

DO UNDERGRADUATES PREFER TO USE THEIR MOTHER TONGUE AT EXAMINATIONS?

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Sinhala and Tamil are the two official languages in Sri Lanka and are also the media of instruction in the primary and secondary state sector schools, up to year 2003, – English being taught as a second language. In the University system, especially in the professional courses of study, English is the medium of instruction. Undergraduates having received secondary education in the mother tongue are now faced with the arduous task of acquiring and mentally separating two language codes with many divergent, overlapping, and intersecting functions, meanings, and forms.

The current study was conducted on the hypothesis that majority of undergraduates although are able to comprehend a lecture delivered in English may have difficulty in expressing it in written language. The authors also believe that undergraduates prefer to express themselves in their mother tongue, at evaluations, despite the fact that the medium of instruction is English. Therefore, the Objectives of this study were to determine whether undergraduates prefer to express themselves in their mother tongue, at examinations, when the medium of instruction is English and to find out whether lectures conducted in English are understood

A one-hour lecture on “medical negligence” was delivered in English for a batch of 82 final year dental students. After one week of the lecture an essay type question related to the lecture topic, was administered to the students. The students were then asked to answer the question, in the classroom, in a language of their preference. The answers were evaluated by an independent examiner and then assessed by another examiner. An average mark was obtained from the two sets of marks.

Sixty-four (78%) undergraduates had scored 50 marks or over while 18(12%) scored below 50. Sixty-four (78%) preferred to answer the question only in English. Less than eight (10%) preferred to answer in both English and Sinhalese while 10 (12%) preferred to answer in Sinhala only.

In spite of a part of the question being of a problem solving type, and the study allowed the use of the mother tongue in expression, it was surprising to note that a majority of undergraduates preferred to express themselves purely in English, rejecting our hypothesis that the students were more comfortable in expressing in their mother tongue. The reason for this maybe the fact that the lecture was conducted in English. It may also be assumed that since the study group consisted of final year students by the time reached the final year they would have acquired adequate competence in the English language.

