appropriate for summarizing responses and identifying overall trends in attitudinal data. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables such as mother tongue, second language, and preferred medium of instruction, while mean values were used where applicable to show central tendencies (e.g., perceived difficulty levels). Furthermore, interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were carefully read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used, following six steps: (1) familiarization with the transcripts, (2) initial coding of meaningful units (e.g., "difficulty understanding lectures," "lack of confidence in speaking"), (3) clustering codes into potential themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes against the dataset, (5)

defining and naming key themes, and (6) selecting representative extracts for reporting. Accordingly, responses were categorized to observe trends in language preference, perceived difficulty and academic impact.

Results and Discussion of Questionnaire

About the results of the Google questionnaire, 86.3% of the participants reported speaking Sinhala as their mother tongue and 13.7% of the participants reported speaking Tamil as their first language. 74.5% of the participants stated English as their second language, 15.7% mentioned Tamil as their second language and 9.8% stated Sinhala as their second language. The participants completed their Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations in different mediums. The highest number of students, 30 in total, had completed their Ordinary Level examination in the Sinhala medium. 15 participants had completed it in the English medium, while the lowest number five participants—had done so in the Tamil medium. The responses for the Advanced Level examination differed from those of the Ordinary Level examination responses. 76% of the participants had done their Advanced Level examination in Sinhala, 8% in English and 16% in Tamil. This indicates a decrease in the number of English medium participants at Advanced Level compared to Ordinary Level. The participants in the study were from different academic years; 20 first -year students, 9 second-year students, 12 third-year students and 9 fourth-year students. 98% of the participants stated that English was the medium of instruction in lectures, whereas 2% stated Sinhala as the medium of instruction.

In terms of difficulty in adapting to English as the medium of instruction (EMI), 4.4% of participants found it completely (100%) difficult to adapt, while 17.8% reported a 75% of difficulty. Another 17.8% found it 50% difficult to adapt to English medium instruction. In contrast, the majority -60% of the participants found it less than 25% difficult to adapt to English medium instruction.

Regarding the perceived effectiveness of English as the medium of instruction (EMI), 25% of participants stated that it is always effective to use English, while 33.3% of the participants believed it is often effective. Another 33.3% stated that it is sometimes effective, and 9.8% mentioned that it is not effective at all. When asked whether the medium of instruction affects their academic results, 27 out of 50 participants believed it does have an impact, while 23 thought that it does not. The participants who mentioned that the medium affects their results explained that using a language other than their mother tongue. As some of the students were less proficient in English, they could not understand the questions on the exam paper. Moreover, they were unable to express what they really wanted to say due to the lack of proficiency. Also, there were moments when the students hesitated to speak in English, and as a result, they were unable to clarify their doubts with the lecturers. The students who believed that the medium does not affect their results stated that the language is not a barrier in the exam, and it is justifiable to use English as the medium of instruction because most of the medical terms are in English. Hence, English is a global language it is quite effective to use English as the medium of instruction. A higher number of students (29 out of 50) recommended that learners should be given the choice of language for their studies, with 20 participants preferring to study in English, while only one student preferred Sinhala.

Results and Discussion of Interviews

Students' reaction to English being the medium of instruction was positive; almost all the interviewed students stated that English is essential for their future career. Nonetheless, two of them preferred to have Sinhala as the medium of instruction for their lectures, while the only Tamil interviewee preferred Tamil as the medium of instruction. The remaining two students wanted to study in English. The preference for the mother tongue arose due to the challenges in understanding the language, basically issues related to vocabulary and grammar. Even though two students acknowledged the necessity of using English as their medium of instruction, they reported having challenges in understanding lectures, such as the speed of the lecture, new terminology and concepts. Almost all five students found it difficult to adjust to the English medium teaching environment because of the

poor participatory style of the lecturers. Similarly, all interviewed students felt that their poor English knowledge negatively affected their performance in their subjects as well as in the examination.

Changes in English language proficiency level before and after the university entrance could be summarized as follows: - None of the students claimed that their overall language proficiency was excellent at the time of entrance to the university. Most of the students fell into the poor category, while 40% of the interviewees rated their overall proficiency as 'good'. 80% of the students reported that their listening skills were poor at the beginning and the remaining 20% placed themselves between poor and good. In terms of reading skills, 60% of the students interviewed were in the 'very poor' category, whereas 40% rated themselves as good. Regarding writing skills, 80% considered themselves poor, while 20% reported being good. Finally, 80% of the interviewees rated their speaking skills as poor, with the remaining 20% placing themselves between poor and good. Quantitative analysis indicates that there is a significant improvement in every skill. Overall, language proficiency has risen to a good category. Listening skills improved by up to 60%. Both writing and reading skills have shown considerable improvement, and speaking skills have progressed to a good category, with a 60% increase.

Reasons for students' poor language ability could be presented as follows: Students' poor English language proficiency can be attributed to both internal and external factors. Students' perspective and their motivation can be verified as the internal aspects. According to the research study, almost all the students believed that English is hard to learn, and they had lost confidence in their ability to master it. They revealed that they felt shy in the classroom, which prevented them from asking questions, answering questions, or participating in discussions. All five students acknowledged that they concentrated more on memorizing subject content rather than improving their language skills. As external factors, students mentioned that at school, they did not have proper guidance for learning English. Thus, they did not have either an English teacher in their classes or English classes were not regularly conducted. In some schools, English teachers were entrusted with duties other than teaching, which interfered with regular instruction. Many of the students could not get any help to learn English from their family or environment. It was noted earlier that they were from a rural environment. Being from rural backgrounds, students cited this as a major cause of their poor English proficiency.

The role of English medium lectures in Language learning was rated as follows. - Students mentioned that many of the lecturers' use of language motivates them to learn the language. When they were asked if they had opportunities to speak in the class, students responded negatively. Even when lecturers asked a few questions, students did not respond. Students rarely ask questions during lectures. This means they do not have opportunities to develop their language skills in subject classes, mainly speaking.

The interaction between the lecturer and the student when using English as the medium of instruction yielded the following results: According to the study, 80% of students mentioned that they did not answer questions asked by the lecturers. Students revealed shyness, language difficulties and fear as the causes of poor participation. Furthermore, 80% of the interviewees declared that the fear of being misunderstood due to unclear speech and inaccurate responses, and the fear of being ashamed by the lecturers as well as peers, led to reluctance in responding. 40% of the interviewees acknowledged that students considered some lecturers unfriendly which made them afraid to ask questions in class. However, 60% of the students revealed that they had positive interactions, which helped in using English as the medium of instruction in lectures. Conversely, 40% of the interviewees admitted that they had negative interactions, which discouraged the use of English as the medium of instruction.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made. Students should have the option to choose their preferred medium of instruction. Instructors, especially in the first year, can adopt a bilingual approach to support

comprehension. Medical faculties should conduct needs analyses to understand students' language needs, and lecturers should adopt flexible teaching methods based on student proficiency. This study has some limitations. It focuses solely on one aspect of language policy, the medium of instruction, and was conducted at a single medical college, limiting generalizability. Additionally, the sample size did not include students from all academic years. This study investigates the effect of the language of instruction on the undergraduates of the Faculty of Medicine in Sri Jayewardenepura University. Though theoretically, English medium instruction was introduced in this university with a view to enhancing the English proficiency of the students, the desired outcome has been questionable. Students at the tertiary level face many challenges in developing English language proficiency while coping with their academic studies. Higher language proficiency is crucial for successful academic study in English medium. The majority of students undertake their school studies in the vernacular languages such as Sinhala and Tamil. As a result, students entering university are mostly monolingual. Even though English is taught as a subject at schools from grade 3 to GCE Advanced Level, various reasons affect the successful learning of English at schools, including inadequate resources and the lack of motivation among the students towards the language (The World Bank, 2009). The external factors, such as not having proper guidance for learning and internal factors such as negative attitudes towards English, can lead to poor language abilities. Therefore, this limited language proficiency affects their successful learning of content subjects, and developing language proficiency by following English medium instruction seems to be difficult for them. According to Flowerdew and Miller (1992), as more students have started studying in the medium of English, especially at tertiary levels, the ability to comprehend academic lectures has been a challenge for those students. Moreover, as findings state, students seem to have lecture comprehension problems coupled with their limited language proficiency in English. According to Graddol (2010), most university students struggle to learn because the double burden of mastering their subjects and thinking in a foreign language is far too great a strain on them. Mostly, students have low English language proficiency at university entry, while this situation can lead to incompetent graduates in terms of English language skills. The tertiary level learners should be allowed to have a choice about their medium of instruction at least for the first academic year. There is a scope for policymakers, course planners, and medical lecturers to work together to find a practical approach to solve the existing problem highlighted in this study.

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