

Meeting the English language barrier: The perception of first-year students of University of Jaffna

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Background and objective: Sri Lanka boasts a diverse linguistic landscape, with Sinhala and Tamil as its national languages and English serving as the link language. The majority of students receive primary and secondary education in their native languages, and English assumes a prominent role in tertiary education. For students whose educational background primarily consists of non-English instruction, transitioning to an English-medium university can be an overwhelming experience. The objective of this study is to describe the perceptions of first-year students of the University of Jaffna in navigating the English language barrier and its related factors.

Methods: An institution-based descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 427 University students from the 2019/2020 academic year who were studying in English medium. Data were collected using an online self-administered questionnaire. A scoring system was developing incorporating different scales designed to measure the extent of the impact of the language barrier on the learning process, studying, communication and overall impact (mild, moderate, severe). Data were analyzed using SPSS. Chi-square was performed to assess the association between sociodemographic, and academic factors, and the English language barrier.

Results: In total, 371 students participated (response rate 87.08%). The mean age was 23.2 (SD 1.13) years. In the sample, females and males were nearly equal in number (49.9%, n=185 & 50.1%, n=186, respectively). About three-fourths (74.4%, n=275) used apps to overcome the language barrier. Among them, 21.8% (n=81), 50.7% (n=188), and 27.5% (n=102) felt mild, moderate, and severe language barriers, respectively. This study revealed a significant association between English language barrier and O/L medium ($p<0.001$), A/L medium ($p<0.001$), O/L ($p<0.001$) and A/L ($p<0.001$) results for English, having studied English literature ($p<0.001$), following extra classes for English during A/L ($p=0.028$), and having obtained satisfactory marks in the first attempt of the English language barrier exam ($p<0.001$).

Conclusion and recommendations: Most university students face a moderate English language barrier especially those who took their O/L and A/L examinations in their native language. We recommend implementing targeted support for students who did not achieve satisfactory marks in the English language barrier examination. In addition, our results strongly support the recommendation to promote access to extra English classes during A/L years.

Keywords: Language barriers, English as a second language, Undergraduate education, Jaffna, English medium, Native language