

An Analysis of the Relationship Between Ordinary Level English Performance and Cambridge English Placement Test Scores Among Foundation Programme Students in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of second languages in local educational settings is of great importance, particularly due to the need to enhance students' proficiency in the English language. This study aimed to conduct a comparative analysis of students' Ordinary Level English results and their scores on the Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT) among students enrolled in the foundation program at a higher educational institute in Sri Lanka. A sample group of 373 students was selected based on the total enumeration sampling technique, and each student was administered the CEPT. Their CEPT scores, along with their English grades from the GCE O/L, Edexcel O/L, or Cambridge O/L, were utilized for the analysis. Data analysis was performed using SPSS software, with close monitoring of the dataset's behavior through both descriptive and inferential statistics. The study's findings confirmed a moderate positive correlation of high statistical significance between students' Ordinary Level English results and their CEPT scores. Notably, it was revealed that only 24% of the students who took the Cambridge English Placement Test demonstrated the necessary level of competence, specifically the CEFR B2 level, which is widely regarded as the international standard for language proficiency required for enrollment in undergraduate programs. The observed deficiencies in language skills can be attributed to the inability of local English curricula to adequately address all four language skills. Therefore, it is recommended that a targeted approach to learning and teaching be developed to enhance specific language skills, enabling students to meet international language requirements.

Keywords: English as a second language; Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT); English language competency; English language curricula; International language requirements

Introduction

Second language learning has become a socially valued and vital learning process, as it has the potential to form, shape, and change individual's social identity towards positive recognition. The English language is identified as the lingua franca, as it is widely accepted as the language of international business, economics, education, and global communication. Due to its globally imperative role, the English language has the potential to expand learning opportunities and provide individuals with options, as well as openings for enhancing their prospects. In the Sri Lankan social system, while Sinhala and Tamil are recognized as the primary languages of most people, English serves as the second language or target language. Through a gradual social transformation, English has become the most prestigious language in society, and competence in English is now a key requirement for social recognition and mobility. Thus, the educational process of learning English as a second language has become a highly acknowledged and vital component of the Sri Lankan educational system (Amarasooriya, 2023).

According to Indrarathne and McCulloch (2022), although English holds prominence in the fields of business, administration, and higher education, most students who follow a compulsory English program in their curriculum fail to attain the requisite level of language proficiency. This inadequacy impedes their ability to perform effectively in both higher educational contexts and the labor market. Most specifically, based on their observations, it was noted that by the end of Grade 11, most students demonstrate proficiency at only the CEFR level A1, categorized as the Basic User level. This limited proficiency is particularly evident in their performance on speaking and listening tasks, where they consistently struggle to meet the expectations necessary for effective communication. As Amarasooriya (2023), Brunfaut & Green (2019) and Liyanage (2014) state, in Sri Lanka, significant limitations and impediments to English language proficiency have been observed, particularly in areas such as writing, especially the ability to develop formal documents, reading, spelling, grammar accuracy, and oral communication. Additionally, the low levels of written and verbal communication skills in English lead individuals to exhibit less confidence in their ability to communicate effectively in the language.

These deficiencies were identified as negative outcomes stemming from the failure to integrate all four skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking, into the teaching and learning processes of English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022). Although the curriculum provides guidelines emphasizing the importance of improving all four skills, these instructions are often ambiguous and lack a specified timeframe for developing each skill. In contrast to the curriculum directives, teacher guides tend to place greater emphasis on reading and writing, which is problematic (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022; Rohan, 2012). These lapses in the teaching mechanism negatively impact the overall language performance and English language proficiency of the students, as they are guided primarily to enhance their reading and writing, focusing on preparing them for the GCE Ordinary Level English exam. The discrepancies that exist between teaching guides, materials, exam structures and curriculum hinder students from mastering all four skills and achieving a high level of English language proficiency. Thus, the current study, through scrutinizing this issue, aims to explore the performance levels of students in the GCE Ordinary Level English exam and the Cambridge English Placement Test, in order to determine the proficiency level, they achieve based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the global scale of reference for language ability.

English Language Teaching in the Sri Lankan Education System

Diverse language policy reforms have been incorporated into the Education System in Sri Lanka to enhance English language proficiency among the population at large, including students, undergraduates, and the community in the labor market. However, according to Liyanage (2021), these policy adjustments were unable to adequately address the persistent language deficiency, which remains a critical issue in Sri Lanka. Further, according to Bogamuwa (2023), even though several General English and Specific English programs have been implemented in Sri Lankan universities, students in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, who lack adequate prior exposure to the language, often show reluctance to actively engage in learning activities. Furthermore, she noted that the teaching methods employed in the ESL classroom are conventional, and due to the large number of students in the classes, direct monitoring and providing feedback are not practical. Moreover, students with prior exposure to English tend to dominate classroom interactions, while course materials typically target individual language skills without fostering active participatory learning.

In-depth observations on the O/L and A/L English assessment structures affirmed that listening and speaking competencies are not tested, while only grammar and writing are examined (Indrarathne & McCulloch, 2022). Furthermore, these assessments lack standardization and do not comply with international guidelines for designing effective tests. Since they contain inauthentic test items and irrelevant areas to test language ability, certain issues related to the validity and reliability of the exams occur. Consequently, these exams fail to assess the exact language proficiency level of the students.

Thus, in providing undergraduates with the opportunity to acquire and develop their English language competency, an innovative and interactive English language learning and teaching platform needs to be developed. Therefore, incorporating an internationally accredited curriculum and assessment methods into the existing program structure would enhance the quality and creativity of the program while making it more beneficial for students. Thus, a higher education institute in Sri Lanka, introduced the Cambridge English programs and assessment structures and conducted the Cambridge English Placement Test to assess the English language competency level of students enrolled in the Foundation Program. The study aimed to investigate the correlation between students' performance in GCE O/L, Edexcel O/L, or Cambridge O/L English examinations and their scores on the Cambridge English placement test.

Materials and Methods

The research was conducted within the framework of positive philosophy, employing a quantitative research approach due to its reliance on numerical data such as test scores and grades. The data collection process encompassed both primary and secondary methods. For the primary data collection, students enrolled in the Foundation program at a higher education institution in Colombo were selected as the sample population, and their English subject results from the GCE O/L, Edexcel O/L, or Cambridge O/L were gathered. In selecting the sample, the entire population was included in the study through total population sampling. The selected students share common characteristics, including being registered in the Foundation program at the chosen higher education institute and achieving at least a credit pass in the English subject at the GCE Ordinary Level exam. The details of the students' grades for English were obtained from a database maintained by the Registrar's Department at the selected higher education institution.

The study utilized the Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT) structure to evaluate the students' competency level, and the examination paper was developed in accordance with the format of the Cambridge English Placement Test. The Cambridge English Placement Test assesses the most important skills required for learning English, and its results correspond to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR), the global scale of reference for language ability. The results of the CEPT determine the CEFR levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) of the students based on their language performance (Cambridge Assessment English, 2021; Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024a; Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024b).

In the study, the placement test was conducted for all the students who registered to follow the Foundation Program, and a cohort of 373 students completed the examination. Their test scores on the CEPT and their English grades from the GCE O/L, Edexcel O/L, or Cambridge O/L were utilized for the analysis. The data was analyzed using SPSS software, and the behavior of the data set was closely monitored through descriptive and inferential statistics. Thus, the calculations were carried out to analyze frequencies, means and crosstabulations under descriptive statistics, while Pearson's correlation and regression analysis were conducted under inferential statistics to observe the existence of a statistically significant relationship between students' CEPT scores and grades received at O/L examination.

The secondary data obtained from journal articles and British Council reports provided a comprehensive overview of the issues within the Sri Lankan English education system, encompassing both school and higher education contexts. This information was instrumental in establishing the context for the investigation and in analyzing the primary data with a solid understanding of the purpose of the study.

Results and Discussion

The study focused on investigating the relationship between the students' Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT) scores and their O/L English results. The Cambridge English Placement Test assesses the most important

skills required for learning English, and its results correspond to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the global scale of reference for language ability. Therefore, the analysis was performed using descriptive statistics to observe the distribution of grades in relation to each CEFR level.

The CEFR Level Distribution

Table 1

The Distribution of O/L English Grades in Relation to CEFR Level

		O/L Grade											Count	%
		A	A*	B	B Edexcel	C	C Edexcel	Cambridge C	D	IELTS 6.5	Level 09	S		
V9	BA1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1%
	A1	7	0	11	0	24	0	0	0	0	0	1	43	12%
	A2	46	0	30	0	17	1	0	0	0	0	0	94	25%
	B1	109	1	23	2	8	0	1	0	1	1	0	146	39%
	B2	74	3	6	0	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	88	24%
		63%	1%	19%	1%	15%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	373	373

As the overall trend, within the sample group, two students were classified as 'Below A1 level', and no students were classified as above B2 level. It was observed that from the total number of students who enrolled in the foundation program, 63% of the students obtained an 'A' for their O/L English, while 19% of them received a 'B' grade, and only 15% received a 'C'. This highlights that most of the students enrolled to follow the Foundation program have 'A' grades in the English discipline. Among the students who received 'A' grades, 183 were classified within the B1-B2 range, with a high representation in the B1 category. Most of the students who received 'B' grades were in the A2 (30) and B1 (23) levels, with the highest representation in the A2 category. The data indicate that most students with 'C' grades are at the A1 (24) and A2 (17) levels. It was observed that two candidates with 'C' grades were classified as Below A1. Additionally, it was noted that students who received 'C' grades in GCE O/L were generally at a lower competency level compared to those who received 'C' grades in Edexcel O/L and Cambridge O/L. While most students in the former group achieved A1 level, those with Edexcel 'C' grades attained A2 level, and those with Cambridge 'C' grades reached B1 level. Furthermore, among the Edexcel and Cambridge categories, students with 'C' grades from Cambridge are generally at a higher level than those from Edexcel.

Furthermore, the mean values were comparatively analyzed to observe the relationship between O/L grades and the mean of the total score (out of 50) on the CEPT.

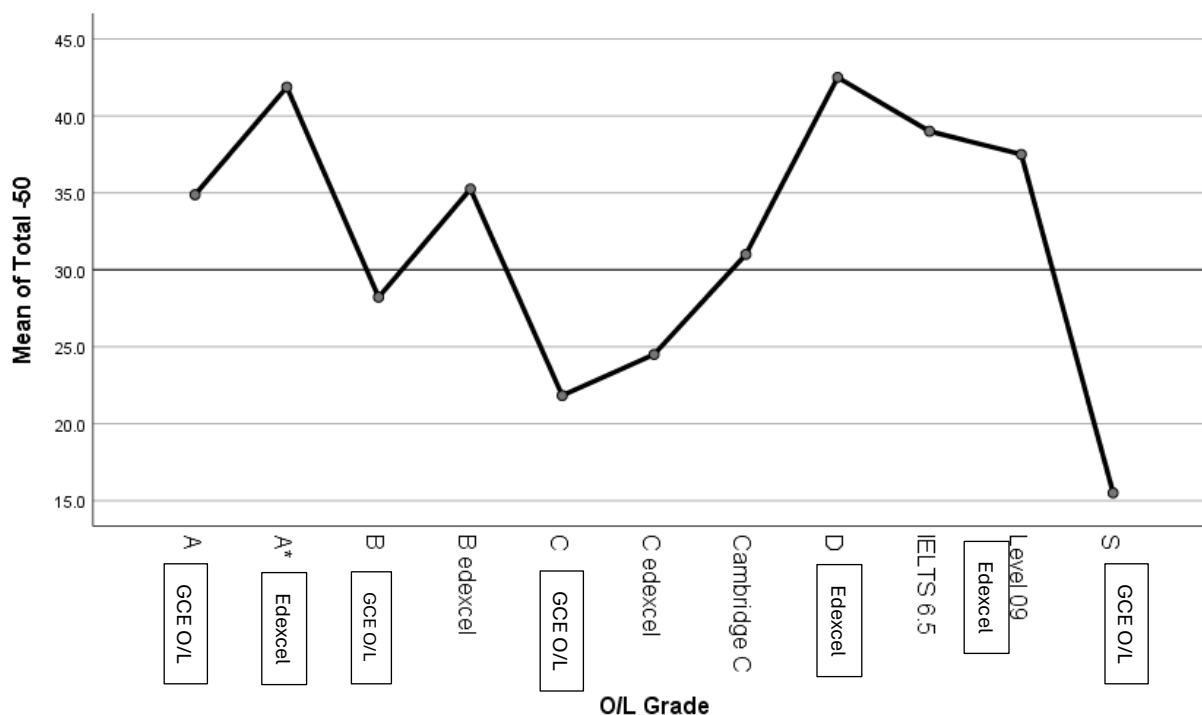


Figure 1

The Distribution of Mean Values in Relation to O/L Grades

The analysis of mean values across the various grade levels reveals a notable trend: students who obtained 'O/L A' grades and 'Edexcel A grades demonstrated significantly higher mean scores on the Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT), with average scores of 35 and 42 respectively. The mean CEPT score of students with 'Edexcel B' (35 mean value) is higher than that of students with 'GCE O/L B' (27 mean value). Another notable finding is that the average CEPT score of students with 'GCE O/L 'C' is notably lower, with a mean value of 21, whereas students in the Edexcel 'C' and Cambridge 'C' categories achieved relatively higher average scores of 24 and 31, respectively.

A general observation of the study indicates that, out of all candidates who took the placement test, the majority (39%) were placed at the B1 level, followed by 25% at the A2 level, 24% at the B2 level and 12% at the A1 level. As per the language proficiency standards set by the Government of the United Kingdom, students must attain a CEFR B2 level to qualify for admission to a degree program. From this standpoint, it is evident that only 24% of students who faced the Cambridge English Placement Test possess the required level of competence. The gap that exists between the competency levels of students following the local English syllabus and those following the Edexcel and Cambridge syllabuses highlights the weaknesses and deficiencies of the local English curriculum. Although 236 out of 373 students enrolled in the foundation program had obtained 'A' grades in English at the GCE O/L examination, only 74 of them achieved B2 level on the Cambridge English Placement Test, which is internationally regarded as the minimum level of language proficiency required for pursuing a degree. This crucial discrepancy raises serious concerns about the validity and reliability of the 'A' grades as an indicator of actual language proficiency. Moreover, it reflects critically on the overall credibility of the Sri Lankan examination system and its grading standards.

Correlations

		Level	OL_Grade
Level	Pearson Correlation	1	.489**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	373	373
OL_Grade	Pearson Correlation	.489**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	373	373

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2

The Relationship between CEPT Scores (CEFR Level) and O/L Grades

The correlation between the CEPT scores and the O/L grades of the students was examined using the Pearson correlation coefficient, and the results revealed a statistically significant, moderately strong positive relationship. With the strength of correlation ($r = .489$) and the significance level ($p = .000$), the findings indicate that as O/L grades improve, there is a corresponding increase in the students' language competency levels too.

Assessment of Writing Skills

It is essential to consider writing accuracy as a key indicator of students' language proficiency. Since the Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPL) does not assess writing skills, a separate writing component was incorporated into the examination without altering the original CEPT format and guidelines. This component focused on evaluating students' ability to construct coherent sentences using appropriate grammar and sentence structure. Accordingly, the scores obtained for the writing task were analyzed to examine the distribution of mean values of the writing scores across the different competency levels.

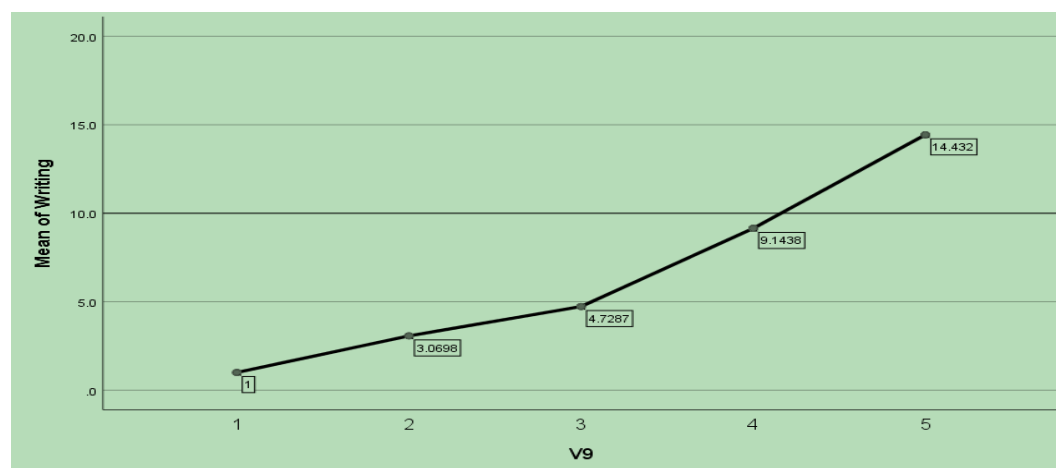


Figure 3

The Distribution of Mean Values of the Writing Scores

The graph above depicts the correlation between students' CEFR levels and the average writing scores for each level. The data clearly show that lower competency levels, such as A1 and A2, received lower mean values, while higher competency levels, namely B1 and B2, received higher mean values. Notably, only the B2 level obtained

mean values above the average level, with the rest of the competency levels falling below average.

Correlations

		Level	Writing
Level	Pearson Correlation	1	.587**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	372	372
Writing	Pearson Correlation	.587**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	372	372

Figure 4

The Correlation between the Writing Scores and the CEFR Levels

The analysis of the correlation between writing scores and the CEFR levels indicates that as competency levels increase, the mean writing score consistently improves. With a Pearson correlation coefficient of ($r = 0.587$), which is statistically significant at $p < .001$ level, the trend represents a moderately strong positive relationship between writing scores and CEFR levels. It is worth noting that students at the A1 and A2 CERF levels exhibited inadequate writing skills. Additionally, students at the B1 level did not demonstrate proficiency at the expected standard in their writing abilities.

Significance of Enhancing all Four Skills

Emphasizing the balanced development of all four language skills is a key requirement that is often lacking in local English curricula. This issue can be illustrated through the performance of students on the Cambridge English Placement Test, and an accompanying analysis is presented using a scatterplot.

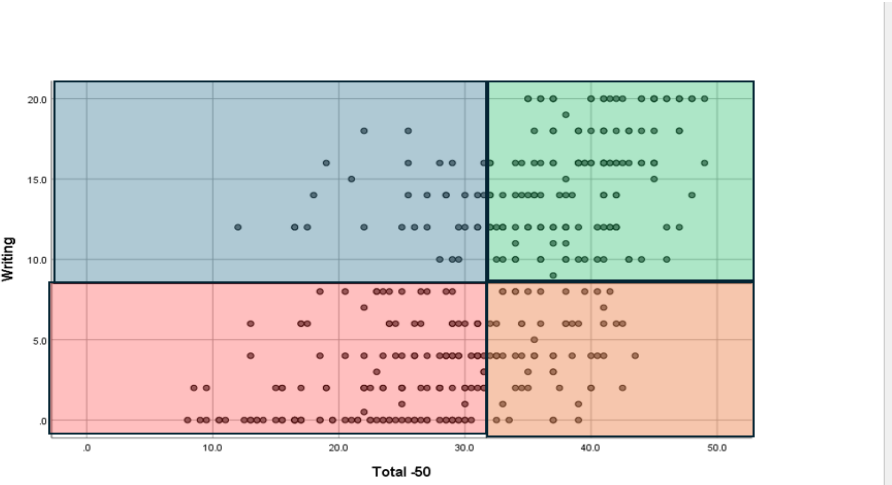


Figure 5

The Distribution of the Individual Total Score and Corresponding Writing Score

This scatter plot visually segments the performance of individuals based on their total scores and writing scores. The total score was ascertained based on assessments conducted in the domains of listening, reading, grammar,

and vocabulary. Each dot on the chart represents an individual observation for the total score and the corresponding writing score. The chart is divided into four sections based on thresholds for both writing and total scores. The blue quadrant indicates the students who scored high (above 10) for writing and less (below 30) for the total scores. The orange quadrant represents individuals who demonstrated strong overall performance, scoring above 30, but exhibited a deficiency in writing skills, scoring below 10. The red quadrant highlights the individuals who performed poorly, scoring low in writing (below 10) and receiving low overall scores (below 30). The green quadrant represents the best-performing individuals who received high scores for writing (above 10) along with high total scores (above 30).

Analysis of the scatter plot shows that the overall performance of students in the green quadrant is commendable. Conversely, while students in the blue quadrant demonstrate strong writing abilities, their weaker performance in areas such as reading, listening, vocabulary, and grammar highlights the need for improvement in these domains. Students in the orange quadrant, who excel in most areas but struggle with writing, would benefit from targeted guidance to enhance their writing skills. The red quadrant is particularly concerning, as students here exhibit both low writing scores and overall performance, indicating an urgent need for focused interventions to improve their language proficiency across all areas.

Linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between total scores and writing scores, specifically to determine the extent to which total scores predict writing scores. This analysis explored the impact of knowledge and performance in listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary on students' writing skills.

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
1									
	(Constant)	-5.853	.962		-6.083	.000	-7.744	-3.961	
	Total_50	.453	.029	.629	15.556	.000	.396	.510	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Writing

Figure 6

The Relationship between Total Score and the Writing Score

The results of the regression analysis indicate that the total score is a strong and statistically significant predictor of writing scores. The positive slope of 0.453 suggests that for every 1-point increase in Total 50, the Writing score increases by approximately 0.45 points. The Beta coefficient value of 0.629 indicates a moderately strong positive relationship. Accordingly, the results highlight the fact that the students with higher total scores tend to perform better in writing. Thus, it is essential to address the issue of unequal emphasis on the four language skills in local curricula by highlighting the importance of offering balanced attention to each skill. Focusing exclusively on the improvement of one or two skills will not enhance the overall English language proficiency of the students. Therefore, the balanced approach that emphasizes the simultaneous improvement of all language skills ensures that each skill complements the others, facilitating a more effective and holistic use of language in various contexts.

Implications for Curriculum Development

The secondary-level English curriculum in the Sri Lankan education system is based on a competency-oriented approach, and its competency descriptors are not clearly defined, making them vague. It was further observed that the curriculum does not adequately focus on improving speaking and listening skills, nor does it adequately train

students to use English for career purposes. The emphasis is instead placed primarily on writing skills aimed at passing the GCE O/L English examination (Brunfaut & Green, 2019). Upon conducting a comprehensive analysis of the content in textbooks and learning materials used in the English curriculum of government schools, it was observed that the overall focus fails to emphasize the development of students' communicative competence. Furthermore, these materials feature inauthentic language tasks, overemphasize writing and underemphasize speaking tasks. The lack of clear guidance for teachers, ambiguity regarding the specific skills targeted in individual activities, and the inclusion of lengthy and complex materials are among the notable issues identified in the content (Aloysius, 2015; Brunfaut and Green, 2019; Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022). Due to these issues, international schools often replace the prescribed textbooks with Cambridge textbooks and teachers' guides.

Listening and vocabulary are two vital components that are evaluated in the Cambridge English Placement Test. Thus, the results of these two components impact the overall performance of the students in the CEPT and low competence in reading and listening is a key influential factor that prevents students from reaching the B2 level. Further analysis shows that the secondary-level English curriculum in Sri Lanka does not focus on improving speaking, usage of vocabulary in different contexts and listening skills. While government schools neglect speaking and listening skills, they utilize a curriculum that lacks clear details and guidance. According to further research, some private schools registered under the Ministry of Education follow the government curriculum, but allocate extra time for speaking, reading and listening. In addition, international schools following the Cambridge English curriculum, allocate equal space and time for enhancing all four skills while using English as the medium of instruction (Brunfaut and Green, 2019; Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022).

The knowledge and awareness of teachers regarding the range of language assessment formats is limited, creating gaps between the content of the curriculum and the test tasks (Bandara, 2014; Brunfaut and Green, 2019; Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022; Liyanage, 2014; Sedere et al., 2016). Therefore, providing training for the teachers, examiners, paper setters, and moderators on designing high-quality tests adhering to the international language testing is crucial (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022).

Mitigation of the existing deficiencies within the national English education system requires internationally standardized strategies. A systematic mapping of curriculum content, textbooks, teachers' guides, and exam content is recommended to ensure proper alignment. Inclusion of listening and speaking skills within the curriculum and allocating equal weight and space to all four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening is highly required, while it is equally important to include speaking and listening components in the assessment structure. Revising textbooks according to international language teaching standards and developing comprehensive teaching guides is another key strategy (Brunfaut and Green, 2019; Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022).

To address the deficiencies within the Sri Lankan English education system, it is essential to incorporate significant modifications, including the implementation of an internationally recognized English curriculum and assessment framework. This approach would enhance the quality of language education and ensure that assessments effectively measure students' actual language proficiency and communicative abilities.

Conclusion

The results of the study affirmed that a moderately strong positive correlation can be observed between students' Ordinary-Level English results and their scores on the Cambridge English Placement Test. Additionally, it was found that most students receiving 'C' grades at the O/L level were classified in A1-A2 CEFR levels. These students need to improve their English language skills to reach the CEFR B2 level, which is widely recognized as the international standard for language proficiency required for undergraduate program enrolment.

Among all the candidates who took the Cambridge English Placement Test, only 24% of students enrolled in the Foundation Program possess the required competence at the CEFR B2 level to pursue a degree program. Notably, a moderately strong positive correlation, which is statistically significant, exists between students' CEFR levels and their average writing scores, with only the B2 level achieving mean values above the average level, while the other competency levels fell below the average.

A group of students showed low performance across all skills, while another group excelled in all areas. Conversely, some students demonstrated high proficiency in writing but struggled with other skills, and another group scored well in reading, grammar, listening, and vocabulary but showed lower proficiency in writing. Therefore, it is recommended to design a targeted learning and teaching approach to enhance specific language skills, as this could significantly improve students' overall English language proficiency.

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