

English for Employability – the need of the hour for Sri Lankan graduates

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Abstract

Education is a determining factor that plays a major role in identifying whether a country is moving towards development. In Sri Lanka, one factor that plays a pivotal role, especially in the service industry, is the competency of English, especially the spoken and written skills in facilitating the employability of graduates into both the private and public sectors. A good English language proficiency amongst graduates enhances their employability and is a gateway to the world of work-readiness which will attract the attention of prospective employers. This situation has arisen due to the fact that English has been recognized as a lingua franca in today's globalized world with its free market economies. However there have been recurring complaints from employers in Sri Lanka, especially in the service sector that business graduates on the threshold of employment lack proficiency in English language skills, especially the spoken skill. Graduates from State universities in Sri Lanka have proved themselves to be workplace ready in respect of their subject knowledge but, when compared with their counterparts from private universities, are sadly lacking in their English proficiency. This leaves the employers with Hobson's choice in employing graduates from private universities, thereby causing a major social impact in the population which results from unemployment. This article which could be considered as a review of literature which focuses on the theoretical norms of the employability of graduates, provides insights as to how this crucial issue could be better addressed.

Key words: English language, Graduates' Employability; Employer Expectation

Introduction

The need to enhance employability skills and English competency amongst graduates is an ongoing crisis that is being faced by policy makers, employers and graduates alike. Research has revealed that there is a serious unemployment problem amongst graduates due to the lack of English skills and competency. The English language is considered as a stepping stone along the pathway to securing employment and Ranasinghe (2012) is of the view that English is a means for the acquisition of employment, power and privilege in society.

Globalization in the 21st century has interconnected the world in every aspect, whether social, political or cultural, and opened unmatched opportunities in every sphere, and the English language plays an important pivotal role of lingua franca in this uniting process. As such, English is gaining momentum as being recognized as a Global unifying language and a bonding force which is found in a variety of domains. The business world is no exception. Omar (2005) suggests that employers have expectations of suitable English skills that graduates should possess upon completion of their course of study at tertiary level in order to narrow down the existing gaps. Omar further adds that most graduates are ill-equipped to face the challenges that lie before them in the competitive and vast job market due to the fact that they lack competence in the English language. This serves as an impediment in securing a job as employers have certain pre-conceived notions of what prospective employees should possess by way of language skills required for gainful employment. Omar reiterates the fact that, whilst employers are on the lookout for graduates who possess qualities such as leadership skills, computer literacy, confidence and motivation, enthusiasm and initiative, in addition to good academic credentials, they place high priority on graduates who possess good communication and interpersonal skills together with excellent written and spoken English skills, as employees who are able to communicate lucidly with counterparts and customers in English are an asset to any organization. Kachru (1983) recognized English as having an international functional range whilst accommodating diverse forms of literary activity. According to Pride (1982), looking to the future, the English language should not be thought of as something which has been imposed from outside, but rather, be accepted from within. Indeed in the 21st century, this has surely come to pass, pole-vaulting English into the driving seat on a wave of acceptance, globally, by people of varied linguistic backgrounds and from diverse sections of the world.

The Past Affecting the Present

Adikaram (1979) emphasized the fact that university education in Sri Lanka should give priority to developing all aspects of human life. In this scenario, English plays a lead role in today's globalized world as a unifying force for the betterment of international relations between nations. The poor standard of English amongst today's youth in Sri Lanka stems from a political move way back in the 1950s. In 1948, when Sri Lanka gained independence from the British, English was established as the language of the elite and a language that paved the way to acquire power and privilege in society. English was the medium of instruction in institutions of primary, secondary and tertiary learning in Sri Lanka, as well as being the official language which was used to conduct all government and business transactions. However, a change in political power in 1956 saw the Official Languages Act of 1956 being enacted and this brought about a decline in the status that English had thus far enjoyed in society in Sri Lanka. This was followed by the medium of instruction in schools and universities being converted to Swabasha (Sinhalese and Tamil), and all private schools were universities were absorbed into the education system that came under the purview of the State. This move brought about limitations in occupational mobility and the dominant role that the English language had played thus far diminished, thereby creating a segment of society, namely the youth, monolingual. The significant yet negative impact that this political

move had on universities is seen even today, where a majority of graduates face an uphill task in securing employment despite their subject knowledge competence, due to the fact that they lack communicative competence in English, and are thereby rejected by employers. In this 21st century, the problem seems to have been compounded due to the fact that, upon rejection by employers as a result of a lack in competency in English, there is an acute problem of unemployment amongst the youth in Sri Lanka who feel inferior at their inability to compete for the available jobs in the market owing to the lack of communication skills in English. Serasinghe (2007) highlights the fact that there have been instances where youth who have completed their tertiary education in Sinhalese or Tamil have been marginalized in employment.

Sri Lanka witnessed two revolts by the youth of the nation in 1971 and 1988-1989. Many critics are of the view that one of the reasons that led to these revolts was unemployment amongst youth which brings with it a gamut of other problems such as frustration, and a feeling of segregation and deprivation and unequal opportunity (Fernando, 2002; Hettige, 2007; Serasinghe, 2007). However, there are a privileged few in society that have enjoyed an English medium education, having gone through the portals of currently growing international schools and private universities which are affiliated to foreign universities where the medium of instruction is English, and this in turn has caused a division in society based on education, as the chances of this minority securing employment is high. (Ranasinghe, 2011).

Facilitating Graduate Employability

Employability is defined by Yorke and Knight (2003) as “A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” The need to augment graduate employability is a pressing need in the ambit of tertiary education in Sri Lanka. As such the skills that go hand in glove with the imparting of subject knowledge to students at institutes of tertiary education are of prime importance as, they will help in shaping the individual into a work-ready graduate who is able to function as a productive and responsible citizen. The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) highlighted the fact that one of the main objectives of higher education is to get students ready for the world of work which is the arena where they will put into practice all that they have assimilated in their years of study at the university. As such this will be the platform for them to display nonspecific qualities such as the ability to work in a team, possess interpersonal skills, exhibit confidence, be moral, be willing to learn, display problem-solving skills, demonstrate computer literacy and be competent in English language skills, coupled with their subject-specific knowledge.

It is therefore necessary to create a market-driven tertiary education system which incorporates needs analysis and thereby empowers the 21st century graduate to be work-ready and uplift his/her organization in the business environment. Lee et al, (2001), cited in Quek, (2005) articulates the fact that employees with generic capabilities such as leadership skills and interpersonal skills, teamwork and oral and written English skills are much sought after by employers. Research further enunciates the fact that English language competency is of prime importance in deciding if a graduate is employable or not: The Curtin Business School carried out a Professional Skills Project and gathered feedback from stakeholders belonging to a variety of disciplines, and compiled them to form learning outcome objectives such as communication competency (which included speaking and presentations skills and writing in English), computer literacy, information literacy, the ability to think critically and solve problems, be ethical and sensitive to intercultural dimensions, be able to work as a team, and possess decision-making skills. (Harpe et al, 2000). Similarly, in a previous study, skills such

as communication skills, problem solving skills, decision-making and leadership skills, and analytical skills required for the effective working of managers were identified by the Nijenrode University (Everwijn et al, 1993). In all these examples, the basic generic skill - the ability to communicate effectively in English plays a pivotal role in the assessing of the suitability of graduates for gainful employment. Thus the onus is on institutions of tertiary education to focus on this significant and the vital attribute in their course curriculum so as to release into the job market graduates who are employable and are able to communicate in a way suitable to the graduate's discipline, the audience and the purpose.

In Sri Lanka most of the academia attached to the tertiary level education system are focused only with producing results in the various disciplines; this particular attribute will not produce an all-rounder, but one who is widely knowledgeable in his/her field of study. As such this will not produce a work-ready graduate who is sought after by the employer. This poses the question as to whether graduates released into the industry upon successful completion of their course of study are equipped with both the subject knowledge and the skills required by the industry to be gainfully employed and therefore an asset to the organization to which they belong. According to Lee (2002), "Being employed means having a job, being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the work place."

English – the driving force

In today's global world, English can be considered as being the language of the world due to its wide acceptance as being the vehicle of communication that can transcend all barriers, and learning the language and being fluent in it, especially for those on the threshold of employment is a necessity. Being knowledgeable and fluent in English is undoubtedly a powerful tool that can bring about personal as well as global advancement and development. Short et al (2001) are of the view that if one is to be competitive and successful in the global market, the ability to speak in English is an imperative. According to *The Economist* (2001), in today's world, fluency in English has been termed as a basic skill of modern life, and has been compared to being able to use a computer or drive a car. Further, the modern trend in the business world is global interactions in the business world and this has acted as a stimulant for proficiency in English communication across borders, thereby making the language a universal tongue. Skapinker (2007) is of the view that "It is not just that Microsoft, Google and Vodafone conduct their business in English; it is the language in which Chinese speak to Brazilians and Germans to Indonesians." Due to the fact that many companies are seeking expansion multi-nationally, English has been elevated to the position of a common corporate language in order to bring about an economic integration and a closer networking in the global business environment. Thus a good English proficiency will undoubtedly open up vistas and pave the way for graduate employability and better equip graduate performance in especially the service sector.

There is a demand for English medium education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Sri Lanka. The policy proposal for educational reforms put forward by the National Education Commission (2009) acknowledged the fact that it was vital to build up the English medium education in both State schools and State universities where teaching English requires being well-versed in the four skills, namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, this has encountered problems due to the fact that there is a dearth of trained instructors in English in Sri Lanka and as such, the fundamental problem of increasing the English proficiency remains unsolved. Additionally there are conflicting views amongst experts in the field of English language about which kind of English is more suitable to the Sri Lankan society. Parakrama (2005) is of the view that the use of 'Sri Lankan English' for both writing and speaking is more apt, and that the 'standard English' or 'British English'

used by the British, is less important in post-colonial Sri Lanka. However, there is another school of thought amongst scholars which promotes the thinking that, by resorting to the use of 'Sri Lanka' English, the standard and quality of 'British English' will be weakened. They are of the view that those speaking the 'Sri Lankan English' variety will be less competitive in the global employment market (Fonseka, 2003). However, the Presidential Secretariat, having realized the gravity of the situation, whereby a majority of graduates pass out of institutions of tertiary education with a lack of competency in the English language, has come forward with a programme titled 'The Presidential Initiative on English as a Life Skill' and has opted to accept the fact that English can be learnt in a way which is suitable to Sri Lankans.

The 'Presidential Initiative on English as a Life Skill' was launched in 2009 with the aim of making a breakthrough in fostering the spoken English skill amongst teachers and school children from rural schools (Sunday Times, 2013). International Standard English is accepted in Sri Lanka as the official written form of the English language; however the 'English as a Life Skill' programme has placed emphasis on the spoken English skill to promote communication and thereby facilitate employability and enable graduates to gain access to the world of knowledge and technology. Yet, the fact remains that there is a problematic situation with regard to the improving of the English proficiency amongst school leavers and undergraduates in Sri Lanka. To compound the situation, some institutions of tertiary education in Sri Lanka, especially management faculties have shifted from the vernacular and adopted English language as the medium of instruction without providing adequate facilities to teach English to undergraduates.

This will undoubtedly complicate the already existing problem in that, the performance of undergraduates whose proficiency in English is low, will be seriously affected. It is therefore crucial that a solution to this grave problem which can trigger a series of other difficult situations such as unemployment amongst graduates and the non-acceptance of local graduates into post-graduate programmes in foreign universities due to their lack of competency in English, be found before it is too late. The onus therefore is on teachers of English and policy makers to recognize the challenges they are faced with in this rapidly changing scenario and equip themselves to face reality whereby they need to shape syllabi and course content in order that they can contribute to the producing of builders of the nation by enhancing the employability of young graduates. Hence it could be said that English which the role of being a driving force that lunges the graduate forward into gainful employment, is a global language that is a secondary mother tongue to peoples of all nations irrespective of their mother tongue.

Employer Expectations

Communication and teamwork skills have been highlighted as two important attributes that employers expect of prospective graduate employees (Coldstream, 1991). According to a study conducted among 52 business institutions, 90% of them enunciated the fact that the most important skill that a graduate should possess is the communication skill. (Gunawardena, 1997). Ariyawansa and Perera (2005) have highlighted the fact that two crucial factors that determine whether a graduate is employable or not are English proficiency and IT skills. In another study done by Gunawardena (1997), on the relationship between education and employment opportunities, the findings revealed that a majority of the respondents who were employers for State, semi State and private sector establishments in Sri Lanka were of the view that communication skills are the most expected skills when deciding if graduates are employable or not. Thus it could be said that, in addition to important skills such as computer skills, experience/training, leadership and decision making skills, team work and interpersonal skills, and problem solving and analytical skills, expected from a

graduate to display work-readiness, employers are on the lookout for graduates who possess suitable communication skills in English in order to compete with and liaise with international business associates. The responsibility, therefore, of formulating a cohesive and comprehensive curriculum at university level, whereby an all-rounded graduate is nurtured and released into the job market, rests on the shoulders of academics, teachers and administrative authorities of universities in Sri Lanka.

English for Employability

Yorke (2006) defines employability as a “multi-faceted characteristic of a person, a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” English, which can be considered as an international language and the most dominant language in the world plays an important role as a tool of communication both locally and globally, having gained the status of being recognized as the global medium for business and communication. According to Nesa (2004, p.8) “English [is] the lingua franca of business, commerce, science, arts, literature of the whole world.” Therefore it is vital that today’s graduates be well versed in English in order to increase their employment opportunities, be able to use and communicate via the internet, communicate with foreigners, increase their knowledge and travel to other countries and thereby widen their horizons in their future lives and bring empowerment to their lives. Proficiency in English will undoubtedly increase employability by boosting basic skills to get, keep and do well in a job.

Thus a wake-up call has been given to stake-holders who wield authority to provide the suitable infrastructure to increase the English skills in graduates in order that the industry and the economy will benefit, and be able to give out as well as receive from both local and international stakeholders. It is imperative that measures be taken to close the gap between the language classroom and skills that are crucial for employment, and provide an employability-oriented education especially at tertiary level. For this, a needs analysis pertaining to competency in English must be conducted in order to ascertain the requirements of the industry, and this information must be brought into the classroom and made known to both teachers and students.

This requires the close working between employers and institutions of tertiary education in order that the gap in respect of a lack of English competency be bridged. Creating a learner-centered classroom atmosphere coupled with the needs of the industry, and thereby implementing a holistic integrated approach to teaching English at tertiary level, will, over time, facilitate the linking together of a variety of aspects concerning the enhancing of English language competency amongst graduates and undoubtedly bring about a solution to this increasing problem of unemployment. Additionally, focusing on the final goal of producing an employable graduate will ease the burden placed on employers to train their staff in English, with the additional benefit that these graduates will be an asset to their employers and, at a personal level, be able to forge ahead with their career advancement.

Today, more graduates are aware of the crucial role that English plays in helping them be gainfully employed and it is essential that teachers of English and policy makers thrive on this positive attitude to meet the needs of both the employer and the graduate. Regardless of their social background, graduates have come to the realization that, without being competent in English, they will not be able to find suitable employment. English has thus been accepted as being a vehicle that will bring about change in the lives of graduates. The language is also gaining a strong position in institutions of tertiary education in Sri Lanka as being essential to perform better in higher studies and to secure suitable employment. It is therefore the need of the hour that teachers of English at tertiary level, strive against all odds to transform young

graduates into professionals who are competent, confident, skilled and proficient in the English language.

Conclusion

Players in the team of ‘employability’ of graduates need to work together towards a common goal – organizing the various team-members to play their part with the ultimate aim of achieving the goal set before them. Having identified the English proficiency problem well in advance, all the team members comprising students, employers, university authorities, teachers of language teaching and curriculum designers need to come together, to address the problems at hand and find lasting solutions that will benefit all parties concerned and the economy of Sri Lanka. Having identified the needs analysis of the industry, focusing towards achieving these targets will undoubtedly see a rise in the performance of industries both locally and globally and bring down the graduate unemployment statistics in Sri Lanka. The present trend among all stakeholders is that the English language ranks high at universities, as the importance of a good English proficiency to secure a respectable job and achieve greater opportunities in higher studies, has been highlighted. Learning a lesson from the past, Sri Lanka needs to forge ahead with plans to improve the English competency amongst graduates, thereby minimizing the chances of producing disgruntled graduates who are unemployable and dissatisfied employers who are unable to contribute to the growth and progress of the nation.

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