
Perceptions of University Students on the Role of English Language Proficiency in Career Choice and Mobility

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ABSTRACT

The English language plays a pivotal role in Sri Lankan society as the language of the elite. It is also considered as a means for acquisition of employment, power and privilege in society. However, the deficiency in English language communications skills among present day undergraduates and graduates is identified as a factor that affects their prospects of securing employment particularly in the private sector. The present paper inquires into the perceptions of a sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students on the role played by English language proficiency in their career choice and mobility. The study was carried out in two leading national universities in Sri Lanka, based on a self administered questionnaire, on a sample of 96 students. The findings revealed that both the undergraduate and postgraduate students in the sample had a positive attitude towards learning English. Over 90 per cent of the respondents believed English language proficiency to be a means for upward career mobility and better career prospects. The majority believed that proficiency in English was a requirement to perform better in higher studies.

Key words: English Language Proficiency, Perceptions, Attitudes, Career Choice and Mobility, University Students

1. INTRODUCTION

English education dominated the Sri Lankan polity since the early 20th century, and thus was perceived as the language of the elite and as a means for acquisition of power and privilege in society. The change in the political power structure in 1956 enabled wider segments in society to gain greater capacity to influence social policy issues such as the medium of instruction in schools and the language of conducting official business of the State. With the enactment of the Official Languages Act of 1956, the importance attached to English as a link language began to decline. The shift towards the mother tongue in school education was also followed by the offer of Sinhala and Tamil medium degree programmes in the universities.

Free education had been the norm in Sri Lanka since 1944, which enabled a child from a less privileged family to go up to university education without a hindrance. The opportunity to study in one's mother tongue was an added advantage. However, there was increasing evidence of educated unemployment which was a serious issue as the state sector could absorb only a limited number of Swabhasha educated youth into gainful employment. The private sector, which was a relatively small actor in the economy till the late 1970s preferred to employ English educated youth with a particular social background. There had been limited opportunities available in the private sector for Swabhasha educated youth including graduates.

The importance attached to English as a medium of instruction increased further during the last two decades after Sri Lanka became increasingly exposed to globalization. The education system comprising school as well as university education was compelled to respond to the changing situation by revising the curricula and re-introducing English as one of the media of instruction. The state universities carried out only limited reforms to facilitate the shift towards the English medium education mainly due to resource constraints.

The lack of English communications skills has been identified as a major deficiency among present day undergraduates and graduates which affects their prospects of securing employment particularly in the private sector (World Bank, 2009). The deficiency in English communications skills (soft skills) has also been identified as a factor that has limited the capacity among graduates in Information Technology to perform at a higher level and share higher job responsibilities (Sigera, 2009). A Test of English Proficiency focusing on the four major language skills, i.e. Reading, Writing, Speech and Listening was conducted by the Post Graduate Institute of English in 2008, covering a sample of undergraduates representing Engineering, Science, Social Sciences and Management/ Accountancy selected from nine universities and one professional institute. The results of the test revealed that "Skillswise, all institutions performed best in Reading. The next best performance, skillswise, was in Speech and Listening. Writing proved to be the weakest skill" (Raheem & Wijetunga, 2009).

Against this background, one might expect university students to adopt diverse attitudes towards learning English. These attitudes might be either positive or negative or a mix of both. How undergraduates in particular perceive proficiency in English as a factor that helps in higher education and also in career selection and advancement is likely to be influenced by their social background, as well as by their attitude towards English education. One might observe that the students' attitude towards learning English is likely to be influenced by their current level of English communications skills and by their prospects of developing these skills through university education.

2. OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of the present paper is to inquire into the perceptions among undergraduate and post-graduate students in selected disciplines towards English language proficiency as a means of reaching a higher level of performance in education and achieving better prospects of employment as well as career advancement.

It is proposed to address the following research questions through the study;

- (a) Do the students in the sample consider proficiency in English as an essential attribute towards achieving better performance in higher studies?
- (b) Do the students in the sample consider proficiency in English as a means of securing competitive employment particularly in the private sector and also advancement in career?
- (c) Is there a difference in attitude towards English between undergraduates who have entered the university from rural and urban schools?

3. A BRIEF SURVEY OF LITERATURE

The political power structure in Sri Lanka changed in 1956 from the pro-western United National Party to the nationalist MEP coalition led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. This change is considered a watershed in social transformation since gaining political independence from British rule in 1948. One of the major steps taken by the new government was the introduction of the Official Language Act in 1956, which made Sinhala the official language. It also led to a shift in the medium of instruction in schools from English to Swabhasha (Sinhala and Tamil languages). This change was followed by the state taking over almost all private schools (including the missionary schools established during the British rule) and their absorption to the State education system. Under colonial rule, English education offered citizens an opportunity to acquire material benefits as well as an opportunity to move away from traditional caste-based occupations (Fernando, 1977, p. 343). The shift to Swabhasha education limited the extent of occupational mobility and also led to implications such as the English language losing its dominance and making the children monolingual with limited access to information.

The shift of the medium of instruction to the mother tongue made a significant impact on university education as well. One critic has observed that "[e]xtension of Swabhasha education to higher educational institutions has helped to perpetuate educational segregation even at the university level. This is particularly so in the context of Liberal Arts education where a majority of university students are concentrated" (Hettige, 2007, p.7). A majority

of the Arts graduates who have a rural social background faced an acute problem of unemployment. Most of them felt inferior and unable to compete for the available jobs in the employment market due to the lack of English communications skills. There is evidence that youth who have completed either secondary or tertiary education in Sinhala or Tamil languages have often been marginalized in employment (Serasinghe, 2007).

Sri Lanka experienced two youth revolts in the South, one in 1971 and the other in 1988-89 spearheaded by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which comprised largely of educated rural youth. Critics are of the view that these youth revolts have been fueled by problems like unemployment, a sense of deprivation and unequal opportunity (Fernando, 2002; Hettige, 2007; Serasinghe, 2007). The privileged position enjoyed by a minority who had gone through English medium education offered by the currently growing international schools (numbering about 120) and a large number of private university colleges affiliated to various foreign universities has no doubt created segregation in Sri Lankan society based on education. This situation has made the Swabhasha educated graduates to compete with the degree or diploma holders from private universities and institutes for employment, often on unfair grounds (Ranasinghe, 2011).

Sri Lankan society holds education in high esteem. Most parents as well as teachers consider obtaining good educational qualifications through the State education system, including universities, as a means of securing stable employment particularly in the State sector. Thus, when the opportunity for employment in the State sector through transparent and merit based systems of entry such as selection examinations had been denied, the educated youth saw it as a reason to revolt against the State (Report of the Presidential Commission on Youth, 1990). A critic has observed that the problems of youth particularly in the rural sector are entrenched in a vicious cycle of poverty in which inadequate access to education and training is an important dimension (Fernando, 2002, p.147). In the new phase of global capitalism, education is also treated as a commodity subject to the rules of the market where the rich can afford more demanded courses at a higher price and acquire a higher competitive capability compared to the youth from poor households who are compelled to follow less demanded courses in Sinhala or Tamil medium offered by State sector institutions. Serasinghe (2007) argues that this situation has led to an unequal concentration of wealth and power in a selected group of people.

According to a study done by the Marga Institute (2007), the overall enrolment in higher education in Sri Lanka is low, about 11 per cent of the eligible population, out of which university enrolment is still lower at 3 per cent. The low enrolment in higher education persists despite the fact that the market for those with tertiary education is expanding. In Sri Lanka there is a strong ideological commitment to free education provided by the State. Hence, the entry of the private sector to provide higher education in an education

market has been resisted mainly by the constituency of students. The demand for private education in the English medium has been growing at primary and secondary levels as well as at the tertiary level. However, as the state has not been able to commit sufficient resources to expand higher education beyond the present level of 0.6% per cent of the GDP, a large number of youth aspiring for university education is compelled to join the labour market and remain unemployed for some time.

The National Education Commission in its policy proposal for educational reforms (2009) has identified the importance of strengthening English medium education in State schools and expanding facilities for English education in the universities. However, providing quality English education in schools as well as in universities appears to be a problem due to the shortage of well trained instructors. The curriculum for the teaching of English in schools as well as in universities is expected to address the four areas of Reading, Writing, Speech and Listening. However, no comprehensive study has so far been done to assess how effectively the teaching of English is done in schools and universities focusing on these four areas.

There are also different views among English language experts about the kind of English that is more appropriate or more acceptable to Sri Lankan society. According to Parakrama (1995) the 'standard English' (or the elitist 'British English') is of less relevance in a post-colonial society and there is a case to promote "Sri Lankan English" both in speech and writing. This view has been challenged by other scholars (see Fonseka, 2003) as a way of undermining the quality of spoken and written English, making Sri Lankan teachers of English less competitive in the global employment market. One might also note that a national level project launched by the Presidential Secretariat to popularize the learning of English seems to have accepted the position that English can be learned in our own way. However, our fundamental problem of improving the English proficiency among the school leavers and undergraduates remains unresolved. A major issue is that the language of instruction in certain degree programmes like management studies has already been shifted from the vernacular to English in most universities without having adequate facilities to teach English for undergraduates. This institutional deficiency is likely to affect the performance of undergraduates, particularly those who are low in English proficiency.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey method for the purpose of data collection. A structured questionnaire in the English medium consisting of 18 questions was utilized and respondents were expected to self administer the questionnaire following the instructions given. The questionnaire was administered among a convenient sample of 96 university students (81 undergraduates, 11 MBA candidates and 04 other post-graduate students) from the

University of Colombo and the Open University. The sample comprised an equal number of males and females. The data analysis was done using the SPSS package. The researchers also wish to highlight the limitations associated with the convenient sample adopted in the present study as it does not adequately represent the undergraduate or post-graduate student population of universities. Thus, the extent to which one could generalize the study findings would be limited.

5. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

5.1. Profile of the sample

The sample of the study consists of 96 undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Colombo and the Open University of Sri Lanka. The sample had an equal contribution of male and female participants. Figure 1 depicts the distribution of the four disciplines of study of the sample where 47 (49%) were from the Management Studies, 30 (31%) were from the Arts, 14 (15%) were from Natural Sciences and 5 (5%) were from Social Sciences.

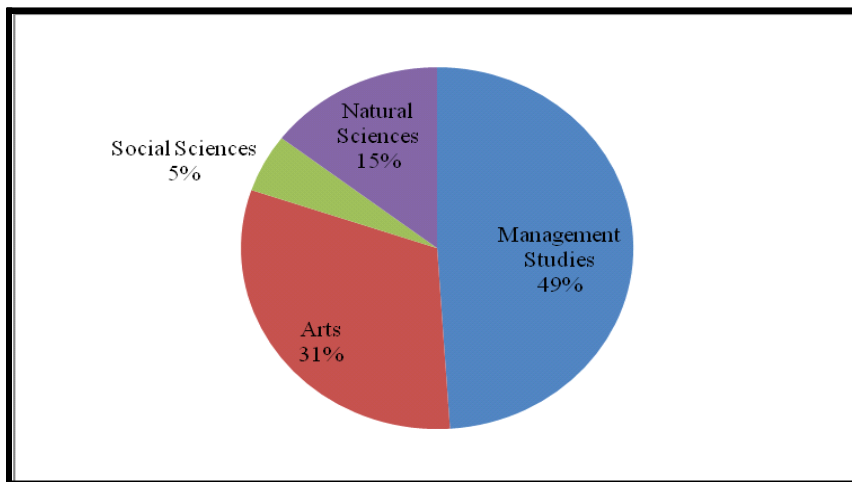


Figure 1- The stream of study of the sample

The medium of study indicated that 64 (66.7%) belonged to the English medium and 32 (33.3%) were following their degrees in the Sinhala medium. Among the sampled students 29 (30%) were employed and 67 (68%) were full time students. Further 49 (54%) of the participants entered the university from urban schools while 42 (46%) had a rural school background.

Table 1: Age profile

Age range	Frequency	%
20-24	70	72.9
25-29	14	14.6
30-34	1	1.0
35-40	4	4.2
Above 40	7	7.3
Total	96	100.0

The age profile of the sample given in Table 1, illustrates that over 70% of the sample consists of students in the age group of 20 to 24 who comprised mainly undergraduate students.

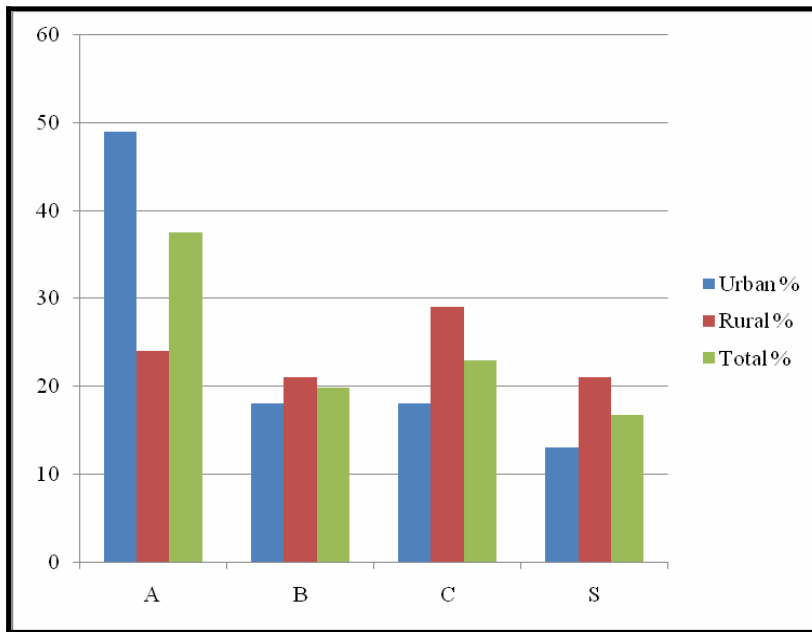


Figure 2 - Level of performance in English language reached at GCE (O/L)

The sample seems to have performed significantly well in the General Certificate of Education- Ordinary Level examination in English language, since over 35% of the sample had acquired an A pass (see Figure 2). Further, Figure 2 also depicts the segregation of the performance of students from rural and urban schools. As expected, the participants who have entered the university from urban schools have performed better in the English language at GCE(OL) compared to their counterparts having a rural school background.

5.2. *Perceptions on the current level of proficiency in English*

In order to understand students' perceptions regarding the extent to which school and university education had influenced them in reaching their current level of proficiency in spoken and written English, the sampled students were asked to state whether school and university education has helped them learn spoken and written English to a satisfactory or a limited extent. As depicted in Table 2, only one third of the sample had stated that their schools had assisted them to reach a satisfactory level of proficiency in terms of spoken English and close to 50% made the same observation with regard to proficiency in written English. However, 63% perceived that school education had assisted them in improving their spoken English ability to a limited extent only. Where written English proficiency is concerned, 48% of the sample stated that school education had assisted them only to a limited extent. Further, as indicated in Table 2, the respondents perceived that the contribution of university education towards the improvement of spoken and written English proficiency had been comparatively better than school education.

Table 2: *Perception on how far school and university education contributed to proficiency in spoken and written English*

Aspects of proficiency	School Education						University Education					
	Satisfactory extent		Limited extent		No Response		Satisfactory extent		Limited extent		No Response	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Spoken English	32	33	60	63	4	4	42	44	50	52	4	4
Written English	46	48	46	48	4	4	56	58	36	38	4	4

Table 3 further analyzes the data on students' perception regarding the level of proficiency of spoken and written English based on their school background. As expected, students with an urban school background perceived their schools to have contributed to a higher degree towards their reaching a satisfactory level of improvement in spoken and written English, while a majority of students with a rural school background considered their schools to have contributed to a limited extent in improving their level of proficiency in spoken and written English.

Table 3¹ - Perception on how far school education contributed to proficiency in spoken and written English by sector

Aspects of proficiency	School Education											
	Satisfactory extent				Limited extent				No Response			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Spoken English	23	47	8	19	25	51	31	74	1	2	3	7
Written English	30	61	14	33	18	37	25	60	1	2	3	7

As indicated in Table 4, the perceived extent of influence of university education towards improving the level of proficiency in spoken and written English seems to vary among the urban and rural divide. The majority of students who have an urban school background perceived university education to have increased their level of proficiency in English to a satisfactory extent, while the students with a rural school background perceived university education to have contributed to a limited extent in improving their level of proficiency in English, particularly with regard to spoken English.

Table 4: Perception on how far university education contributed to proficiency in spoken and written English by sector

Aspects of proficiency	School Education						University Education					
	Satisfactory extent		Limited extent		No Response		Satisfactory extent		Limited extent		No Response	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Spoken English	32	33	60	63	4	4	42	44	50	52	4	4
Written English	46	48	46	48	4	4	56	58	36	38	4	4

Table 5 depicts the perception of the sample on their current level of proficiency in English in relation to the five areas: grammar, vocabulary, spoken English, written English, reading and comprehension. Although only a few participants stated that their level of proficiency was "excellent" (7%), the majority (45%) perceived that their proficiency in relation to the five areas was "good". It is to be noted that the perceived level of proficiency in written English and reading and comprehension appears to be relatively high among the sample. Among those who perceived their current level of proficiency as "average", a high value has been attached to vocabulary and grammar. In the case of those who have assessed their proficiency in English to be "poor", vocabulary and spoken English appears to have taken a higher value.

¹The urban and rural division was determined based on the location of the school the participant attended; however, five participants did not disclose this information.

Table 5: Students' perception of their current level of proficiency in English

Aspect of Proficiency	Excellent		Good		Average		Poor	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Grammar	4	4.2	42	43.8	40	41.7	10	10.4
Vocabulary	4	4.2	37	38.5	42	43.8	13	13.5
Spoken	6	6.2	38	39.6	39	40.6	13	13.5
Written	5	5.2	50	52.1	32	33.3	9	9.4
Reading and comprehension	15	15.6	49	51	29	30.2	3	3.1
Total	34	7.0	216	45.0	182	38.0	48	10.0

5.3. Attitudes towards English

In replying to the question of whether proficiency in English is essential to perform better in higher education, almost 90% of the respondents agreed, while only 5% disagreed. Approximately 93% of the sampled students were of the view that good communications skills in English are essential to secure an attractive job in the private sector. Further, English communications skills was also considered as an influential factor for career advancement by 75% of the respondents.

The students' attitudes towards English were further analyzed through question number 18 of the questionnaire. Under this question the sampled students were requested to indicate their response in terms of agreement, disagreement or indecision for six statements. These statements, along with the attitudes of the respondents categorized as urban, rural and the total sample are given in Table 6. Their attitudes categorized in terms of whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate students are given in Table 7.

Table 6² - Students' attitudes on the influence of the English language

Attitude measuring statement	Agreed %			Undecided %			Disagreed %		
	U	R	T	U	R	T	U	R	T
English proficiency enables a person to compete for a well paid job in the market place	98	98	98	2	0	1	0	2	1
The criterion of English proficiency discriminates those who are less proficient in English when it comes to higher education and employment	82	79	79	8	19	15	10	2	6
Knowledge of English opens up many opportunities for the youth	100	95	98	0	5	2	0	0	0
I prefer to communicate in English with my colleagues	71	62	68	16	26	21	12	12	11
English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth in our society	69	55	63	12	14	14	18	31	23
I prefer to work in the public sector as the working language is either Sinhala or Tamil	25	41	32	27	26	28	49	33	40

The above pattern of attitudes suggests a common agreement among the participants on the significant influence of the English language for career advancement and for opening up opportunities for youth. However, it is also considered as a factor that discriminates those who are less proficient in English. This is evident from the fact that 63% of the respondents agree with the statement that English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth.

Where employment is concerned, a commonly held belief is that compared to the private sector, public sector jobs are relatively less challenging and that the work culture is easy going though salaries in the public sector are low. Therefore, it was presumed that those who were not proficient in English but were proficient in their mother tongue would prefer to be employed in the public sector. However, 40% disagreed with the statement that those who are less proficient in English would seek employment in the public sector and only one third of the sample displayed their preference to work in the public sector.

To understand whether there is a difference in attitudes among the undergraduate and postgraduate students, a categorization was made based on their responses to attitude measuring statements. This categorization is presented in Table 7.

²U- Urban; R- Rural; T- Total

Table 7³ - Attitudes on the influence of the English language based on student categories

Attitude measuring statement	Agreed %			Undecided %			Disagreed %		
	UG	PG	T	UG	PG	T	UG	PG	T
English proficiency enables a person to compete for a well paid job in the market place	98	100	98	1	0	1	1	0	1
The criterion of English proficiency discriminates those who are less proficient in English when it comes to higher education and employment	77	92	79	16	8	15	7	0	6
Knowledge of English opens up many opportunities for the youth	98	100	98	2	0	2	0	0	0
I prefer to communicate in English with my colleagues	69	62	68	19	31	21	12	7	11
English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth in our society	64	62	63	15	8	14	21	30	23
I prefer to work in the public sector as the working language is either Sinhala or Tamil	36	23	32	30	0	28	34	77	40

It is interesting to note that Table 7 portrays similar patterns of attitudes among the two groups of students for almost all of the statements given. The only difference that seems apparent is in the last statement relating to their preference for working in the public sector. This difference is due to the fact that all postgraduate students are employed and have chosen their sector of employment, while most undergraduates are unemployed and therefore may still have an element of indecision. Thus, the attitudes among students relating to the influence of English language seem to be similar not merely among the rural and urban division but also among the undergraduate and postgraduate division.

6. DISCUSSION

Overall the study findings suggest that the sampled students have a favorable attitude towards English. This is established by the fact that almost 90% of the sample considers English to be essential to perform better in higher education. Although the students sit their GCE Advanced Level examination in their mother tongue, the data shows that they are convinced of the importance of English language proficiency to perform better at

³UG-Undergraduate students; PG- Postgraduate students; T- Total.

higher education. This favorable attitude is prevalent both among those who have entered the university from urban as well as from rural schools. Thus, the above data provides resolution to the first research question which deals with the relationship between English language proficiency and performance in higher education.

According to the findings, approximately 93% of the sample agreed that good communications skills in English are essential to secure an attractive job in the private sector. Moreover, 98% agreed that English proficiency enables a person to compete for a well paid job in the market place. Further, English communications skills are also considered as an influential factor for career advancement by 75% of the participants. This shows the awareness among most undergraduates about the requirement of English communications skills in order to secure a job in the private sector with better prospects and opportunities for career advancement. Thus, the data positively affirms that students in the sample consider proficiency in English as a means of securing competitive employment particularly in the private sector and also advancement in career.

Given the present context of English education, it is a known fact that rural schools are handicapped due to the non availability of trained English teachers. This continues to deprive students of learning English within the given syllabi. Compared to rural schools, well equipped urban schools located in convenient centers tend to attract well trained English teachers. Hence the students in such schools may have better access to learning English. This fact is also evident from Table 3, where most students who have entered university from an urban school background perceived that their schools contributed to a satisfactory extent in improving their spoken and written English compared to those who have rural school backgrounds. Although the perception of university education towards the improvement of spoken and written English proficiency is comparatively better than that towards school education among the two groups, there is an apparent difference. The students from rural school backgrounds perceived that even university education improved their proficiency in English to a limited extent, especially in spoken English while the majority of those who have an urban school background perceived a satisfactory improvement in their overall English proficiency.

The present study attempted to inquire as to whether there is a significant difference in attitude to English between students who have entered the university from urban and rural schools. However, the data presented in Table 5 does not show a significant difference in attitudes towards English among the two groups of students. Therefore, the importance of the English language for better performance in higher education as well as for career advancement is acknowledged by both parties. Further, both groups of students have agreed that a lack of English proficiency may be a cause for discrimination in relation to higher education and employment. It has also been perceived more or less equally by the

two groups that English causes an unnecessary barrier for rural youth in our society. Thus, the study findings do not suggest that there is a notable difference in attitude towards English among undergraduates who have entered the university from rural and urban schools.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that there is a favorable attitude towards English among undergraduates regardless of the background of the school from which they have entered the university. English language seem to be regaining a strong position in universities due to the commonly shared view that a higher level of proficiency in English is essential for a higher level of performance in higher studies and to secure an attractive job particularly in the private sector. However, the findings reveals that the extent of support received by the students through school and university education for improving the level of proficiency in English does not appear to be adequate to fulfill their expectations.

Over 60% of the respondents of the survey agreed with the statement "English creates an unnecessary barrier for rural youth in our society" which is suggestive of discrimination and lack of opportunities for rural youth. Given the fact that Sri Lanka has already experienced two youth insurrections in the past, it is of vital importance to ensure that opportunity for quality English education is evenly distributed.

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