Intergrating Information Communication Technologies to Arts Faculty Undergraduate English Courses in Sri Lanka: A Survey

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Abstract — **The overarching objective of this study was to find out how feasible and sustainable the introduction of computer-aided instruction is for the development of English language skills among arts undergraduates whose medium of instruction for the degree is their first language; i.e., Sinhala or Tamil. The descriptive research design was adopted for this purpose, and a survey-type questionnaire was deployed. The purposive sampling method was used when selecting the sample and data were collected from a total of 102 arts undergraduates in four arts faculties in Sri Lanka. Percentages were generated in order to tabulate the data. The main findings of the study reveal that these students are not only ICT literate to a notable extent but that they are positively inclined towards the introduction of technology-enhanced learning practices for the enhancement of their English proficiency.**

Keywords — undergraduates, English, ICT

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Sri Lankan context English proficiency has become an inevitable educational and social requirement for individuals wishing to become upwardly mobile, secure lucrative employment opportunities and belong to the entity of the socially "elite" community. Additionally, the fact that this language acts as a 'lingua franca' used to bridge the communication gap between different ethnicities in the country has further enhanced its potential of being used as an effective communication tool. Therefore, the need for becoming a proficient users of English has been acknowledged by most Sri Lankans, and recent governments have made various attempts to promote and facilitate the acquisition of this second language (L2). This is notably so in the education and higher education sectors.

In terms of the penetration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Sri Lanka, there is no denying that it has managed to infiltrate all spheres of modern living in the country; including social, political, economic and educational milieus. Out of these, much attention has been paid to the task of incorporating the use of ICT in the field of education specially among adult learners. This information can be substantiated by observing the computer literacy surveys conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka over the years. For instance, the 2016 report on "Computer Literacy" states that out of the 28% of computer literate people in the island, a majority falls into the age category of between 15 to 19 years with a percentage of 63 computer users [1]. Considering the above statistics, it is apparent that most of the youth who belong to the school-going age in our country are already familiar with computer usage by the time they enter the university, and that the necessary context for the integration of ICT in education has already been put in place.

Under these circumstances, the potential successfulness of the systematic integration of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) practices into university ESL programmes seems to be inevitable. However, with regard to the current educational set up in Sri Lanka, the purposeful and effective synthesis of CALL into ESL study programmes still remain at the infantile stages. Nevertheless, the rapid infrastructure facility developments in the education sector - notably in higher educational institutions focusing on the development of ICT and English literacy skills of students - have paved the way for introducing effective methods of using technology for learning and teaching purposes.

Since this study is based on a feasibility survey of introducing CALL for teaching ESL to Arts undergraduates, a cursory glance at the way on which the L2 is taught is required. In all state universities in the country, either English Language Teaching Units (ELTU) or Departments (ELTD) have been established with the objective of improving the level of English of the undergraduates so that they may be able to use it for general and academic purposes. In the case of the undergraduates who are required to follow their degrees in English medium, such as those following their degree programmes in medicine, engineering, science, architecture, management, commerce, law and technology, there is no option for them but to acquire the English language by whatever means possible because such degree programmes are only offered in the medium of English. Nonetheless, the above scenario considerably differs in faculties involving in the study of the Arts and Humanities since the majority of students follow their degree programmes either Sinhala or Tamil (their first language). In such a context, minimal exposure to the L2 has resulted in low proficient arts undergraduates.

The research questions posed were:

1. How ICT literate are these Sinhala and Tamil medium Arts undergraduates?

2. Have they already been exposed to this type of instruction during their English courses, and if so to what extent has it been integrated into these programmes?

3. Research Question 3: Are these learners receptive to the adaptation of CALL for learning ESL?

The study is timely and important as it was conducted in order to obtain a birds-eye view of the present circumstances before making claims about the impact of introducing computer technology for second language acquisition (SLA) in Arts faculties. This study was necessary in order to deliberate on the various aspects that needed to be studied

when evaluating the feasibility and sustainability of the implementation of CALL into our university system.

II. OBJECTIVES

One of the main intensions of conducting the research was to find out whether the introduction of effectively selected CALL activities for purposes of teaching ESL to arts undergraduates would be welcomed by them. The fact that this generation of digital natives is invariably drawn towards technology can be manipulated to promote the acquisition of English by disseminating knowledge on how computers can be used to develop language skills in fun, educational and interactive ways. Due to the flexibility of time and place that technology-enhanced learning activities offer, it is presumed that with substantial training on CALL, these ESL learners would be able to considerably improve their English language proficiency by the time they graduate.

III. METHODOLOGY

For the study, the descriptive research design was adapted so as to understand the contemporary landscape of ICT use for learning the L2 in Sri Lankan arts faculties, its awareness, usage and the undergraduates' attitude towards its integration into the Arts Faculty English programmes.

For this purpose, a survey-type questionnaire was developed for the Sinhala and Tamil medium Arts undergraduates. The research population consisted of Arts undergraduates attached to Sri Lankan state universities following their degree programmes in their first language. The sample size responding to the CALL questionnaire included a total of 102 Arts undergraduates in their first or second year of study. The total sample consisted of 79% females and 21% males falling into the age group of between 20 to 24.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1; How ICT literate are these Arts undergraduates and what is the availability of the resources for ICT engagements?

To measure the extent of their ICT literacy, a set of questions were presented in the format of "Can do" statements indicating the respondents' ability or inability to perform a particular computer-related task. From the tabulated data, 93.1% of the respondents reported that they can start, use and shut down a computer, 59.4% stated their ability to use a word processor such as Microsoft Word, 70.3% said they can create presentations using presentation software such as PowerPoint, and 71.3% mentioned that they can use either and/or laptop computers, tablet PCs and smart phones. With regard to their internet usage, a little more than three quarter of the sample claimed that they use the internet to gather information, while 44.3% stated that they use the internet to develop their English language skills.

In addition, 70% of them claim to be able to use a smart phone, laptop or desktop computer. In terms of their ability to use the internet, the majority (76%) mentioned that they are able to surf the internet to gather information while close to 63% mentioning that they use it for social networking purposes. Close to half of the sample claimed that they use the internet for developing their English skills.

Since this was a preliminary survey of the context in which CALL could be integrated, another important aspect of its implementation was to find out about the availability of the resources that are needed for IT related engagements. Based on the analysis, out of the total number of participants, 36.1%

had desktop computers and 60.7% had laptop computers. Even in cases where learners did not have their own personal computers, 85.3% mentioned that they owned phones with internet capability.

Research Question 2: Have the Arts undergraduates already been exposed to CALL during their English courses and if so to what extent has it been integrated into their English programmes?

The following figure details the mode of instruction that is being adapted at present when teaching English to arts undergraduates.
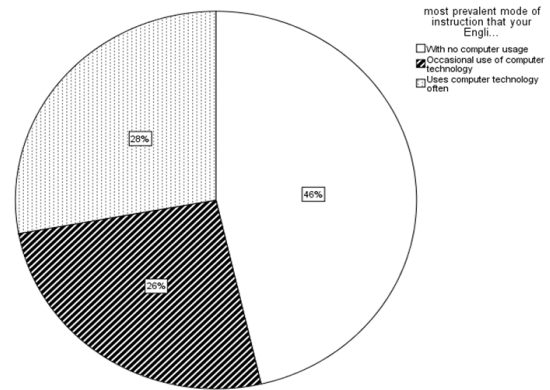

Fig. 1. Current Mode of Instruction of the arts undergraduates

It is sticking to note that 46% stated that the English teachers did not resort to the use of computer technology during instruction. However, a little over a quarter of them stated that ICT was used very frequently in the English class. This points positively to the potential of such usage on a larger scale.

Research Question 3: Are these learners receptive to the adaptation of CALL for learning ESL?

In figure 2, the preference towards the adaptation of computers for learning English is strikingly high as 89% insisted on going for the blended mode of instruction while in fact 10% of the cohort went so far as to claim that they prefer only computer-led instruction. Strikingly, only 1% ended up opting for the teacher-fronted mode of instruction.
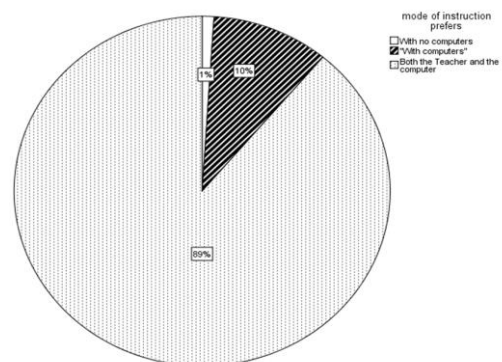

Fig. 2. Preferred Mode of Instruction of the arts undergraduates

Several straightforward "yes/no" questions were posed in order to find out their willingness to use ICT for developing English skills. For the question: "Do you think using computer technology can improve your English learning experience?", almost all the respondents answered in the affirmative (98%). Moreover, 96.1% stated that they are willing to engage in self-learning activities using ICT if they are given the necessary training and skills to do so. Furthermore, a percentage of 87 said "Yes" to the statement "I would like the teacher to use

computer technology to teach us English" with only 6.1% being undecided about this claim.

Since the whole point of the study is to evaluate the possibility of integrating Computer-assisted Language learning practices into ESL Arts undergraduate programmes, knowing that the respondents are proficient users of computers points towards its successful integration. In fact, it can be observed that close to half of them already use computers for language learning purposes. This data indicates that students are invariably inclined towards the use of technology for enhancing their English knowledge.

The finding that the majority ascertained to the possession of having one or more of the following ICT empowered devices: desktop computers, laptop computers, smart phone, and/or tablet PCs. With such ready access to computers at a personal level, even if computer facilities are poor within the universities, learners could still engage in CALL activities using their own machines. Hence, this finding indicates a lot of potential for introducing autonomous learning practices to the students using CALL. Yet another Striking finding of the research was the fact that almost all the respondents strongly recommended the use of the blended mode of developing ESL An unexpected finding was made when one tenth of the participants in the study went so far as to claim that they preferred to be taught exclusively through the use of technology rather than through face-to-face teacher fronted sessions.

V. Conclusion

Two things that emerge from this presentation of the tabulated data and discussions are; firstly, the fact that there is a radical and almost alarming inclination among the learners to believe that teachers are in fact replaceable.

Secondly, this points towards the unsuccessful methods of teaching English which has remained confined to traditional teaching formats even in the present context. As such, English educators should adjust their teaching strategies and pedagogy so as to evolve and develop with the changing educational landscape that invariably demands a "do or die" situation where there is no question as to whether one needs to consider CALL for future integration as it is indeed a ubiquitous requirement. These insights are crucial when considering the possible integration of technology-enhanced learning practices into the Arts undergraduates' English programmes.

From the finding of the student questionnaire, there is no doubt about the fact that the undergraduates are already convinced about the potential benefits of using information communication technologies to develop the L2 and to them including these types of technologies seem a highly welcome and worthwhile move. The fact that most of them appear to be already familiar with ICTs is an added incentive to the proponents of CALL since not much training or convincing is required in order to get these undergraduates to learn how to use and engage in technology enhanced learning practices for developing their English skills.

In sum, there is no question about the fact that students in Sri Lankan Arts faculties are yearning for a well-balanced synthesis of the two elements – teacher and computers – and it is high time action is taken to address this need.

Reference

[1] Department of Census and Statistics, 2016. Computer Literacy Statistics – 2016 (Annual). Sri Lanka. Available at: http://www.statistics.gov.lk/education/ComputerLiteracy/ComputerLiteracy-2016Q1-Q2-final.pdf [Accessed May 16, 2019].