

CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS IN ENGLISH MEDIUM UNDERGRADUATE CLASSES: AN EXPERIENCE OF A YOUNG UNIVERSITY IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This study looks into the challenges faced by the students in English Medium undergraduate classes of a Sri Lankan university where English is taught as a Second Language. Though theoretically EMI was introduced with a view to enhancing the English proficiency of the students, the desired outcome has been a question. Students at tertiary level EMI classes face many challenges to develop language proficiency while coping with their academic studies. A higher language proficiency, it is envisaged, would lead to a successful academic study in English medium, while the latter could also be a platform for language development.

This study, which was conducted among a group of students who were already identified as weaker in their English proficiency, revealed that those students have several issues concerning their language proficiency, which in turn, hamper their learning of content subjects. The findings of this study was used to provide additional language support for the students.

Keywords: English Medium Instruction (EMI), English proficiency, interaction, content learning, language development.

INTRODUCTION:

In 19th century, the countries whose mother tongue (L1) is not English, started to introduce 'English' as a medium of instruction into their academic programme at both secondary and tertiary levels. Most of these countries like Sri Lanka, India, and Malaysia were once the colonies of the Great Britain and during their colonial era, English was given prominence at all levels. Later, when these countries became independent, the elites who controlled the key positions in the state sector continued to perpetuate English language which they believed gave them a higher social status. In addition, the continuing globalization makes these countries give 'English' a major role in their academic curricula as a Medium of Instruction (MoI). However, policy level changes concerning MoI were brought in later into those countries.

As more and more students have started studying in the medium of English, especially at tertiary levels, the ability to comprehend academic lectures has been a challenge for those students (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992). A lecture, among other instructional media, is considered to be a central instructional activity (Flowerdew, 1994) and it is the most common means of conveying the content knowledge to students in Sri Lankan universities.

In Sri Lanka, English is widely used as a medium of instruction at tertiary level except for the courses in humanities and fine arts. Competitive job market and globalization made the courses at tertiary level to be offered in English. Nevertheless, the preparation made for learning in English Medium Instruction (EMI) is inadequate at schools. Even though English is taught as a subject at schools from grade 3 to GCE Advanced Level, various reasons affect the successful learning of English at schools including inadequate resources and lack of motivation among the students towards the language (The World Bank, 2009). Moreover, only a limited number of students study in English medium at schools. For example, in year 2015 only 1% of the students followed GCE A/L in English medium in all Sri Lanka schools (Ministry of Education, 2015). English has not been made a criteria for consideration for university entrance (University Grants Commission, 2015).

In India, Graddol (2010) argues that when teachers' and/or students' English proficiency is below C1 (C1 on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) equates to about Band 6.5 of the IELTS test) then the quality of education will suffer. In another study Students who are less proficient will be marginalized and tend to fall back on note-taking and rote learning. Graddol makes this claim reflecting Henry Whitehead, Bishop of Madras (cited in Graddol, 2010) who states that most of the university students are struggling to learn because *'the double burden of mastering their subjects and thinking in a foreign language is far too great a strain on them'* (p. 101). In another study, David O and Ogunsiji (2009) found that English Language proficiency had a significant positive relationship with their academic achievement. Similarly, Yushau and Omar (2015) identified that there was a positive relationship between language proficiency and performance in Mathematics of the bilingual Arab university students in Saudi Arabia.

In the Korean context as well, the language problems have been highlighted. Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim, and Jung (2010) investigated the 'EMI policy' in Korean higher educational institutes to find out how it influences teaching, learning, and other aspects of university operations. The study revealed that mandatory and unilateral implementation of EMI has led to problems because of the poor English knowledge of students and lecturers. Therefore, the study suggests that 'it is crucial to take a more flexible approach which carefully takes into account the specific situation of an individual institution' (p. 10), mainly the instructors' and students' language capability. Another study conducted by Yousif (2006) investigates the reasons for lecture comprehension problems in 'English as Foreign Language' (EFL) context. This study was conducted among Saudi Arabian students majoring in English. Yousif found that five kinds of problems affect students' lecture comprehension such as linguistic and conceptual variables (e.g. terminology), discourse variables (e.g. difficulty in understanding longer sentences), acoustic variables (e.g. speed of lecture), environmental variables (e.g. noisy classrooms) and psychological variables (e.g. boredom).

A study conducted by Ibrahim (2001) among the undergraduate students of an Indonesian University brings to light the several issues in conducting courses in EMI. He found that due to poor language proficiency of students and teachers, there were problems academically, socially, and psychologically. Academically, teachers' and students' low proficiency may lead to inefficient and ineffective teaching and learning processes. In addition, if their second language (English) is not adequately developed, they will have difficulty in expressing themselves in it, and this situation can create a feeling of frustration or powerlessness, which in turn may affect their self-esteem or self-confidence (ibid).

The problems of students in EMI have been investigated in different European contexts (Hellekjær, 2010; Vinke, Snippe, & Jochems, 1998). In Vinke et al's study, which was conducted among lecturers from several educational institutes across three disciplines: Engineering, Agricultural Sciences and Economics, reveals that though the lecturers did not feel any difference in teaching in Dutch and English, 67% reported that they had to

spend more time in preparation for EMI teaching, while expressing themselves clearly was difficult for around 60% of the respondents. It was found that EMI has brought difficulties not only for students but also for lecturers. Students had to face linguistic difficulties while lecturers had to put extra effort in preparing EMI classes, which in turn influenced their lecture delivery.

Hellekjær (2010) investigated the lecture comprehension of three Norwegian higher education institutions and two German universities. The results of her survey indicates that 42% of Norwegian students and 72% of the German students reported lecture comprehension problems.

The only study to have investigated students' lecture comprehension in the Sri Lankan ESL (English as a Second Language) context is that of Sally (1985). Sally exposed Engineering undergraduates to an experimental course in listening comprehension. After exposing students for eight weeks to different lectures, their comprehension was measured. It was found that the students had difficulties in understanding vocabulary, prepositional phrases and phrasal verbs, which in turn affected their lecture comprehension.

Before looking at the objective of the study, a brief review on Sri Lankan education sector may be beneficial to understand the context further.

EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKA:

Primary, secondary and tertiary sectors:

The primary and secondary sectors:

The Ministry of Education is responsible for managing the entire secondary education system in Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka Ministry of Education, 2015). In addition, there are provincial education ministries and departments to manage the schools at the provincial level. However, the provincial departments are vested with limited powers only, while major policy planning and implementation are performed at the ministerial level. Each province is divided into districts and zones in order to decentralize the administration of schools. There are ninety-three zones on the island.

The school education is divided into three phases: primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary. Students join schools in grade 1 when they complete five years of age and follow the primary education for five years. At the end of primary education, students enter the junior secondary level and it lasts for four years (grade 6 – 9). This is followed by senior secondary level for another four years. Senior secondary level is made of two cycles: GCE O/L (General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level) (Grade 10 & 11) and GCE A/L (General Certificate in Education Advanced Level), for two years. These two cycles have the national level exit examinations for the school students.

When passing the GCE O/L examinations (General Certificate in Education – Ordinary Level), students either enter the GCE A/L cycle or leave school and follow vocational training or technical education. If they decide to enter the advanced level studies, they select different streams such as Biological Science, Physical Science, Arts, or Commerce. This choice is highly influenced by the performance at GCE O/L than when compared to personal interest.

Students, upon their successful passing of the GCE A/L examinations, are admitted to universities on a Z-score system by the University Grants Commission (UGC). The students with higher Z-score, which is similar to the GPA, from each stream (e.g. Biology or Mathematics) gain admission to university. Hence, gaining admission to university is a highly competitive task in Sri Lanka. Annually only around 20% of the eligible students are admitted to universities (Sri Lanka University Grants Commission, 2016).

The tertiary sector

There are 15 universities at present in Sri Lanka. All are funded by the government, except the Open University of Sri Lanka which is self-financed. The University Grants Commission (UGC), which was established under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978, is the apex body of the University System in Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka University Grants Commission, 2016). It manages the admission of students to different universities and lays regulations to manage the universities. Sri Lankan universities offer education free of charge for their internal students admitted through the UGC.

Students enter universities between the ages of 18–20. As mentioned earlier, only 20% of all the qualified students from GCE A/L are admitted on a competitive basis. The percentage of these students of the total population of Sri Lanka is 0.01. However, the percentage of 18–20 age group which enter university is not known, as there is no census data available for that particular age group. In addition to these university entrants, it was speculated in 2008 estimated that around 8% of the qualified students go abroad to pursue their studies ("Sundaytimes," 2008) but this number should have been higher presently. The Open University of Sri Lanka, the only higher educational institute that provides distance mode of education, enroll around 8% of the students each year (Quality Assurance and

Accreditation Council, Sri Lanka 2013). This reveals that not all those students who are qualified to enter university receive opportunities for tertiary education in Sri Lanka as regular internal students of universities. This happens due to the limited number of universities in the island and their limited capacities.

The constitution of Sri Lanka entitles a person to be educated through the medium of either of the national languages (Sinhala or Tamil). However, it stipulates *'provisions of this paragraph shall not apply to an institution of higher education where the medium of instruction is a language other than a National Language'* (Parliament Secretariat, 2015). This clause sanctions English medium instruction in universities. The medium of instruction in many of the universities has been English for Science, Engineering and Medicine. Also, some universities offer English medium courses for Management and other related fields. Generally, Arts and Humanities courses are conducted in Sinhala or Tamil. However, the University of Peradeniya, the biggest residential university in Sri Lanka offers Arts courses in all three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English (Sri Lanka University Grants Commission Handbook, 2016).

In 2009, under the restructuring of university education, there have been voices to convert the medium of instruction to English in 'Arts and related courses' too (National Education Commission, 2009). But the universities haven't shown any positive response so far. There have always been voices against the introduction of English medium (Illeperuma, 2008) and universities also consider students' poor language proficiency.

Many of the lecturers teaching in Arts related courses followed their degrees in the mother tongue, so it is feared that they would not be able to cope with teaching in English. In addition, the HETC project (Higher Education for 21st Century) implemented in 2012 in Sri Lankan universities has spent a considerable amount of money on enhancing the English standard of the undergraduates, but the outcome of this project is yet to be evaluated.

Teaching English at primary and secondary Levels:

English is a compulsory subject from grade 3 of primary school to advanced level. In schools, at all levels (primary, junior secondary and senior secondary), English is taught as a subject for 5 periods. At primary level, each period lasts for 30 minutes duration, while in the upper levels, the duration is 40 minutes. Usually there are two term tests (1st term and 2nd term), followed by a year-end examination in an academic year. The first national level examination for the students includes a subject in English at the GCE O/L.

In addition to English Language examinations, limited numbers of students (3%), who are already somewhat fluent in the English language, take English literature examination as well at GCE O/L (Performance Report of Department of Education, 2015). Only the metropolitan schools prepare students to participate in this examination. It is noteworthy that the majority of the student population of FS come from the rural areas and so do not sit the GCE O/L Literature examination.

Teaching English at tertiary level:

Traditionally at Sri Lankan universities, teaching English Literature was very popular compared to Language or Linguistics. Most of the academics attached to the Department of English of older universities (e.g. University of Peradeniya and University of Colombo) specialized in English Literature and they trained a small number of students (3-5) for a special degree in English each year. In addition, the general degree programme of several universities for the Arts students offered English as a subject along with other subjects (i.e. Economics, Political Science, etc.) to be taught over a three year period. The students who had already passed the GCE A/L English Literature were selected for these courses, though some new universities enrolled others too, based on their fluency in the language. Almost all these subjects in these degree programmes were relevant to English Literature, while only a few focused on Linguistics.

The result of the above situation was that English Language courses were not available for the majority of the student population, and therefore in the early 1980s, the University Grants Commission established the ELTUs (English Language Teaching Units) in all universities in order to teach optional English Language courses during a pre-sessional academic programme to students irrespective of their medium of instruction. However, as individual universities are allowed to have their own programme, the content and length of the programmes vary between universities.

ELTUs in the 1990s taught EAP/ESP (English for Academic Purposes/ English for Specific Purposes) type courses for those in the English medium courses (i.e. Science and Engineering) and also started to teach ongoing English Language courses for several degrees along with regular academic subjects. In addition, the standing committee on English teaching of the University Grants Commission has suggested teaching a General English component as a mandatory programme during the first semester of the first year in all higher educational institutes from the early 2000s.

At this backdrop, this study which investigates the problems faced by students in EMI classes arises. The students who had very limited language proficiency at schools continue to struggle at the university too. Sudden

change in the medium of instruction for almost all the students, except for a very few who studied in English medium at secondary level, has been a problem to cope with their academic studies. This situation affects them from developing their language proficiency further. In this study, it has been attempted to find the problems faced by EMI students to see whether there is any improvement in their language proficiency by following their courses in English medium.

OBJECTIVE:

Objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by the science undergraduate students in EMI classes. Also, this study investigates if there is any improvement in the level of language proficiency of students by following their courses in EMI.

METHODOLOGY:

The study took place in the Science Faculty of one of the national universities in Sri Lanka (here in after referred to as FS). The Faculty runs with three departments: Departments of Biological Science, Department of Mathematical Science, and Department of Physics. In the Faculty, English is taught as a compulsory credit carrying subject for the first two years. For this study, around 50 students who failed the English language examinations in the first year of their academic study were selected (Semester I). In the faculty nearly two-third of the students had failed that examination out of 180 students who sat for the first year first semester English examination.

The students who participated in the survey are mostly from rural areas and all of them studied their secondary education in their mother tongue. In this study, students whose mother tongue is Sinhala and Tamil participated. Sinhala language is spoken by Majority Sinhalese on the island, while Tamil is spoken by Tamils and Muslims who make around 20% of the Sri Lankan population. Though there are a few students who studied in English medium in the faculty they were not included into the sample as the sample is made up of students who failed their English language examination in the first year. Hence, the sample consists of students from both Mathematics and Biology streams.

Currently these students are in their second year of academic study. A common syllabi is taught for the second year students. Of those 50 students, 40 students participated in the study. Of the participants, nearly 60% followed their school studies in Sinhala medium and the rest in Tamil. This means 60% of the students' mother tongue is Sinhala and for others, Tamil is the mother tongue. Among the participants 15 female and 25 male students were there.

During first year, English subject is taught as a mixture of general English and English for Academic Purposes. Three hours of instruction is given each week in a 15-week semester. Due to constraints of space and teaching staff, students are taught in larger classes of around 60 students, in three parallel classes.

In this study, questionnaires were distributed to collect data. In addition, two Focus Group Discussions were held with students. One among the students whose mother tongue is Tamil and another one for Sinhala-speaking students. These discussions were held to collect further data and at the same time to ensure data triangulation with the data collected from questionnaires.

FINDINGS:

Background of the Students:

The English language proficiency was measured at two public examinations they faced. One is GCE O/L (General Certificate in Education Ordinary level) and the other one is GCE A/L–Advanced Level. Students sit for O/L after studying 11 years at schools, while A/L is after 13 years. GCE A/L is used to select students to universities too. Of these students, 40% have passed the GCE O/L English examination, while only 20% have passed the GCE A/L General English examination.

Table 1: GCE O/L English results of the participants

Grade	Percentage %
A	6
B	13
C	22
S	50
W	9

Table 2: GCE A/L English results of the participants

Grade	Percentage %
A	-
B	-
C	7
S	13
W	80

Students' reaction to learning in English:

Almost all the interviewed students reported that English is essential for their future career. Nevertheless half of them preferred to have their mother tongue as a medium of instruction for their subject lectures, while the rest wanted to study in English. The preference for the mother tongue arises due to the difficulties in understanding the language, mainly grammar and vocabulary related issues. On the other hand, of those who preferred English medium instruction, 80% reported difficulties in understanding lectures that are conducted in English. In other words, majority of the interviewed students faced lecture comprehension problems. Similar to the medium of instruction, an equal number of students (50%) preferred to use their mother tongue in classroom discussions. Similar to the present study, Flowerdew and colleagues (1992, 1996 and 2000) conducted a series of studies of second language lecture comprehension among a group of Hong Kong Chinese students. Of these three studies, the first one identified students' problems in lecture comprehension. Hence, the findings of that study was similar to the findings of the present study. It was found that, among other reasons, speed of the lecture and new terminology and concepts affected students' lecture comprehension. The other two studies that investigated the lecturers' perceptions of students' problems found that students had problems mainly with vocabulary. In addition, the lecturers reported that developing a participatory style of lecturing was difficult due to poor student cooperation.

In this study, nearly 90% of the interviewed students feel that poor knowledge of English affects their performance in their main subjects. These students' performance in English examinations were poor as already mentioned. With regard to specific language skills that are difficult for them, majority of the students reported that writing is the difficult skill for them. Similarly, speaking is also difficult. They are somewhat confident that they could read and understand the texts. We have already seen that understanding lectures has been a problem for almost all the students. Also, they perceive that their listening skills improve over the period of study at the university.

The objective of conducting English medium instruction is to enhance the language proficiency of students by teaching them in English. Hence, in this study, students' perception of how their different language skills improve over a period of study at the university was looked into. The results are shown below.

Table 3: Changes in the language proficiency when entered to the university and at present as perceived by the students (after spending an year)

	When entered to the university					At present					chi-square value	P value
% reported	poor	Somewhat good	Average	Good	Excellent	Poor	Somewhat good	Average	Good	Excellent		
Skills												
Overall English proficiency	44	38	12	6	0	18	48	28	6	0	18.466	0.000
Listening	19	34	34	13	0	6	25	47	22	0	12.534	0.005
Reading	13	16	40	28	3	6	19	41	31	3	2.987	0.384
Writing	38	28	28	3	3	24	28	34	11	3	6.942	0.074
Speaking	58	19	15	8	0	41	25	25	6	3	6.296	0.098

Significant value $p < 0.05$

Good and Excellent were considered together for the analysis

None of the students claimed that their overall language proficiency was excellent at the time of entrance to the university. The majority of the students fall in the poor category, while slightly less percentage state that their language proficiency was somewhat good. Hence, this percentage increased to 50% as a present condition. With regard to individual language skills nearly 60% of the surveyed students felt that their speaking ability was poor, next to writing (38%).

The statistical analysis using chi-square indicates that there is a significant improvement in the overall English proficiency as well as the listening skills as shown in the table 1 (P value 0.000 and 0.005 respectively). Nevertheless there is no significant development in other three skills, namely reading, writing and speaking.

Reasons for students' poor language abilities:

The reasons can be of external nature as well as internal. As external factors, students mentioned that at schools they did not have proper guidance for learning English. Thus, they did not have either an English teacher in their classes or English classes were not regularly conducted. In some schools, English teachers are entrusted with other duties than teaching, so that they do not conduct English classes regularly. Many of the students could not get any help to learn English from their family or environment. We noted earlier that they were from a rural environment.

In addition to these external reasons, students' attitudes and motivation also influence their learning of English. Some students think that English is hard to learn and they have lost confidence that they could learn English language. They feel shy in language classes so that they do not ask question, answer questions or involve in discussions in English even in their subject classes. Many of the students (50%) acknowledged that they concentrate on learning the main subjects only, so that they could not pay much attention to learning of English.

Role of English medium lectures in language learning:

Students mentioned that many of the lecturers' use of language motivate them to learn the language. However, when asked if they got opportunities to speak in the class, students responded negatively. Even a few questions asked by the lecturers, were not answered by the students. Students rarely ask questions during lectures. This means they do not have opportunities to develop their language skills in subject classes mainly speaking.

DISCUSSION:

Even though it was assumed that EMI at universities may help to improve the language proficiency of the students, the reality is not so. As the findings in this study and subsequent discussions on EMI indicate the English proficiency of the students who have followed their degrees in EMI is not as high as expected at the end of their course. In addition, students seem to have lecture comprehension problems, coupled with their limited language proficiency.

The important outcome of the study, which was undertaken in an EMI context is that, at FS, the lecture delivery is mostly monologic (Navaz, 2012), so that opportunities for students to interact in the classroom were limited. Also, the root of the problem is coupled with English education in schools and the EMI at university. Although EMI is a fait accompli, as discussed below, identifying the problems in EMI may help to address the existing students' issues in a better way. Moreover, the South Asian and Southeast Asian countries (e.g. Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Malaysia) teach students in English to receive degrees, while most of their school studies are in their mother tongue.

In Sri Lanka, almost all the textbooks that are relevant to higher education are available in English and also the lecturers have followed their higher education in English. The lecturers are more comfortable using English terms (technical vocabulary) than Tamil or Sinhala equivalent, though the appropriate use of language cannot be assured. On the other hand, the situation in Europe is different. Their lecturers have already learnt in the mother tongue and the textbooks are available in the mother tongue. Lecturers in European countries where English is used as a medium of instruction at tertiary level have to switch their medium of instruction from the mother tongue to English.

Nevertheless, despite these contextual differences, the limited language proficiency of students has been a common issue in EMI tertiary classes, and has been the focus of studies in both Europe and Asia. Another common issue has been the limited language proficiency of lecturers, although this has generally been investigated in Europe rather than Asia. For example, Vinkie et al (1998) found that the switch from Dutch to English produced linguistic limitations in the field of vocabulary, redundancy, and clarity and accuracy of expression on the part of the lecturers. But the fact is that at FS the lecturers' English proficiency is not considered as a factor in their appointment.

Sustainability of EMI:

A debate over whether Sri Lanka needs English medium instruction at tertiary level may seem inappropriate because all Sri Lankan universities have conducted their courses, such as Medicine, and Engineering, in English from the inception of higher education in Sri Lanka, while for the last two to three decades, courses in Science and related subjects (e.g. Agricultural Science) are also being held in the medium of English. Further, English has been widely used as the medium of administration in most of the government ministries and departments, while the usage of English in the private sector is much higher. It may be suitable to claim that 'English has assumed its place as the language of communication within the new linguistic global order' as suggested by Marsh (2006: 29). Moreover, as a recent initiative, the government has urged schools to conduct English medium classes for selected subjects at primary and secondary level, subject to the individual discretion of the schools when they have enough resources, mainly the teachers. But schools that conduct English medium classes are limited in number and also these schools are confined to the metropolitan areas of the island.

Though English is already in use as a medium of instruction in Sri Lanka, the problems in English education as well as English medium instruction (EMI) are many. The majority of students undertake their school studies in the vernacular languages, as already mentioned. As a result, the student population entering the university is highly monolingual. When the courses are offered in English at universities most of these students find problems in understanding lectures and participating in lectures. Therefore, this situation leads to incompetent graduates in terms of English language skills. It is also claimed that 'the English language skills of a large proportion of graduates [in Sri Lanka] are well below the threshold expected by private sector firms' (The World Bank, 2009: E3).

CONCLUSION:

This study reveals that Students in EMI classes had difficulties to cope with their language and subject classes. Their poor language proficiency affects their learning. Studying in EMI does not seem to help them develop their language proficiency either.

Language proficiency is believed to influence students' ability to interact in the classroom. At FS students might feel reluctant to answer questions or ask questions in the class fearing that their poor language may allow other students to make fun of them. Due to their inability to ask or answer questions in the class, students rarely clarified any lecture comprehension problems either within or outside the class. In Flowerdew et al.'s study (2000), the Hong Kong Chinese students in the BA TESL methods course were reluctant to ask questions and participate in classroom discussions due to their low English proficiency, which is similar to the findings of this study. Nevertheless, language problem was not the only factor which influenced the students' ability to ask or answer questions. Some of the students, whose English proficiency was satisfactory and were active in classroom discussions in English classes, rarely answered or asked questions in content classes. This was partly due to their fear of talking in the class or shyness to do so.

This study revealed that students had lower language proficiency at entry. This is due to various reasons like school level issues and lack of motivation. This limited language proficiency may affect their successful learning of content subjects and at the same time developing language proficiency further by following English medium instruction seems to be difficult for them.

As Rogier's (2012) research indicates institutions whose goal is to increase language proficiency through EMI need to have clear instructional goals in place for language development along with support systems for teachers and learners throughout the entire educational experience and not just in pre-academic support programs. Hence, at this university too, a similar mechanism should be implemented. In addition, further research is needed to find whether the lecturers' instructional methods are conducive for language development. In Sri Lanka, though both students and lecturers' language proficiency affect the quality of learning and teaching as revealed in this study, lecturers' language proficiency has not been the focus of any studies in Sri Lanka. Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate the lecture comprehension and related problems of EMI students in Sri Lanka.

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