



**Title:** Challenges in Teaching English at Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University Sri Lanka

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### **Abstract**

This research attempts to dig out the major challenges in teaching English to the undergraduates of Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University. There are 7 departments functioning under 3 faculties. The medium of instruction for all the academic programmes is English. Teaching English seems to be a herculean task, especially teaching to the first-year students who enter the university with the medium of instruction either in Sinhalese or Tamil all throughout the schooling from grade one to GCE A/L. However, lectures at Trincomalee Campus begin with English medium from the first day onwards no matter in which standard the students are in at the point of entry. This contradictory situation in medium of instruction is further aggravated by numerous challenges arising from linguistic diversity, socio-economic disparities, resource constraints, and outdated pedagogical practices. These issues hinder the effective acquisition of English skills, which are critical for students' academic and professional development in a globalized world. This paper explores these challenges in detail, highlighting their root causes and impacts on teaching outcomes. It also provides recommendations to improve English language teaching (ELT) at Trincomalee Campus. The researcher has collected the primary data through observing the classes directly, having discussions with the students on their difficulties, conducting discussion with the fellow lecturers on their challenges in teaching and observing the available teaching tools and aids at the campus.

**Key words:** Challenges in teaching, ELT, teaching tools and aids.

### **Introduction**

English is widely regarded as a global lingua franca and plays a significant role in academic and professional success. In Sri Lanka, where Sinhala and Tamil are the official languages, English functions as a link language and serves as the medium of instruction in many university programs. However, teaching English in Sri Lankan universities is laden with challenges that limit its effectiveness and perpetuate disparities in student outcomes. Language policy of the government is yet to be improved and the present language policy permits the students to enter the university with zero knowledge in English as it is not taken for Z-score calculation. It has been found that the subject-knowledge of the undergraduates is limited when writing the answers in English. In worse case, some students fail to comprehend the questions in the exam-paper as they were very poor in English even though the students are knowledgeable in the subject area. This paper examines these challenges, identifying socio-economic, national language policy in schools and university education and pedagogical factors that make English teaching harder at the university level.

## **Background:**

English occupies a unique position in Sri Lanka's education system. While primary and secondary education offers English as a subject, students' proficiency varies significantly depending on their geographic and socio-economic backgrounds. Upon entering university, many students lack the proficiency required to engage effectively in academic settings, creating a pressing need for English language programs. The reason for this problem is the fact that the students heavily focus on their 3 subjects of their chosen field in GCE A/L with the aim of securing adequate Z-score, neglecting English which is not taken into Z-score for entering university. When GCE A/L is a competitive exam, who will waste their time in studying English at the expense of losing the chance to enter the university? Some years back, there was an English language teaching programme (GELT) for the students who were selected to the universities, and it was administered for nearly 4-6 months prior to their entry to respective universities. This good programme was discontinued by the government for the reasons unknown to anybody in the system.

The responsibility of equipping students with English proficiency falls on university ELT programs, which aim to prepare students for academic tasks, such as reading academic texts, writing research papers, and participating in discussions. However, despite its importance, English language teaching in Sri Lankan universities continues to face several structural and systemic barriers. It is noteworthy to mention that there is no ELT department at Trincomalee Campus, and it is the only campus in entire Srilanka where department of ELT has not been set up from its inception in 2001. Department of ELT is vested with the universities as per the guidance of UGC Srilanka. In that sense, Eastern University has the department of ELT which has the responsibility to share their lecturers to teach English language to the undergraduates of Trincomalee Campus. However, this is not in practice for the reasons unknown. However, the ELT at Sri Palee is looked after by the University of Colombo and the University of Jaffna looks after the needs of ELT for 3 faculties located at Kilinochi. This patronage is missing to Trincomalee Campus by Eastern University Sri Lanka to which it belongs to. It is a serious lapse in developing English among the undergraduates in the absence of the department of ELT at Trincomalee Campus. Eastern university as well as UGC has never bothered about setting up the department of ELT at Trincomalee Campus in the last 25 years ever since Trincomalee Campus was established in 2000.

## **Challenges in Teaching English in Trincomalee Campus**

### **1. Linguistic and Socio-Economic Diversity**

Undergraduates come from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, creating significant disparities in English proficiency.

**Rural-Urban Divide:** Students from rural areas, where English exposure is limited, struggle to compete with their urban counterparts, who often have access to private English medium education.

**Multilingualism:** Teaching English in a multilingual context is challenging, as students often rely on their native languages (Sinhala or Tamil), which may interfere with English learning. At Trincomalee campus, lecturers strictly maintain English medium because the composition of students are Sinhalese and Tamils and using either of the vernacular language will be detrimental to either of the community. Therefore, no lecturer uses vernacular language while lecturing.

### **2. Resource Constraints**

Limited resources are a persistent issue at Trincomalee Campus, affecting the quality of English language teaching.

**Insufficient Infrastructure for Language learning especially to improve speaking skill:** Trincomalee Campus does not have a well-equipped language lab, and access to modern teaching aids such as headphones, and digital library with audio visual aids that are available with British Council in Colombo.

**Shortage of Qualified Lecturers:** Minimum one lecturer should be available for each department. It means 7 lecturers in English. Since the department of ELT is not available at this campus, English is taught by visiting lecturers and temporary assistant lecturers. This scenario reduces not only the effectiveness of English programs but also hampers the learning process. The existing one or two lecturers who teach English often face heavy workloads, leaving little time for lesson planning or individual student attention.

### 3. Outdated Curricula and Pedagogical Practices

The curricula used here are outdated and fail to address the real-world needs of students.

**Traditional Teaching Methods:** Grammar-focused, lecture-based methods dominate ELT at Trincomalee campus. These methods emphasize rote memorization over communicative competence.

**Lack of Customization:** English courses are often generic and do not cater to the specific needs of students from diverse academic disciplines, such as business management, medicine, computer science, physical science, media studies or social sciences.

### 4. Attitudinal Barriers

Students' attitudes toward English learning also pose significant challenges.

**Perception of English as an Elite Language:** Many students from rural or underprivileged backgrounds view English as a language of the elite, creating psychological resistance to learning it. The members of the students' union are mostly the ones who antagonise the studious students who thrive to promote their English-speaking skills. Students who are poor in English tease the students who thrive to improve it. It is a conduct that should be eradicated; but how? Only their change of mind-set will contribute positively to change the existing rigid set-up.

**Low Motivation:** For some students, English is seen as a compulsory subject rather than a skill essential for their future, leading to a lack of interest and effort.

### 5. Large Class Sizes

The major challenge is the large class size (nearly 200 students in a single class) makes it difficult for lecturers to address individual student needs or implement interactive teaching methods.

Classrooms that are not appropriate for language learning activities are the other major challenge. Existing seating arrangement is hostile to language learning.

**Reduced Teacher-Student Interaction:** Teachers struggle to provide personalized feedback or engage students in active learning.

**Difficulty in Monitoring Progress:** Evaluating and tracking the progress of students in large classes becomes a logistical challenge.

### 6. Assessment and Evaluation Issues

Assessment methods often fail to measure students' practical English skills.

**Focus on Written Exams:** Assessments prioritize written exams that test grammar and vocabulary but neglect speaking and listening skills, which are critical for real-world communication. Srilankan government education system does not have a testing system for Speaking skill and Listening skill for GCE O/L or GCE A/L since independence of this country. The English language testing system of this country is not only a big challenge but

also a threat for developing English even at the school level especially on the Speaking skill and Listening skill which require specific equipment.

**Lack of Formative Assessments:** Continuous assessment methods that provide feedback and guide improvement are limited.

#### Impact of Challenges on Teaching Outcomes:

The challenges discussed above have far-reaching implications on ELT at Trincomalee Campus. Subsequently, the graduates passing out with inadequate English proficiency, limit their employability and global competitiveness.

The existing one or two lecturers of English at this campus experience burnout due to heavy workloads and lack of institutional support. As mentioned earlier, the department of ELT is not existent in Trincomalee Campus. Faculty of Siddha Medicine with its 3 departments completely relies on visiting lecturers who are mostly retired school-teachers. Department of Business and management studies also hires visiting lecturers. Department of computer science and Department of physical science get the lecturers to teach English from inter-faculty service where the classes are conducted by Temporary Assistant lecturers who have just passed out from the same Campus with not much experience in teaching English.

The disparity in proficiency levels among students perpetuates social and economic inequalities.

### Recommendations for Addressing Challenges

#### 1. Bridging Proficiency Gaps

**Pre-Sessional English Courses:** It is advisable to offer intensive English courses for students with low proficiency before they begin their academic programs. This should be conducted for one month with 4 hours per day.  $4 \times 5 \times 4 = 80$  hours in Total.

**Remedial Classes:** Provide additional support for students who struggle with English during their university studies.

#### 2. Curriculum Reform

**Contextualized Learning:** It is essential to design curricula that align with students' academic disciplines and future career needs.

**Skill-Based Approach:** lecturers must deploy practical skills, such as speaking, listening, and critical thinking, over rote learning. The higher order such as application, synthesising, creating, and critical thinking must be encouraged as suggested in the Blooms field's taxonomy.

#### 3. Professional Development for Teachers

**Training Programs:** Campus administration must organize regular workshops and training sessions to equip teachers with modern ELT methods.

**Peer Learning and Collaboration:** faculties should encourage teachers to share best practices and collaborate on innovative teaching strategies.

#### 4. Integration of Technology

**Digital Learning Tools:** In the modern era, it is highly advisable to use online platforms, mobile apps, and multimedia resources to enhance student engagement and self-learning opportunities.

**Blended Learning Models:** lecturers must try to combine traditional teaching methods with digital tools to create a more interactive and flexible learning environment.

### 5. Reducing Class Sizes

Campus must immediately set up the department of ELT as it is functioning in all the universities in Sri Lanka. It is a tragedy to see Trincomalee Campus without the department of ELT while conducting all the academic programmes in English medium. It is ideal to reduce class sizes to 50 students and facilitate personalized attention. This means more work for the lecturers. Hence, recruitment of new lecturers, minimum 7 for 7 departments is highly recommended since the status of proficiency in English among students is pathetic at Trincomalee Campus.

### 6. Reforming Assessment Methods

**Holistic Evaluation:** It is necessary to incorporate assessment-system that tests all language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

**Formative Feedback:** lecturers must provide regular, constructive feedback to help students identify areas for improvement.

7. Establishing English club, English circle, poetry café, debate-club and informal gatherings to promote English is highly recommended.

## Conclusion

Teaching English at Trincomalee campus faces numerous challenges, stemming from linguistic diversity, resource limitations, and outdated teaching methods. These issues significantly impact students' academic and professional prospects. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes curriculum reform, teacher training, resource investment, and the integration of modern teaching tools. By implementing these changes, Trincomalee Campus can create an environment where students acquire the English skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly globalized world. Trincomalee Campus administration with the support of the Eastern university must establish a language laboratory with necessary teaching-learning digital materials to support self-learning. Further, informal English clubs must be set up to give opportunity to the undergraduates to develop their speaking skills through debates, speeches, discussions and dramas. On top of it, the inhibition with which many students suffer must be broken by motivation and encouragement.

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