

Language-Related Barriers and Insights to Overcome the Challenges of English Medium Instructed Learning Environment for Undergraduates

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Abstract

The practice of English Medium Instruction in the tertiary phase of education in the non-Anglophone circle is a significant but perplexing argument. The void of academic exploration of the students' authentic perspectives and the challenges they face due to the quick transfer of the academic language from L1 to L2 without any smooth procedure is a critical ground that needs investigation. Thus, the current study aimed to explore the language-caused challenges and the strategies utilized by the students to overcome the challenges of the EMI learning environment in the tertiary phase of education. The study utilized the purposive sampling method and data was collected through a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the collected data. The findings highlight that the significant language gap between secondary and tertiary education is the primary reason for students' language difficulties. However, students have developed strategies to tackle these language-related challenges. The study concludes by proposing potential solutions to facilitate a smoother transition from an L1-based learning environment to an L2-based learning environment.


Keywords:

Challenges, English medium instructions, Strategies, L1 and L2, Tertiary education, Undergraduates.


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Introduction

Background and Significance of the Study

The profile of English Medium Instruction (EMI) within the arena of education is a context-bound sensation. Context-wise perspective on EMI is a debatable topic within non-Anglophone countries, which has a linkage with the colonial past. Accordingly, the context-wise belonging of the concern directly represents the category of Outer Circle (Kirkpatrick, 2014) of Kachru's World Englishes categorization (Y. Liu, 2022). In particular, the outer circle represents the countries which owe a historical relationship with British colonization, and these countries place the English language within their domain as the Second Language (L2). A clearer version of the contextual boundary is presented in the shaded area of Figure 1. Bestowing to the contextual boundary, the study clearly focused on the issues encountered in the EMI learning environment within the English as a Second Language (ESL) context.

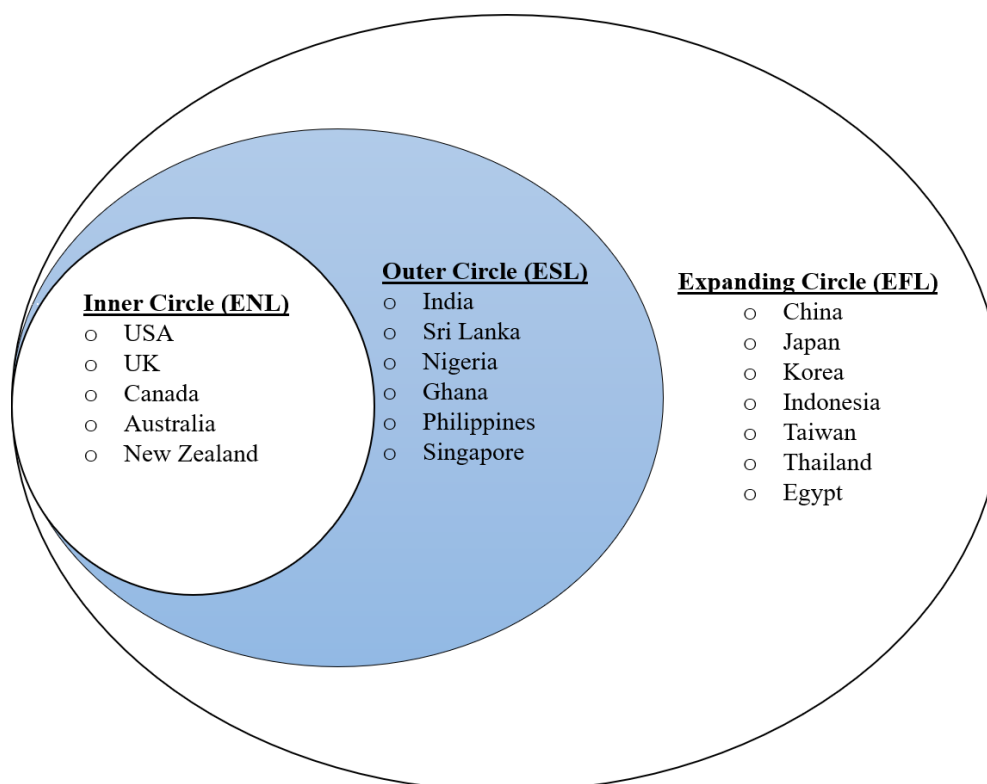


Figure 1. Kachru's Concentric Circles

In the aforementioned sphere, English plays a pivotal role in its language policy and anticipated demands of the future, aligning with the realities of globalization and economic trends (Schmidt-Unterberger, 2018). The majority of these outer circle countries had no exposure to the English language from the external environment they are in, and the majority remained in the attitude of promoting their Mother Tongue (MT/L1). In the former British colonies (e.g., India, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore) EMI mushroomed widely with the concern of internationalization of education and welcoming the economic benefits of new innovations (Jayathilake et al., 2021). Thus, in order to capture the competitive professional avenues in the international and local grounds, it is



vital to equip the Sri Lankan graduate professionals with required sharpness. EMI is one prominent catalyst for better survival on international professional grounds.

Contextual Importance of the Study through Existing Literature

According to the previous discussion, it was identified that other languages that were previously used in education, particularly in the tertiary phase of the Sri Lankan education system, were not suitable for science, technology disciplines, and global connectivity (Vaish, 2010). The impact of the notion, the first word decides where the resources of the developing world will head, led to an uplift in the quality of Sri Lankan tertiary education, with the introduction of first-world-launched projects such as IRQUE (Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education) (Vaish, 2010). This led to a noticeable improvement in tertiary education as a response to the management of global capital. Therefore, the current context of university education remains on the solid belief that English is the only language that will enable people to participate in modernity and development.

Yet, the tertiary education system of the country had lapses and criticisms over the ability to provide students with skills needed to function in modern organizations and to prepare them for the professional demands and challenges of globalized business in a pluralistic world (Simões, 2020). Though the system has invented the concept of EMI within the university system with the intention of providing equity and quality (Vaish, 2010), due to various reasons, the system was unable to reach the optimal outcome. The study on the education system of Sri Lanka unveiled challenges faced by the Sri Lankan education system with poor quality, mismatch of the curriculum with existing labor market demands, lack of training of school teachers, inefficient administration, limited government expenditure on education, lack of clear national/state educational policy, un-planned policy changes, the politicization of recruiting procedures of school teachers and administrative staff, lack of proper teacher training (Liyanage, 2014). Further, it demonstrated the lapses of English language skills in the English language learning situation of Sri Lanka. Only 10% of students achieved a targeted level of mastery in English language skills, while English writing skills are recorded as 1% in the tested skill levels in the aforementioned study. According to the tested criteria, urban areas recorded that 23% of students master the English language, whereas only 7% of rural students achieve the same level of proficiency (Liyanage, 2014) which hinders the differences remain between contexts.

However, when narrowing down the case into the arena of tertiary education the extreme requirement of widening the avenues in education is mandatory. Specially, medium of instruction in English has a valid rationale in conquering the knowledge without any demarcation. The reasons are: (i) gaining increased attraction of the international students, (ii) reach higher university ranking and (iii) institutional expectations. Thus, the internationalization of higher education is the sole reason behind the process of implementing EMI in the phase of higher education and it has been defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of higher education (de Wit, 2020).

By 2009 the government's national policy framework for the development of higher education highlighted one



key aspect: improve the economic relevance of higher education by promoting skills in demand in the labor market, such as English, information and communication technology, and soft skills as well as expanding job-oriented higher education programs in the alternative higher education sector (Schultheiss et al., 2023). Yet, these aims were not fully accomplished due to prevailing lapses within the system. One significant cause for the situation in Sri Lanka is unevenness between L1 (Sinhala/Tamil) based secondary education and L2 (English) based tertiary education.

While Sri Lankan school education system in the EMI learning environment has been investigated by prominent Sri Lankan scholars (Punchi, 2001) with reference to authoritative and administrative layers, it has proven the downfall of language proficiency as neither teachers nor students are comfortable with the learning component in English. As a result graduates are deficient in key professional skills such as oral communication, critical thinking, negotiation, analytical thinking etc. (Ariyawansa, 2013; Pushpakumara, 2021). Further, it is noteworthy to state that the contextual empirical evidence related to EMI in tertiary education remains with a considerable lacuna as the findings are inconsistent (Jayathilake et al., 2021). Due to this scantiness in the context, EMI in tertiary education system needs more research. According to the remaining requirement of the current research lacuna, it is vital to explore the challenges and coping mechanisms utilized by the undergraduates in tackling the medium of instruction-caused challenges.

Therefore, the current study aims to explore (i) the challenges faced by undergraduates during this uneven transition of language, (ii) the coping mechanisms utilized by the undergraduates while they were getting accustomed to the EMI learning environment. Thus, the outcomes of the current study will enable the policy makers, curriculum designers and respective authorities to smoothen the language gap that remains between each phase of education. Further, the findings of the study will be effective for the universities when designing their orientation programs more effective by focusing the most challenging areas to be covered in their orientation programs.

Method

Study Context

The study context of the research is a state university of Sri Lanka which was established as a university in 1991 in which currently practicing EMI is present in all the faculties. The current study has narrowed down its research sample to one faculty of the aforementioned university. The context employs English as the primary medium of instruction. Within its academic framework, the university provides courses and workshops tailored to undergraduate students, encompassing English for general purposes, academic purposes and professional purposes (Prasanna, 2023). One reason was that the faculty consisted of a unique combination of multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational communities. Further, the context consisted of international students from Bhutan, Nepal, Nigeria, and the Maldives. Thus, the context can be interpreted as a melting pocket.



Participants

The total population considered for the sample was 250 surveying sciences undergraduates. They were divided into two groups based on the research instruments. Thus, 130 participants were selected using the purposive sampling method for the questionnaire survey, and five participants from the same cluster were selected for the semi-structured interviews using the purposive sampling method. Table 1 below clearly displays the demography of the sample.

Table 1. Demography of the Sample

Gender	Male	63	
	Female	67	
Age range		20 - 23	
Study year and semester	YISI	65	
	YISII	65	
Department	SUGEO	130	
	RSGIS		
Nationality	Sri Lankan	Sinhalese	60
		Tamils	63
	Chinese	1	
	Maldives	4	
	Filipinos	1	
	Moroccans	1	

Research Tools

The study utilized two basic research tools: (i) Questionnaire survey, and (ii) semi-structured interview series. Primary data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire through an online questionnaire survey which was designed as a Google form. The questionnaire is comprised of two sections. Section I included open-ended questions to capture the demographic information of the undergraduate: gender, age, school, and employment status of their parents. Section II of the questionnaire comprised of items taken from the research objectives and research questions. Open-ended questions were given at the end to capture other opinions and suggestions of the respondents, as it is beneficial to derive themes. For the feasibility check, both questionnaire and the interview questions were distributed among five random undergraduates to check whether the language needs to be changed and to check feasibility.

The interview questions were given two days before the scheduled time for the interview. Apart from that, the study referred to existing scholarly articles and other relevant documents, reports, and theories to collect secondary data. Collected data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed by using qualitative thematic analysis.

The procedure of the study is visualized in Figure 2.

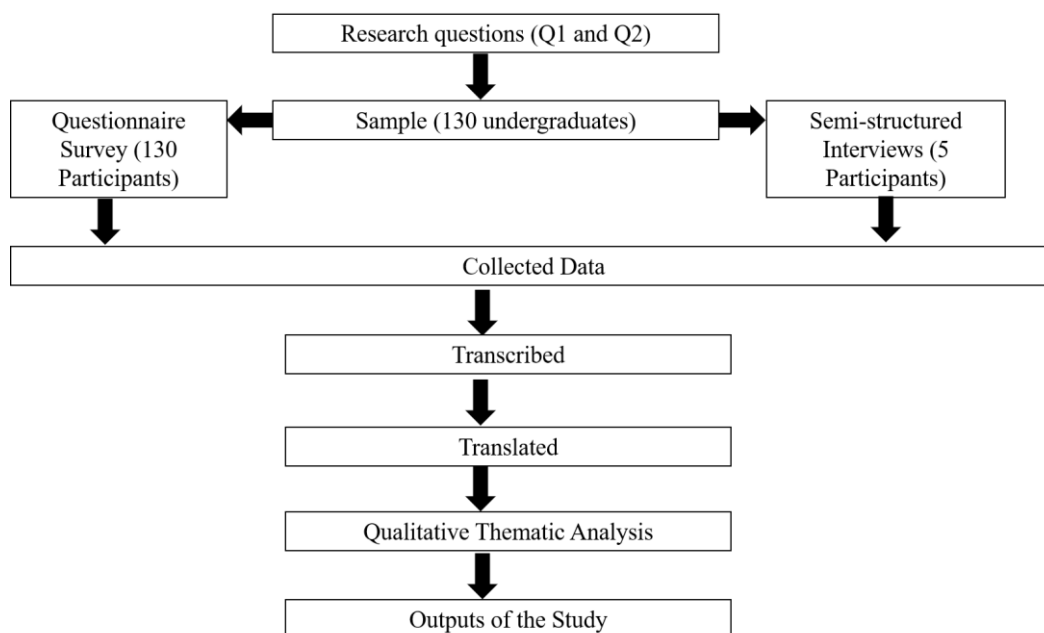


Figure 2. Procedure of the Study

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are primarily divided into two: (i) language-related challenges of EMI learning environment in the tertiary phase of education, and (ii) coping mechanisms utilized by the students to overcome the emerged challenges. The identified challenges are visualized in Figure 3. Then the study moved its focus to explore possible solutions to overcome the discovered issues. In this section, the study discussed the coping mechanisms invented by the students themselves and the possible suggestions from the existing empirical evidence.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university was functioning via online platforms. Thus, the researcher had to use online platforms to conduct the interviews. However, the researcher guaranteed that confidentiality was protected in the collected data. The study only addressed the profile of EMI via undergraduates' perspective due to the consideration of time and the type of the data analysis. Despite these limitations, the study reveals the authentic replica of the EMI situation of the research site, and the findings are applicable and can be generalized into the wider context as well.

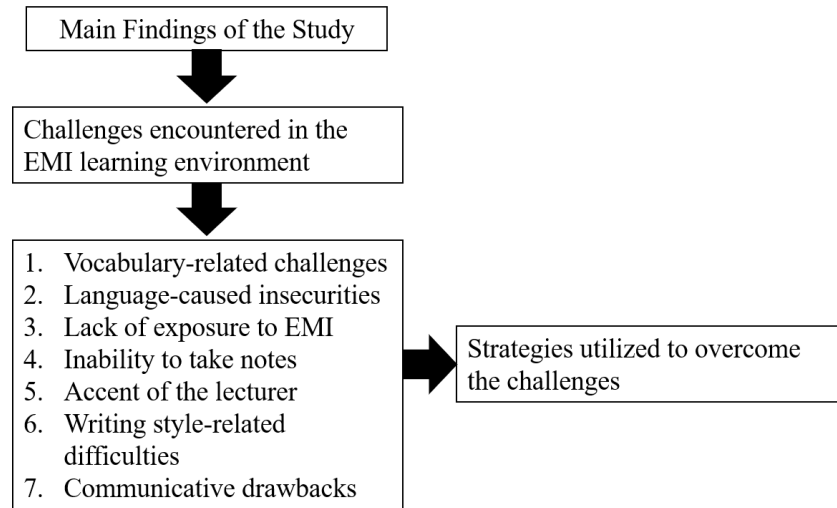


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Research Findings

Challenges in the EMI Learning Environment

In the EMI learning environment, students face a vast variety of language-related challenges. Responses of the considered sample of the study are visualized in Figure 4. The most dominant challenges are writing style-related issues (78%), language-caused insecurities (74%), and communicative issues (70%). A minimum number was recorded for an accent of the lecturer (40%) and vocabulary-related challenges (49%).

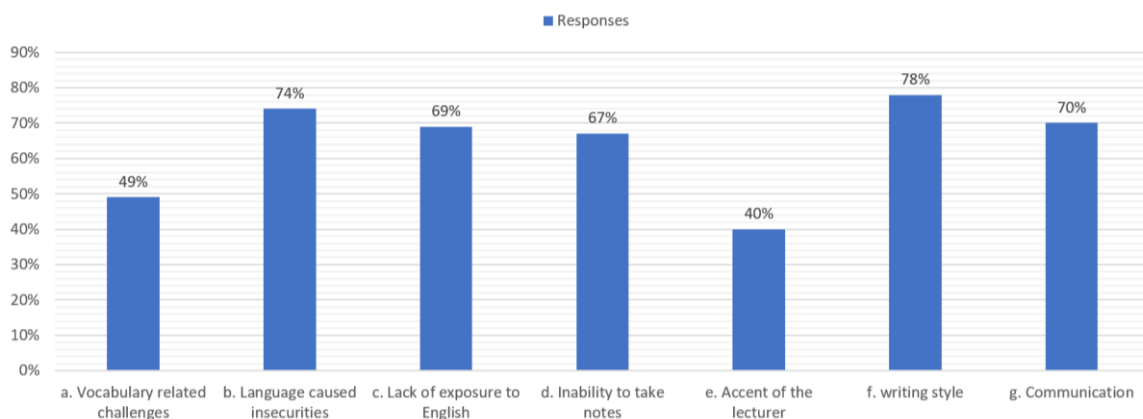


Figure 4. Number of Responses on Each Challenge

Vocabulary-related Difficulties

Students face diverse issues related to vocabulary. According to the tested sample, 49% of students struggle with subject-related technical terms. Almost all the students of the sample have followed their primary and secondary education in their mother tongue (Sinhala/ Tamil). Hence, these students have met the basics of mathematics and physics subject contents in Sinhala or Tamil medium. When it appears in an unhomely language it becomes hostile sphere to enter in a comfortable manner. Most of the sample revealed that the equations and calculations are

manageable. As evidence, only 1% of students consider the equations and calculations to be challenging factor. But the theories and concepts are very troublesome due to unfamiliar terms they encounter in English language. According to the collected data for 32% of the sample, understanding theories and concepts written in English is a challenging factor. The challenge related to vocabulary and technical terms is common among the international context (Hatch & Brown, 2000; Heath, 1992; Hiebert & Kamil, 2005; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Snow et al., 2005). Bestowing to the semi-structured interviews, this vocabulary issue was frequent among undergraduates. Though students have many things to say they struggle with finding words. If we define it through their own words, it is “words don’t come”. More evidence is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Evidence from the Semi-Structured Interviews (Interviewee A and B)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
A	“Maths contents and equations are manageable... but the theories and concepts are very hard to understand. But when we have kuppi programmes, the way our friends taught us is clearer because he is doing it in Sinhala... so we can understand the concept in a simple manner.”
B	“Even when we write academic answers, we don’t know how to find the most suitable word. Some friends write in a very nice way. But personally speaking, I struggle with finding words. Even when we speak, I take a long time to think and find a word that at least gives the slightest meaning I want to convey... but when I speak in Tamil, it does not go like this... Tamil words come naturally, but not English words...”

Word choice when writing academic answers is a challenging factor for 19% of the sample, while understanding words while reading academic documents is a considerable challenge for 25% of the sample. The subcategories considered under vocabulary related challenges are clearly displayed in Figure 5 below.

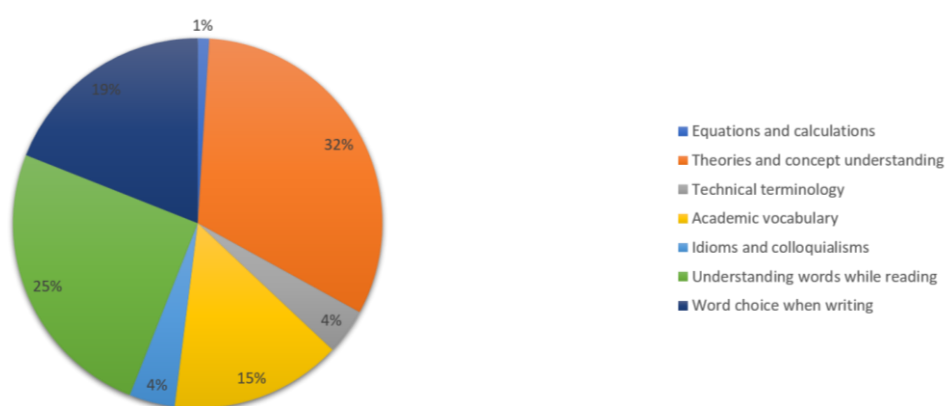


Figure 5. Sub-Categories of Vocabulary-Related Challenges

Language Caused Insecurities

Language-caused insecurities are detectable through behavioral changes of each student in different learning environments (Asad et al., 2023). Most of the time, the students remain very silent in the lecture and do not cooperate with the lecturer to build up academic rapport. The main reason behind this behaviour is that language



caused anxiety (Pichette, 2009). The study launched eight areas to test the language which caused anxiety. According to the collected data, as displayed in Figure 6, 12% of the sample gets nervous when the lecturer asks a question. The most dominant proportion of the sample, which is 27%, revealed that they are reluctant to converse with the lecturer due to English language difficulties. On the other hand, 20% of the sample revealed that they do worry over their grammatical and vocabulary related doubts. It is not because the student is weak for a subject. But due to the heavy nervousness of the student, unconsciously the student locks himself and his thought process clogs withing himself due to the strong inability to acculturate the L2 proceedings as evidence is depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. Highlights from the Semi-Structured Interviews (Interviewee A and E)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
A	“Most of the times, I don’t involve in conversations with the lecturer XXX, YYY and PPP because they are very strict and only conduct the lecture in English. But in CCC lectures, I try to talk and share my thoughts. Because that madam gave me the feeling that my thoughts were important and that she made corrections in a really nice and interesting tone.”
E	“I don’t want to talk with lecturers. I usually try to omit eye contact with them because I’m afraid of their way of looking at us. Basically, I don’t know whether I understand what they say. In one day, I only realized that I had given a wrong answer a few minutes later. Only when one of my friends told me what she asked. So I don’t like to speak with them in English. I don’t understand... I’m afraid the others might judge my errors.”

Causes tested to identify the language-caused insecurities are visualized in the Figure 6. The most affected cause for the issue is shyness and lack the confidence to speak out (Ahsan et al., 2020). This situation gets worst when they are aware of that the other students are more competent. In such instances, they worry whether others might identify their insecurities (Ojongnkpot & Laurent, 2018). By considering the facts identified under the language caused insecurities, the context tends to have imposter conditions within students. A country like Sri Lanka has no procedure to identify those.

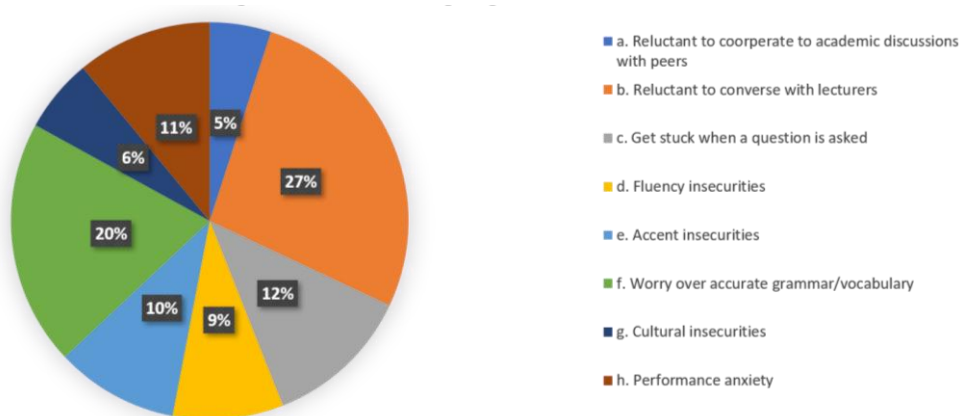


Figure 6. Tested Sub-Categories under Language-Caused Insecurities

*Lack of Exposure to the EMI*

In the Sri Lankan education system, primary and secondary education primarily uses the mother tongue (Sinhala/Tamil). However, tertiary education, especially in math streams, is conducted in English to ensure quality education and unrestricted access to knowledge (Vaish, 2010). The lack of an effective transitional period for students between secondary and tertiary education in Sri Lanka leads to struggles in understanding subject content in English. This situation aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasizes the significance of culture, language, and community roles in the learning process (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2012). In the Sri Lankan context, there is a strong connection between culture, the roots of culture, and the community with Sinhala or Tamil languages. English is seen as a separate space beyond MT but is not easily accessible in early learning stages, contributing to a widening gap between L1 and L2 as children mature. Moreover, the minimal exposure to English language input from the outer society, results in a lack of interaction with authentic English exposure. (Al Zoubi, 2018). However, majority of the Sri Lankan context is filled with MT (Sinhala or Tamil). Being a grown up amidst MT based context, Sri Lankan students must continue their tertiary studies in an EMI environment. Further, the student's immediate background or families are also not that refined to speak English at home. Thus, the English language input that they should receive from the outer environment is zero in the studied context as evidence displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Highlights from the Interview (Interviewee B)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
B	<p>"My parents speak in Sinhala, they don't know English at all. They are farmers in Kahatagasdigiliya. They are happy to hear that I am studying at the university, but I am 100% sure they don't know what I am doing here... I have heard that they tell the others, 'My son is going to be a surveyor'".</p> <p>"[...] In my school days, we did not have a teacher to English, our science teacher did some English lessons, but the students were escaping from the class when it is English period. We never even thought of doing studies in English"</p> <p>"Actually, these university lectures are truly hard to understand... at the very beginning of my university life, I felt like going away from the lecture because I did not understand anything. But during my school days, I was one who scored highest marks. But here at the university, it was totally different. I always wanted to leave this place because I didn't understand anything."</p>

However, the study tested eight subcategories under the theme of language exposure. Thus, the causes that were dominant in the tested category were (i) low socio-economic status (28%), (ii) minimal interaction with English speakers (24%), (iii) gap between MT based secondary phase and EMI based tertiary phase (27%) as displayed in Figure 7. The impact of the digital divide in Sri Lanka is minimal, accounting for only 2% of the overall impact in the tested sample. While Sri Lanka has access to internet facilities and media, certain knowledge sources are restricted due to high dollar rates when converted to LKR, contributing to a digital divide in third-world countries



despite low awareness in tested clusters.

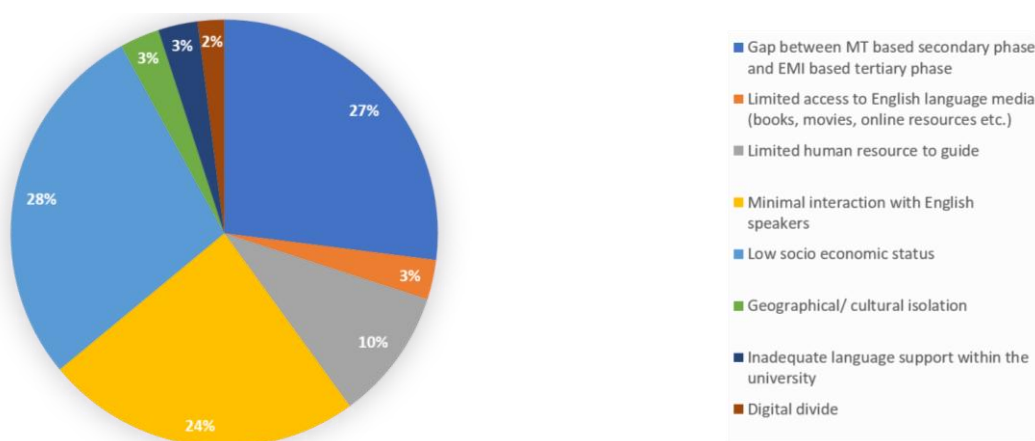


Figure 7. Sub-Categories Tested under Lack of English Language Exposure

Inability to Take Notes

Note taking poses a notable challenge for undergraduate students, as indicated by Figure 4 where 67% of the participants identified it as a significant difficulty. The primary reason for this challenge stems from the transition in learning mediums and the substantial differences between note-taking practices at the school level versus those at the university level. This difficulty is particularly pronounced during the initial year of university education. The adverse effects of this transition include struggles with subject-specific terminology, a heightened aversion to the English language, and a generally negative attitude towards English, as evidenced in Table 5, which provides substantial validity to the claim. The study conducted by Tang (2012) brings out a valid point that the students were unable to produce sufficient content in English because they have a linguistic problem in understanding the basic concepts. Further, the study focuses on the structural changes between L1 and L2, which also affect the inability to compose content in the related subject.

Table 3. Capture from the Semi-Structured Interviews (Interviewee B)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
B	<p>“First thing is I did not understand what the lecturer was saying... and thought the lecturer would give notes like what we did in our school and A/L tuition classes.”</p> <p>“University’s situation was totally different from what I was used to. Sometimes we felt that it was necessary to explore more knowledge through academic documents and other books. Still, since everything was in English, I gave up doing that... actually, I had no idea how to understand those big books in English. I didn’t understand a single paragraph in English. Sometimes, I felt this was not the right choice to continue my education at university... I still am in that doubt.”</p>

The primary challenges in note-taking stem from the differences between secondary and tertiary education

practices, with 28% of students citing this as the most impactful factor. In Sri Lankan schools, students are accustomed to receiving notes from teachers, unlike the independent notetaking required at universities. Additionally, 20% of students struggle due to a lack of English proficiency. Other significant factors include technological distractions (14%), issues with attention span and focus (11%), lack of practice in note-taking strategies (10%), and feelings of anxiety and stress (7%) as displayed in Figure 8. Although the students have represented these factors in comparatively low amounts, it certainly has a significant impact upon the students' academic performances (Luby & Southern, 2022).

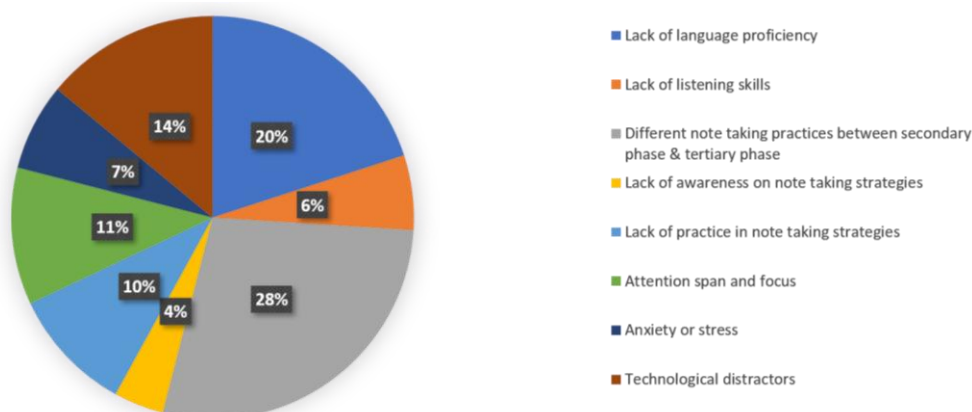


Figure 2. Sub-Categories Tested under Difficulties Related to Note-Taking

Accent of the Lecturer

With the globalized education system, gaining resources from international grounds is a vital concern in the tertiary phase of education (Huang & Xiong, 2023). Depending on the various language accents of the globe, each person has accent deviations. In such instances, students struggle to gain access to the subject content (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wilkinson, 2020). According to the prevailing literature, language ability is highly intertwined with the teaching-learning process (Başibek et al., 2014; Werther et al., 2014). With the unreachable accent of the lecturer, students are unable to accommodate the subject contents (Vinke et al., 1998). Claims for the statement are displayed in Table 6.

Table 4. Highlights of the Interview (Interviewee A)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
A	<p>"...even I can't understand the language... top of that, when the lecturer uses a different accent, obviously it is hard to grab."</p> <p>"... even I only focus on what he is saying, I could not understand... so I don't think there will be any effective way to understand the lecture."</p> <p>"I only hear some set of sounds, and that is it... actually, I did not understand anything, especially in guest lectures."</p>

According to collected data, variations in pronunciation has the highest impact (29%). Further, speech rate and



rhythm and weaknesses in listening skills have recorded 23% impact as displayed in Figure 9. According to the studied causes, the first four causes are beyond the control of students. The students can focus of developing weaknesses in their listening skills as it is the only possible way remain in their control (Field, 1998).

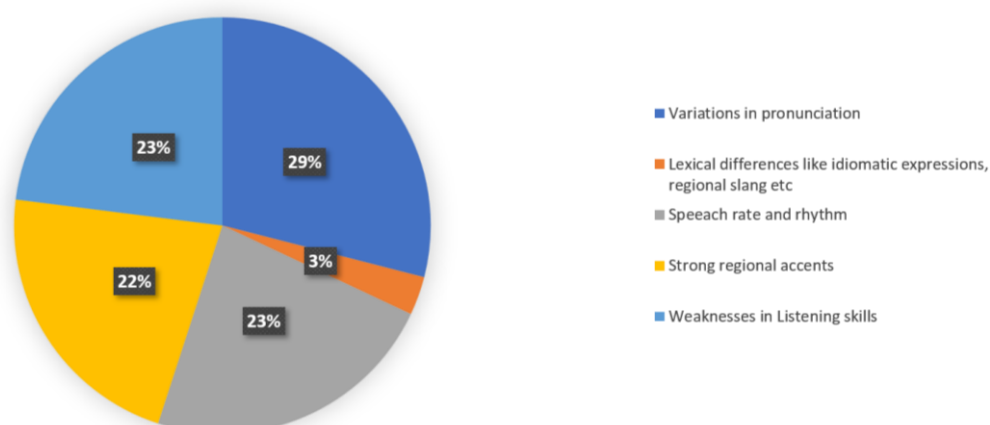


Figure 3. Sub-Categories Tested under Difficulties in Lecturer's Accent

Writing Style

Undergraduate students in outer circle countries encounter significant challenges when tasked with writing assignments and reports, struggling to effectively blend language and subject content. The transition from school to university exacerbates these challenges, highlighting the need for targeted support initiatives like writing-across-the-curriculum programs and language competency development tools to enhance academic writing skills among these students (W. Liu, 2023). The major reason for the emergence of this issue is the uneven transfer from the L1-based senior secondary phase to the L2-based tertiary phase. The lack of a refined and effective mode to sharpen their writing style is a significant drawback of the education system (Faruquzzaman Akan et al., 2019). As a result of this, when they tried to organize a sentence or any essay-type answer, they were unable to manage it at the expected level of language competency as the pre-installed language rules of L1 interfered with the new language rules (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). The most important findings are displayed in Table 7.

Table 5. Highlights from the Interviews (Interviewee B and D)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
B	<p>"I should tell that I have no idea about how to construct a grammatically correct simple sentence in English..."</p> <p>"I used to think in Sinhala and then directly say it in English, but I also didn't know whether the sentence was correct or wrong."</p> <p>"Obviously, I had zero knowledge about the structure of an academic answer. Actually, I have never thought about writing a paragraph in a proper organization until I randomly sat for an English lecture in the second year first semester."</p>
D	<p>"I had no idea about academic answers...um... I just wrote what came to my mind. Sometimes, I just wrote the key terms that came to mind after reading the question."</p>

	<p>“No, I never even thought about academic language ...umm..., tone or anything...”</p> <p>“I can remember that we had a few lectures about academic writing, note taking... umm... in our intensive English programme, but actually, I never thought those things were practically applicable until I got a few C passes for my first-semester exam.”</p>
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According to collected data displayed in Figure 10, grammar and academic vocabulary choice is the highest recorded challenging factor, that is 23% of the sample. On the other hand, academic tone and style (22%), lack of individual attention and feedback from lecturers (17%), and inability to integrate language and subject content (15%) has a significant impact on writing style of the undergraduates. Thus, it is vital to address these writing issues to enhance the students' academic performances in the EMI learning environment.

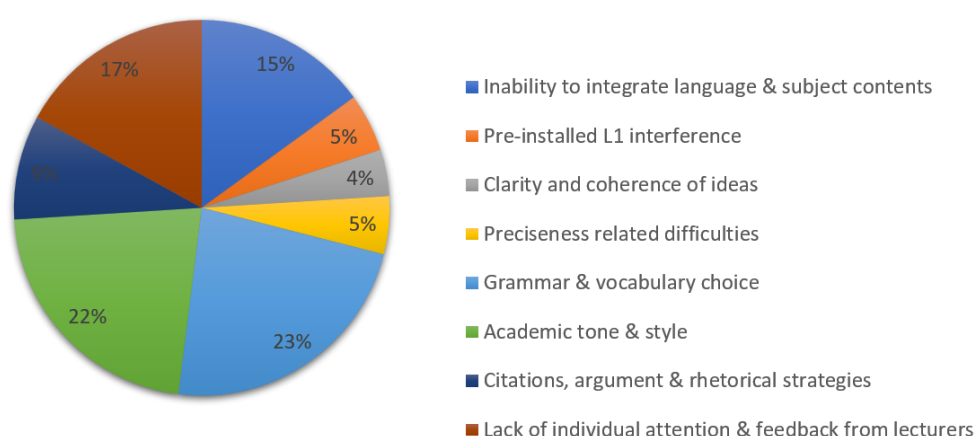


Figure 10. Sub-Categories Tested for Challenges in Writing Style

Communication

Communication is a mandatory purpose within an academic context. To support the point Kaur (2020) stated that in addition to being the language of lecturing, the need to use English often extends to other elements of an EMI course including the spoken interaction in lectures, tutorials, and study groups (Kaur et al., 2020). By applying the same lens to view the research context, it is mandatory to use English language to communicative purposes as the context is multicultural. Jensen and Thogersen (2011) stated that creating and sustaining an interactive teaching and learning environment in English presents significant linguistic challenges compared to traditional lecturing. This is because both teachers and students are required to possess advanced language skills that enable them to actively engage in academic discussions focusing on the course content. (Kaur et al., 2020). Further, the existing literature has evidence to prove that the students face greater difficulty in participating in various teaching-learning activities that involve the oral skills that go beyond delivering and understanding a lecture (Kaur et al., 2020). In support of the same argument Andrew (2017) stated that English language proficiency skills can be developed by using EMI in a university context.

According to the primary data as displayed in the Figure 11, the highest impact-caused factors are lack of confidence (27%), errors in sentence structure (18%), hesitation to speak (19%), difficulty in finding words with



smooth flow (21%) which clearly hinders that the lack of language exposure and confidence are the dominant factors to the communicative drawbacks.

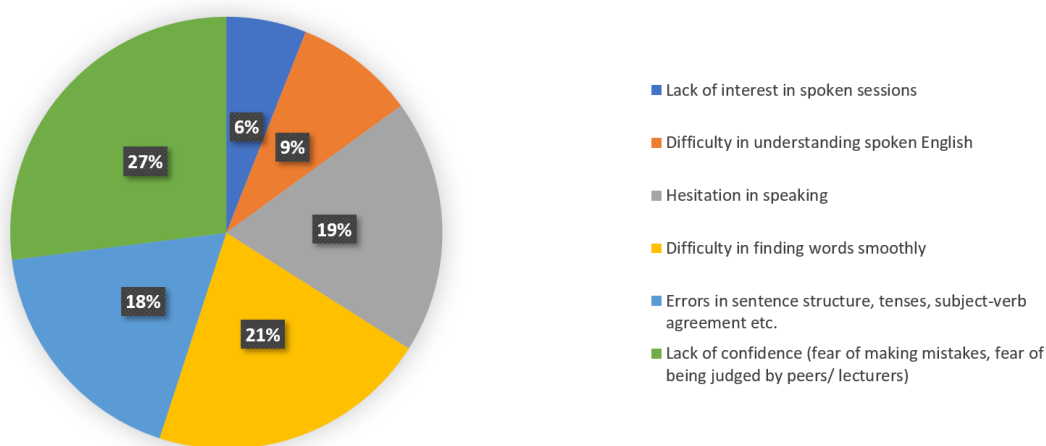


Figure 4. Sub-Categories Tested under Communication-Related Challenges

Afore-mentioned insights are highly effective when a non-Anglophone individual shifts into an EMI learning situation. Thereby the curricula that is designed for English course units should focus on sharpening the skills like note-taking, giving presentations, taking part in discussions, reading, and writing academic papers (Hyland & Shaw, 2015). Conversely, this entails support amongst language experts and the relevant subject departments to design EAP course curricula which supports learners in acclimatizing their ‘academic discourse’ (Schmidt-Unterberger, 2018).

Mechanisms Used by the Students to Overcome the Language-related Challenges

Vocabulary Development

Most students focus on improving their vocabulary, believing that the problem stems from poor vocabulary. To address this, they use traditional methods such as reading newspapers, research articles, and collecting unfamiliar words (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Further, the scholars assigns three key spheres that caused an impact on oral communication effectiveness: (i) social knowledge, (ii) self-knowledge, and (iii) content knowledge (McGeer, 2001). According to the argument, these three components should be integrated. In most cases the fluctuations occur in the component self-knowledge (McGeer, 2001). Due to the lack self-knowledge related to English, they were unable to grab the content knowledge within the EMI setting. One example is that a student who is good at managing the language has shared that he continuously watched English movies and due to that positive impact, which is visible in his language usage, the other students started following the same strategy. Evidence is displayed in Table 8.

Table 6. Highlights of the Interview (Interviewee C)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
C	<p>“one of my closest friends is really good at English... he is fluent, and words come like water. But I’m not like that... I talk and find words with much difficulty. I also tried the method invented by my fluent friend. He said that as a habit, he has continuously watched English movies since childhood. I also tried the same, but I have still not made any progress. Maybe it needs time.”</p> <p>“Sometimes, unintentionally... when I talk with my Tamil friends, some good conversations happen... but still, I am not good at selecting the most suitable words in conversations and writing.”</p>

The study explores how students utilize newer technological tools like Google Translate to address subject-related terminology challenges. It suggests that engaging in stress-free activities such as watching movies, reading novels, and listening to music inadvertently provides significant benefits to students. These activities offer practical and unintentional advantages, potentially aiding in stress reduction and enhancing overall well-being. According to the collected data as displayed in Figure 12, The positive impact of stress-free activities on vocabulary development is evident, with 26% of the sample acknowledging its effectiveness in providing practical exposure. Traditional methods like reading and simply adding new words to a book are perceived as less effective compared to engaging in stress-free activities. Students have rated conventional mechanisms lower in effectiveness, emphasizing that merely collecting words without continuous usage is not as impactful. In contrast, when students immerse themselves in meaningful modes of entertainment in English, the benefits are more substantial and fruitful for vocabulary development (Huo, 2022). According to the process of vocabulary enhancement invented by Grauberg (1997) involves four stages: (i) discrimination, (ii)undertaking meaning (iii) remembering and (iv) consolidation and extension of meaning. For an instance absorbing words is a slow process that happens over time, it permanently absorbs when the learners use it within their personal stock of words. Thus, the importance of continuous exposure is mandatory in vocabulary development.

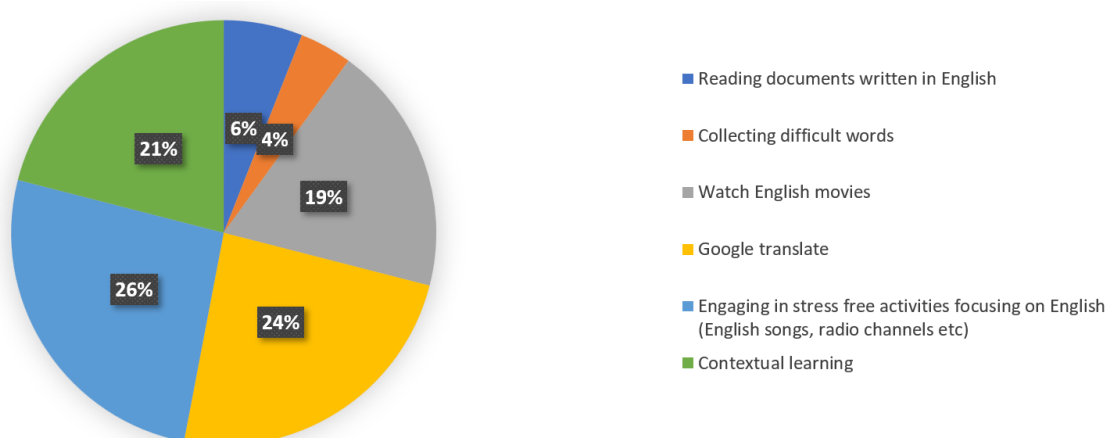


Figure 12. Mechanisms Utilized by the Students to Overcome Vocabulary-Related Challenges

Mechanisms Utilized to Overcome Language Anxiety-related Issues

Language anxiety is a significant concern within the study context as 74% of the sample has stated it is a



challenging factor in the Figure 4, they have experienced in the EMI learning environment. Most of the tested sample rated remaining silent manner during learning hours as the strategy they utilized to overcome language anxiety (42%). Further, 27% of the sample has stated that they are utilizing English core subjects to minimize their language related insecurities as evidence is displayed in Table 9.

Table 7. Highlights of the Interview Series (Interviewee E)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
E	"...always I just listen to the lecture, but I am afraid of entering into a conversation in English when I am in a lecture. Because sometimes lecturers and other students judge me based on that. I don't want to show them that I am not confident in handling English."

Further, 17% of the tested sample has revealed that they try to build conversations with other communities whose MT is different. Additionally, 14% of the sample has rated that they try to engage in in-class academic conversations in English as displayed in Figure 13. The main reason for that is the friendly and stress-free learning environment created within the ELTU. As a result of this, many students make use of the time to talk and enhance their language skills as evidence in Table 6.

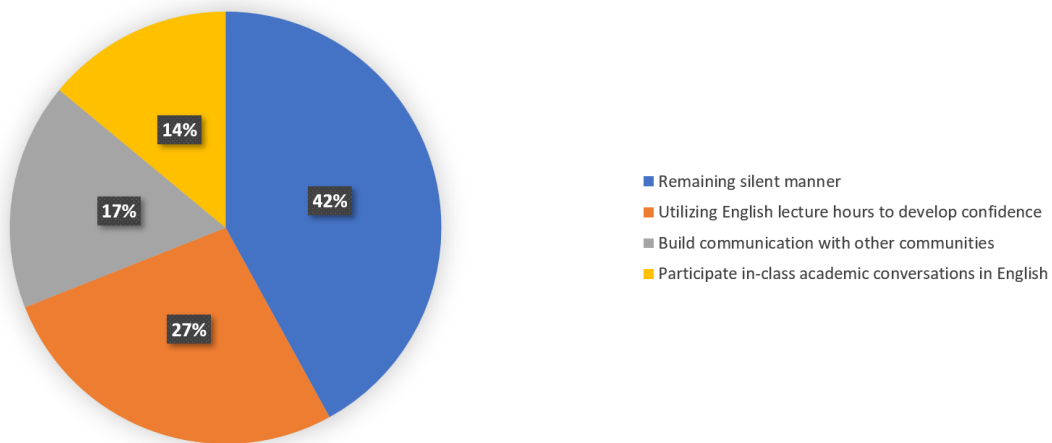


Figure 13. Mechanisms Utilized to Overcome Language Anxiety

Mechanisms Used to Gain more Exposure to the EMI Environment

Among the most frequent Mechanisms utilized to gain exposure, the study identified coping mechanisms like watching the lecture recording repeatedly (37%), contextual learning (21%), technological exposure (28%), searching about the topics on the internet (6%), watching documentaries, referring to online tutorials, watching foreign lecturers, and watching YouTube videos related to their subject areas (8%) as evidence is displayed in Table 10.

Table 8. Highlights of the Interview Series (Interviewee D)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
D	<p>“I think during our field practical sessions, we learn a lot while working with group members from other language communities and other international representatives.”</p> <p>“At the beginning, I tried to listen to the recorded versions of the lectures, but I gave up it as it consumes time.”</p>

Each strategy and the frequency of the usage is clearly visualized in Figure 14. According to Fellini’s explanation, language is not a genetic gift, it is a social gift. Learning a new language is becoming a member of the club, the community of speakers of that language (Bano & Zaman, 2016). Bestowing to this definition, for a language to get flourish social contact and interaction is a mandatory requirement (Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). Scholars have revealed that out-side the learning environment has a dominant impact upon the student’s language exposure (Ghelichli et al., 2023). According to the findings of Kucukler et al. (2021) English language exposure can be gained through television and films to develop their contextual learning. More dominantly, digital technology plays a vital role in language exposure in the current environment. Thus, most importantly technological exposure helps to increase exposure to the language.

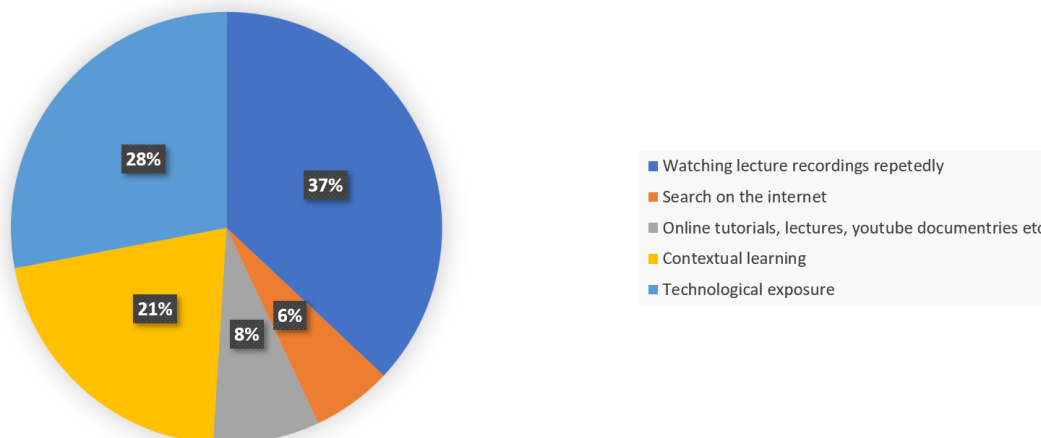


Figure 14. Coping Mechanisms Utilized to Gain More Exposure to the EMI Contents

Inability to Take Notes

A majority of the students had issues in taking notes when they are in the EMI environment due to several reasons as discussed in 3.1.4 section. The sample had their own ways to overcome these issues. Those mechanisms are clearly displayed in Figure 15 and Table 11. The primary strategy favored by the sample is requesting complete notes from a proficient student, accounting for 38% of participants. The term 'bright student' was defined as one adept in managing the English language. Watching lecture recordings multiple times was the second most popular strategy, chosen by 34% of the sample. Additionally, 28% of participants utilized PowerPoint slides for reference.



Notably, no students opted for in-sessional academic English courses, as this strategy is not currently implemented in the Sri Lankan university system.

Table 9. Capture from Interview (Interviewee A)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
A	<p>“I have tried to do it, but I gave up as it only consumes time to refer to dictionaries and compose the notes. So, the most effective way is to have a photocopy of a bright student note or a note from a senior student.”</p> <p>“No... there was no difference between the notes and the slides shared without senior batches. Most of the time it is the same note or the lecture slide.”</p>

Prevailing literature provides possible suggestions to sort this issue (Cancino et al., 2011). Students' English levels should be checked regularly through the program, to allow them to benefit from language support and employ effective learning methods in EMI (Cancino et al., 2011). Thompson et al. in 2019 highlighted a subsidiary benefit of in-sessional academic English courses (e.g. ESP and EAP) in developing not only students' academic English but also their confidence (i.e self-efficacy) towards success in learning through English (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020).

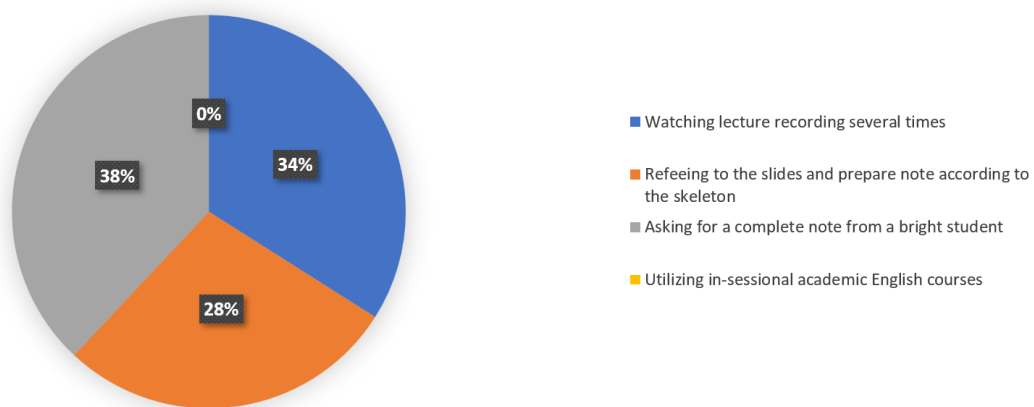


Figure 15. Mechanisms Utilized to Overcome Note-Taking Related Difficulties

Mechanisms Used to Tackle the Accent of the Lecturer

Most of the sample recorded collective discussions as the most popular method to sort the issue related to hard accents of the lecturers. According to Figure 16, 56% of the sample has utilized collective discussions to overcome this challenge. Further, in the university sub culture of Sri Lanka, the term ‘kuppi’ is utilized by the students to this type of academic discussions taken by the student groups (Kommalage & Thabrew, 2011) as evidence is displayed in Table 2. Thus, it is clear evidence to prove that these types of coping mechanisms are common among young undergraduates in Sri Lanka as they owe their own way of sorting out the academic issues. In these ‘kuppi’

sessions the main resources utilized by the students are the lecture recordings, the main keywords of the lecture and the slides the lecturer shared with students. Then they searched the internet for tutorials and research articles about the subject contents (Lin & Morrison, 2010). Further, this is more closely related to self-learning by referring to other resources related to the subject area (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Chand, 2014; Elliott & Higgins, 2012; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Thus, this is a process that they used to overcome the heavy accent of the foreign lecturers. This process is very effective for them to build up the lesson according to the skeleton they have. Thus, collective peer discussions are the dominant and most effective strategy utilized by the students. Figure 16 clearly displays how students have rated on each component tested.

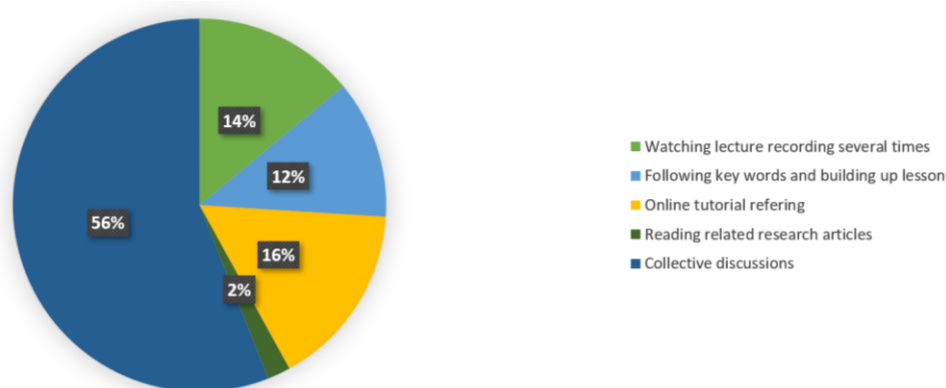


Figure 16. Mechanisms Utilized to Overcome Challenges Related to the Accent of the Lecturer

Coping Mechanisms to Develop their Writing Style

According to the collected data as displayed in Figure 17, the sample utilized four major coping mechanisms: seeking support from the ELTU, referring to teaching materials on core subject content, practicing with corrections and feedback, and engaging in extensive reading. Seeking guidance from the ELTU was the most popular strategy, chosen by 48% of participants. English lecturers based their study materials on students' subject content (32%), focusing on topics like mapping, GIS-related research articles, and news articles. Additionally, students requested corrections from English lecturers upon completing field reports (14%) as evidence is displayed in Table 12.

Table 10. Captured Evidence from Interview (Interviewee D)

Respondent	Quote from the interview
D	<p>"I usually ask someone to read and correct my reports and other assignments."</p> <p>"Our English madams are really helpful in developing our writing skills because if we request them to give feedback on our work, definitely they do it with pleasure. The friendly attitude in them makes it easier"</p>

The study conducted by Zhao and Dixon (2017) suggested possible ways to improve these issues by providing students with more natural opportunities to improve overall competence in English, enabling students to improve oral English, to acquire more specialized knowledge and information through extensive reading (Park, 2016).



Through continuous reading one can easily get familiar with a writing style and identify sentence structures and order. The tested sample reveals that only 6% of the sample is utilizing extensive reading to improve their writing style as depicted in Figure 17.

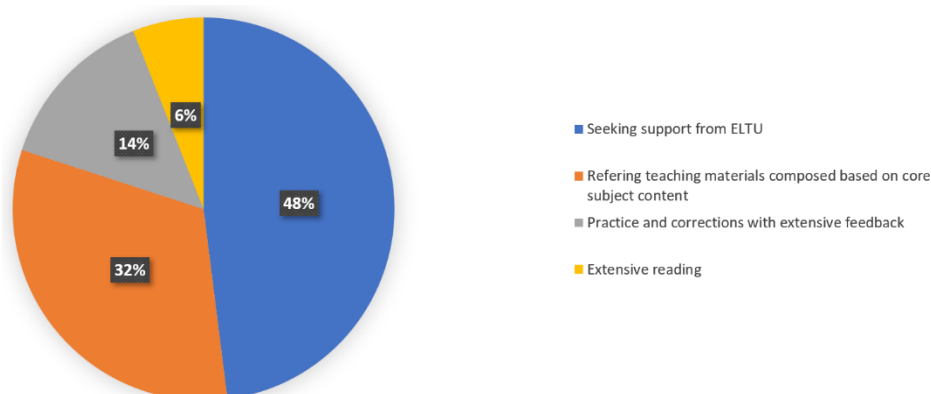


Figure 17. Strategies Utilized to Overcome Issues Related to Writing Style

Mechanisms to Develop Communicative Drawbacks

According to the secondary data referred for the study, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) promoted the idea of communicating in both informal and formal settings that help and share the students' problems and other issues with their peers. In the tested sample 24% of the students have utilized this strategy as displayed in Figure 18. According to the collected data 12% of the sample is practically utilizing active listening practices. Long-term practice and exposure have significantly enhanced students' academic performance. In addressing communicative challenges like viva examinations and academic presentations, students need to effectively organize answers within time constraints. Approximately 33% of the sample expressed a desire for speaking opportunities to improve their oral communication skills. When responding to questions from lecturers, students must demonstrate skills such as retrieving relevant knowledge, interpreting information, comparing elements, and summarizing key points. As it is mandatory to communicate and interact with the lecturer in an effective way to develop rich scholarly dialogue it is an urgent requirement to develop more logical ways to enhance the student's language performances in the tertiary phase of education (Khoudri & Khoudri, 2023).

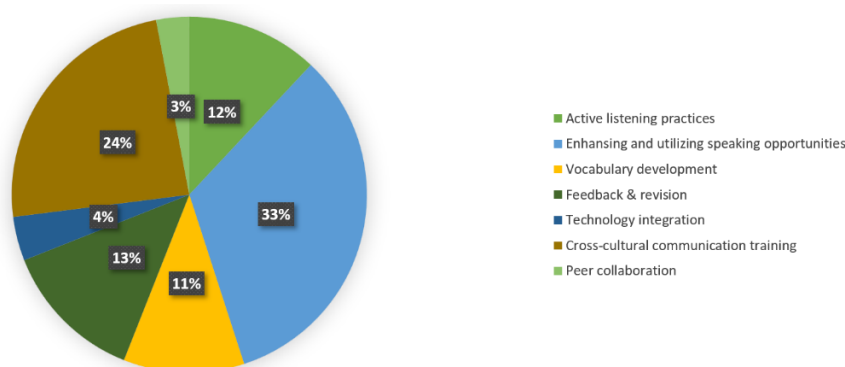


Figure 18. Mechanisms Utilized to Minimize Communicative Challenges



Conclusion

This study has reported the findings of a study which aimed to determine the challenging factors, causes and coping mechanisms utilized to overcome the challenges in the EMI learning environment of Sri Lankan tertiary phase of education. The case of study reveals a lack of confidence in their English abilities. Furthermore, the highest challenging factors lie in writing skills (78%), language caused insecurities (74%), and communicative drawbacks (70%). In addition, the lowest challenging factors for the tested sample are vocabulary-related issues (49%) and the accent of the lecturer (40%). Further, the study has identified causes for the afore-mentioned challenges. Among those, the most significant factor discovered was that psychological lapses related to English language skills developed since school education has a significant impact on the performances of the students in the tertiary phase. Psychological concerns are apparent behind almost all the causes discovered. Another vital factor identified is that most of the tested sample has revealed symptoms related to imposter syndrome. This psychological condition needs to be addressed in Sri Lanka through a more confidential and logical way with the intention of uplifting the performances of the most valuable fruitage of the Sri Lanka's free education system.

Moreover, the coping mechanisms utilized by the students to overcome the challenges encountered in the EMI learning environment have two distinct parallaxes. Some mechanisms the students have identified consisted of rationale that it has a solid impact on language improvements. For instance, language development through extensive reading, stress-free engagement with the English language, contextual learning, peer-assisted academic discussions, seeking professional advice and feedback continuously etc., owe a logical foundation towards the positive acquisition of language. On the contrary, coping mechanisms like remaining silent manner, avoiding in-class academic discussions, avoiding more interactive lectures, and asking for a completed note from another student lacks a language development. Those irrational mechanisms only provide a temporary space to avoid the real problem, which leads towards a vital concern that is psychologically harmful repercussions in the learning environment.

Recommendations

Thus, the study would recommend that policymakers and curricula designers in the education field pay more attention to these areas. As the students are struggling with language caused difficulties, it is mandatory to bridge the fluctuated transit between the two educational phases which will be beneficial for the coming generations. Apart from that, through effective collaboration between the content lecturers and language teaching educators, the language component in EMI can be dealt in a more fruitful manner. Further, the study recommends that the learning environment should be stress-free. Despite the challenges encountered by the students, EMI is truly important as Sri Lankan academics are more mobile within the contemporary globalized world. It is hard to expect them to become a solid part of the international academia without proper command of English.

Author(s)' Statements on Ethics and Conflict of Interest

Ethics Statement: We hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered



in all the stages of the study. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

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