Analysis of Technology Utilization in Sri Lankan State Universities' English Teaching and Learning Process

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Abstract— This research paper intends to identify the technological devices utilized for English language acquisition processes in Sri Lankan state universities. The majority of non-linguistic undergraduates face the challenge of conducting their degree programs in English. Hence, both the English language lecturers and the undergraduates utilize different and innovative techniques and technological devises to upscale their English language proficiency. Being in the technological era, both the lecturers and the undergraduates use different digital approaches to make their language education successful. Hence, this research carries the results of eight lecturers and 16 undergraduates from eight geographically spread state universities selected under purposive sampling. The utilized data collection method was semi structured interviews and classroom observations in both virtual and physical contexts. The key findings revealed that the lecturers try to integrate digital games, online activities, interactive boards but do not have as much success with the higher number of undergraduates. Meanwhile, the discussions with lecturers revealed that digital literacy too creates a huge barrier to maximizing student participation. On the other hand, a considerable number of students are using artificial intelligence to get their activities done, and most of them heavily rely on online translators to produce the necessary English output they require as they expressed. Very few students out of the sample mentioned using the free subscriptions of BBC English Learning, Dulingo, and Englishpod101 to improve their proficiency, but not frequently. In a holistic view, undergraduates at state universities have found more instant remedies to get the tasks done than long-term, dedicated practices. While the lecturers' effort to familiarize podcasts, interactive boards, and real-time virtual games too find difficult but are not genuinely supported by the undergraduates in the teaching process.
Keywords— digital mechanisms, state universities, English, teaching and learning process

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Crystal (1997), the role of English has become more prominent than ever as a lingua franca. In the Sri Lankan context, English has become an inevitable proficiency for every individual. Not only for educational purposes but also in career specifications, English has become a lucrative standard for upward social mobility. (Thirunavukkarsu,2012) Due to the fact that many universities conduct lectures in English as the medium of instruction, students tend to increase their proficiency in English. With the understanding that the majority of undergraduates lack necessary skills in English, there are modules based on proficiency development throughout all academic years.

The use of digital mechanisms to teach and learn English in state universities in Sri Lanka has been a growing trend in recent years. However, the success of these initiatives has been mixed, due in part to the low literacy in technology among students and faculty. (Dearden, 2015) During the post-Covid period, attempts to continue uninterrupted educational sessions augmented the usage of digital strategies. Thereafter, as a method of engagement and a way to deviate from traditional teaching and learning methods, lecturers utilize digital mechanisms. (Embogama,2020) Thereafter, in the attempts to incorporate digital mechanisms in the teaching process, there is a wide range of methods and platforms for utilizing software as a result of limited technical literacy. Even though most of the lucrative education systems use mechanisms to process natural and native language learning environments (Coleman, 2006), it is not possible to learn with limited technological supplies within the classrooms at state universities.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives are:

A. To figure out what kind of digital mechanisms are used by the lecturers to teach English.
B. To trace the methods used by undergraduates to facilitate their English learning.
C. To understand the reasons and effects of the teaching and learning processes.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted at the University of Kelaniya, the University of Sri Jayawardenapura, the University of Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa University, Rajarata University, the University of Colombo, the University of Jaffna, and the University of Peradeniya. The sample was selected based on purposive sampling as per the lecturers that

conduct general English modules for non-linguistic departments and 16 undergraduates from non-linguistic backgrounds. Data collection was done through individual, semi-structured interviews, which gave them free speech spaces. In order to create a gender-neutral environment among undergraduates, the selection was done with one male and one female participant from each university. The results were analyzed using a qualitative method.

III. DISCUSSION

During the post-COVID period, the frequency of using digital mechanisms and virtual interactions to teach any stream of studies has gone comparatively higher than before the COVID pandemic. The students had to get used to virtual platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams, which facilitate interaction and promote active engagement and collaboration. The use of digital techniques in teaching English in virtual environments has become increasingly prevalent in state universities in Sri Lanka. Virtual classrooms offer an effective means of real-time interaction between students and lecturers, regardless of their physical location. Yet, most of the undergraduates disregard the ease of joining the classes irrespective of their location due to the low quality and interruptions caused by the internet service providers. This factor leads students to get fed up with continuous attempts to fix their connections while concentrating on the lessons.

As the digital mechanics within the classroom increased, most of the lecturers were incorporating online discussion forums. As a common technique, they post a question on one of the platforms like Miro, Figma, Google Jamboard, Flipgrid, Padlet, or Scribbler (which just one lecturer was utilizing) and ask students to add their points of view or answers to the questions. These forums are utilized in order to allow students to seek assistance, pose questions, and share their perspectives on course content, promoting a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Even though the forums are to be used as a student-centered learning method, very few participate in the given discussions. As mentioned by the lecturers, based on various excuses, they tend to neglect the activity, and from the students' end, many find they are alien to the specific platform, which becomes a concern of digital literacy. Furthermore, the use of educational games can prove beneficial in teaching English virtually. Games provide an interactive and enjoyable learning experience, effectively capturing students' attention and facilitating the acquisition of new language skills. Games seem to attract more attention and participation, but they consume time by giving instructions and waiting for everyone to join and get settled on the platform.

In addition to that, many lecturers have the tendency to attach self-paced, free courses to the subject so the students

may follow them at their convenience. This methodology is identified as a method to leverage teaching English in a virtual environment and a fair attempt to replace traditional lectures, thereby accommodating diverse learning styles and preferences. Additionally, podcasts offer a convenient method for delivering lectures or other course-related content that specifically enhances English listening skills. Students can listen to these audio recordings at their convenience, promoting independent learning and reinforcing lesson concepts. A considerable fraction of undergraduates admires and appreciate the guidance provided by lecturers to find courses at better institutions. Still, transgression occurs as students point out that they do not have much time to contribute to additional courses of English based on their majors.

Moreover, videos serve as a powerful medium to enhance the virtual learning experience. Most of the lectures utilize YouTube and content from content platforms such as Quora and Reddit to provide the class with ideas for their written production. Even though content management is an inevitable component of students' learning processes, their newness to fact-finding has made lecturers start at the preliminary level. Even though lecturers try to create a dynamic and engaging environment that enhances students' understanding and retention of the course material, the results of end-of-semester examinations act as a source of failure for all the innovative attempts, creating a huge contrast with assignments.

In recent years, the availability of digital devices among youth has significantly enhanced the English proficiency learning experience for undergraduates. (Jayathilake et al., 2021) As a fact, the modulated or systemized language being English, many students generate awareness among the associated jargon for the specific device. These techniques provide students with convenient and accessible ways to extend their language proficiency in an accelerated manner.

Moreover, the use of digital mechanisms is far more aligned with open source or free subscriptions. Yet, a limited number of students have demonstrated an urge to learn languages through applications such as BBC Learning English, Dulingo, and English Pod101. Even though some are compassionate about developing their skills, some neglect the opportunities to learn English. Their main reason was that they are currently learning in their mother tongue, and they hardly come across situations where they can use fluent English. In fact, this was observed beyond the metropolitan universities.

A fact that was realized through the discussions was that many students lack adequate support. Many students do not have access to the necessary technology, as not all

students possess computers or internet connections, as realized by going through the examples brought forth by the sample of the research. Most students were unaware of guidelines, methodologies, and assignment expectations to foster a structured and productive learning environment. Most of the students find it hard to trace the accent generated through digital devices, which have an automated robotic effect. Hence, the majority of the interactions in the virtual environment were teacher-initiated between the teacher and the whole class. The major reason is the language weakness of both lecturers and students. As such, most of the participants agreed that they were not resistant to students' usage of L1 for any interaction, while five of the interviewees admitted that bilingualism is welcome in classrooms.

One of the major astonishing facts traced from the interviews of undergraduates was that the latest trend was using artificial intelligence to ease their tasks. Some students disclosed that they use applications such as Quillbot, Writely, openAI, Bard, and Pro Writing Aid. Instead of focusing on generating content by themselves or trying to compile the assignments by themselves, the undergraduates demonstrate a heavy dependence on artificial intelligence tools, which hinders their creativity and cognitive power.

Therefore, analyzing the content of the interviews, the research demonstrates that the students comparatively lack enthusiasm and encouragement to learn English via virtual environments, irrespective of all the efforts put in by the lecturers. Moreover, the majority of the students have the aspiration to learn English and raise their proficiency. Yet, many complain about the lack of time and access to resources, even though quality content is provided by their lecturers. On the other hand, the technical failures and inability to understand accents and monolingual classrooms also affect the quality of their teaching and learning processes.

IV. RECOMMENDATION

The research has shed light on the importance of addressing the barriers and limitations associated with technology integration in English language education. Accesses to the necessary technology, clear expectations, regular feedback, and patience and understanding from lecturers are vital factors for successful implementation. While the usage of digital techniques in teaching and learning English in virtual environments is growing, there is a need for further exploration and support to ensure their effectiveness. Future research can focus on strategies to improve digital literacy among students, provide professional development for lecturers, and assess the long-term impact of these digital mechanisms on English language proficiency. Overall, the findings of this research

contribute to our understanding of the current state of digital English language education in Sri Lankan state universities. By addressing the challenges and implementing effective digital strategies, educators can create a more engaging and dynamic learning environment, fostering improved English language proficiency among undergraduates.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper has explored the utilization of technological devices for English acquisition processes in Sri Lankan state universities. The findings highlight the challenges faced by both lecturers and undergraduates in integrating digital approaches into language education. While lecturers attempt to incorporate digital games and discussion forums, they face limited success due to various factors, including the low level of digital literacy among students and the lack of support from undergraduates. Additionally, many students rely heavily on artificial intelligence and online translators to complete their English activities, seeking quick solutions rather than dedicated practice.

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