

Anoma A. Gunawardana, J.A.M. Buddhima Karunaratna,
University of Vocational Technology, Sri Lanka mailanug86@gmail.com,
contactbuddhima@gmail.com

1. Abstract

It is a widely held perception that English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka is a failure. Although several implementations were made in recent years to remedy the issues pertaining to English language teaching and learning, achieving the expected objectives was a failure. Teachers of English being the most important stakeholders in English language teaching, their contribution to these failures are significant. Out of several reasons it is apparent that teachers' skills, professional knowledge, perceptions and pedagogic practice all contribute to the failure in ELT. Therefore, it is of vital importance that teachers should be equipped with innovative pedagogic skills deviating from traditional in – service training programs. An independent method which undoubtedly contributes to the improvement of teaching, and professional development is carrying out 'research', where teachers experiment and reflect on the problem, reason and solutions. Hence, this study examines to which extent teachers are aware and exposed to research, which teachers can apply in their working contexts. A variety of research instruments was used for data collection with final year undergraduates of the Bachelor of Education in ELT degree of the University of Vocational Technology, possessing several years of English language teaching experience. The results of the study revealed that majority of teachers were not aware and exposed to any research related to ELT during their

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career. They often reacted negatively to the suggestion that they can use teacher research to support their professional development. However, with the completion of a mini research, students emphasized that, research help them to develop professionally and academically, enabling them to reflect upon their own teaching, creating a positive attitude and encouraging them to experiment new ideas in teaching. Therefore, motivating teachers to engage in research would make teaching an evidence-based profession making English language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka a success.

2. Introduction and research problem/issue

It is a widely held perception that ELT in Sri Lanka is still a failure being unable to achieve its anticipated objectives. It is evident since the last few decades by student performance at the two major examinations GCE (O/L) and GCE (A/L). For instance, according to the Examinations Department, in 2015 the GCE O/L and A/L English language failure rate was 54.6% and 60.81% respectively. However, it is also an undeniable truth that even after completing nearly ten years of English language learning, students cannot use the language in a proficient level.

English could decide the future of our lives. Millions of children all over the world spend years studying the language. Sri Lanka is no different in this regard. English is the passport to a wealth and opportunity and an essential requirement for almost every profession. Therefore, teachers have a fundamental role in their learners'

academic achievement. Teachers of English being the most important stakeholders in English language teaching, their contribution to these failures are significant. Out of several reasons it is apparent that teachers' skills, professional knowledge, perceptions and pedagogic practice all contribute to failures in ELT. To remedy this situation, it is of vital importance that teachers should be equipped with innovative pedagogic skills deviating from traditional in – service training

programs. An independent method which undoubtedly contributes to improvement of teaching, and professional development is carrying out 'research', where teachers experiment and reflect on the problem, reason and solutions. At present, educational policies in many countries involve engaging classroom teachers more in educational research making teaching an evidence-based profession where findings of such research could heavily impact pedagogic practice.

Hence, this study examines to which extent teachers of English in Sri Lankan government schools are aware and exposed to research, which teachers can apply in their working contexts and how such research affect their quality of teaching.

3. Research Methodology

The research is of both qualitative and quantitative, since it would focus on the secondary data collected through the findings of previous researchers and primary data by questionnaires and focus group discussions.

The participants of the study are 35 student teachers of the Bachelor of Education in ELT degree programme of the University of Vocational Technology. They possess several years of experience teaching English as a second language in Sri Lankan government schools, making the degree an in-service teacher education and training

The questionnaires consisted of a range of closed and open ended questions. Closed questions took the form of Likert-scale and open-ended questions provided participants with the opportunity to add written qualitative comments. The questionnaire was piloted among six student teachers. Revisions were made to the questionnaire's length, wording and overall

structure in the light of their feedback. The closed data was analysed quantitatively via MS Excel software. Open responses to questionnaires and responses in focus group discussions which provided a further substantial were thematically categorized.

4. Results and findings

The results of the study revealed that although the majority of teachers possessed over twenty five years of experience in teaching English as a second language in the government school sector, they were not aware and exposed to any research related to ELT during their career. However, engaging in research as part of the degree program has helped them to develop professionally and academically, enabling them to reflect upon their own teaching, creating a positive attitude and encouraging them to experiment new ideas in teaching.

Analysing in-service teacher education opportunities provided for teachers of English showed that they have undergone several training programmes offered by institutes such as the Regional Educational Service Centre (RESC), Zonal Educational Office, and Ministry of Education, where they were not exposed to any research as means of improving quality of teaching and learning English in Sri Lankan school system. Through all programmes, the knowledge of 'outside experts' has been disseminated.

Regarding the research exposure of the 35 participants, 32.6% who possess the National Diploma in ELT from the National College of Education has conducted 'action research' as part of their course work. 6.1% of the participants were involved in various types of other research which were not related to ELT. 61.3% of the sample was not exposed to any kind of research previously which ascertains the facts that teaching is not an evidence-based profession in Sri Lanka making teachers autonomous in making changes and decisions to the teaching and learning process of the classroom.

Teachers often react negatively to the suggestion that they can use teacher research to support their professional development. According to the first focus group discussion session which was conducted before students engaged in research work, 81% did not like the idea of doing research, but they started doing research as a requirement for completing the degree. However, through the second focus group discussion session conducted after the commencement of the research, 97% of students emphasized that doing research on issues pertaining to teaching English in classrooms was useful and helpful to reflect on areas that went wrong, and find reasons and find practical remedial measures to problematic class room situations. 85% of student teachers were engaged in action research and the final focus group discussion revealed that the research is useful for teachers to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, improving their quality of teaching. Research is, hence, contributory to teaching and learning improvement, as well as teachers' professional development. Here, the teacher becomes the 'expert' who can make independent decisions experimenting new ideas in teaching.

Thus, the starting point for teacher research is a question that the teacher wants to learn more about or understand better. Although this initial question is often driven by a problem, teacher research is not simply a strategy for solving problems, but teachers may want to develop a better understanding of something that works well.

5. Conclusions, implications and significance

6.

In conclusion, it could be mentioned that although majority of teachers is not aware and exposed to research, their career will benefit in varying ways to professional development by engaging them in research. Teacher research has significant transformative potential in finding solutions for failures in English language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka

enhancing the quality of the teacher. Although, it is not the right or the only option to remedy the situation, incorporating workshops on research as in – service professional development programmes would make teaching an evidence-based profession making English language teaching in Sri Lanka a success, which will directly affect students enhancing their learning of the language.

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- * Corresponding Author: Anoma Gunawardana Tel: 071 8069802

E-mail Address: mailanug86@gmail.com
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