



The Use of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) Skills in English Language Curricula of Sri Lankan Universities

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ABSTRACT

It is a well-known fact that the Sri Lankan graduates and undergraduates are often criticized by the society and specifically by the private sector employers for not possessing required skills such as critical thinking, logical thinking, independent thinking, problem-solving skills and ratiocination skills. Those skills, namely Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) skills should be developed among undergraduates in order to be competent employees following graduation. CALP, a theory designed by Jim Cummins (1979) emphasizes the importance of enhancing the above-mentioned higher order skills in the learner. This research attempts to determine if the tertiary level English language curricula in Sri Lanka have given attention in developing the CALP skills among undergraduates. The aim of the research was to find out the focus given on developing CALP skills among Sri Lankan undergraduates at tertiary level, and the objectives were to examine the existing English language curricula of different Sri Lankan universities and to find out the type of skills developed through the existing tertiary level English Language curricula in Sri Lanka. The English language curricula of 6 state universities including 8 faculties were examined in terms of ILOs, course outline (structure) and

content. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. It was found that the English language curricula of state universities in Sri Lanka mainly focus on developing the 4 English language skills in addition to improving vocabulary and presentation skills. They also focus on English for Professional Purposes (EPP) such as medical English, business communication and technical jargon. Developing higher order CALP skills was not a main focus in the majority of ELT curricula in Sri Lanka. However, it is suggested that such skills could be developed through the existing ELT curricula, through systematically designed activities which enhance not only the four language skills, but also CALP skills.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Enhancing Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) skills such as critical thinking, logical thinking, analytical thinking, problem-solving skills and ratiocination skills during university tenure is pivotal for the Sri Lankan undergraduates to excel as competent graduates in their future. Ariyawansa (2008) points out that “in many situations, the reality is that the qualification alone does not help enough to find a job because of the mismatch between the demand and the supply of the job market” (p. 92). It is in this scenario, development of CALP skills becomes important, as the undergraduates will have to enhance such skills required by the job market by the time they graduate. Enhancement of CALP skills among undergraduates can happen in various ways. One such method is incorporating such skills to the existing curricula. ELT curricula, is a good platform to incorporate CALP skills, as students from many subject streams get exposed to the English component/course of universities and thus it serves as an ideal platform to incorporate and develop soft skills along with the language skills. Thus, this research focuses on the use of CALP Skills in Sri Lankan University English Language

Curriculum. The aim of this research is to find out the focus given on developing CALP skills among Sri Lankan undergraduates and the objectives are to examine the existing English language curricula of different Sri Lankan universities and to identify the types of skills developed through tertiary level English Language curricula in Sri Lanka. As per the research problem, Sri Lankan graduates are often criticized by the society as being unemployable or lacking the competencies required to perform well at work. The reason is identified as the mismatch between the skills that are required to contribute to the workforce and what they gain at universities. Among many skills that are absent in the graduates, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and independent thinking skills are identified as lacking in the present-day graduates.

According to Tharmaseelan (2007) examination-oriented school system in Sri Lanka prepares students for exams “without preparing them with life skills and practical capabilities” (p. 177). He further states that the “intellectuals, experts and practitioners do always criticize the system and the quality of graduates produced by the universities” (p. 175). It is understood that undergraduates, at the entry point to the university possess, lower-order skills as presented in Bloom’s Taxonomy where they are able to duplicate, memorise, repeat, and are able to generally get by. Even when required, they barely manage higher order skills such as analyzing or, evaluating at a comparatively lower level owing to the heavily-criticized examination-oriented education system in the country.

Secondly, it is revealed that the private sector employers complain about the inability of their graduate employees to engage effectively in the tasks assigned to them including team work, thinking on their own, making correct decisions, and solving problems at their work places. “Public Universities in Sri Lanka are unable to

produce employable graduates to match with the requirements of the industry, particularly the expected knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” (Kanagasingam, 2014, p. 187). He identifies a set of skills undergraduates should develop in order to be competent graduates who can meet the demands of the industry which includes effective communication skills along with English, the ability of interpersonal relationships, and the ability of logical and rational thinking. In the competitive education system, the learners target only competitive exams and not life skills or any other skills related to their personal and professional development. “Majority of graduates pass out from universities begging for employment from the public sector or with no choice of careers” (Tharmaseelan, 2007, p. 174). The reason has been identified as the mismatch between skills required for employment and the kind of education given to students (Singam, 2017). Since the learners are spoon-fed in order to achieve the ultimate goal of obtaining a higher number of distinctions at an exam, their attention is on nothing else but on exam results in an exam-oriented system. The other reason is school and university curricula in Sri Lanka give little opportunity for the learners to develop thinking abilities. They are designed in a way that the learners can cram and score well to be selected to a university. According to Attanayake (2017), the vocational and skill-based curricula are not encouraged making the students with low exam performances remain as left-outs. Due to the said reasons, development of thinking abilities such as logical thinking, critical thinking, and analytical skills of the Sri Lankan learners become an important aspect in the present-day teaching.

Studies prove that the need for developing CALP skills of the undergraduates and graduates is, in fact, a global need. Bilisland et al. (2014) show the need of CALP-related employability skills such as communication, interpersonal, teamwork,

problem solving, research, and analytical skills, planning and organizing, technology, and lifelong learning skills as important graduate skills. Therefore, it is evident that development of CALP skills in undergraduates and graduates is a timely requirement in the contemporary society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is a language learning theory presented by Jim Cummins in 1979. It refers to formal academic learning including development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The foundation for a learner’s capability to cope with academic demands is normally placed in the nature of various subjects. CALP is said to take 5-7 years for development in a user. At this level of learning, the language is cognitively demanding, and the teaching of the language should be carried out through new ideas, concepts and novel methodologies. Apart from understanding the content, vocabulary too should be developed, and for that, skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring are required.

According to Cummins CALP should address 3 components of the construct.

1. Cognitive: The instruction should be cognitively challenging and require students to use higher-order thinking abilities rather than the low-level memorization and application skills that are tapped by typical worksheets or drill-and-practice computer programs.

2. Academic: Academic content (Science, Math, Social Studies, Art etc.) should be integrated with language instruction as in content-based ESL programs

3. Language: The development of critical language awareness should be fostered

throughout the program by encouraging students to compare and contrast their languages (e.g. phonics conventions, grammar, etc.) and by providing students with extensive opportunities to carry out projects investigating their own and their community's language use, practices, and assumptions (e.g. in relation to the status of different varieties). Cummins (1999, p. 6)

An Iraqi study done by Kadhim (2018), identifies CALP as academic English and emphasizes that "the teachers are supposed to use academic materials and they expect their students, in return, to write or communicate academically" (p. 30) as undergraduates are expected to use advanced language than the conversational English according to Kadhim (2018, p. 30).

According to Cummins & Davison (2007), learning of a language which takes place through experience and action is different from learning that takes place through texts and instructions from teachers. "In de-contextualized language, there is no shared social context that one can rely upon in figuring out what something means, or what one should say" (Aukerman, 2007. p. 627). If the medium of instruction at school is similar to that of at home, a child would perform better in CALP; and this highlights the fact that the BICS of such a child is better anyway.

The positive aspect of the introduction of CALP is that it gave educators a framework on how to think about how language learning defines a child's academic concerns. It also nurtures a grander recognition of the importance of developing ones' native language. Cummins's (1979) argument is that when CALP gets developed in the native language, it easily gets transferred to a second language. Cummins stands as a strong supporter of bilingual education. However, according to Kester and Pena (2002, as cited in Aukerman, 2007, p. 628), bilingual students face disadvantages because they tend to use the different languages

they know in different ways. Thus, Kester and Pena (2002) argue that it could influence a child's independent conceptual knowledge on each language. But "when CALP is narrowly defined, it inevitably obscures many facets of what children can do" (Aukerman, 2007, p. 629).

Cognitive abilities also take the form of a socio-cultural aspect. Scholars point out that if literacy varies cross-culturally, learners are capable of acquiring knowledge, skills and even values related to certain practices linked with their homes and other social backgrounds. CALP highlights the fact that the ability of a child to converse well in a language does not have any connection to his academic performance in the classroom.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to get the general picture of the English language curricula in universities of Sri Lanka, curricula of 8 faculties of 6 leading state universities in Sri Lanka were examined with an aim to find out the focus given on developing CALP skills in the students.

Since the study focuses on the development of CALP with regard to English language learning, only the English language curricula from the selected universities were explored. This included 8 faculties in 6 leading state universities. The selection of universities for the sample was done following convenient sampling method. The 6 universities were referred to as A, B, C, D, E and F respecting the request for confidentiality of the sources and thereby complying with research ethics. The 8 faculties included 3 faculties of Engineering, 1 Medical Faculty, 2 Management Faculties and 2 Faculties of Arts.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The basic components of a curriculum; (i) goals, (ii) materials, (iii) teaching methods and (iv) assessment were taken into consideration when

designing themes to analyze. Thus, the data collected were examined in terms of ILOs, course outline (structure) and the content (material) in this research. The content of the syllabus was examined in terms of the CALP skills to check if CALP related skills were incorporated in the existing ELT curricula.

3.1 Limitations of the study

Despite the fact that a fair representation of the university system in the country was needed in this regard, the researchers were able to obtain the ELT curricula of 6 universities (4 universities in the capital and 2 provincial universities only). Even though the researchers attempted to obtain the ELT curricula of many universities to have a fair representation of the Sri Lankan undergraduate ELT scenario, unfortunately, some universities were reluctant to send their curricula, while some other universities required a rigid permission process to obtain the curricula. One faculty of a pioneering state university barely had a curricula and stated that they use a 'daily hand out system' to teach English to their undergraduates. The attempts to visit the universities around the country were restricted due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Most of the universities were closed and were functioning online.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The structure of the English language curriculum and the need of the courses varied from faculty to faculty. The faculty of Medicine of University A had only one language curriculum and the students could complete the course and pass it within their university tenure (5 years). The undergraduates could complete the language courses at any academic year (within their 5 years) irrespective of the order of semester completion. The Faculty of Engineering of the same university had English courses in 3 semesters with different curricula for each semester. Their Faculty of

Management also had English as a GPA subject and had 4 semesters of teaching. The Faculty of Arts of the University B and F had 'levels' instead of 'semester teaching' with regard to English language. The students, irrespective of their academic year, had to gradually fulfill the level requirement where they had to pass each level, step by step to reach the required number of levels in the course before graduating. The Faculty of Engineering of University C showed similarities in the English language course structure to the Faculty of Engineering at university E as well as that of University A. They had included English into 4 semesters in which the students had to pass each semester. In university E, unlike the 2 other Faculties of Engineering examined, the English courses are non-GPA, but the students had to complete and pass continuous assessments, and the end-semester examinations in order to obtain the degree. University D had an EAP course where the undergraduates had to complete continuous assessments and individual and group presentations with the end-semester examination in order to pass the subject.

In examining the ILOs of the selected curricula, it was found that every faculty had ILOs to achieve as their focus. In a large majority of them, it was grammar and English related to the respective stream of study. The Faculty of Management in University A, focused on business communication and business English where the ILOs aimed at making the students able to write business letters, make PowerPoint presentations and reports on management-related topics, and learn telephone etiquette. The 3 Faculties of Engineering focused on developing language skills necessary for technical writing, various documents related to engineering applications, describing tabulated data, report writing etc. The Faculty of Medicine focused on enhancing communication skills with fellow colleagues such as nurses, patients, consultants, and in social contexts. It also focused

on enhancing related vocabulary to provide relevant medical and healthcare assistance and writing 'case reports'. The EAP course in University D focused on enhancing dictionary skills of the undergraduates, uplifting appropriate language of presentations and non-verbal communication effectively, identify the parts of a text book, learn why they are important, and taught how to find the books by using the library classification and how to use books effectively. Apart from the above mentioned areas, every curriculum focused on developing the 4 essential skills of English; speaking, writing, listening and reading together with grammar, vocabulary and doing presentations. Kanagasingam (2014) also points out that the public university education system of Sri Lanka has to be re-oriented in order to produce global graduates who are capable of meeting the educational as well as job-oriented challenges. He states that the universities have to perform multiple roles in creating new knowledge, acquiring new capabilities, and producing intelligent graduates through challenging teaching, research, and activities. Thus, it is in this milieu, the need to develop CALP skills of the undergraduates are of prime importance in the Sri Lankan context.

It was noted that most of the English language curricula practiced in those universities were GPA courses, and they included at least one CALP skill in them. University C and D had stated directly that they aimed higher order skills development such as improving critical reading, analytical writing and negotiation skills (Faculty of Engineering, University C). However, other universities have included enhancement of higher order skills indirectly. It was understood that through teaching the skills of summarizing, paraphrasing, interpreting authentic academic texts and enhancing ability to express opinions about general topics, CALP skills were the focus. Also, Faculty of Medicine at University A encouraged discussions of medical histories and

cases while Faculty of Engineering of the same university focused on formulating independent conclusions through the analysis of literature, which indirectly targeted the development of CALP of the undergraduates.

5. CONCLUSION

Thus, according to the above data, of the 8 faculties of 6 universities, only 2 faculties in 2 universities directly focus on CALP development of the undergraduates in their ELT programmes, whereas 4 faculties in 3 universities indirectly focus on developing CALP of the undergraduates. When taken together, it is noted that the English language curricula of state universities in Sri Lanka mainly focus on developing the 4 skills related to English language in addition to improving vocabulary and presentation skills. They also focus on developing subject-related skills such as medical English, business communication and technical jargon. Developing higher order CALP skills are not a main focus, except a few language curricula indirectly focus on them. A considerable emphasis is not given by the majority of the English language curricula examined above in developing CALP skills of the undergraduates. In light of the expected graduate output considering the employer (dis)satisfaction of the current graduate employees, it is clear that heavy emphasis should be given to developing higher-order cognitive academic skills in graduates to meet the expectations of the society.

Since the responsibility of developing CALP in undergraduates lies in the hands of curriculum designers and respective course developers, different faculties should pay attention in order to see if their syllabi include components that could enhance higher-order skills of their undergraduates. Since the undergraduates represent the educational standards of the respective faculty, it is of paramount importance that every faculty in every university focuses on

this matter. Therefore, in ELT, a field which could practice student-centered language learning through various methods such as task-based learning, problem-based learning, communicative language teaching etc., it is paramount that the English language syllabus designers and facilitators (lecturers) focus on CALP development through their teaching processes. It is suggested that CALP development could be done by incorporating language activities which enhance CALP related skills in par with the four language skills.

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