

## A critical analysis of the Secondary-Tertiary Academic Reading Skills gap among ESL Secondary School and Sri Lankan university students

Chethika A Samarajeewa \* and Lubna Ali Mohammed

*Lincoln University College, Malaysia.*

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 27(01), 551-557

Publication history: Received on 16 May 2025; revised on 01 July 2025; accepted on 04 July 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.27.1.2440>

### Abstract

The review analyses the pedagogical differences identified between ESL learners in selected secondary schools in Sri Lanka and university students. Elements that might influence this difference include curriculum implementation, approaches to teaching, language barriers, and cultural issues. The work also expounds on the implications of these challenges for students' learning and possible intervention approaches. Such recommendations include changes in trends in teachers' practices, the ways fiscal resources are allocated, and teachers' preparation curricula. In the context of the present study, the findings can be helpful for policymakers, educators, and learners with the goal of promoting and facilitating equal and efficient ESL learning in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Academic Reading Skills; ESL Education; Curriculum Gap; Tertiary Education; Sri Lanka

### 1. Introduction

The movement from secondary to tertiary education involves a significant academic and linguistic change for ESL learners in Sri Lanka. English, an important medium used in higher education, presents a significant challenge for students in terms of the reading demands of universities. When leaving school, many students fail to achieve what is expected at the tertiary level, providing evidence of a gap between school and tertiary learning. Such differences have certain causal factors founded on linguistic, pedagogical, and socio-cultural aspects.

At the linguistic level, most ESL learners have inadequate knowledge of the academic vocabulary, reading approach, or understanding to comprehend a university reading. In secondary schools, the scholars' achievements are judged by their ability to pass examinations. Therefore, learning strategies involve memorization rather than analysis and interpretation skills. This leads to minimal experience in the individual and intensive reading expected of a university level. In our pedagogy, the teaching approaches used in secondary education do not prepare the students for tertiary institutions. Secondary schools' primary concern remains the refinement of linguistic skills and basic academic literacy, and the transition in tertiary institutions to the application of interpretive, analytical, and critical skills for academic writing comes as a shock to so many.

Socio-cultural factors further compound these challenges. Cultural expectations to perform well on examinations, lack of adequate materials, and absence of frameworks that would facilitate the improvement of reading abilities are the important factors affecting it. Moreover, rural students compete differently from other students because they are limited in exposure to English outside the classroom (Renganathan, 2021). These are the multiple reasons for this disconnect, about which this paper provides a practical understanding of how better to coordinate academic reading skills across different levels of learning. To fill these gaps, knowledge and awareness are imperative for supporting ESL learners in Sri Lanka with regard to the linguistic challenge arising in tertiary education.

\* Corresponding author: Chethika A Samarajeewa.

## 2. linguistic challenges

### 2.1. Vocabulary and Syntax Limitations

Among a number of linguistic concerns of Sri Lankan ESL students shifting from secondary to tertiary education, learners' restricted range of academic vocabulary and syntactical development is one of the significant concerns. Secondary school curricula have remained relevant to academic achievement and functional English only while assessing the student's comprehension of the complex terms, most of which emerge in the text contents of universities. Most of the secondary-school leavers do understand such words as epistemology, synthesis, or hypothesis, which are frequently used by scholars (Green and Lambert, 2018). This lexical gap dramatically limits their ability to understand the textual content of scholarly readings, which delays comprehension and interpretation of the content.

Also, the syntactical differences between Sinhala or Tamil and English make a difference for these learners. English is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), while Sinhala and Tamil are mostly Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). This leads to a lot of syntax mistakes like "He school went" instead of "He went to school". Further, Sinhala and Tamil languages do not include auxiliary verbs and articles. Hence, there are more often smaller mistakes in whole English sentences, for example, "She is a doctor" instead of "She is a doctor". Such linguistic restrictions pose a huge hurdle to educational achievement at the tertiary level, and thus, systematic and focused intercessions must be conducted at the secondary level. Specifications of context and syntactic density of lexical items and practice with patterned structures for consolidating grammatical form can be used to narrow the gap significantly (Skinner, 1969).

### 2.2. Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Another important challenge is that learners lack higher-order reading comprehension skills, which are very important for tertiary education. The multiple-choice, true/false, and other similar types of questions used in secondary education teach little but rote memorization and direct recall, which hampers the student's acquisition of the higher-order thinking skills necessary for developing good analytical and inferential reading skills. As a result, students coming to the university are not ready to handle the challenges of reading from their study materials. For example, secondary school students might be required to retrieve information from a text, while university work requires them to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate arguments presented in academic sources (Bharuthram, 2012).

This is compounded by the fact that at the secondary level, there is no direct teaching of comprehension strategies. Teaching skills like skimming, scanning, digesting, inquiring, and analyzing texts are rarely used, so students have no means of studying reading academically. Besides that, secondary school students are not expected to read various types of academic works, like research articles, theoretical essays, or argumentative writings. In contrast, at the tertiary level, such works are commonplace (Singh, 2014). This limited exposure usually allows only a steep learning curve, leading to frustration and low academic morale.

These generalities will need systemic shifts in how comprehending reading is instructed across the secondary level. The application of techniques like the SQ3R method (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review), guided reading, and exercises that require inferencing will improve the student's performance at the tertiary level. Furthermore, secondary curricula with relevant and quality texts should be used in order to facilitate students' early exposure to the types of texts they are going to come across in college. Such interventions can also assist in reducing the reading comprehension gap and hence facilitate the smooth transition to tertiary education for Sri Lankan ESL learners.

---

## 3. Pedagogical challenges

### 3.1. Curriculum Misalignment

Another one of the major teaching-learning issues that have fostered the secondary-tertiary reading skills gap among Sri Lankan ESL students is the discrepancy between the requirements of secondary education in Sri Lanka and tertiary education. The secondary curriculum is largely exam-based and focuses on memorization of content alongside the ability to regurgitate passages literally on the exam. This approach tends to emphasize rote memorization and the capacity to reproduce knowledge during tests and less on the acquisition of skills, which include the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information (Stoerger, 2018). Thus, university education fails to prepare students for the required academic reading levels, including interpreting texts, discussing multiple perspectives, and synthesizing information to support developed arguments.

Further, secondary school students hardly encounter real academic resources, such as journal articles, theoretical articles, or case studies, which are used in universities. However, the texts read in secondary education are clear and straightforward, and their purpose is to prepare students for nationwide assessments. This limited exposure creates a gap between the skills students gain while studying in secondary schools and the challenges they face when it comes to academic reading at universities (Williamson, 2008).

In order to fill this gap, there is the call to change the curriculum to reflect on the teaching of academic literacy skills at an earlier level. Comprehension and inferential reading, alongside other skills like critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills, should become part of the implementation of secondary school curricula in order to prepare students for tertiary education. For example, activities that imply a comparison of the arguments, the analysis of the relevant literature, or a discussion of modern problems are helpful for practicing critical analysis. Moreover, developing the use of interdisciplinary books that reflect the difficulty and variety of university materials is helpful for students in enhancing their readiness for education.

### 3.2. Teacher Training Deficits

Another crucial pedagogical question is that ESL teachers are insufficiently prepared, which affects, in particular, their tasks to promote the academic literacy of learners in secondary school. It is becoming apparent that most teachers in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms have little prior experience in implementing sophisticated methodologies for improving teaching skills related to instantaneous reading comprehensiveness and academic proficiency. Conventional pre-service teacher education interventions assume that the courses they offer provide a solid foundation for general pedagogical practice strategies (Cheek, 2016). The practice-oriented strategies employed in traditional teacher education paradigms do not address instruction-specific strategies for teaching key reading, critical thinking, and self-learning skills, usually referred to as advanced literacy skills.

The rarity of opportunities for professional development of in-service teachers worsens this absence in teacher preparation. Most instructors are unaware of new technologies in regard to reading instruction that include graphic organizers, reciprocal teaching, or scaffolds, to name but a few, which have been witnessed to improve students' understanding and critical thinking skills in reading. Lack of skills and resources may hinder teachers from being able to assist learners when it comes to interpreting concepts presented in different texts or offer constructive feedback that will enhance learning (Wilson, 2016).

The challenge can, therefore, be addressed by professional development programs aimed at training teachers in new and improved teaching methods. Pre-service and in-service professional development activities, including workshops, seminars, and online courses that inform teachers about the empirical findings and how these can be applied to their practice, including teaching metacognitive reading strategies, using academic language in context when reading, and designing inquiry-based learning activities, can enhance teacher-implemented strategy for preparing students for post-secondary schooling. For example, preparing teachers to promote a specific reading approach, such as the SQ3R, or to model collaborative reading lessons that require students to read with a focus and in groups where they discuss what they have read enhances the student's academic literacy.

Furthermore, mentorship programs where the participant teachers are teamed up with other educators who are more proficient in teaching can be employed, as they offer knowledge exchanges and a chance to acquire practical experience. The steps can in effect build a community of practice by helping the ESL teachers to share common practices and strive to advance the best practices in the practice of teaching techniques. (Liu and Kuo, 2007).

### 3.3. Instructional Practices and Resource Constraints

Lack of curriculum alignment, teacher training, pedagogy and resources in many Sri Lankan secondary schools also play a role in the discrepancy in academic reading skills. School education has a designated role of a teacher who acts as the main sender of knowledge while students are the passive receivers, without reading actively or interacting with the texts or resource materials. This approach hinders the prospects for physical practice of analytical and inferential reading, which is vital at the university level.

In addition, many schools fail to provide essential skills, like an academic library, computers, digital tools, books, and journals, which enhance the academic literacy level among students. Students do not get the needed exposure to different and rigorous texts to develop the needed background information and vocabulary for academically challenging texts. This is because large class sizes make it difficult to personally attend to a learner or participants, also it is challenging for the teacher to physically engage with learners, or employ techniques that promote critical reading and evaluation skills.

These challenges cannot be solved by one single strategy; instead, they require a complex set of changes in the provision of education material and teaching methods that are student-oriented. For instance, the provision of well-stocked school libraries containing academic resources such as journals, research articles, and e-books that enhance the extent of students' access to advanced magazine reading materials can go a long way in boosting this level of exposure. Altogether, the application of technological tools in the classroom, like developing digital reading applications or an online discussion forum, opens up possibilities for the enactment of academic texts.

Teachers can also use a proactive approach in their teaching. For instance, they can incorporate group learning, project-based learning, or a Socratic approach in the hope that students will read texts with more understanding and keenness. The skills of inquiry, discussion, and critical thinking a teacher develops can assist the learner in achieving the required competencies in tertiary education.

### **3.4. Policy and Systemic Support**

Finally, it can be concluded that the improvement of secondary-tertiary academic reading skills deficits is based on identifying relevant pedagogical barriers, which call for systemic support and policy measures. To achieve these outcomes, educational policymakers need to incorporate academic literacy skills into the secondary curriculum and provide resources for teachers' professional development. Specific two-way relations such as co-seminars, transition programs, or tutorship between secondary schools and institutions of higher learning can also enhance a better transition and harmony between the two sub-sectors.

That way, Sri Lanka will have put in place proper reforms and systemic support measures to ease the pedagogical challenges so that ESL students can be well prepared for the challenges that characterize university education and education success.

---

## **4. Socio-Cultural Influences in ESL Education in Sri Lanka**

Socio-cultural factors play a critical role in ESL education in Sri Lankan context especially, if analyzed according to the secondary and tertiary level student's academic reading skills deficit. These influences can be in the form of attitudes towards English, equity in teacher resources, and socio-economic factors that affect learning. Such issues need to be tackled through approaches leading to the formation of favorable and fair ESL learning system.

### **4.1. Attitudes Toward English**

To a big extent, in many areas of the country English is considered to be a useful language only in academic terms. This kind of attitude discourages students from following both formal, and additional practices of the given language beyond the classroom setting. Unlike the students in urban programs who perceive English as a passport to the international market, the rural students perceive it as a means of cramming and scoring high grades. This perception is aggravated by the lack of association between the teaching of a foreign language and its practical application.

Most studies indicate that such attitudes can be transformed by promoting English as a medium through which people can access global information, reputable universities, and improved job prospects. Teachers can take a central role in choosing definite contexts for discussion, for example, presenting students with global concerns and encouraging them to participate in international web forums or stressing the availability of local success stories that can be completed only with the help of English. Furthermore, making classrooms bi/multilingual to recognize students' first languages can help promote an accepting learning atmosphere and increase students' interest (Chang, 2018).

### **4.2. Resource Inequality**

Because of educational resource availability differences between urban and rural zones, disparity in reading academic skills continues to persist. Since urban schools also come with libraries, different types of books, computers and other teaching aids, and highly skilled teachers, students are exposed to English in various media. On the other hand, rural school students posed resource deprivation challenges where schools lack books, online tutorials and other academic literacy tools.

For instance, students at the secondary level in urban areas use computer-based and analytical texts suitable for tertiary institutions. Learners in rural areas often use textbooks alone, and some of them may not be comprehensive enough to cater to university-level knowledge. This limited experience prevents them from mastering tools for comprehending a text while researching study: skimming, scanning, and synthesizing.

To tackle such issues, there is a need for policymakers and educators to ensure the distribution of resources reasonably. Measures could be as follows: Support of providing rural schools with digital libraries, affordability of connecting to the World Wide Web, and providing schools with a variety of informational writings. Another strategy for establishing resource centers arises through public-private partnerships, especially in the most impoverished areas. That way, students from different regions will be able to have similar chances to improve their academic reading.

#### **4.3. Socio-Economic Disparities**

Socio-economic challenges extend the problem of resource inequality in society as well. Students from low-income families do not have an opportunity to attend private classes, take extra language learning after school, or use modern elements that can help them study better. Although students in urban settings have been fortunate enough to attend international schools or receive special lessons in foreign language acquisition, rural students are strangled by a lack of school funding and overcrowded classrooms.

Thirdly, socio-economic status determines parents' engagement in a child's learning process. Parents in urban areas are more likely to assist their children directly in their academic work, for instance, by buying extra textbooks or by promoting children's enrollment in language camps. On the other hand, parents in rural settings may lack vision or turn a blind eye to timely goals of education rather than necessarily immediate earnings; hence, they tend to be less involved with their children's language development.

Therefore, societies can design language programs at the community level to address these gaps. These programs can provide free or cut-rate tutoring and reading materials, as well as an opportunity to learn with other students. In the same way, offering scholarships for needy and deserving high academic achievers from low-income families in rural areas can make a major difference in the children compared with their counterparts in cities.

#### **4.4. Bridging Socio-Cultural Gaps in the Classroom**

The highlighted socio-cultural issues have critical implications for ESL learning and, as such, require a culturally sensitive and aggressive approach. Teachers need to foster cultures of inclusion and respect for the multiple languages within the classroom while ensuring each student's proficiency in English. For instance, culturally sustaining pedagogy can adjust English lessons to include storytelling, cultural practices or use languages familiar to the students.

Settling the students into cooperative learning partners who are from different socio-economic and linguistic groups within society also promotes both motivation and understanding. Interactions within these settings assist students in viewing English as a common means of interaction rather than creating division.

In addition, cultural sensitivity and flexibility of approach should be major features of teacher training. Preparing educators for socio-cultural differences empowers them to handle everyone in the classroom and make provisions depending on their students' needs. For instance, teachers can use a bilingual intervention strategy in which they modify communication with students and gradually teach them more English while easing the load on their working memory.

#### **4.5. Enhancing Equitable Resource Allocation**

For enhanced ESL learning to be sustainable, stakeholders must ensure that resource inequalities are eliminated through directed enhancement. The governments should encourage non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other sector players to construct facilities, including digital classrooms, spacious libraries, and information centers in the rural areas. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to use such an approach as technology can perform a transformative function. For instance, students can study given texts and practice a language on their mobile applications and with the help of online platforms, irrespective of their location.

Government and other authorities need to be encouraged to think ahead, revisit curriculum development, and promote a shift from rote learning to reasoning and academic literacy. This shift may not be desirable for students to be able to engage effectively in tertiary institutions where they are expected to critically analyze, evaluate, and synthesize written information.

## 5. Proposed Solutions

### 5.1. Enhanced Curriculum Design

There is a gap in secondary-tertiary academic reading skills, and a curriculum design is necessary to close this gap. Implementing the strategies for specific instruction of reading skills in secondary school curricula positively impacts comprehension, analytical, and synthesizing skills. These skills are crucial to learning at the tertiary level of education. The curriculum should include cross-curricular reading tasks that resemble actual academic tasks and promote the reading of texts from a range of subjects other than those students focus on. Such activities enable students to become aware of expectations of university learning with features such as critical thinking skills and problem-solving. Additionally, including collaborative reading tasks may help students learn through peers by paying more attention as well as enhance language acquisition.

### 5.2. Teacher Professional Development

Fixing the void in learning academic reading skills requires teachers' intervention. Officers should ensure that professional development programs aim to guide teachers on using scaffolding techniques and introducing academic discourse. Classes focused on teaching students' ways of reading, for example, summarizing, skimming, and analyzing, can help complement teaching and learning processes. Teachers themselves should also know how to incorporate the use of other media, including e-readers, forums, and multimedia, as well as variety in the reading (Dwiningtiyas, Sofyan and Puspita, 2020). Not only do these tools help to make reading relevant for students, but they also teach students about the technology requirements in college. In addition, continuous professional learning and feedback systems can enable teachers to improve their practices since they can always enhance student academic achievement.

### 5.3. Resource Allocation

Accessibility to education requirements forms one of the foundations of narrowing the gap in academic reading skills. Creating for well-stocked libraries and websites that are accessible to both urban and rural schools can make students of all the stations across the country exposed to the different academic texts. Other partners, such as NGOs and private organizations, may complement the government in a way of offering school academic needs, teachers and training, and technologies. Strategic cooperation should also seek to establish reading points or groups within given societies in order to foster learning outside the classroom (Ni et al., 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

In essence, interventions to close the academic reading skills gap between Sri Lankan secondary and tertiary students' needs to be holistic and systemic in nature. These actions include changing the curriculum to teach higher-order reading skills, training teachers in proper and efficient technique, and making sure that textbooks are fairly divided equally. In this way, employing the mentioned strategies, it will be possible to increase the readiness of ESL learners in order to achieve success in tertiary education and to improve the learners' outcomes. Such efforts will not only help the individual learners but will also help in the nation building by producing a well-educated and skilled population.

## References

- [1] Bharuthram, S. (2012) "Making a case for the teaching of reading across the curriculum in higher education," South African Journal of Education. Education Association of South Africa, p. 205. doi:10.15700/saje. v32n2a557.
- [2] Chang, S. (2018) "Beyond the English Box: Constructing and Communicating Knowledge Through Translingual Practices in the Higher Education Classroom," English Teaching & Learning. Springer Science+Business Media, p. 23. doi:10.1007/s42321-018-0014-4.
- [3] Clarence Green, Nanyang Technological University, 1 Nanyang Walk, NIE3-03-118, 637616, Singapore, clarence.green@nie.edu.sg, James Lambert, Nanyang Technological University, 1 Nanyang Walk, NIE3-03-118, 637616, Singapore (2018) "Advancing disciplinary literacy through English for academic purposes: Discipline-specific wordlists, collocations and word families for eight secondary subjects." Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1475158518302157> (Accessed: January 17, 2025).
- [4] Dwiningtiyas, G.N., Sofyan, D. and Puspita, H. (2020) "TEACHERS' STRATEGIES IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION," JALL (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literacy). doi:10.25157/jall. v4i2.3682.

- [5] Ji Young Kim, Fayetteville State University, Colleen Walker, Campbellsville University, Priscilla Manarino-Leggett, Fayetteville State University (2012) "Equipping Classroom Teachers for English Language Learners." Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/tesj.40> (Accessed: January 17, 2025).
- [6] Martha Collins Cheek, Louisiana State University (2016) "PRESERVICE EDUCATION IN READING: WHAT DO THE TEACHERS SAY?" Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0270271820030105> (Accessed: January 17, 2025).
- [7] Ni, S. et al. (2021) "The effects of parental involvement in parent-child reading for migrant and urban families: A comparative mixed-methods study," *Children and Youth Services Review*. Elsevier BV, p. 105941. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.105941.
- [8] Renganathan, S. (2021) "English language education in rural schools in Malaysia: a systematic review of research," *Educational Review*. Taylor & Francis, p. 787. doi:10.1080/00131911.2021.1931041.
- [9] Singh, M.K.M. (2014) "Challenges in Academic Reading and Overcoming Strategies in Taught Master Programmes: A Case Study of International Graduate Students in Malaysia," *Higher Education Studies*. Canadian Center of Science and Education. doi:10.5539/hes.v4n4p76.
- [10] Skinner, P.F. (1969) "Supplement Grammar Instruction with Sentence Modeling," *The English Journal*. National Council of Teachers of English, p. 257. doi:10.58680/ej196920630.
- [11] Stoerger, S. (2018) "Writing without words: Designing for a visual learning experience," *Education for Information*. IOS Press, p. 7. doi:10.3233/efi-189002.
- [12] Williamson, G.L. (2008) "A Text Readability Continuum for Postsecondary Readiness," *Journal of Advanced Academics*. SAGE Publishing, p. 602. doi:10.4219/jaa-2008-832.
- [13] Wilson, K. (2016) "Critical reading, critical thinking: Delicate scaffolding in English for Academic Purposes (EAP)," *Thinking Skills and Creativity*. Elsevier BV, p. 256. doi: 10.1016/j.tsc.2016.10.002.