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An analysis of the importance of pursuing the BA Hons (English) degree programme in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

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Introduction: Second language learning has become a socially valued vital learning process since it has the influencing potential to form, manipulate and change the social individual identities towards positive recognition. In Sri Lanka, English has become the most prestigious language in society and competence in English is required as the most obligatory qualification for a person to be recognized in society. Thus, the educational process of learning English as a second language has become a highly acknowledged and vital section of the Sri Lankan educational system.

Objectives: The study aimed to analyze the impact of the BA (Hons) in English programme in facilitating individuals with a pedagogy through which they will be able to enrich their knowledge of the study of language, fields of linguistics, diverse domains of literature, philosophy and research.

Methodology: The study was conducted as secondary research and within the secondary data collection process, the information was gathered and analysed discursively based on selected secondary sources of information such as scholarly articles, books, reports etc. The theoretical perspectives and ideologies of Bonny Norton, Pierre Bourdieu, Chris Weedon, Susan M. Gass, Larry Selinker, Dudley-Evans, Maggie Jo St John etc. were applied.

Results: Literature studies are considered an integral part of the BA English curriculum since they can be considered a source which triggers social empowerment and develops critical and analytical skills of the students while enabling them to perceive the world through diverse perspectives. Computational linguistics, an emerging science in the current educational sphere, strengthens the quality of the BA Hons in English degree programme by facilitating the coordination between two disciplines, linguistics and computer science, in producing an innovative language teaching and learning platform embedded with computer applications and programs. The undergraduates who follow the BA English degree programme are expected to develop communication skills in English and other competencies which are needed for lifelong learning.

Conclusion: The Bachelor of Arts in English degree can be identified as the most productive educational programme in providing students with a greater improvement from communicative competence to mastery of English proficiency. It was observed that graduates with a BA in English are given more preference than conventional business-minded graduates since English graduates are identified as super thinkers, individuals with skills in teamwork, problem solvers with rich analytical skills and risk takers who handle challenges strategically.

Keywords: English language needs, BA(Hons) in English, Employability

Introduction

Second Language Acquisition is a process where an individual learns a new language that differs from his or her first language (mother tongue) depending on diverse phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic features that can be observed within the two distinct language structures. Consequently, language learners build a relationship with the second language endeavouring to enhance their knowledge and language skills while encountering the complications arising from the mother tongue interference. Within this educational process where the individual makes himself familiar with the second language and the particular linguistic components of that language, has to interact with the culture, societal environment and ideologies that exist in connection with that novel language which introduces the learner to a totally different atmosphere. Through this exposure to a new language experience, the learner gains the ability to perceive the diversities that exist between languages and develop his awareness of the construction and practice of the varied language patterns. The individuals who are involved in the process of learning a second language tend to develop different perspectives due to the complexities that they encounter and based on their capability to surmount those difficulties they will either become motivated by having positive attitudes or demotivated by perceiving the learning process through negative notions. Since language plays an integral role within the social sphere in enabling communication between individuals and is utilized as the intermediate channel through which thoughts are given the form of expression and each object is defined, it tends to influence the development of individual personalities and the relationship of the individuals within the larger social world.

As Gass and Selinker (2008) exemplify second language refers to any language learned in addition to a person's first language; although the

concept is named second language acquisition, it can also incorporate the learning of third, fourth, or subsequent languages. Within the Sri Lankan societal atmosphere while the Sinhala language functions as the official language reflecting the authoritative characteristics, the position that the English language is assigned tends to remain in diverse dimensions as a result of the diverse socio-political consequences, cultural prejudices and the different concepts and attitudes of the individuals towards the learning and communicating in the English Language.

In Sri Lankan social system while Sinhala and Tamil languages have been recognized as the first languages of most people, English functions as the second or target language. Through a gradual social transformation English has become the most prestigious language in society and competence in English is required as the most obligatory qualification for a person to be recognized in society. Thus, the educational process of learning English as a second language has become a highly acknowledged and vital section of the Sri Lankan educational system (Amarasooriya, 2017). Therefore, providing individuals with a productive and enriching educational platform to enhance their English knowledge on a wider scale can be emphasized as a dire necessity since English is required to interact with international communities in the modern context. Thus, introducing a BA (Hons) in English programme will facilitate individuals with a pedagogy through which they will be able to enrich their knowledge of the study of language, fields of linguistics, diverse domains of literature, philosophy and research.

Accordingly, in developing a BA Hons in English programme, the requirements of the labour market, the available career opportunities for the graduates with a BA Hons in English and the recognition given for the degree programme in the social context need to be taken into thorough consideration. Within the process of developing a curriculum, learner centred approach is applied

since that focuses on the learner's requirements and expectations, in particular, their needs are analysed prior to the designing stage (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Silva & Devendra, 2014). As Silva and Devendra (2014) stated, through analysing the needs of the students/target group and identifying their requirements, the objectives, methodology, design of the programme, assessment and evaluation can be decided in order to develop the programme more productively. According to a study conducted by Sardi (2014), it was observed that the respondents hold a strong stance on the vitality of the role of English since it is the major global language and they have the opinion that they will be able to reach their career goals if they have proficiency in English to a satisfactory level (Sardi, 2014).

According to several research conducted focusing on the Sri Lankan labour market, (Ariyawansa, 2008; Brunfaut & Green, 2019; Wijewardene, Yong & Chinna, 2014) English and communication skills have been identified as the top job requirements in the labour market, especially in considering the perspectives of the employers. Moreover, English and communication skills are given a high value as the most vital soft skills which are needed in the service-oriented economies in South Asian countries to enhance the competitiveness of the workers, in particular in the business process outsourcing and hospitality sectors (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013). According to the research conducted by Brunfaut and Green (2019), it was identified that 50% of employers were of the opinion that due to low competency in communication skills, it is difficult to recruit qualified employees. The major impediments were observed in relation to the fluency in the English language, especially in the areas of written and oral communication. Further, it was identified that due to the low level of written and communication skills in English, individuals show less confidence in communicating in English. Of 85% of the respondents who mentioned that

proficiency in English is a required qualification in recruiting employees, 41% stated that English is an essential requirement for all employment categories. Further, 59% mentioned that proficiency in English is a highly value-added requirement for managerial and supervisory positions and also for the employment sectors such as human resources, marketing, IT, business development, engineering, customer relations etc. In collaborating with external professional bodies, coordinating with internal and external parties, delivering presentations, making negotiations, engaging in merchandising processes and adhering to global trends, demands and innovations, proficiency in English is an essential component since it plays a dominant role in the acquisition of employment, power and privilege in the society (Brunfaut & Green, 2019; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012).

In Sri Lanka, the limitations in English language proficiency were observed in the areas of communication such as writing, speaking and reading, developing formal reports and letters, spelling and grammar accuracy and oral communication. As a result of these limitations and gaps in proficiency in English, the Sri Lankan economy and labour market were confronted with diverse issues (Brunfaut & Green, 2019). Thus, the inability to adhere to modern technological advancements, lack of modernization, low level of employability, less incompetence in interacting with the international market sphere, lack of opportunities to integrate into the international supply chains, the decline of the tourism industry, limited collaborations with international communities, fewer development opportunities etc. were identified as the major negative results incurred due to incompetency of English language (Brunfaut & Green, 2019). Therefore, identifying the strategies and developing a productive educational platform to enhance proficiency in the English language requires thorough consideration and implementation of immediate actions.

Literature Review

Sri Lankan society consists of socio-cultural and socio-economic diversities allowing it to exist as a stratified system and those differentiations and inequalities have fabricated distinct identities for the individuals. Thus, these identities design and define the social status of a person and determine his or her social space and capability to access and achieve the favourable aspects of society. Within this setting the English language functions as an identity formation tool which enables individuals to advance towards positive social recognition (Amarasooriya, 2017).

In Sri Lankan social context English has been assigned several validities within diverse communal groups and the attitudes that the individuals have towards English tend to vary to a greater extent depending on the societal diversities.

As Wijeratne (2015) draws attention to the significance of this phenomenon, 'In present-day Sri Lanka, the government is dedicated to providing an English education to its entire population, with new language policies giving high importance to English as a language of international importance.'

Exposure to globalization and the recognized status assigned to the English Language as the lingua franca has persuaded the Sri Lankan education system to consider English as the medium of instruction. Thus, schools and universities adopted several measures to restructure their curricula incorporating English as the medium of instruction (Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012). According to the World Bank (2009), the lack of English language proficiency, especially the lack of communicative competence in English among Sri Lankan graduates and undergraduates has been identified as a major deficiency since that issue impacts their employability negatively. This leads graduates to be unemployed since the labour market

especially the private sector demands a high level of English language proficiency in recruiting employees. The tourism, IT and business sectors give prominence to the English language since that is the main component through which the linkages can be developed with the international market and other global bodies. In dealing with multinational companies, English functions as a bridging language which interconnects all the international branches with the main company. As the language of international communication and business, the penetration of English into Sri Lankan society has created a high demand for English proficiency among Sri Lankans and has paved the way for educational institutes to develop diverse English programmes to enhance the English language skills of school students and undergraduates (Brunfaut & Green, 2019; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012).

Development of English education programmes requires prior investigation into the current social demand and recognition given to the English language, diverse proficiency levels of students, students' perceptions about the mastery of the English language, limitations that exist in enabling students to obtain high proficiency levels in English, language components and areas in which students show poor performance and specific language requirements of the students. When the prevailing social condition is properly identified, inventing a strategic approach will be more productive. According to a test of English proficiency conducted by the Post Graduate Institute of English to measure the proficiency levels of undergraduates in Management/Accountancy, Social Sciences, Engineering and Science, it was identified that English writing was the weakest area that students need to focus on improving. Further, graduates with an art degree and also from a rural background encountered challenges in competing in the job market and obtaining employment due to their incompetence in the English language and lack of confidence. Moreover, individuals who completed their secondary or tertiary education

in Sinhala or Tamil languages also encountered marginalization due to their incompetence in English (Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012).

Society employs language as a measuring device to evaluate the validity of an identity of a person within specific social strata to accept or negate one's existence within the community. Within the social system where diverse social classes exist with their particular characteristics, several conflicting relationships can be observed among the groups. While the larger social group maintains the authority upholding their cultural and social identities, their language is given a dominant role thus implementing it as the main language of education, business, law, politics etc. As a result of this authoritative status offered to the role of language, it operates as one of the guarding gates which grant permission to the individual to enter into the prestigious dominant social class. As a result of this social milieu the individuals who use minor unrecognized languages and who are incompetent in the dominant language are marginalized and downgraded.

'.....I take the position that power does not operate only at the macro level of powerful institutions such as the legal system, the education system and the social welfare system, but also at the micro level of everyday social encounters between people with differential access to symbolic and material resources – encounters that are inevitably produced within language' (Norton, 2000).

Consequently, the National Education Commission identified the necessity to strengthen English education in Sri Lanka and expand opportunities in universities to introduce novel English education programmes to produce more employable graduates who can distinguish themselves in the job market (Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012). Further several issues were noted in relation to the facilities and the quality of English education in Sri Lanka. Thus, it was brought to the attention that the English training

that is provided through GCE Ordinary and Advanced level curricula is not standard since they are at the elementary level and certificate programmes in English do not provide quality language training to enhance communicative competence in English to enable individuals to meet the international standards (Brunfaut & Green, 2009). Hence, emphasis can be placed on the necessity of developing a more advanced and quality English education programme with a standard curriculum while adhering to the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework with the objective of improving the employability of graduates to meet the demands in the national and international labour market.

Methodology

Within the secondary data collection process, the information was gathered and analysed discursively based on selected secondary sources of information. Consequently, 20 research studies, scholarly articles in indexed journals, reports and books that were published from 1987 to 2022 on the subjects of second language learning, the significance of the English language in improving the employability of graduates and the role of English in the Sri Lankan context etc were referred. The key words such as the importance of BA in English degree programme, English and employability, English in the Sri Lankan university system, the vitality of literary studies, modern language modules, English and labour market etc. were utilized.

In discussing the pivotal themes and issues in relation to second language learning, identity and the dominant role of English as the international language, the fundamental theories were applied focusing on the formation of social identities of the individuals through the influence of learning English as a second language. Consequently, the theoretical perspectives and ideologies of Bonny Norton, Benedict Anderson, David Block, Pierre Bourdieu, Chris Weedon, Zoltan Dornyei, Susan M. Gass, and Larry Selinker etc. were

given thorough consideration in applying those concepts to critically analyse the contemporary phenomena and consequences in relation to the process of learning English as a second language. Further, analysis of the secondary sources was conducted by categorizing the selected information thematically and summarizing significant details, synthesizing and drawing conclusions.

Results

English as a constructive and influential societal tool has been utilized as a fundamental criterion within the Sri Lankan context to allow individuals to access higher social positions, fabricate new identities and elevate their identities within the social hierarchy. Accordingly, English and higher education maintain an intimate linkage within the university system since the medium of teaching and learning mostly happens to be English and it is one of the most advanced and recognized places for individuals to enhance and empower themselves with English knowledge. Thus, the perspectives of the undergraduates with regard to the impact of English on higher education are vital since they have been familiarizing themselves with English since their primary and secondary education and they have encountered diverse social experiences in relation to the role of English within the Sri Lankan social context. The research studies conducted in the area of second language learning and the dominant role of the English language and its impact on career mobility (Amarasooriya, 2017; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012), observe that the majority of the undergraduates believed that a high level of proficiency in English is the most required and decisive factor for career advancement. According to Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe (2012), 93% of the respondents were of the opinion that excellence in English communication skills is highly required to secure attractive employment while 98% stated that proficiency in English enables individuals to compete with improved employability in obtaining varied employment

opportunities. Moreover, 72% of the respondents mentioned that a high level of English language competency influences career advancement. As Amarasooriya (2017) stated 92% of the undergraduates who participated in the research had the positive perspective that English is highly necessary for pursuing higher education. Further, it was observed that less proficiency in English create social barriers for undergraduates to aspire to achieve their goals and that limitation restrict their career mobility and choice (Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012).

A Bachelor of Arts in English degree can be identified as the most productive educational programme in providing students with a greater improvement from communicative competence to the mastery level of English proficiency (Sárdi, 2014). According to the University of IOWA (2013), a degree in English language and literature gives a prime focus on developing the skills that are required to obtain personal and economic success. Those skills are excellent reading skills while focusing on textual details, analytical thinking, effective communication skills both in oral and written methods, critical thinking skills, research skills, creativity, English language skills, ability to develop new ideas and projects, technology skills in pedagogy, teaching skills etc. (López & Velázquez, 2019; University of IOWA, 2013). It was observed that graduates with a BA in English are given more preference than conventional business-minded graduates since English graduates are identified as super thinkers, individuals with teamwork skills, problem solvers with rich analytical skills and risk takers who handle challenges strategically. These skills were defined as not only vital and impressive for employers, but also essential skills to enrich human lives (University of IOWA, 2013). Contrary to the general and traditional courses of study which produce graduates who are unable to cope with the evolving trends of the global world and who are unable to adhere to the changes in the modern context, the English course of study aims to cultivate the potential in

the graduates to critically analyse the real world scenarios and lead them to be socially engaged individuals who can interpret multiple viewpoints and perspectives (University of IOWA, 2013).

Amidst the number of employment opportunities that BA graduates are qualified for, the teaching/lecturing profession is highly popular and recognized. The English degree programme provides graduates with technical skills as well as transferable skills to become competent teachers with profound pedagogical knowledge. Thus, the knowledge and practice of curriculum planning, assessment, reflective teaching, innovative teaching strategies, language acquisition and classroom management which are needed by professional teachers (Borg, 2006) are provided by the English course of study (López & Velázquez, 2019). The undergraduates who follow the BA English degree programme are expected to develop communication skills in English and other competencies which are needed for lifelong learning. Further, enhancing autonomy, adaptability, and ability to handle responsibilities while focusing on training students to develop language skills to enhance their teaching skills and perform effectively in diverse workplaces are considered beneficial attributes of the BA English degree programme (López & Velázquez, 2019). Students gain the ability to improve their critical thinking skills through engaging with self-reflection, questioning the ideas presented in texts and thinking differently moving away from the traditional pattern of learning. Research skill is another major component which is given focus in the English course of study since research skills are needed for students to investigate educational issues and other social issues which require their attention. It was observed that the majority of the graduates of the BA English degree programme became autonomous (López & Velázquez, 2019) and during the programme, the students are encouraged to develop autonomy in decision-making and attending real-world situations. The development of language skills can be recognized as one of the most vital effects

of the programme and graduates have become more confident in their language skills which can directly have a positive impact on their career choice and mobility. Another significant aspect of the BA English degree programme is it aims at developing the motivation of the graduates towards continuous professional development. Thus, with motivation and guidance provided by the English course of study, graduates become inspired to follow post-graduate programmes such as MA and PhDs since that provides them with the opportunity to expand their knowledge in the field, gain a deeper understanding of the subject area and engage in research work.

Discussion

Literature studies are considered an integral part of the BA English curriculum since they can be considered a source which triggers social empowerment and develops critical and analytical skills while enabling them to perceive the world through diverse perspectives. Further, it was emphasized by several scholars that English literature possesses the scope of studying the nature of literary narratives, the usage of language and the reflection on culture. It has the potential to strengthen the development of self-knowledge, self-expression and, most importantly, enhance democratic citizenship (Dodou, 2020). The intersection between studying literature and the value of higher education has to be properly analysed in identifying the areas of literary studies that should be included in the higher education curriculum. The nature, value and purpose of studying literature and the knowledge that is disseminated through the course of study should be properly defined before the curriculum development. Further, strategic decisions need to be taken on what subject areas should be taught, which specific knowledge should be disseminated and the composition of the curriculum should logically reflect and answer the question 'Why study literature' (Dodou, 2020). According to Dodou (2020), the majority of the BA English degree programmes offer

introductions to Literature in the first year and they are comprised of modern and contemporary literature modules. The second-year modules tend to teach survey courses in literary history focusing on literature from the Renaissance to the 20th century. The third year focuses on teaching the BA thesis courses and specialised thematic courses in literature. Thematic literary modules aspired to teach literary history, theory and criticism. Along with that academic writing modules and introductory theory modules are offered to enhance literary studies. The literature modules aim at developing knowledge about literary genres and themes, improving disciplinary knowledge on engaging with literary texts, interpreting cultural expressions and enhancing the contextual knowledge of culture, socio-historical events, phenomena and perspectives. Further through the development of contextual knowledge and understanding of the diverse cultural milieus, the students improve their awareness of global issues and phenomena. The BA in English degree focuses on incorporating literary conventions and literary characteristics of modernism, post-modernism, realism, renaissance and romantic literature. Further, thematic modules such as postcolonial literature, world literature and courses on genre fiction such as children's literature are included (Dodou, 2020). Through teaching literature modules, students are given the understanding that literary work provides complex responses to intellectual, cultural and material conditions. Further students are enabled to analyse the literary works based on the knowledge they have of the literary periods, conventions and characteristics. Significantly literary studies prioritize guiding students to investigate and observe cultural mentalities and socio-political matters with rationalistic and innovative approaches. Thus, they inspire them to realize how literature reflects and addresses social realities such as identity, ideology and equality (Dodou, 2020). Another significance of English curricula is they give more attention to developing critical reading and interpretation skills of the students guiding them to read the

literary texts more closely and sensitively (Dodou, 2020). The majority of the BA English curriculums emphasize the significance of theory and theoretical applications for literature studies. According to Dodou (2020), the following theories such as Postcolonial theory, Literary and cultural theory, Gender studies, Feminist theory, Narrative theory, Poststructuralism, Cultural studies, Ecocriticism, Postmodernist theory, Psychoanalytic theory, Marxism, Structuralism are mostly used in the curricula. Through teaching theoretical approaches, students' ability to identify the theories in the social, cultural and ideological contexts and comprehend the theoretical approaches in diverse socio-cultural contexts are enhanced. This inspires them to engage in applying the theoretical approaches more argumentatively in analyzing sociocultural and political matters, expanding their intellectual capacity.

Familiarizing the students with the cultural context, histories and values of English-speaking societies is promoted through literature modules and by allowing them to understand the multicultural elements in the English world, their ability to develop literary analysis on the social conditions, cultural mentalities and political ideologies of those communities is strengthened. (Dodou, 2020). The development of language skills was identified as a dominant practice in English literary studies since it provides the students with the opportunity to enhance their oral communication and writing skills. The production of literary analysis, criticisms and interpretations are utilized to reflect the students' standard of language.

The computational linguistics incorporated into BA English degree programmes standardizes the programme's quality and intensifies its advanced practicality since computational linguistics has emerged as an interdisciplinary field through the interrelation between linguistics and computer science (Seddiki, 2022). Computational linguistics as a module which

is in the intersection of the humanities and hard sciences such as computer science, mathematics, engineering etc. provides the learners with the potential to address the language demands and challenges in language production. This enables the learners to be familiarised with utilizing techniques, systems, methods and applications to create computer models to generate, understand, analyze and synthesise the natural language (Ahmad, 2022; Seddiki, 2022). Since language is the main and most natural mode of communication, using computer systems to facilitate language production assists language learners and teachers in achieving teaching and learning objectives. Further, by being specialists in computational linguistics with expertise in linguistics, the learners can design innovative programmes to produce and treat natural language through computer systems since that discipline encompasses the areas of study of languages, morphology and syntax (Seddiki, 2022).

The area of computational linguistics comprises main components such as speech recognition, speech synthesis, machine translation and dialogue systems. Enhancing knowledge in these fields enables the learners to comprehend the application of computer programmes to generate and produce natural language, transform written form into spoken form and translate one language to another. Further, through gaining exposure to both linguistics and computer science, the learners improve their potential to engage in designing computer systems to analyse texts, produce automatic machine translations, comprehend human language and analyze and organize words for social media and internet use (Seddiki, 2022). Moreover, the learners will gain the competency to utilize computers to comprehend, produce and implement linguistic theories while explaining the fundamental strategies for generating and interpreting natural languages. Most significantly, the promising area of Computer Assisted Language Learning develops knowledge of the students on the usability of the computer for

language teaching and learning process. This field focuses on enabling students to design programmes using computer applications to assist individuals in learning foreign languages (Seddiki, 2022). Hence computational linguistics as an emerging science in the current educational sphere, strengthens the quality of the BA Hons in English degree programme by facilitating the coordination between the two disciplines, linguistics and computer science, in producing an innovative language teaching and learning platform which is embedded with computer applications and programs.

The BA (Hons) English degree programme with the suitability, validity and applicability of the modules in addressing the global demands and challenges, can be upheld as a degree programme which has the potency to contribute to the pedagogy by creating an innovative and creative educational environment that can produce graduates with the employability skills, critical thinking, self-autonomy, analytical skills, competency in computer science and creativity.

Conclusion

The significance of the English language continues to evolve in the Sri Lankan context along with the favourable attitudes that the undergraduates hold towards the English language, and they uphold the common perspective that a high level of proficiency in English is a prerequisite if they need to attain greater academic performance. Further, society perceives the necessity of improving the English language competency of the younger generation while providing them with the necessary awareness of the vitality of the English language as the lingua franca and the language of business in enhancing their employability in the local and global labour market. However, within the Sri Lankan context, the steps and strategies that were implemented in facilitating students with a solid platform to learn English to address the global demands appeared to be less satisfactory and inadequate to

reach the expected level. Therefore, expanding opportunities for students to follow BA (Hons) in English degree programme will be the key to producing graduates who can be empowered to expand the Sri Lankan economy to reach the global territories by addressing the trends

of the international markets, adapting to the foreign cultural demands, strengthening foreign relationships, expanding the business networks, applying modern technology and facilitating the cross-cultural communication.

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