

# English Language Literacy Initiatives in the Institute of Human Resource Advancement (IHRA), University of Colombo (UoC), Sri Lanka

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**Abstract** - Being a colonial country under the British government for 150 years, Sri Lankans as a society familiar with English language. Recognizing that enhancing the literacy of English Language gives a better life, IHRA (UoC) has been in the process of improving the knowledge of English from the beginning. The undergraduates of IHRA, though they are considered as normal full-time students, are employed adults who have responsibilities in their working places as well as in the family. These responsibilities become barriers when it comes to both studying and reading materials. Since the people who were exposed to the Education system in Sri Lanka after 1956 are mainly mono-lingual the employed students also have to put extra effort to learn English. The library of the IHRA has taken several steps to motivate its students to borrow books in English from 1992 to 2011. But the statistics did not show whether there was an improvement of their borrowing books in English. Therefore a study was being carried out in 2011 and in 2013 it was repeated. The purpose of the survey was to find out the nature and extent of the usage of the materials in English of the BLE students in IHRA. To achieve this objective, a sample of students of IHRA engaged in higher studies while being employed was selected and a questionnaire was distributed among them to identify the demographic information, to examine the nature and extent of reading books in English and attitudes towards learning English. Though the majority of students have a positive attitude towards learning English, they do not tend to read in English. When compared to 2011, they did not even interested in indicating preferences if they get a chance to read in English. According to the survey results, the students were aware of the importance of learning English as well as other languages.

**Keywords:** Literacy of English, Learning English, Library usage

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a multi ethnic or multi cultural society, it will be difficult for each and every nationality to learn all the other languages used in a country. The debate still goes on whether to learn different languages or to promote one common language. Most of the societies can justify that the language of the majority should be the official language, but it has created problems in various countries including Sri Lanka. That is why Dr. Colvin R. De Silva said - One Language - two Nations and two Languages - one Nation. But today the situation is not simple as that.

In general, a country that has a diverse society adopts a policy of cultural pluralism which recognizes the language rights of minorities, while at the same time working on forming a common cultural identity. When doing that, the policy makers face number of problems related to all aspects as well as choosing official language/s.

1. Should one language be identified as official language while other languages recognized as other languages?
2. Should all languages be given official status?

Whatever decision that the policy makers take, the reality is that it is not easy for each and every person to learn three, four or more languages. In various countries it is accepted that language pluralism is the most democratic and the sensible approach for multilingual societies. But there are other options too. The countries like USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand with lot of migrants, the second generation children those growing up in immigrant households are bilingual -that means most speak an immigrant language at home while being proficient in English. But the third generation children are mostly mono lingual - that means they speak only English at home. They are highly unlikely be bilinguals as their adults.

France on the other hand has a different kind of story. After the French revolution, French became the only language used in schools, administration and social life in general. Though some minority groups protested, that policy was successful in France. But some other countries failed in this implicit policy, including Sri Lanka. The government of Mr. S.W. R.D. Bandaranayake made Sinhalese as the official language in 1956 and that decision created a number of problems after that.

Being a colonial country under British government for 150 years, we as a society familiar with English Language though we have different opinions towards the language. Today in general, the society accepts its value as a medium of gaining knowledge/ information and more opportunities in life. Recognizing that enhancing the literacy of English Language leads to a better life, IHRA ( Institute of Workers' Education (IWE) till 2008. ), UoC has been in the process of enhancing the LoEL for some decades from 1970s. With the introduction of the open economy in 1977 and the consequent expansion of the private sector, a huge demand for English educated employees was created. Being aware of the need of the society, IWE introduced several short term English courses during that period(Perera,2000). According to the requests of the government and private sector employers, a special English course was designed and conducted in organizations such as Ministry of Youth affairs, Ministry of Education, Department of Irrigation, Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Board, Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Cement Corporation, Lake House, C.W.E., Ceylon Cold Stores, John Keells and Hayleys Ltd. In addition to those

two courses, another course named English for All has been introduced in the Dinamina newspaper in collaboration with the Lake House. At present a Certificate Course in English Language is conducted in three levels by IHRA.

The undergraduates of the IHRA, though they are studying while working are considered as normal full time students. In the University, employed students doing their first degree are very much different from other full time undergraduates who are without formal work affiliations and responsibilities of the family. But the undergraduates who are also employed have to perform designated roles in the working places as well as in the family. These responsibilities sometimes turn to be barriers to employed students to find time for reading various materials such as books, journals and newspapers. Those exposed to the education system after 1956 are mainly monolingual - having learned only in the mother tongue. Therefore the employed students doing their first degree are not very much interested in reading various materials made available in the English Language.

Identifying the need of enhancing the LoEL among the BLE students, the library of IHRA/IWE has taken several steps to encourage them to borrow various library materials from 1970s.

#### ***A.Steps taken to enhance the knowledge of English of BLE students from 1992 to 2010 in the library context.***

##### ***1.Printing all the information of the official documents used by the library in English Language.***

Printing the library tickets, membership forms, spine labels, warning notices and book pockets in English was started in 1992. Earlier the official documents used by the library such as the library tickets, membership forms, spine labels etc. were printed in Sinhala language. The purpose of printing these documents in English was to make the BLE students, who read these materials, learn at least a few words in English.

##### ***2.Purchasing books related to English Language, Literature and various other subjects in English Language suitable for all age groups and all knowledge levels.***

The students of the IHRA belong to a very broad age group ranging from 20 to 60. Unlike the undergraduates of a University, the students of IHRA belong to various age groups – from teenagers to youth and adults. When building up a book collection for such a group to improve their knowledge of English language the library has to provide books suitable for various age groups and different knowledge levels. Considering this, the library has planned to develop the English collection in three aspects. Books related to English Grammar suitable for beginners who start learning English Language, who know English up to a certain level and those who know the language quite well, were added.

When selecting books related to English Literature too,

the library has considered that the English knowledge of these students are of various levels. The readings for elementary level, middle level and high level were added to the collection. A few classic novels were also added. When adding various additional readings in English language also, the different levels of knowledge in English was considered. For the same subject there are books belonging to various knowledge levels.

##### ***3.Purchasing books in English related to various popular subjects such as cookery, photography, sports etc.***

When building up the English collection the library has identified that as adults, the students of IHRA are interested in various subjects other than fiction. So, from the 1990 s it has gradually developed the collection with books belonging to various other subjects not related to their syllabus that are of interest.

##### ***4.Purchasing books relevant to small children.***

Since most of the students of IHRA are parents, the library has developed a collection for children hoping that the adult students will borrow books for their children too.

##### ***5.Purchasing popular titles related to English Fiction such as Hardy Boys series, Sweet Valley series, Harry Potter series etc.***

In 2000 the recruitment policy of the students was changed. Earlier, the employed students who had passed their O/L s and A/L s had to enroll to a five year degree program. After 2000, the employed students who had passed their GCE O/L could enroll for a four year degree program and the employed students who had passed their GCE A/L could enroll for a three year degree program. This meant that more young students within the age group of 18 – 25 were keen to join as students of IHRA. Earlier the age group of 35 – 60 were keen to follow the BLE degree.

To suit the teenage and youth age groups, the library also was keen to adjust its English collection by adding more fiction suited for teenagers and youth. First the Sweet Valley series and the Hardy Boys series were added, with some other popular novels. Gradually the novels of popular authors such as Dan Brown, Danielle Steel, Meg Cabot, Judy Blume, Sandra Brown, Paulo Coelho, Stephani Meyer, Nicholas Sparks were added. Before 1992, only simplified versions of classic novels of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte were in the collection and the students were not very interested in reading them unless they were instructed by the lecturers.

The statistics of borrowing books were maintained from 1996. When considering the statistics, there is no regular trend in increasing or decreasing behaviour in borrowing books in English.

According to statistics maintained from 1996, the number of books in English that the students borrowed were fluctuating. In 1996, the number of books in English borrowed by the students were 93. It was 5% of all the library books borrowed by the students. In 1997 it was increased by 20%. In 1998 it was increased by 3%. In 1999 it was decreased by 8%.

Though 2000 was recorded as the year that the highest number of books (1214) in English that were borrowed by the students, it was 20% of all the books borrowed from the library. In 2006, only 6% of the borrowed books were in English, in 2007 it was 9% and in 2008 it increases up to 18%. In 2009 it reduces by 3% and then again increases by 1%. In 1998, the number of books borrowed from the library was relatively very low. But it was the highest percentage of books borrowed in English. That is 28%.

Since the statistics do not provide a clear picture of whether the steps taken to encourage the readers borrow English books had an effect, the librarian has decided to use other techniques to encourage the students to borrow more books from the English collection.

TABLE I BOOKS BORROWED FROM 1996-2010

Year	Books borrowed in English		Books borrowed in Sinhala	
	Total	%	Total	%
1996	43	5	1981	95
1997	432	25	1272	75
1998	70	28	177	72
1999	783	16	4146	84
2000	1214	20	4798	80
2001	634	18	2814	82
2002	646	16	3106	84
2003	601	16	3125	84
2004	416	6	6325	94
2005	260	10	2543	90
2006	208	6	3624	94
2007	481	9	4909	91
2008	468	18	2136	82
2009	329	15	1856	85
2010	386	16	2094	84

***B. Steps taken to enhance the knowledge of English of BLE students in 2010 in the library context.***

***1. Moving the Special English collection to a place that is more prominent to the readers.***

The library services are provided using a lecture hall which is not suitable as a library building at all. Till 2010, the English collection was kept in a corner of the library because of the limited space. In 2010, the book shelves were rearranged and the English collection was kept in a place where it was more visible to everybody.

***2. Display new books.***

Before new books were added to the collection, the books were displayed in a rack for about two weeks. The purpose of displaying new books was to introduce the new books to the students before shelving them.

***3. Label popular titles and authors.***

In 2010 the library started labeling popular titles such as Harry Potter, Twilight, Vampire Diaries, Da Vinci Code, Lord of the Rings etc and popular authors such as Enid Blyton, Danielle Steel, Dan Brown, Stephenie Meyer and Nicholas Sparks etc.

***4. Conduct a survey.***

Since the statistical records maintained by the library from 1996, do not provide a clear picture whether the steps taken to encourage the students to borrow English books had an effect, the researcher decided to conduct a survey in 2011 and it was repeated in 2013.

**II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In most of the countries, University libraries, public libraries and community centers one of the main tasks is to improve the knowledge of English language -or the main language used in the country - especially for migrants. British council conduct English classes and other programs to improve the knowledge of English in various countries. They have programs designed to adults for specific work places as well as for young learners.

In 2004, the participants of a community conversations forum pointed out the need for the library to provide more materials for non English speaking residents in Stratford, USA (Lord, 2012). The immigrant population in Stratford is diverse. Since the largest group is the Spanish speaking population, others are from Poland, Syria, Pakistan, India, Korea, China, Japan, Haiti and Russia. The Stratford Library Association has designed and presented the Learn English @ the Stratford Library program.

They intended to familiarize the community with the concept of a free public library as well as the materials and learning materials connected with it. This was created as a grant and helped the library to provide a basic collection of materials for the Adult/Teen Learn English Collection.

This grant provided more circulating materials that help to learn English for children, their parents and caregivers and community members from cultures other than the United States.

Though the library found it difficult to locate materials in

certain languages, they somehow managed to collect most of the materials needed, with the help of some publishers. In general, it was easier to find picture books than chapter books. Then they found that the older children get less books. When readers requested materials from Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu, the library came across that it is difficult to find materials for older children.

Earlier, juvenile foreign language and bilingual materials were scattered throughout the children’s department. In 2005, the library staff decided to shelve these materials in one place. Once they were kept in one place, it was easier for the librarians to take decisions regarding purchasing materials too.

The library obtained new shelving and signage for the Learn English area in the children’s department, display fixtures and seating for patrons who browse the Adult/Teen English Collection that was located in the library lobby.

A training program was organized for the library staff giving the opportunity to learn how to serve better the members of the Stratford’s multicultural community.

The multi cultural programs conducted by the library were very successful and they increased their fund raising opportunities too.

According to the project coordinator Martha Simpson, the English teachers from schools were keen to help the project. The library staff got the opportunity to visit the classes, meet the students and to talk to them. The students also visited the library.

According to library records, 34 children were registered for the Summer Reading Program in 2005 and 21 have completed it. 49 children were registered for the program in 2006.

Circulation of the Learn English Collections increased by 100% than previous year. 747 materials were newly added

to the collection and 90 out of them were learning English materials as well as 116 were cultural materials.

85% of the 90 Multicultural Family Day Program participants stated that the library helped them feel a valued part of the community through program offerings and materials that met their diverse needs and materials.

**III.METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

The main purpose of the study was to find out the nature and extent of the usage of the materials in English of the BLE students of IHRA. The objectives of the study was to find out the nature and extent of the usage of the materials in English and the attitudes towards learning English of the sample. To achieve these objectives 10% were selected as a sample of 550 BLE students and a questionnaire was distributed to find out the demographic information, the nature and extent of using materials in English and the attitudes towards learning English of the sample.

**IV.ANALYSIS OF DATA**

The questionnaire was distributed among 550 BLE students randomly selecting 10% of the students. Out of 55, 46 have responded. That is 83.6 % of the sample. From the respondents 50% were belonged to 20-30 age group and 50% were belonged to 31-55 age group. In 2011, 40% were from 20-30 age group and 60% were from 31-50 age group. From the respondents 4% were diploma year students and 43%, 20% and 33% were respectively from BLE 1,11 and final year students. 61% of the sample stated that they were doing professional jobs.13% have stated that they were doing executive jobs and no one has stated that he was doing technical jobs. 7% of them have stated that they were self employed and 17% have marked as other jobs. From the respondents 11% have stated that their highest educational qualification as G.C.E .O/L and 89% have said it as G.C.E. A/L.

TABLE II DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Age group		Academic Year				Profession					Educational	
20 - 30	31 - 50	Dip	BLE I	BLE II	Final	Professional	Executive	Technical	Self employ	Other	O/L	A/L
50%	50%	4%	43%	20%	33%	61%	13%	-	7%	17%	11%	89%

When the students were asked about the subjects that they give priority when they borrow books, 91% have stated as the books related to studies as their first choice. Only 7% have stated that their first choice as fiction and books related to Psychology and Arts. One respondent has stated that s /he has started studies recently and had no time to pay attention to books.9% of the respondents have stated fiction as their 2<sup>nd</sup> preference.

In 2011, 88% of the respondents have stated that their 1<sup>st</sup> choice is subjects related to their studies and 12% have stated it as fiction, English novels, other English books, translated novels and short stories. 16% of the respondents have stated fiction as their 2<sup>nd</sup> preference. 13% of the respondents have stated that they usually borrow English books and the rest of the respondents stated it as Sinhala books.

In 2011, only 3% have stated that they usually borrow English books. When they were asked about the types of books that they prefer to read in English, 73% of the respondents have selected books related to studies as one of their preferences. In 2011 it was 72%.

TABLE III SELECTION OF ENGLISH BOOKS

Particulars	2013	2011
Fiction	22%	52%
Children's stories	13%	42%
Short stories	15%	52%
Fun stories	11%	35%
Detective stories	7%	38%
Scientific fiction	9%	33%
Books related to studies	73%	72%
Books related to other subjects	28%	50%

According to the table it can be seen that the respondents have not given choices as in 2011. When selecting reading materials rather than the ones related to studies, there is a considerable difference. In 2011, 52% of the respondents have stated that they would like to read English novels and short stories. But in 2013, only 22% and 15% have stated as that. But when they were asked whether they like to read books or magazines in English, 98% have said yes. In 2011, it was 88%. The respondents have a positive attitude towards learning English through audio visual materials. When the teachers have used them in classroom, their response was very good or satisfactory. In 2011 also the response was the same. The respondents have suggested to maintain a audio video collection in the library, to provide internet facilities in the library and to start an online English program. In the questionnaire, there were 12 statements that sought the respondents' attitudes towards learning English. From the statements, no.02, 04, 06, 08 and 10 were negative statements towards English.

TABLE IV NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

Particulars	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
02. I do not think I need to have a thorough knowledge of English to spend a good life in Sri Lanka.	17%	61%	20%
04. I can do my higher studies even if I do not have a very good knowledge in English.	61%	20%	18%
06. I can get my promotions easily even if I am not fluent in English.	43%	20%	24%
08. I have gained nothing in my life with the help of my fluency in English.	13%	59%	22%
10. Without having a very good knowledge in English, people have even managed in getting overseas jobs.	74%	11%	15%

From the 05 negative statements regarding learning English, only for 02 statements more than 50% of the respondents have disagreed. They are statement 02. I do not think I need to have a thorough knowledge of English to spend a good life in Sri Lanka. and statement 08. I have gained nothing in my life with the help of my fluency in English. For the other 03 negative statements 61%, 43% and 74% of respondents respectively have agreed. So that we cannot clearly say that the majority of the respondents have a positive attitude towards learning English. The statements no. 01, 03, 05, 07 and 09 are positive statements towards learning English.

TABLE V POSITIVE STATEMENTS

Particulars	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
01. I do not have much educational qualifications, but I am fluent in English.	46%	30%	17%
03. English is money.	17%	57%	20%
05. English is knowledge.	61%	26%	13%
07. You can gain a good job only if you know English well.	61%	20%	11%
09. I would have not studied so far, if I was not fluent in English.	46%	24%	20%

From the 05 positive statements towards learning English, the majority have agreed to 04 statements. Only for the statement 03. English is money, the majority of respondents have disagreed (57%). So that as a whole we can say that the majority of respondents have a positive attitude towards learning English. In a multicultural society like in Sri Lanka, people can be united because of English language. For this statement 65% of the respondents have agreed: 13% disagreed and 13% were uncertain. English is mainly needed for education. We should learn other languages used in Sri Lanka. 78% have agreed for this statement while 11% disagreed and 7% were uncertain. From these two statements, statement 11 is for learning English and the statement 12 is for learning other languages. Since the majority of respondents (65% and 78%) have agreed for both statements we can suggest that they are aware of the importance of learning English as well as other languages.

## V.CONCLUSIONS

Even though the majority of students have a positive attitude towards learning English, they do not tend to read in English. There may be barriers for them to read in English such as lack of time and not having sufficient knowledge of the language etc. But in the questionnaire there were no questions to identify the barriers to read in English. In a future research study the questions to identify the barriers for students to read in English can be included. It seems that less respondents were keen enough to indicate their preferences if they get the opportunity to read in English than in 2011 (Table 3). It may be because the majority is not interested in reading in English. According to the response for the statement 11 and 12, it can be said that they are aware of the importance of learning English as well as other languages.

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