

УДК 372.881.111.1+37.061

DOI: 10.31862/2500-2953-2024-2-86-112

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Public attitude towards English language and its implication in life progression in Sri Lankan final year government university students

This paper explores the influence of family and surrounding networks on the English language competency of final-year undergraduates of Sri Lankan state universities. I analyze the language norms, practices, and attitudes of the Sri Lankan society and how they affect the potential opportunities associated with English language competency. The findings reveal that the final-year undergraduate population, who predominantly represent youth with middle-class backgrounds, demonstrate an average level of English skills. A noticeable disparity exists in the confidence to use the language, particularly in speaking and listening. Students from Westernized and English-based backgrounds are less influenced by societal biases compared to their peers with limited language access. These findings suggest that while English competency is critical in life success, its effect is moderated by the socio-economic background the students are coming from. Policymakers and educators should understand this scenario and design strategies that will minimize the influence of socioeconomic background in acquiring English competency and the future life paths of state university students of Sri Lanka.

Key words: English, English competency, socio-economic factors of English competency, career aspirations, Sri Lanka

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FOR CITATION: Alles S.S. Public attitude towards English language and its implication in life progression in Sri Lankan final year government university students. *Rhema*. 2024. No. 2. Pp. 86–112. DOI: 10.31862/2500-2953-2024-2-86-112

DOI: 10.31862/2500-2953-2024-2-86-112

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Отношение общества к английскому языку и его влияние на жизненный путь студентов последнего курса государственных университетов Шри-Ланки

В данной статье исследуется влияние происхождения и социального окружения на уровень владения английским языком студентов последнего курса государственных университетов Шри-Ланки. Анализируется, как языковые нормы, языковая практика и отношение общества Шри-Ланки влияют на потенциальные возможности индивида, связанные со знанием английского языка. Результаты исследования показывают, что студенты последнего курса, которые в основном представляют молодежь среднего класса, демонстрируют средний уровень владения английским языком. Обнаружено заметное варьирование в степени уверенности в использовании языка, особенно в устной речи и аудировании. Учащиеся из западных стран и с английским происхождением в меньшей степени подвержены влиянию социальных предубеждений по сравнению со своими сверстниками с ограниченным доступом к языку. Эти результаты свидетельствуют о том, что, хотя знание английского языка имеет решающее значение для жизненного успеха, эффект от владения языком во многом определяется социально-экономическим положением студентов. Политики и педагоги должны понимать этот аспект и разрабатывать стратегии, которые позволят свести к минимуму влияние социально-экономического положения на овладение английским языком.

Ключевые слова: английский язык, владение английским языком, карьерное развитие, социально-экономические факторы владения английским языком, Шри-Ланка

ДЛЯ ЦИТИРОВАНИЯ: Alles S.S. Public attitude towards English language and its implication in life progression in Sri Lankan final year government university students // Рема. Rhema. 2024. № 2. С. 86–112. DOI: 10.31862/2500-2953-2024-2-86-112

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

English is one of the most popular languages in the world. The statistics indicate that there are around 1,456 million English language users worldwide¹. Apart from natives that speak English as their first language many other countries worldwide use it as their official language in international communications. According to Vásquez et al. (2024), different hierarchies are formulated around English that reflect different segments of the social hierarchy. Individuals highly competent in English with a Westernized influence and accent that reflects the British are automatically considered superior to those who speak English in a native dialect.

The attached superiority of English has created discrimination across society. For example, Zhang-Wu et al. (2024) discuss a case study where a transnational multilingual student was constantly positioned by others as lacking in English competence. This study was conducted across Indian and US universities and the level of discrimination seemed to be present in both cases. This has created psychological and academic trauma for the students. Based on such evidence, English language skills are considered vital for well-being and life progression, particularly for those in developing countries. Kim et al. (2024) explain this scenario with the potential opportunities that open up with English skills and improved positive communication. Individuals with English competence communicate confidently and with clarity extracting the best opportunities.

Power and privilege determines accessibility to a good English language education, particularly in developing countries [Vandrick, 2014]. Worsening this, the language education framework of Sri Lanka is quite weak. Although the responsibility of strengthening English language education is distributed

¹ Statista, 2024. The most spoken languages worldwide in 2023. URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide/> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

among many agencies they seem to have scattered agendas and isolated policies that fail in the long run². Linguistic research that explores the societal issues of Sri Lanka associated with English language competence is few. Inadequate policies and greater emphasis on national language use have prevented most Sri Lankans from being competent in English [Walisundara, Hettiarachchi, 2016]. Still, the discrimination against English language competency continues in different settings such as schools, universities, or workplaces. This research attempts to study how English language competency affects the life progression of Sri Lankans.

1.2. Research problem

The research will particularly explore the influence of family and surrounding networks on the English language competency of final-year undergraduates of Sri Lankan state universities. It will also explore the language norms, practices, and attitudes of the Sri Lankan society and how they will affect the potential opportunities associated with English language competency. Ultimately the research will look into the dynamics of English language competency and potential opportunities in formulating career and educational aspirations of the final-year undergraduates.

1.3. Research objectives

1. To determine the influence of family background and network on the English competency of final-year undergraduates.
2. To determine the influence of public attitude, social norms, and practices on creating more opportunities for English-competent individuals.
3. To evaluate the dynamics of English language competency and available opportunities in shaping the career and educational aspirations of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

2. Literature review

2.1. English education, usage, and related dynamics in Sri Lanka

English was first introduced to Sri Lanka with the British invasion in 1815. The elite class of the country eventually started using English as their first language rather than their native tongue. In 1948, the British Colonial Era ended in Sri Lanka. However, at this point, the country was already divided into two classes the elites who had more Westernized culture and the peasants who were mostly Sinhalese with the values of Buddhism.

² British Council, 2020. Current Challenges, Future Directions, s.l.: British Council. URL: <https://www.britishcouncil.lk/programmes/education/research> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

A significant minority of Tamil-speaking communities also existed at the end of the colonial era. The government that came to power after the independence had a vision of nationality and patriotism towards Sinhalese and Buddhism. Therefore, they named Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka.

Making Sinhala language the official language of the country caused many complications. Particularly the Tamil community in Sri Lanka had to face many challenges due to this and these issues sowed the seed for the civil war of Sri Lanka as well. Still, Sinhala became the mainstream language of the country and public offices, schools, and other institutes operated by this language. However, the elite class continued to enjoy education in English often offered through privatized education providers or via migrating to other countries. Ultimately this created a significant difference between the elite and the regular middle- and lower-class individuals in terms of language usage, perspectives, and opportunities. Linguistic stratification theory can be applied in explaining this context. According to Rajapakshe Lekamlage (2022) ultimate power, politics, and social respect of Sri Lanka remained around this English-speaking elite community. Even after a near 70 years, this situation remains unchanged.

In 1987, Sri Lanka created a new language policy and identified Sinhala and Tamil as the official languages while English was the link language³. The move was made to make the country a global citizen as well as to resolve the issues with Tamil and Sinhala community issues. According to this policy, English learning is included in the Sri Lanka school education curriculum as a subject. However, it is only sufficient to teach the children to read and write basic English but does not go deep into creating their self-confidence and interest in using the language in a more elaborative and spoken manner. Also, English language teaching at school-level remains challenging with a lack of qualified teachers in some parts of the country (particularly rural areas) and a lack of investments in enhancing the school-level English curriculum to encourage students to use the language more profoundly [Walisundara, Hettiarachchi, 2016]. This system failure is evident with around 49% of the ordinary-level examination candidates failing English⁴. Only around 24% of the Sri Lankans can speak English fluently⁵. Therefore, the majority of students who enter the state universities only have a basic English literacy or none at all.

³ Ministry of Public Administration, 2024. National Language Division. URL: https://www.pubad.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=117&Itemid=193&lang=en (accessed: 08.05.2024).

⁴ Daily News, 2018. English language pass rate records low. URL: <https://archives1.dailynews.lk/2018/04/06/local/147770/ol-english-language-pass-rate-records-low> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

⁵ Sunday Observer, 2019. English Language cannot be taught; it must be learnt. URL: <https://archives1.sundayobserver.lk/2019/08/11/thoughts/english-language-cannot-be-taught-it-must-be-learnt> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

The state universities also offer English language learning opportunities to the students. English language units (ELUs) are established in all the state universities. U.P. Gamage (2010) studies the strengths and weaknesses of these ELUs. The findings indicate that the teaching methods used in teaching English as a second language are quite old-fashioned. Adding to that, the system ignores assessing the initial skill levels of students and grouping them into classes based on prior proficiency. A classroom with students with different English proficiency levels ignores the needs of the less competent students while withholding the competent ones to sharpen their language skills. Adding to this, the students in state universities of Sri Lanka do not utilize the English learning opportunities presented to them by the university. The main reason to do so is the lack of experience and awareness about the world. Spending most of their time in a mono-lingual setup, they believe English is of lesser importance [Rathnayake, 2013]. Due to these various reasons, the English language education offered by the state universities has not shown significant results.

Even though, the English language education policy of Sri Lanka stagnates, with the expansion of technology, connectivity, social media, and smart devices, the present generation seems to understand the value of the English language and the opportunities it opens up. Also, after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the public attitude towards English gained a new respect. Most of the public not wanting another civil war preferred to use a common language for all over the Sinhala-Tamil conflict. Therefore, more and more individualistic efforts are being made to study the language. In this back drop, the Sri Lankan government needs to reinvent their English language learning policy and support the country to become English-proficient.

2.2. Impact of English competency in the life progression of Sri Lankans

2.2.1. *Employability and career advancement within Sri Lanka*

A higher unemployment rate constantly challenges the Sri Lankan economy. The average unemployment rate remained stable at around 4.7% within the last decade from 2013–2023⁶. However, this number shows significant fluctuations within different social, economic, and demographic segments. Graduate unemployment remains a significant issue in this scenario⁷. However, there are no official statistics on the rate of unemployment prevalent among Sri Lankan graduates. The CBSL (2021) reports that the unemployment rate

⁶ CBSL, 2024. Unemployment rate. URL: Available at: <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/en/economic-and-statistical-charts/unemployment-rate-chart> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

⁷ Sunday Times, 2017. Graduate Unemployment in Sri Lanka. URL: <https://sundaytimes.lk/online/news/graduate-unemployment-in-sri-lanka/18-1022653> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

of Advanced Level or above-qualified Sri Lankans is 9.1% in 2021⁸. This is the nearest estimation that can be made of the graduate unemployment rate in Sri Lanka.

According to Hosain et al. (2023), graduate employability depends on their individualistic qualities attached to academic performance, technical skills, communication skills, personality, leadership and motivational skills, and teamwork and problem-solving skills. Sri Lankan employers also seem to seek these qualities in the graduates they hire. The limited number of research conducted on the topic highlights that gender, degree classification, professional qualifications, English proficiency, training experience, and soft skills are the graduate characteristics evaluated by Sri Lankan employers [Jayasinghe, Suraweera, 2020; Fernando et al., 2023]. These results indicate while state universities of Sri Lanka offer a comprehensive curriculum to the students it is not completely satisfactory from an employer perspective. They are more interested in soft skills and skills that are specifically relevant to the profession than a general education.

Often English is offered as a supplementary course within state university degree programs to enhance the English skills of the students. But such efforts seem insufficient [Weerasooriya, 2021]. According to Jayathilake et al. (2012) even the higher study programs offered in English are mostly disasters due to lack of strategy. While this context might have improved to a certain extent from 2012 to 2024, there is more scope for improvement. The ultimate conclusion that can be drawn from this discussion is that English language use in higher education is insufficient for graduates to master the language for regular use beyond their academic knowledge. Therefore, these graduates are unable to access illustrious career opportunities.

2.2.2. Access to higher education or foreign employment

The first degree is only a start for ambitious students who want to navigate their academic journey to higher education levels. However, the technology and body of knowledge within Sri Lanka is not significantly improved to add the latest educational content to the higher education programs. Thus, graduates with higher education ambitions have the option of migrating to another developed country to pursue their academic journey. Research in Sri Lanka has not focused on studying how English proficiency affects the formulation of such a study plan. However, Pearson (2021) states that according to a 15-year study of IELTS results, the South Asian region showed the poorest performance. This is an indication that Sri Lankans

⁸ CBSL, 2022. Sri Lanka Socio Economic Data, Sri Lanka: Central Bank. URL: https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/publications/otherpub/publication_sri_lanka_socio_economic_data_folder_2022_e.pdf (accessed: 08.05.2024).

are weak in their English proficiency and need serious measures to improve the situation.

2.2.3. Underestimations and mental withdrawal

In Sri Lanka, English proficiency is not only a qualification to succeed academically or professionally, but it is also a tool of self-estimation. This self-estimation issue is directly associated with the inability to make significant strides in career and education. However, with time this self-underestimation can lead to withdrawal from challenges and lack of interest in expanding personal potential. One theoretical framework that can explain this situation is stereotype threat. This occurs when less English-proficient individuals may feel tension and difficulty in certain circumstances whereas the English-proficient individuals may not feel it. In such a context, those who feel tension may avoid such situations [Jalil, 2020]. This situation can be an examination, an interview, a client meeting, or any other critical point of an individual's life. This not only deters the personal and professional growth of individuals but also puts severe mental pressure on them.

Another perspective of this language barrier is the inability of individuals to realize their full potential. When individuals feel that they lack some quality or due to their characteristics they are not able to attain something, they will feel threatened and unable to attain full self-efficacy. For example, Kutuk et al. (2022) state that when gender stereotypes are presented to a group of language learners, their perceptions may alter and the gender that is said to perform well in language indeed perform well in learning while those who are said to be slow learners learn slowly. This is also a result of stereotype threat. In the case of English proficiency, those who come from less privileged backgrounds may demonstrate poor confidence in learning and using English due to such stereotype threat. While this may affect the growth of an individual it is also associated with the societal issue of language-based discrimination.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research assumes a positivist philosophy. It believes that there is only one objective truth in the world and data directs knowledge towards that [Žukauskas et al., 2018]. It evaluates how the perception of English competencies and associated opportunities will formulate the career and educational progression plan of individuals. From a data collection point of view, this research adopts a quantitative approach. In its raw form, the data collected by this research are qualitative. They are about an opinion

or perception of an individual about their surroundings associated with English competence. However, through a rating scale, the research converts these data into a numeric form. Therefore, in essence, the research takes a quantitative approach and analytical tools.

3.2. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for the research was developed upon several fundamental theories associated with linguistics, individual perceptions, and life progression. Figure 1 illustrates it.

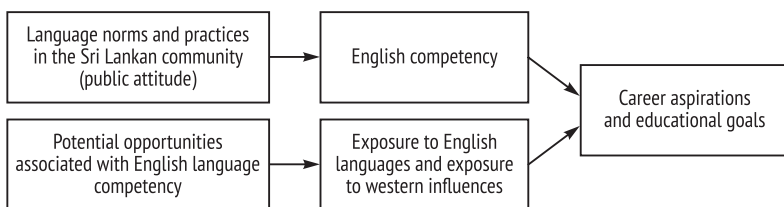


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the research

Within this conceptual framework, language norms and practices in Sri Lanka and exposure to English language and Western influences have a direct relationship with the career aspirations and educational goals of the final-year undergraduates of Sri Lanka. English competency and potential opportunities associated with English language competency had a mediating effect on these relationships. Therefore, the hypothesis associated with the research was as follows.

H1: Language norms and practices (public attitude) towards English language has a significant influence on career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan government universities.

H2: Potential opportunities associated with English language competency has a significant influence on career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan government universities.

H3: English competency has a mediating effect on the relationship between language norms and practices (public attitude) towards the English language and career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan government universities.

H4: Exposure to English languages and exposure to Western influences has a mediating effect on the relationship between Potential opportunities associated with English language competency and career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan government universities.

All the variables included in Figure 1 are immeasurable with a single numeric value. Therefore, they were operationalized using Likert scales. Various theoretical models were used in formulating Likert items that can evaluate the variable effectively. Table 1 indicates various theories used in construction and operationalizing variables within the conceptual framework.

Apart from the theories that helped in operationalizing the variables, the relationships developed within the conceptual framework are solidified based on theories such as social cognitive career theory (SCCT), expectancy-value theory, and human capital theory. In summation, all these theories emphasize the importance of setting goals and following them with confidence and efficacy.

3.3. Population and sampling framework

The study focuses on understanding the public attitude towards English and its impact on the life progression of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan government universities. Therefore, the study population is the final-year undergraduates in Sri Lanka in 2024. In 2021, the total university enrolments made was 122,679 students⁹. While some proportion of this population might be graduating within three years and another proportion of it drop out from university education, the majority are final-year undergraduates in 2024. Therefore, this number can be considered a close estimate of the total population size. Using Morgon's table as a reference, a sample of 350 will be considered the data saturation point. After the data saturation, the sample size expansion will not provide any additional insights.

The collection of undergraduate details from each government university of Sri Lanka is a complex task. Therefore, details on the total population cannot be entirely accessed to apply a probability sampling framework for the research. Instead, a convenience sampling approach was adopted to collect data. A Google survey was shared on social media and final-year undergraduates could voluntarily contribute to the analysis. However, this is a non-probability sampling approach which can lead to some biases in findings.

3.4. Data collection

A Google survey was distributed within social media until the intended number of responses are collected. The survey was circulated in various social media groups irrespective of their content. The intention behind

⁹ UGC, 2021. Student Enrolments, Sri Lanka: University Grants Commission. URL: <https://www.ugc.ac.lk> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

Table 1

Theoretical aspects of variables and operationalization

Variable	Theoretical foundation	Operationalization
1. Language norms and practices in the Sri Lankan community (public attitude)	<p><i>Language Attitude Theory</i> This theory explores the way individuals perceive different languages and dialects.</p> <p><i>Language Contact and Language Change Theory</i> This theory explains how languages interact and evolve within multilingual settings.</p> <p><i>Acculturation Theory</i> This theory explains the process of how communities adapt to new cultures and their symbols such as language</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolism of quality education by English competence • Favoritism associated with English competency • Potential of winning life challenges with English skills • Respect associated with English skills • The number of opportunities open up with English skills
2. Exposure to English languages and exposure to western influences	<p><i>Language socialization theory</i> The theory discusses how individuals attain linguistic and communicative competence through their socioeconomic background.</p> <p><i>Social learning theory</i> The theory suggests that individuals learn by observing their surroundings and imitating the observed behaviours</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family use of English as a first language • Peer usage of English as a first language • Relative and neighbor usage of English • English as a formal education medium • Additional support on learning English
3. English competency	<p><i>Attribution theory</i> The theory looks into how individuals perceive their behaviours and skills.</p> <p><i>Self-efficacy theory (Bandura)</i> The theory focuses on individual beliefs around their ability to perform certain tasks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence in using English in any form • Accuracy of English usage • Ability to speak in English in public platforms • Ability to use English in its different forms • Proven performance based on an official language test

<p>4. Potential opportunities associated with English language competency</p>	<p><i>Communicative competency theory</i> This theory explains that language skills are not about accurate grammar or vocabulary, but how a user can skillfully utilise the language according to their circumstances.</p> <p><i>Language socialisation theory</i> The theory suggests that individuals acquire language skills by constantly interacting with the environment around them. Therefore, a professional-oriented English competency will widen this socialisation and enhance individual skills.</p> <p><i>Critical discourse analysis (CDA)</i> The theory examines the relationship and interactions between language use, power, and social inequality. Therefore, this theory is a fundamental explanation of a given language's superiority over others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Necessity of English language in career progression • Necessity of English language for networking within the professional field • Need for English to access higher education opportunities • Need for English in career flexibility and fluidity • Necessity of English in career entry
<p>5. Career aspirations and educational goals</p>	<p><i>Goal setting theory</i> The theory emphasizes the necessity of setting SMART goals in guiding their behaviour and future endeavours</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The formulation of a detailed career plan • Selection of a career entry point • A detailed higher education plan aligning with career progression • A plan to acquire additional skills for career and personal growth • A plan to acquire English skills that will enhance the career progression

such circulation was to get a more representative sample of final-year undergraduates rather than collecting a concentrated sample of undergraduates with similar characteristics. To avoid this bias, the survey was not shared in specific undergraduate groups such as an undergraduates' social media collective of a particular university or undergraduates' collective related to one specific degree program. However, the survey was shared among social media groups that involved all-island undergraduate communities in Sri Lanka.

3.5. Data analysis

Once the data was collected, the details were checked for missing data. The motive was to remove responses with missing data as each question evaluated a different perspective associated with an individual sampling unit. However, no data was missing as the respondents filled out the questionnaire with extreme precision. Therefore, all the 350 responses were used for the analysis.

The demographic details of the sample were analyzed first. Details such as gender, age, and family details were the key insights offered by this analysis. Secondly, constructed variables were descriptively analyzed using individual indicators and as a constructed variable. The individual indicators associated with each Likert scale were analyzed using percentages. The constructed Likert scales were evaluated using mean, standard deviation, and similar descriptive statistics.

The third phase of the analysis included finding the associations and relationships between variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to assess the association between each variable. Then regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between language norms and practices (public attitude) associated with English, potential opportunities associated with the English language competency, and career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

In the fourth phase of the analysis, the mediating effect of English competency and exposure to English and Westernized influence was evaluated. First, these two mediating variables were categorized as high and low from their mean. Then, combinations of these variables were separately evaluated as regression models. By comparing these models, insights were gained on how these mediating variables influence the original relationship between the language norms, opportunities associated with English language competency, and career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in public universities of Sri Lanka.

4. Data analysis and discussion

4.1. Demographic data analysis

The data was collected from final-year undergraduates studying in Sri Lankan state universities in 2024. Out of 350 responses collected, 24 had to be removed due to missing data. The remaining 326 responses were used for the analysis. Usually, demographic analysis involves the assessment of gender proportions within the sample. However, this research attempted to identify the final-year undergraduate population as a unique segment of the Sri Lankan population irrespective of gender. With a higher level of educational attainment, they are expected to be ambitious and career-oriented with no differences between genders.

The state universities are accessible to those who pass the Advanced Level examination in Sri Lanka irrespective of age. However, most students who enter the Sri Lankan state university system are young. Table 2 indicates the age dynamics of the sample. This implies that the average age of the final-year undergraduates in Sri Lanka is 26 years and with a quite low SD value, the changes from this average are slight. However, in rare instances, this age would be at least 24 years or a maximum of 28 years.

Table 2

Age dynamics of the sample

Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Value, years	26.40	1.25	24	28

The residential districts of the respondents are indicated in Figure 2. A significant proportion of the sample comes from Colombo and Gampaha districts. Other districts are represented in small and equal proportions within the sample. The Northern region is only represented through the Jaffna district. Residential districts and English competency have a relationship in the Sri Lankan context. According to Silva et al. (2021) often students coming from relatively rural and underdeveloped districts face various obstacles due to English incompetency.

The respondents were asked about their family income range. This question is asked to understand the financial freedom the individuals have to access English education and facilities to sharpen their language skills. Figure 3 illustrates the related statistics. Accordingly, the majority of families had an income above Rs 150,000. Around 51% of the respondents indicated that their family income is between Rs 50,000–150,000. However, this current income status does not exactly reflect poverty levels.

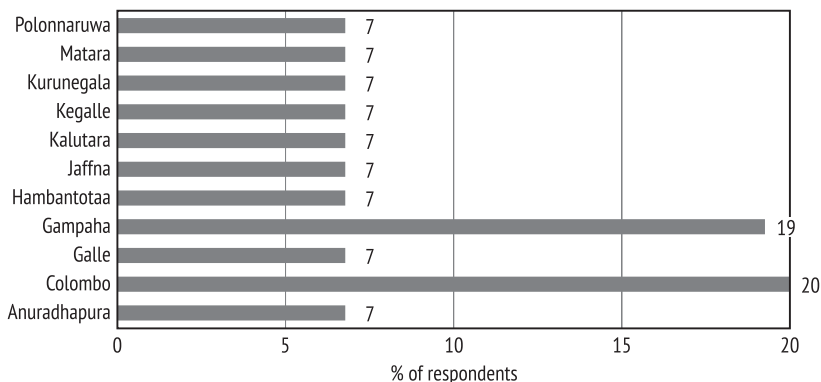


Fig. 2. Residential districts of the respondents

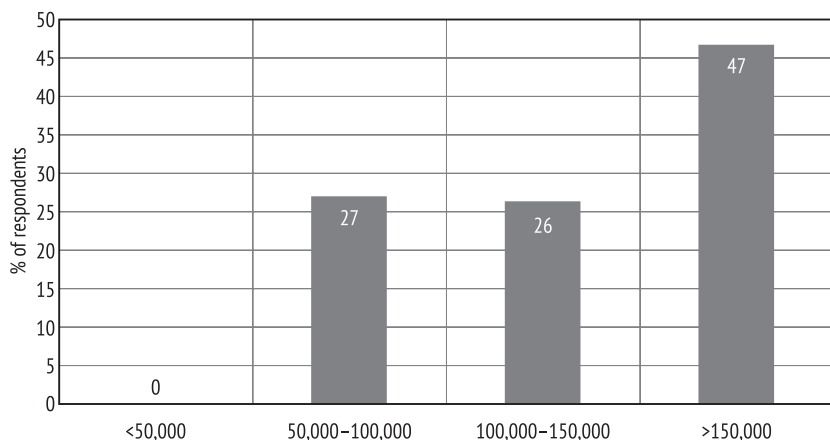


Fig. 3. Family income range of the respondents (Rs)

With the economic deterioration of Sri Lanka, the minimal family income required for survival has increased.

Parental education and social and professional background influence the socio-economic setting an individual experiences during their early years. Figure 4 indicates the occupation of the mothers of the respondents. Figure 5 describes the various occupations of the fathers of the respondents. Most fathers are involved in careers associated with the vocational sector such as carpentry or masonry. Around 13% of the respondents had fathers occupying senior managerial positions or influential job roles. Therefore, most final-year undergraduates of Sri Lankan state universities seem to come from a middle-class background.

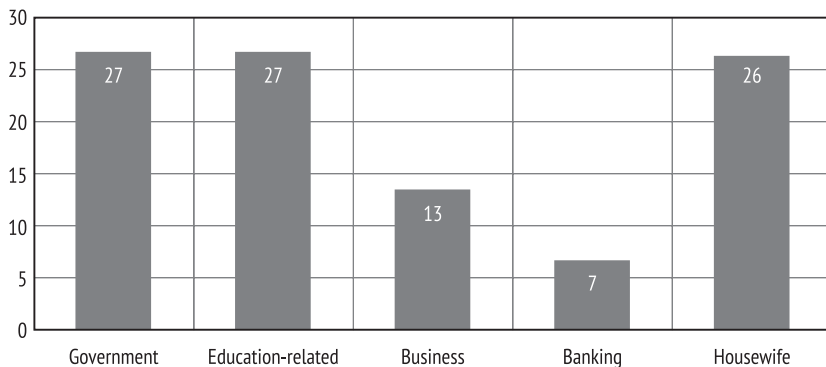


Fig. 4. The occupation of the mothers of the respondents

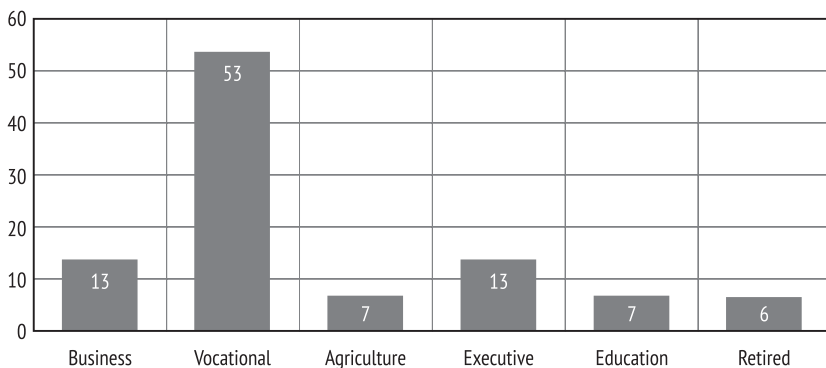


Fig. 5. The occupation of the fathers of the respondents

4.2. English competency of final-year undergraduates

Language competencies sharpen when children are exposed to the language in their early years. The regular middle-class families in Sri Lanka rarely have this luxury [Silva et al., 2021]. The respondents were asked whether they received an English medium education in such circumstances. The majority stated that they did not receive an English-medium education. Only 13% of the sample stated to enjoy the privilege. Figure 6 illustrates this data graphically.

Apart from the regular English lessons, the subject “English Literature” offered for the Ordinary Level examination as an optional subject is also a significant opportunity to learn the language. However, only 7% of the final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities have studied English Literature. The rest have missed an opportunity to sharpen their English skills.

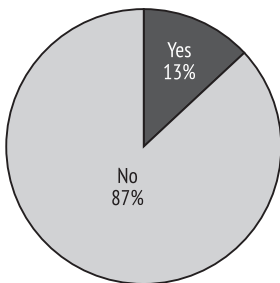


Fig. 6. Statistics on the reception of an English-medium education

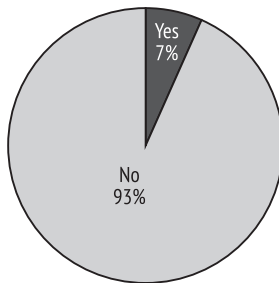


Fig. 7. Study of English literature for ordinary level examination

The next significant and compulsory English skill evaluation test is the “General English” subject offered at the Advanced Level Examination. The respondents were asked about the “General English” results. Figure 8 illustrates related statistics. Most final-year undergraduates have attained a good grade on this test. However, this test only evaluates the reading and writing skills of individuals. Hence, good results from this test do not indicate adequate English skills but it is a good start for an individual who enters the higher education system.

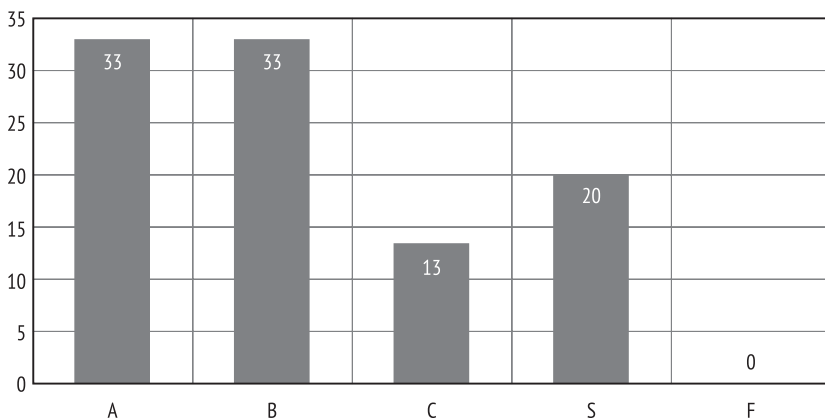


Fig. 8. Results of the “General English” test offered at the Advanced Level

The conclusion that can be reached from the above statistics is that the final-year undergraduates in state universities of Sri Lanka have average English skills. They are good at reading and writing but lack opportunities

to sharpen their listening and speaking skills. They can do well in reading and writing assessments in a familiar format. However, their English usage abilities may be limited in regular life particularly due to their inability to speak the language confidently.

4.3. Language norms and practices of the Sri Lankan community (Public Attitude) towards English

Language is a part of the social structure. Therefore, it is attached to social values, norms, and beliefs. English language skills are recognized as a social and professional value and a decisive factor in accessing career opportunities in Sri Lanka¹⁰. The respondents were asked to share opinions about advantages, respect, and bias towards English in Sri Lankan society. The data was collected and analysed in the form of a Likert scale. Table 3 exhibits the summary statistics associated with it.

Table 3

Summary statistics of the Likert scale measuring public attitude towards English in Sri Lanka

Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Value, years	19.52	2.63	16	23

The Likert scale contained 5 items with 5 rating points. Therefore, the Likert value range is between 5 and 25. The Likert value in case an individual responds with neutrality to all responses is 15. However, the actual mean value is above 15. Thus, it is concluded that undergraduates perceive English as a vital tool for earning respect and status in society. Linguistic research in Sri Lanka has to explore this biased treatment offered to English competency within the country.

4.4. Exposure to English in the regular socio-economic setting of an individual

Early exposure to a language helps an individual become proficient in that language. Most Sri Lankans spend their early years in traditional family settings where the common languages are Sinhala or Tamil. Only a few upper-end families in the country enjoy the advantage of growing up in a setting where English is the first spoken language. A Likert scale inquired whether the respondents grew up in such an English-based and Westernized environment. The Likert statistics are illustrated in Table 4.

¹⁰ British Council, 2020. Current Challenges, Future Directions, s.l.: British Council. <https://www.britishcouncil.lk/programmes/education/research> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

Summary statistics of the Likert scale that evaluated socioeconomic settings of the respondents

Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Value, years	14.11	5.24	9	22

Similar to the previous Likert scale, this one had 5 Likert items with 5 rating points. Therefore, the minimum and maximum values ranged from 5 to 25. If a respondent marked all Likert items as average, the Likert score would be 15. However, the actual mean value of the Likert scale is less than this. It indicates that Sri Lankan state university students mostly come from less Westernized and English-based backgrounds. It is also observed that the standard deviation is a higher value for this variable indicating the differences in the socioeconomic settings of the undergraduates in the sample.

4.5. Perceived English competency

One of the key reasons that Sri Lankans cannot speak English fluently is their lack of self-confidence. English has become a symbol of social status and mistakes in spoken English are considered to lessen this status [Nadarajah, 2011]. To understand how these dynamics affect the final-year undergraduates in public universities, they were asked about their confidence in using English in different formats and circumstances. The summary statistics are illustrated in Table 5. The mean Likert value is above 15 indicating that most of the final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities are confident in using English in a regular setting.

Table 5

Summary statistics of the Likert scale measuring perceived confidence in English use

Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Value, years	19.33	3.92	14	25

4.6. Potential opportunities associated with English language competency

English is an international language. Therefore, those who are competent in English have more prestigious opportunities globally. The perception of undergraduates concerning this opinion was evaluated. The evaluation criteria included statements that inquired into career entrance and progression opportunities, higher educational opportunities, and widened financial

freedom. Table 6 illustrates the associated statistics. The mean Likert value is 20.19 which is above the response value if all criteria are marked as neutral. Therefore, the undergraduates from state universities seem to feel that English competency is associated with more potential opportunities.

Table 6

Summary statistics of the Likert scale that measures the potential opportunities associated with English competency

Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Value, years	20.19	2.10	18	24

4.7. Career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in state universities of Sri Lanka

The final year of university is a decisive time for undergraduates. As they graduate, their success is more guaranteed with a carefully devised career and educational plan. Through a Likert scale, the existence of career aspirations and educational goals in state university undergraduates was evaluated. It included statements that inquired into the existence of an industry entrance plan, career progression plan, and the existence of aligning education goals. Table 7 exhibits the summary statistics of the Likert scale. The actual mean value of the Likert scale is 20.85 which is above the score if all statements are rated at the neutral level. This is indicative of the fact that the final-year graduates of Sri Lankan state universities have developed a detailed career and educational plan for themselves.

Table 7

Summary statistics associated with the Likert scale measuring career aspirations and educational goals

Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Value, years	20.85	3.97	14	25

4.8. Reliability of Likert scales

Before running into deeper analysis methods, the reliability of the Likert scales was evaluated. Cronbach's alpha is the general indicator of reliability. Table 8 indicates the Cronbach's value for each Likert scale used in the research. The general acceptance is that Cronbach's values above 0.7 are conveying reliability.

Table 8

Reliability statistics of the Likert scales used in the research

Variable	Cronbach's value
Language norms and practices in the Sri Lankan community (public attitude)	0.793
Perceived English competency	0.907
Career aspirations and educational goals	0.942
Exposure to English languages and exposure to western influences	0.906
Potential opportunities associated with English language competency	0.762

4.9. Association and relationship between variables

The variable association was evaluated through Pearson's correlation. The correlation matrix in Figure 9 illustrates the correlation coefficients. Accordingly, all the variables had a significant association with one another. However, most of this correlation showed a correlation coefficient of less than 0.5 indicating a moderate level of association. A quite strong correlation was visible between the variables, public attitude towards English and social exposure, and between public attitude towards English and life progression.

The correlation coefficient does not indicate a cause-effect relationship. Therefore, a regression analysis needs to be performed to understand the way different independent variables affect the dependent variable. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates interrelationships between the conceptualized variables.

Table 10 illustrates the R-squared statistics associated with the regression model with the two independent variables. Accordingly, the public attitude towards English and potential opportunities associated with English language competence explains around 82% of the variability in career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities. Table 10 indicates the statistics on model significance. This explains whether the independent and dependent variables had a relationship by a random chance within this particular dataset or is a more solid relationship. Since the significance value is lesser than the general reference value of 0.05, it can be assumed that there is a solid relationship between independent and dependent variables.

	Public attitude	Exposure	Percieved competency	Potentia opportunities	Life progression
Public attitude	1	.924**	.418**	.483**	.904**
		.000	.000	.000	.000
	326	326	326	326	326
Exposure		1	.378**	.189**	.847**
	-		.000	.001	.000
		326	326	326	326
Percieved competency			1	.480**	.539**
	-	-		.000	.000
	-	-	326	326	326
Potentia opportunities				1	.469**
	-	-	-		.000
	-	-	-	326	326
Life progression					1
	-	-	-		
	-	-	-		326

Fig. 9. Correlation matrix of the variables

Table 9

**Variability explanation by the model
with two independent variables**

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R Square	Std. error of the estimate
1	.904 ^a	.818	.817	1.70294

^a Predictors: (Constant), Potentia opportunities, Public attitude.

According to Table 11, both independent variables have a significant influence on the dependent variable. Equation 1 indicates the relationship between them.

Table 10

**Statistics on the model significance
(ANOVA – Dependent Variable: Life progression)**

Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4210.810	2	2105.405	726.002	726.000 ^a
	Residual	936.699	323	2.900		
	Total	5147.509	325			

^a Predictors: (Constant), Potentia opportunities, Public attitude.

Table 11

Model coefficients (Dependent Variable: Life progression)

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-6.845	.959		-7.134	.000
	Public attitude	1.336	.041	.883	32.570	.000
	Potentia opportunities	.080	.051	.043	1.568	.118

Equation 1. Regression equation with two independent variables

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Career aspirations and Educational goals} &= \\ &= -6.845 + (1.336 \cdot \text{Public attitude}) \end{aligned}$$

Ultimately the equation indicates that the public attitude, language norms, and special favorations attached to English competency affect the formulation of life progression plans of Sri Lankan undergraduates in state universities. While the model was tested with two independent variables, only one coefficient is significant. This can be caused by various reasons such as multicollinearity or poor relative predictive power of the insignificant variable.

4.10. Mediating effect of other variables

Many factors influence the strength of Equation (1). Out of these, the perceived English competency and the socio-economic background that supports English competency are key factors. The relationship to naked eye is that those who are competent in English with a more Westernized background are quite confident in making their life progression plan. Those

who are not competent in the language and have more native background limits their life progression plan to new opportunities. This situation was tested under four stages as illustrated in Table 12. The R-squared value and the number of respondents falling under each category are mentioned in the Table.

Table 12 indicates that the life progression variability of those who are unfamiliar with Westernized and English-based culture and lack confidence in their English skills is in larger proportion explained by the public attitude. The lack of confidence and unfamiliarity in English highly affects their life progression plan. Comparatively, those with high confidence in using English are less affected by public attitude. Therefore, the variability in their life progression plans is not completely explained by public attitude alone. Ultimately, these findings imply that public attitude toward English influences individuals differently based on their socioeconomic exposure to English and perceived English competency.

Table 12

**R-squared values of the equation 1 under different levels
of mediating variables**

Westernized and English-based socio-economic setting	Perceived English competency		
		Low	High
	Low	64% (109)	39% (110)
High	48% (64)	45% (30)	

5. Conclusion

This research provides insights into the intersections of English competency, socio-economic backgrounds, and career aspirations of final-year undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities. The findings reveal the complexities of English language proficiency in the socio-cultural context of Sri Lanka.

The final-year undergraduate population predominantly represent youth with middle-class backgrounds. The majority of them demonstrate an average level of English skills. However, a noticeable disparity exists in their confidence to use the language, particularly in speaking and listening. The research provides evidence about the high public regard, social status, and professional opportunities that open up with English language skills. The regression analysis indicates that public attitude and perceived

potential opportunities associated with English skills significantly affect the career aspirations and educational goals of final-year undergraduates. The analysis further reveals that socio-economic exposure to the English language significantly influences career aspirations and further educational plans. Students from Westernized and English-based backgrounds are less influenced by societal biases compared to their peers with limited language access. These findings suggests that while public attitude towards English is impactful in future plans of final-year undergraduates in state universities, the relationship is moderated based upon the socio-economic background and self-perceived proficiency. In summation, addressing English language-based disparities requires a multifaceted approach. It should enhance opportunities to learn the language irrespective of socio-economic background. Further, policymakers and educators should seek strategies to encourage youth to use the language and become proficient in both verbal and non-verbal use of the English language.

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The article was received on 17.05.2024

Статья поступила в редакцию 17.05.2024

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