

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Academic Qualifications of ESL Teachers in Government Schools in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka: Factors and Its Impact

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### Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the lower academic qualifications of ESL teachers in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka and its impact on student's English language learning. This study was a descriptive survey research and mixed approach was applied in data collection and data presentation. The sample population of this study was 150 ESL teachers in government schools and 6 ADEs – English of 6 education zones in the Eastern Province. The research instruments of the study were a questionnaire and a focus interview. The results-based conclusions show that majority of the participants possess only A/L, NDE and HNDE qualifications whereas a few numbers of participants possess BA in English and postgraduate qualifications related to English. The reasons put forward by several teachers for possessing lower academic qualifications were: lack of income, remote opportunities and resources in participants' home city, holding only A/L, NDE and HNDE qualifications and issues in travelling long distance. Particularly, the government of Sri Lanka does not bear the course fee for educational qualifications or grant study leave for teachers and there are no any promotions and salary increment for educational qualifications in SLTS. This is one of the reasons for the failure to complete their basic degree and postgraduate studies related to English. The lower academic qualifications of the ESL teachers negatively impact on students' English language learning and development to a larger extent.

**Keywords:** Academic qualifications; English as a Second Language; Government Schools; Teachers

### Introduction

In terms of the education system in Sri Lanka, both primary and secondary education are implemented by government, government approved and private schools. The government and government approved schools' function under the purview of the Ministry of Education. According to school curriculum, English language is one of the main subjects from grade 1 to General Certificate of Education (GCE) – Advanced Level (A/L). With regard to school education system in Sri Lanka, Halik & Nusrath (2020) state that state and non-state academic organizations offer English as a main or optional subject in the curriculum. As a result, according to the education system of Sri Lanka, English has been offered as a compulsory subject from grade 3 to 13 at government schools. With the goal of enhancing English language competence among every student, a number of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are recruited to schools and the Ministry of education provides many resources for both students and ESL teachers in order to develop the English language skills. However, due to the recruitment of incompetent and disqualified teachers in English, students fail to reach the expected learning outcome and communicative competence. Therefore,

English language teaching and learning has been dissatisfactory for several years, particularly in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka.

According to the review of study on English language teaching in Sri Lanka, Wijeskera (2011/2012) asserts that English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka has not been able to achieve its intended objectives. This failure in ELT is not a baseless assumption. It is proved by what we have experienced for the last forty or so years and evidenced by student performance at the two major examinations. The two examinations include: GCE – Ordinary Level (O/L) and GCE (A/L) examinations. The 2020 GCE (O/L) results percentage in English subject – Eastern Province was 60%. When the Eastern Province is compared to other provinces in Sri Lanka, this (60%) was the lowest percentage for English subject in GCE (O/L) – 2020. (Source: GCE (O/L) – 2020 (English Subject) Report – Eastern Province).

The requirement of National Diploma, Higher National Diploma and Bachelor Degree for recruitment of English teachers is one of the factors for the recruitment of incompetent ESL teachers to schools. As a result, many number of ESL teachers in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka are in teaching service with the same qualifications. According to a study about ELT in Kinniya

Education Zone in Trincomalee district, one of the education zones in the Eastern Province, Halik (2021) finds that as far as the findings of the participants' educational qualifications are concerned, only 15% of the participants possess BA in English and none of the participants had done any postgraduate programmes related to their field to improve their knowledge and teaching skills.

As far as the ESL teachers in Sri Lanka are concerned, majority of the teachers do not have postgraduate studies related to English. A few numbers of teachers possess Postgraduate Diploma (PGD) and Master Degree in their field of teaching since most of the teaching appointments are given for Diploma and HND holders for English subject. Although Bachelor of Arts (BA) Degree holders are recruited into teaching service, apart from BA in English degree graduates, English medium graduates are too recruited as teachers of English.

Moreover, except a few graduate teachers, most of the graduates who serve as teachers of English follow Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) for promotion. PGDE programmes covers majorly: teaching methodology, educational psychology and measurement. The syllabus outline of PGDE does not consist any study areas about English. Despite these, various factors affect the lower academic qualifications of the ESL teachers in the Eastern Province. This current study aims at investigating the academic qualifications of the ESL teachers in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka and the factors that affect their lower academic qualifications & its impact on students' learning.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were formulated based on the problem of this study. They are as follow.

1. Do a large number of ESL teachers in the Eastern Province possess lower academic qualifications?
2. Does the lower academic qualifications of the ESL teachers affect students' English language learning and development?
3. Why do most of the ESL teachers not pursue higher studies to develop their field of expertise and subject knowledge?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Objectives**

The following objectives are addressed in this study. They are as follow.

1. To investigate whether majority of the ESL teachers in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka possess lower academic qualifications
2. To explore to what extend ESL teachers' lower academic qualifications affect students' English language learning and development
3. To identify the factors that affect the ESL teachers' subject knowledge and competence through pursuing postgraduate studies

### **Research Design**

This study was a descriptive survey research. Mixed approach was applied in data collection and data presentation: both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for collecting primary data as qualitative and quantitative instruments were chosen for data collection. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for data analysis and presentation. The sampling technique of this study was a random sampling.

### **Sample Size**

In this study, 150 ESL teachers in government schools in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka and 6 Assistant Directors of Education – English (ADE – English) were chosen as the sample size of this study. As far as the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka is concerned, there are three districts: Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara. Fifty (50) ESL teachers were randomly chosen from each district. The teachers include: junior and senior teachers in national and provincial schools in the Eastern Province. Similarly, 2 ADEs were chosen from each district.

### **Research Instruments**

A questionnaire and a focus interview were used as data collection instruments of this study. The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. The questions were set based on the questions and objectives of the study. The close-ended questions were set focusing on participants; personal information and their academic qualifications whereas the open-ended questions were set focusing on the factors that affect continuing their postgraduate studies related to their field of expertise. Moreover, the focus interview was used to gather opinions among the selected ADEs in English regarding the impact of teachers' academic qualifications and subject knowledge on students' learning and development.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The secondary data were collected through secondary sources such as journal research articles, census reports, university handbooks and Eastern Provincial Education Department reports whereas the primary data were collected using the questionnaire and the interview. A Google Form link was randomly sent to the selected ESL teachers in each district, and they were requested to fill in the Google Form. The opinion survey was carried out using the Google Form. Likewise, the selected ADEs in English were interviewed through telephone conversation. Prior to the interview, the researcher received the consent and appointment from the selected ADEs.

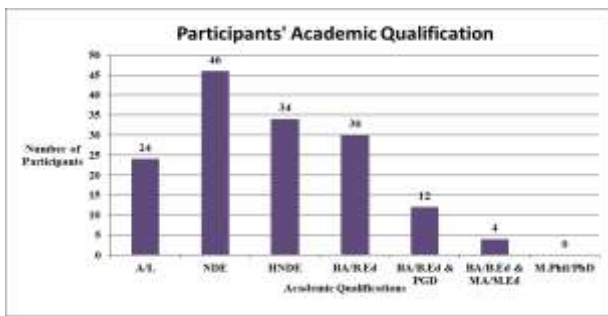
### **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the findings of the data analysis and the discussion of the findings. The findings reveal the

academic qualifications of the selected ESL teachers in the Eastern Province, factors that hinder following postgraduate studies, impact of lower academic qualifications on student’s English language learning and development and suggestions to encourage teachers to follow postgraduate studies in English.

**Academic Qualifications of the Participants**

The following graph shows the academic qualifications of the selected participants. The abbreviations in the graph are as follow: A/L – Advanced Level, NDE – National Diploma in English, HNDE – Higher National Diploma in English, BA – Bachelor of Arts, B-Ed – Bachelor of Education, PGD – Postgraduate Diploma, MA – Master of Arts, M.Ed – Master of Education, M.Phil – Master of Philosophy and PhD – Doctor of Philosophy.



**Figure. 1** (Participants’ Academic Qualifications)

As presented above through the graph, the findings are obvious that A/L qualified teachers were recruited into SLTS 3 – 2 categories. Later, they completed Government Teachers’ Training course, specialized in English which is conducted by the National Teachers’ Training Colleges. Similarly, majority of the participants were NDE holders who are also trained teachers, produced by Sri Lanka National Colleges of Education. Therefore, both category teachers are categorized as trained teachers, and they are promoted as the years are fulfilled for promotion in SLTS. It is noteworthy to mention that most of the trained teachers of English do not pursue their higher studies as they think that they possess sufficient teaching skills and subject knowledge.

However, their subject knowledge and communicative competence seems lower as they are not updated. According to a survey of 412 teachers from across Sri Lanka, the proportions of English language levels among English teachers within the secondary school system in Sri Lanka, the results show that Listening is B2 (Upper Intermediate) among the biggest group (38%), Reading is B1 (Intermediate) among 39% of them, Speaking is B1 or B2 among most teachers (44% and 41% respectively), and writing is B2 among 51% of the teachers. (Allan & Mackenzie, 2019).

Further, according to the findings, a very few numbers of teachers possess postgraduate qualifications. In particular, those who possess postgraduate diploma, their field of study is specialized in Education. Only two participants out of 12 specialized in Teaching English as a Second

Language (TESL). According to the opinions among the teachers in Sri Lanka Teaching Service (SLTS) and the primary data collection of this current study, most of the graduate teachers are willing to pursue PGDE which is a professional qualification. The reasons behind their preference to obtain PGDE or M.Ed is; promotion is given only for professional qualifications and the course fee is covered by the Provincial Department of Education or Ministry of Education only for professional qualifications, not for educational qualifications.

In particular, even the teachers of English in the Eastern Province complete their PGDE or M.Ed programme in Tamil medium. The primary reason for choosing Tamil medium courses is, as because no institutions such as Eastern University, Sri Lanka, NIE Study Centre for Eastern Province and the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) regional centre and study centres in the Eastern Province offer English medium courses. The ESL teachers in the Eastern Province are not ready to travel out of their Province, and pursue English medium courses.

It is noteworthy that the curriculum of professional courses focuses on developing teaching profession. Instead, it does not cover any course content to develop subject knowledge in the field of expertise. Major areas of study in PGDE and M.Ed course content are: Education Administration and Management, Teaching Methodology, Educational Measurement and Evaluation, Educational Psychology, Principle of Education, Research Methodology, Philosophy and Guidance and Counseling (Source: PGDE Handbook - 2014/2015 of University of Peradeniya & M.Ed Course Brochure – 2021/2022 of OUSL) . Therefore, the professional qualifications cannot help the ESL teacher develop their subject knowledge.

On the other hand, as far as educational qualifications such as PGD in TESL, MA in English Studies, MA in Linguistics, MA in English etc. programmes offered by state universities in Sri Lanka are concerned, they cover major course contents: Research Methodology, World Englishes, Sri Lankan Writing in English, Sociolinguistics, English Literature, Methods in language teaching, assessment in TESL, Syntax, Morphology, Phonetics and Phonology, Applied Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, Semantics and Pragmatics (Source: Postgraduate Prospectus, Handbook and Guidebook of state universities in Sri Lanka). Therefore, the above course contents can help the ESL teachers develop their advanced grammar competence, academic writing skills, Linguistics competence, literary competence and effective communication skills. If the teachers have vast knowledge and skills in English, they will be a boon and asset to the students. Students can develop their English language proficiency if the qualified teachers are utilized. However, since the ESL teachers in the Eastern Province possess lower academic qualifications, students’ English language learning and development is affected. For instance, due to lack of English teachers to teach English Literature, a very few students prefer English Literature in grade 10, and the results production in GCE (O/L) examination seems lower. According to Halik (2021), just

51 students opted English Literature in grade 10 in the academic year – 2021 in Trincomalee District. Since the ESL teachers do not have the literary competence, students are not encouraged to prefer English Literature for GCE (O/L). Moreover, teachers fail to improve students' communicative competence.

### **Effect of ESL Teachers' Lower Academic Qualifications on Students' English Language Learning**

As per the opinion survey among the ADEs in English, the followings are the negative impacts on students' English language learning and development due to lower academic qualifications of the ESL teachers in the Eastern Province.

- Language skills development are not focused.
- Difficulties in teaching school textbook effectively.
- Teachers do not have sufficient subject knowledge.
- Neither pronunciation rules are taught nor are pronunciation errors corrected.
- Some teachers are not updated.
- Modern language teaching approaches, methods and techniques are not implemented.

As presented above, as far as school setup in the Eastern Province is concerned, more focus is given only to teaching grammar, reading and writing. Writing is covered based on the textbook. Despite focusing listening and speaking skills in school textbook, these skills are skipped by most of the teaching since they are unable to orally communicate in English effectively. As a result, majority of the students' speaking ability seems lower in school context in the Eastern Province, particularly, rural and semi-urban schools. The findings of a study on oral communicative skills of GCE (OL) students in government schools in Trincomalee District conducted by Halik & Jayasunthara (2021) show that majority of the participants' lexical resource was lower. As a result, their oral communicative skills were poor. Moreover, very little focus has been given to teaching pronunciation rules and practicing pronunciation.

Further, young NDE, HNDE, English medium degree holders as well as some of the senior trained teachers encounter challenges in teaching the textbook effectively. They are unable to strictly follow the teachers' guide. As a result, most of them skip the lessons that seem challengeable to teach. Each unit of every English textbook (grade 6 – 11) begins with the role play. Students should be trained to enact the role play. However, since they are unable to enact the role play effectively. They make the speaking lesson a reading lesson, and students are instructed to read out the role play and answer the questions followed by the role play. As far as the grammar and reading lessons are concerned. Some grammar lessons such as conjunctions, prepositions, use of tense, passive voice and reported speech, and advanced reading

passages and poems seem to be challengeable for some ESL teachers to explain them to students effectively. This challenge is as because of lack of subject knowledge (Advanced grammar competence). As a result, students' fail to understand grammatical competence and reading and comprehension skills.

Another significant negative impact is, neither pronunciation rule is taught nor are pronunciation errors corrected in the classroom since listening and speaking lessons are not emphasized, and they do not have understanding about phonetics and phonology. It is noteworthy that some ESL teachers are not updated. They are not willing to develop their knowledge in spite of knowing that English language is updated day by day. As a result, they use the same traditional teaching approaches and existing limited knowledge in English. In particular, those who teach in rural and semi-urban schools get remote opportunities to update them by themselves.

There are several second/foreign language teaching approaches, and innovative methods and techniques such as Direct Method, Audiolingual Method, Task Based Learning Method and Communicative Language Teaching Method and Learner-Centered Learning Method which aim at improving language skills of the students. However, due to lack of knowledge about language teaching methods and techniques, they use traditional teaching methods in school set up (Grammar Translation Method).

### **Reasons for the Failure to Pursue Higher Studies (Postgraduate Degrees) in English**

According to the opinion survey of the selected participants, the following reasons were put forward for the failure to pursue their higher studies in English.

- Issues in traveling long distance
- Lack of opportunities and Resources in the Eastern Province to pursue postgraduate degrees
- Family situation and financial barrier
- Lack of income (lower salary)
- Mentality that higher educational qualification is not necessary
- No basic degree to pursue postgraduate degree

The above factors were stated by the large number of participants. In particular, the greatest number of ladies' teachers had NDE and HNDE. They had stated that due to various responsibilities, they were unable to travel long distance and continue their higher studies since there are no any courses offered by the state higher educational institutions in their district. It is noteworthy that there are very remote opportunities in the Eastern Province to pursue higher studies in English. No universities in the Eastern Province: South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL), Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL) and OUSL Regional Centre in Batticaloa offer external degree and postgraduate programmes in English. Therefore, most of the teachers fail to travel outside the province and continue their higher studies in other state universities.

Another significant factor is that financial barrier. Teaching salary is lower when compared to the salaries of Instructors and Lecturers in higher educational institutions. Their monthly salary is affordable only to manage their family. As a result, the greatest number of teachers conduct private classes for additional income. Since they spend their weekend (Saturday and Sunday) for conducting private classes, they are unable to allocate the weekend for higher studies. Moreover, Provincial Department of Education does not either reimburse the course fee or grant study leave for educational qualifications as if reimbursing the course fee and granting study leave for professional qualifications. Further, as discussed above, trained teachers of English think that their subject knowledge and teaching skills are sufficient to teach English effectively, and pursuing higher studies is not necessary. Yet, they possess limited knowledge in English. Another reason stated by most of the teachers that they did not have basic degree in English to pursue their postgraduate study programmes in English. Due to remote opportunities and financial barriers, they are unable to complete their basic degree in English. These are the primary reasons for the failure to pursue their higher studies to develop their advanced subject knowledge and language teaching skills according to participants' opinions.

### **Conclusions**

The conclusions of this study can be drawn based on the findings that according to the selected ESL teachers' response, majority of the participants possess only A/L, NDE and HNDE qualifications whereas a few numbers of participants possess BA in English and postgraduate qualifications related to English. As a result, their advanced knowledge in English and communicative competence seems lower. Moreover, some reasons were stated by majority of the participants with regard to the failure to pursue their higher studies. They are: lack of income, remote opportunities and resources in participants' home city, holding only A/L, NDE and HNDE qualifications and issues in travelling long distance.

In particular, the government of Sri Lanka does not bear the course fee for educational qualifications or grant study leave for teachers as though education related professional qualifications such as PGD/PGD in Education and Education Management, M.Ed/M.Ed in Education Management, Teacher Education etc, M.Phil in Education and PhD in Education. Further, teachers do not have promotion for professional qualifications whereas there are no any promotions and salary increment for educational qualifications in SLTS. Due to above reasons, they failed to complete their basic degree in English and postgraduate studies related to English. As a consequence, the lower academic performance of the ESL teachers negatively impacts on students' English language learning. Therefore, the outcome of result production in English has been dissatisfactory in the Eastern Province when it is compared to other provinces in Sri Lanka.

This issue of lower academic qualifications of the ESL teachers in the Eastern Province can be overcome and they can be encouraged to pursue their higher studies when the government bear the course fee and grant study leave for educational qualifications as though bearing the course fee and granting study leave for professional qualifications, and consider educational qualifications for SLTS promotion and salary increment.

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