

TRANSFORM project
English language assessment in Sri Lanka

OUTPUT 1: Research paper on
English and employability in Sri Lanka

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1 Introduction

This research paper constitutes Output 1 of a research project on English language assessment in Sri Lanka, funded by the *TRANSFORM* programme of the British Council and the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka. With this paper, we aim to provide insights into the **Sri Lankan economy and labour market, and the role of English within this**.

In a study by The Economist Intelligence Unit (2013, p.2) on skills development in South Asia, it was stated that “[o]ne of the biggest challenges for South Asian countries in coming years is to unlock the talent potential of the millions of young people entering the workforce”. Skills development was thereby argued to be a key driver for socio-economic development, and, more specifically, so-called ‘soft skills’ such as English language and communication were considered to be vital to the service-oriented economies in South Asia, in order to “enhance the competitiveness of workers in key sectors such as business-process outsourcing and hospitality” (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013, p. 3).

Prior research specifically focusing on Sri Lanka (see for example the reviews by Ariyawansa, 2008; Wijewardene, Yong & Chinna, 2014) has shown that English and communication skills are among the top job requirements from the perspective of Sri Lankan employers. At the same time, Ariyawansa (2008) found that there is a disjoint between what is focused on in university degree programmes versus the expected skills of the Sri Lankan job market. More specifically, Wijewardene, Yong and Chinna (2014, p.137) concluded that graduates from public universities tend to be “workplace ready in respect of their subject knowledge”, but that this is not the case for their written and oral proficiency in English. They regard this to be highly problematic, given: a) the role of English in the service industry which makes up a critical part of the Sri Lankan economy and is part of the Government’s development framework (see Department of National Planning, 2006), and b) the role of English as lingua franca within the country and within the global economy, and the Government’s ambition to become more export-oriented as well as to become a global logistics hub (Government of Sri Lanka, n.d.). Similar conclusions were drawn in a World Bank report, for the area of technical and vocational education and training in Sri Lanka, with regard to the underdevelopment of students’ English and communication skills and its consequences for their work readiness and for the country’s economic potential (Dundar, Millot, Savchenko, Aturupane & Piyasiri, 2014). These research findings lead to questions concerning the full relevancy of educational programmes, and, by extension, the employability of young people in Sri Lanka (which is characterised by considerable youth unemployment rates). As a consequence of this, Ariyawansa pleads for better skills alignment between the educational system and the labour market, while at the same time emphasizing that skills such as English proficiency (and basic IT) should be developed from early on in young people’s educational trajectories rather than left until higher or further education. Wijewardene et al. (2014, p.143) argued that “Sri Lanka needs to forge ahead with plans to improve the English competency amongst graduates, thereby minimizing the chances of produced disgruntled graduates who are unemployable and dissatisfied employers who are unable to contribute to the growth and progress of the nation”.

To gain further insights into the issues outlined above, we conducted an empirical study on the theme of English and employability in Sri Lanka. We opted for a mixed-methods research design, playing to the strengths of different data collection and analysis methods and allowing for data

triangulation, in order to gain rich and comprehensive insights into English and employability in Sri Lanka.

First, we developed an online questionnaire to employers of companies with a base in Sri Lanka. This method was chosen in order to try and reach as large a number of employers as possible, representing a wide range of employment sectors. The online medium enabled reaching out to employers across geographical regions in an affordable manner, while also making it possible for employers (who typically have high workloads) to complete the questionnaire at a time and place that was convenient for them. Since surveys lend themselves to more quantitative research approaches, the emphasis of this questionnaire was primarily on gathering (factual) information on the Sri Lankan economy and labour market by means of questions on the employers' sectors and companies. Proportionally fewer questions focused on the role/use of English. In Section 0 of this research paper, we provide more details on the survey methodology (2.1), we describe the respondent population (2.2), and we report the findings of this part of the study (2.3).

A second set of data was gathered by means of face-to-face interviews with employers from companies based in Sri Lanka. Although more resource-demanding, as a qualitative approach the interview methodology was adopted to gain more in-depth insights into the topic under investigation. While information was gained from the interviews on the employers' sectors and companies, a larger emphasis was put on the role of English in the workplace in Sri Lanka in this part of our research. In Section 0, we report on the interviews. Namely, we describe how we conducted them (3.1), we provide a profile of the interviewees (3.2), and we report the information and views the employers shared with us during the interviews (3.3).

A summary of our findings is provided in Section 4.

2 Survey on the Sri Lankan labour market

To gain insights into the Sri Lankan labour market and economy, and also on the role of English within this, a questionnaire was designed for employers in Sri Lanka. Below, we describe the survey's methodology (Section 2.1) and participant population (Section 2.2), and we report the findings from the survey (Section 2.3).

2.1 Methodology

To reach a wide range of employers, the questionnaire we developed was embedded in the software Qualtrics, which enabled nation-wide distribution via a hyperlink in a participant invitation e-mail. Importantly, it also allowed employers to complete the questionnaire online at a time and place convenient to them, which was hoped to increase participation rates from a target population that has very high workload demands.

Ethical approval for the study was gained from Lancaster University's *FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee*. The e-mail invitation sent to employers contained a written information sheet with further details on the project, the nature of their participation, withdrawal procedures, and data handling procedures (see Appendix 6.1). Consent was sought from respondents on the starting page of the questionnaire, before proceeding (voluntarily) to the questions.

The development of the questionnaire went through a number of drafts. An initial version was produced by the Lancaster University researchers on the basis of a literature review on international studies on the role and use of English in the workplace (e.g., Bernaisch, 2012; Crosling & Ward, 2002; Kassim & Ali, 2010; Kingsley, 2010). Staff from the British Council offices in Sri Lanka then reviewed this and provided recommendations on the basis of their insights into the local context and the broader aims of the TRANSFORM project.

The final version of the questionnaire was thematically organised into four parts and consisted of a mix of open-ended questions and questions where the respondent could select from a range of options provided. Depending on a respondent's answer to some of the selected-response questions, they were guided through specific pathways eliciting additional information. An offline copy of the questions can be found in Appendix 6.2.

The first section of the questionnaire comprised six questions on respondents' personal background (e.g., gender, nationality, province). The second section focused on the employment sector the respondent worked in (six questions). It elicited information on the size and annual turnover of their sector in Sri Lanka, and of growth predictions and new job requirements for future growth. In the third section, respondents were asked for more information about the company/institution/organisation they worked at (28 questions): the type of company, its size, its annual turnover and growth predictions, its registration base, its main product/service, its main market, number of sites, the respondent's role in it, and its organisational structure. They were also asked about the levels employees at the company work at, whether specific qualifications are required, whether the company conducts workforce planning and for what time frames, where they recruit staff from, how big the recruitment pool is, and whether there are particular labour market shortages. In addition, the questionnaire explored what jobs need filling as a priority, and whether the company has problems recruiting people with specific skills. A final set of questions in this third

part of the questionnaire focused on staff development support, training, and funding for this. Finally, in the last section of the questionnaire the respondents were probed about the role of English in their company (14 questions), i.e. whether, what for, and with whom employees need to use English at the company, what level of English proficiency is needed for different jobs, how and when levels of English are identified, and the importance of English to the company's growth. The questionnaire concluded with asking for the respondent's views on the benefits of good English communication skills for the Sri Lankan economy and labour market, or the risks of not having these. Respondents were also able to leave any final comments regarding the Sri Lankan economy and labour market, and the role of English within this.

2.2 Participants

The target audience for the employer survey were CEOs (Chief Executive Officer or similar), COOs (Chief Operational Officer or similar), CFOs (Chief Finance Officer or similar), and HR/Workforce Planning Directors (Human Resources Directors or similar) of companies/institutions/organisations with a base in Sri Lanka. Invitation e-mails to participate in this study were sent to 469 employers, whose contact details were gathered through extensive searches of Sri Lankan business and employment-related websites. These employer contacts represented 379 companies/institutions/organisations from 23 different sectors, as listed in Table 1. About one-fifth (24%) of the invited employers worked in Business Services, BPO & ICT. Other sectors with a comparatively larger representation, as resulting from our online search, were: Banking, Finance & Insurance (10%), Manufacturing (9%), Transport & Logistics (7%), FMCG (6%), Engineering, Mechanical & Electrical Process (6%), Textile, Clothing, Footwear & Fashion Accessories (6%), Diversified (6%), and Leisure, Tourism, Hospitality & Entertainment (5%).

Table 1: Overview of invited participants according to employment sector

Sector	Number
Advertising & Marketing	7
Agriculture, Horticulture, Plantations & Fisheries	14
Automotive	2
Banking, Finance & Insurance	47
Business Council	1
Business Services, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) & Information and Communications Technology (ICT)	111
Construction & Architects	15
Diversified	28
Education, Research & Training	17
Electronics, Household Goods, Furniture & Furnishing	5
Engineering, Mechanical & Electrical Process	30
Federal Agency	3
Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	30
Healthcare, Biotechnology, Pharmaceutical & Medical	17
Land & Property	1
Leisure, Tourism, Hospitality & Entertainment	22

Manufacturing	42
Media & Publishing	2
Power & Energy	8
Printing & Packaging	4
Retail & E-commerce	4
Textile, Clothing, Footwear & Fashion Accessories	26
Transport & Logistics	33
Total	469

In addition, the British Council also forwarded our invitations to the contacts in their Professional Development Section's database (Note that for confidentiality reasons, we cannot report further details on this). Despite reminder e-mails, the response rate was unfortunately low and several people broke off the questionnaire after only a couple of questions or left it blank.

Twenty respondents completed the questionnaire. 60% of these were male, 40% were female. Nineteen were Sri Lankan nationals (95%) and one was a British national (5%). All respondents were based in the Western province, with the exception of one respondent who lived in the North Western province. All but one respondent lived in an urban area. The respondents represented a wide range of employment sectors:

- Engineering & manufacturing (20%)
- Accountancy, banking & finance (10%)
- Education (10%)
- Sales (10%)
- Transport & logistics (10%)
- Automotive industry (5%)
- Conglomerates (5%)
- Energy & utilities (5%)
- Information technology (5%)
- Marketing, advertising & PR (5%)
- Media & internet (5%)
- Printing & packaging (5%)
- Property & construction (5%)
- Public services & administration (5%)
- Ready-made garment industry (5%)

In terms of their role in the company they worked at, 45% were CEOs (or a similar executive role), 30% were HR directors (or similar workforce planning roles), 20% were at the middle-level of management, and 5% were CFOs (or a similar financial role).

2.3 Findings

Below, we report the findings from the completed employer questionnaires. First, we describe the information the employers provided with regard to their employment sector (Section 2.3.1). Next, we report information on the employers' companies in terms of size, markets, employees, and workforce planning and recruitment (Section 2.3.2). Finally, we share the employers' views and

insights into the role, practices, and needs of English for their company and the Sri Lankan economy and labour market more generally (Section 2.3.3).

2.3.1 Employment sector information

Size of sector

Based on the information provided by the respondents, the 15 sectors represented in the survey (see Section 2.2) ranged in size from **small to very large**, but with only one sector employing more than half a million people (see Table 2).

Table 2: Size of sectors

Sector size	Percentage of represented sectors of this size
1 – 999 employees	25%
1,000 – 9,999 employees	40%
10,000 – 49,999 employees	15%
50,000 – 99,999 employees	5%
100,000 – 499,999 employees	10%
500,000 – 1,000,000 employees	5%

The **annual turnover** of the sectors, of the 65% of employers who provided this information, ranged between 35 million and 69 billion for those who reported the figures in USD, and between 100 million and 50 billion for those who reported the figures in LKR. The majority of the employees expected some **level of growth** in their sector in the next five years (see Table 3). Particular growth (>5%) appeared to be expected in the sectors of: Engineering & manufacturing, Energy & utilities, Information technology, Property & construction, Ready-made garment industry, Education, and Sales, marketing & distribution.

Table 3: Expected sector growth

Sector growth expected	Percentage of represented sectors
No growth expected	10%
Up to 2% growth expected	15%
2% - 5% growth expected	20%
5% - 10% growth expected	25%
More than 10% growth expected	25%

The overall majority of respondents (90%) indicated that their sector was developing **new job requirements for future growth**. As examples, they cited the following:

- R & D; Innovation
- Engineering; Automation; Mechatronics; Manufacturing
- Artificial Intelligence; Data analytics; Digital Media analytics; Digitization
- E-commerce; Digital banking; Digital payment
- Product development
- Risk & Compliance; Quality Assurance

- Megapolis development
- Finance
- Sales & Customer services
- Construction

2.3.2 Individual company information

Size of company

Just over half of the respondents (55%) worked at a national company, while 40% worked at a branch of an international company and one at a local company (with a remit up to provincial level). All companies were registered in Sri Lanka, with the exception of one which was registered in Hong Kong and the UK.

Fifty-five percent of the respondents worked at companies with more than 1,000 employees (seven companies with up to 10,000 employees, and three with 10,000-100,000 employees). Fifteen percent had between 500-999 employees, twenty-five percent between 50-249 employees, and one company had 10-19 employees.

The annual turnover of those who reported figures in USD ranged between 35 million and 1 billion USD. The annual turnover of those who reported figures in LKR ranged between 100 million and 25 billion LKR.

Thirty percent of the respondents **expected growth figures** for their company to be **more than 10%** in the next five years. These were companies in the sectors of Engineering & manufacturing, Information technology, Property & construction, Energy & utilities, and Sales, marketing & distribution. **Twenty percent expected 5-10% growth**. These were companies in the sectors of Engineering & manufacturing, Printing & packing, Accountancy, banking & finance, and a large conglomerate. Twenty-five percent expected 2-5% growth, while fifteen percent of the respondents expected up to 2% growth and five percent expected no growth.

Market

The **main market of 45%** of the respondents' companies is situated **internationally**, while for **another 45%** the main market is **Sri Lanka as a whole** and for 10% it is located up to the provincial level within Sri Lanka. In addition, the majority of companies represented (75%) worked across multiple sites – within Sri Lanka and/or internationally, with two respondents mentioning sites in 55+ different countries.

In line with the range of employment sectors represented in the survey, there was great variety in the companies' main products and services:

- Apparel and textile; Weft knit fabrics; Apparel branding and packaging
- Aluminium extrusions; Aircraft safety equipment; Solar systems provider
- Automotive
- Civil engineering & construction
- Courier services; Logistics; Exports; Passenger travel
- Data communication services
- Hair & skin care & cosmetics

- Financial services; Banking
- Latex & supported gloves
- Print media
- Tertiary education; Aviation training

Types of employees

Table 4 gives an overview of the levels employees work at in the companies, as reported by the respondents. This indicates that the majority of companies employ **all types of employees**, with the exception of one-third of companies not having unskilled workers.

Table 4: Type of employees

Type of employee	Percentage of companies with this type of employees
Unskilled worker	65%
Semi-skilled worker	85%
Technician	85%
Technical expert	90%
Administrator	85%
Low-level manager (e.g., supervisor, section lead, foremen)	100%
Middle-level manager (e.g., general/branch/department manager)	100%
Top-level manager (e.g., CEO, Board of Directors, (Vice-)presidents)	90%

Although not all respondents seemed to have a clear idea of their company's structure and main roles, the majority seemed to be organized according to a **fairly standardized structure** with:

- A top management body with Chairs, Country Heads, Chief Officers, Directors, Senior Managers
- Middle and lower management body at the Divisions listed below
- Finance Division; Procurement Division
- Legal Division
- HR Division
- Engineering Division; Production Division; Operations Division; Technical Division
- Logistics Division; Supply Chain
- R&D Division; Product Development Division; Innovation Division
- Quality Assurance Division
- IT Division
- Customer Services/Product Division
- Sales/Marketing/Business Development Division
- Stores & sites
- Training Division; Examinations Division

They also reported that specific qualifications are required for a range of jobs in their company. For example, many respondents mentioned **university qualifications** in relevant subject areas for the specific role, or **diplomas/certificates in relevant areas for vocational roles**:

- MBA, PG degrees (and experience) for higher management roles
- BSc in accounting/finance for finance roles
- LLB for legal roles
- BA or BSc in management/HR/marketing for sales, marketing, HR
- BEng or BSc for engineering, technical, quality assurance roles
- BSc or diplomas in Computer Science for IT and data science roles
- BSc in aviation for pilots
- Technician diplomas/certificates (and experience) for technician, foremen and operator roles

Workforce planning and recruitment

Four-fifths of the respondents (**80%**) said that their company **carries out workforce planning**. For about one-third (**35%**) of these, this is conducted **for a 1-2 year time frame**, and for **15%** for a longer time frame of **3-5 years**. Another **third** of companies does workforce planning for **shorter time frames**: 0-6 months (15%) or 7-12 months (15%).

Employees are **recruited via a mix of channels** that can be classified as traditional recruitment routes, media, education, professional bodies and contacts. These are summarized below, with the proportion of respondents mentioning the recruitment source indicated between brackets. For some of these recruitment channels, respondents specified a particular level of jobs.

- A. Traditional recruitment:
 - Agencies & Head hunters (35%)
 - Job sites (20%)
 - Direct advertisements (10%)
- B. Media:
 - (News)paper adverts (35%)
 - Online adverts (20%)
 - Mobile campaigns (5%) – lower-level jobs
- C. Education:
 - Universities (35%) – higher-level jobs
 - Technical colleges/vocational training centres (15%)
 - Schools (10%) – lower-level jobs
- D. Professional bodies:
 - Professional organizations (5%)
 - Other companies (5%)
- E. Contacts:
 - Referrals/through contacts (20%)
 - Internal hires (5%)

Three-quarters of the respondents (**75%**) stated that they experienced **particular labour market shortages** in their company. They primarily named jobs requiring technical knowledge & skills, communication roles, finance roles, and general labourers:

- A. Technical knowledge & skills (35%)
 - Highly-qualified/-experienced engineers

- Electricians, mechanics, laboratory technicians
 - Production technologists & skilled production staff
 - Quality assurance staff
 - Design engineers
 - Trainers with aviation background
- B. Communication (20%)
- Sales
 - Marketing
 - Customer services
 - Multilingual call centre agents (English, Sinhala, Tamil)
- C. Finance (5%)
- D. General labourers (5%)

More specifically, in terms of the **size of the potential pool of employees**, 35% of the respondents reported that there were **hardly any** potential employees for some roles. For example, they mentioned:

- *Technical*: Engineers, printing technicians, die correctors, CNC machine operators, solid work / auto cad operators, experienced aircraft maintenance instructors, product engineers, product developers
- *Finance*: accountants
- *Communication*: marketing and sales staff, investigative journalists

Half of the respondents (50%) stated that for certain jobs there are **some, but not enough** potential employees. As examples, they gave:

- *Technical*: Engineers, machine operators, painters, foremen, electricians
- *Communication*: customer service personnel, English writers, marketing and sales staff, marketing executives, merchandisers
- *HR*: HR executives

Some other respondents (25%), on the other hand felt that there was a sufficiently large potential pool of employees or even plenty of employees for certain roles. They mentioned: unskilled workers for the production floor, general workers, assistants, general clerks, HR staff, finance staff, accountants, administrative, management and marketing qualified staff.

Seventy percent of the respondents felt that it is **difficult to recruit people with the right skills**. The most frequently mentioned skill which respondents stated having difficulty in recruiting people for, was **communication skills (50% of the respondents)**. In particular, the respondents emphasized issues with fluency in English – both in oral and written communication, generally low levels of writing and speaking skills in English, and also low levels of confidence when communicating in English (especially, for junior level staff). **Thirty percent** of the respondents also indicated recruitment challenges in each of the following skill areas: **cognitive skills** (e.g. critical thinking, problem solving, analytic skills), **management & leadership skills** (e.g., people management, team management), and **technical skills** (e.g., engineering, aircraft maintenance, printing). One-quarter (20%) mentioned computer & IT skills, 10% said organisational skills, and 5% numeracy skills.

Where employees do not have the desired skills, **65% of the respondents reported training** them, either through in-house training (20%), externally-run training (5%), or a combination of both (40%). At the same time, **90%** of the respondents stated that their company **has a budget to support staff development**. This is spent in such areas as:

- Leadership competencies
- Project management skills
- Strategic development
- Technical skills
- IT training
- Customer services/sales skills
- English language skills
- Communication skills
- Personal development

A range of **reasons** was mentioned **for spending part of their budget on staff development**, including:

- Employee retention, satisfaction and motivation; employee bonding
- Succession & career planning
- Increasing employees' efficiency and effectiveness; business growth; increasing productivity & excellence; customer retention
- Responding to global trends and demands; product & systems innovations
- Regulatory compliance

2.3.3 English and the workplace

85% of the respondents stated that employees at their company need some level of English language proficiency to effectively carry out their job (note that the other 15% left the question blank). Of these, **41%** said that **English** was needed for **all jobs** in their company, whereas **59%** said for **a selection of jobs**, but not all. Respondents in the latter group typically indicated that English proficiency was a requirement for top and middle management, staff in supervisory roles or staff in marketing, HR, business development, IT, engineering, and accounts, or for specialised roles such as call centre staff. English was thought to be less crucial for operational roles such as machine operators.

In terms of **what employees need to use English for in their job**, the respondents provided the following examples:

- Report & letter reading and writing (company internal & external)
- Preparing Memoranda of Understanding; Purchase Orders
- Professional presentations and negotiations (company internal & external)
- Keeping pace with (technological and knowledge) innovations
- Understanding manuals, job instructions, material specifications, labels
- IT systems work; data entry work
- Merchandising
- Communication with other branches and with overseas colleagues
- Communication with suppliers

- Communication with customers/clients (F2F, e-mail, letters, phone)
- Conducting training

In practice, according to the respondents, this means that employees need to be able to use English for job purposes with company-internal and company-external people:

A. Internal:

- Company management
- Supervisors/subordinates
- Sales and marketing staff
- Expat employees
- Overseas branches

B. External:

- Customers/clients (ranging from hotel guests to government institutes and shareholders)
- Suppliers
- Local and international guests
- (international) Strategic business partners
- Regulatory bodies; Statutory authorities; legal institutes (national & international)
- Students

In terms of the required **level of proficiency**, 55% of the respondents reported that a basic level only was needed for some of the jobs, 60% that an intermediate level was needed for some other jobs, and 65% that a high level of English proficiency was necessary for certain roles at their company. Examples provided by the respondents of jobs requiring a particular level of English proficiency are listed in Table 5.

Table 5: Required level of English proficiency according to job type

Level of English proficiency	Type of job
Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labourer • Lower category role • Machine operator • Store keeper • Supervisor • Team member
Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinator • Foreman • (Senior) Executive • Merchandiser • Supervisor • Technician • Technical staff • Those who do not deal with customers • Training support staff
High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountant • Assistant manager • Call centre agent

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive • Engineer • (Senior/Middle/High-level) Manager • Marketing staff • Those who deal with customers • Trainer
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Eighty percent of the respondents said that they evaluate employees' level of English at the recruitment stage. 50% also do that as part of ongoing performance development, and 40% at the promotion stage. Thirty-five percent of the respondents gave examples of **tools** they use **to evaluate their employees' level of English**. Namely, they let employees do a written assessment (e.g. report/letter writing; test) (4 respondents), presentations (2 respondents), general oral communication (2 respondents), verbal reasoning (1 respondent), or send them on a course and demand higher usage of English on day-to-day basis (1 respondent).

Only 15% of the respondents said that the **level of English of all employees in their company met their expectations**, whereas **65%** said that this was the case for **only some of their employees** (note that 20% left this question blank). In particular, they pointed to gaps in the following areas:

- Communication in general (e.g., labourers and technical staff: reading, writing, speaking)
- Writing reports and letters (e.g., managerial staff, supervisors)
- Pragmatics & style; Writing a personalized, professional, courteous note (e.g., supervisors)
- Spelling and grammar
- Confidence in oral communication with customers

They also suggested that overuse of jargon sometimes also hindered communication.

All respondents who completed the question on the importance of **English for the growth of their company** (80%) felt that it was **important**: 20% said extremely important, 35% very important, 20% moderately important, and 5% somewhat important (note that 20% left this question blank). They explained that English was vital to growth in terms of:

- Delivering and maintaining excellent customer service
- Maintaining and expanding customer base; exports
- Maintaining supplier relationships
- Marketing products
- Winning overseas project bids
- Keeping pace with innovations
- Improving standards
- Competing with competitors
- Developing knowledge, intelligence, technology
- Developing foreign trade
- Developing local entrepreneurship

As **general benefits of having good English communication skills for the Sri Lankan economy and labour market**, the respondents gave the following examples:

- International contacts; breaking barriers with the international market; international sales and marketing; reaching international clients (without the need to learn all languages around the world); ease of working within and across borders
- Attract foreign investments
- Increase competitive position
- Access to technical knowledge; ability to use technology
- Intelligent & knowledgeable workforce; staff development
- Foreign employment opportunities; mobility of Sri Lankans
- Communication across ethnic groups within Sri Lanka

As **risks of not having good English communication skills**, the respondents identified the following issues for the Sri Lankan economy and labour market:

- Diminished attractiveness of the market to foreign investors/clients/customers; Inability to attract foreign investors
- Loss of job markets and sales to other countries; lack of international competitiveness
- Overdependence on local government jobs / in-country jobs
- Lack of or fewer jobs for local workforce; lack of local competitiveness and lower sales
- In-ward looking, outdated approaches; lack of modernization
- Inability to use technology and e-communication; poor knowledge among workforce; unemployable people
- Limited development opportunities
- Lagging behind in expectations
- Increasing gaps with privileged few
- Communication difficulties with clients and suppliers
- Decline in tourism

As a final comment, three of the respondents emphasized **the importance of English and the need to improve the learning, teaching and assessment of English in Sri Lanka**. One specifically urged that schools be assisted to increase the quality and quantity of English language education, and another respondent recommended mandatory English testing for specific job roles. One respondent cautioned, however, to also take into account in-country sensitivities and not use English as “a tool to judge people and not to segregate people into different social classes or groups”.

3 Interviews on English in the workplace in Sri Lanka

A second set of insights into the Sri Lankan economy and the role of English within this was gained through interviews with employers in Sri Lanka. Below, we describe the interview methodology (Section 3.1) and participant population (Section 3.2), and we report the findings from the interviews (Section 3.3).

3.1 Methodology

Potential employers were approached by British Council Sri Lanka employees through their professional networks, aiming to invite employers from a range of sectors. Practical arrangements were also made to determine a date, time and location for the interviews that was convenient for the employers. Although the original intention had been to conduct this part of the research in the form of focus groups with employers from different companies/sectors in each group, bringing employers from different companies together did not prove feasible due to their busy schedules and limited availability. Therefore, in practice, employers from only one company/institution were interviewed at a time. This meant that in some cases only one person was interviewed at a time, and in other cases multiple people from the same company were interviewed in a group.

Ethical approval for the study was gained from Lancaster University's *FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee*. Employers were provided with a written information sheet containing further details on the project, the nature of their participation, withdrawal procedures, and data handling procedures. Written consent was sought from the interviewees prior to the start of the interview. The information sheets and consent forms were made available to the participants in English, Sinhala and Tamil; in practice, all employers opted for the English versions (see Appendix 6.3). The interviewees were also asked to complete a personal background questionnaire (see Appendix 6.4).

The interviews were conducted by one of the Lancaster University researchers, using an interview guide developed for this purpose (see Appendix 6.5). First, the employers were asked to describe their company (type, size, client profile, etc.). After this, they were asked whether there was a formal language policy at their workplace. Next, a series of questions followed on the role of English in the interviewee's job (use, importance, advantages, etc.). The interview was then broadened to other employees' proficiency in English and the impact of this on the workplace, and to questions about English and the Sri Lankan economy as a whole. The interviewees were also asked for suggestions on English language development of employees. Finally, the interviewees were invited to share any other information or views regarding the role of English in the workplace in Sri Lanka.

The interview guide was made available to the interviewees in English, Sinhala and Tamil, but in practice all interviewees indicated they were comfortable in being interviewed in English / in having the interviews carried out in English. The interviewer took notes of the main points conveyed by the participants during the interviews, and the interviews were also audio-recorded. The interviews were then analysed in terms of the key content of the employers' answers to each question.

3.2 Participants

The target audience for the employer interviews were top management and senior HR staff at companies/institutions/organisations with a base in Sri Lanka. Employees of the British Council Sri Lanka office assisted with identifying and contacting potential employers and making practical arrangements for the interviews.

In total, 16 employers from 11 different companies agreed to be interviewed. Nine of these (56%) held senior HR positions, five (31%) were in General Manager roles, one was a Learning & Development Manager, and one was Director of Sales & Marketing. Fifty-six percent of the interviewees was female; 44% was male. Ninety-four percent were Sri Lankan citizens, with two interviewees holding dual citizenship (Australian; Philippines), and one participant was a British citizen. Half of the interviewees (50%) indicated that they spoke Sinhala and English at home, 31% English only, 6% Sinhala only, and 6% English and Philippino. Three quarters of the interviewees (75%) lived in the Western province, 12% in the North Western province, and 12% in the Central province – all in urban areas. In terms of their educational qualifications, the majority (81%) held a university degree (44% undergraduate, 38% postgraduate) in fields such as Management/Business/Economy, Law, Accounting, and Bio Science. For the other three interviewees, their highest level of education was G.C.E. O/L (1), G.C.E. A/L (1), and a Diploma (1).

All participants indicated that they spoke and understand English (very) well, and had studied English up to G.C.E. A/L or higher education level (with the exception of one Sri Lankan national, and the British and Australian nationals). Of the Sri Lankan nationals, 25% had lived in an English-speaking country at some stage in their lives (UK, USA), for 1-6 years.

In terms of the companies the interviewees represented, several of the enterprises were conglomerates and multi-company holdings. The companies represented a range of employment sectors, as specified in Table 6.

Table 6: Overview of employment sectors represented in the interviews

Sector	Number
Agriculture, Horticulture, Plantations & Fisheries	3
Automotive	1
Banking, Finance & Insurance	3
Construction & Architects	1
Education, Research & Training	1
Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	2
Healthcare, Biotechnology, Pharmaceutical & Medical	1
Land & Property	1
Information and Communications Technology (ICT)	2
Leisure, Tourism, Hospitality & Entertainment	3
Retail & E-commerce	1
Telecommunication	1
Textile, Clothing, Footwear & Fashion Accessories	2
Transport & Logistics	2

3.3 Findings

3.3.1 Individual company profile

Based on the information provided by the interviewees, the companies represented in the interviews ranged **from relatively small in scale** (from about 250 staff) **to the biggest employer in the private sector in Sri Lanka**. Six companies employed up to 1,000 people, four up to 10,000 people, and one approximately 100,000 people. In addition, some interviewees noted that part of their company's work was outsourced (e.g., security, cleaning, packing, catering, sales, call centres, IT, etc.) and thus that they indirectly represented a much larger workforce. All were reported to have employees/branches based in **different parts of the country**, although the Sri Lankan Head Offices were concentrated in the Colombo region. Five of the companies were reported to be **part of a larger international-based company**.

Three main profiles of **clients** were identified through the interviews. With the exception of one company, all companies targeted the **local Sri Lankan market** as part of their client base. This comprised of individual Sri Lankan consumers, but importantly also other Sri Lankan companies such as IT business providers, banks, insurers, airports, hospitality training institutes, and other Sri Lankan corporates. A second client profile was that of **international customers within Sri Lanka**, especially in the hotel, tourism and (luxury) consumer goods sector. Thirty-six of the companies aimed at this clientele. Finally, more than half of the companies (55%) held an **international client base abroad**, which the interviewees reported to cover Asia (2), Europe (1), the Middle East (1), Oceania (2), the US (1), or also globally (1).

In line with the range of employment sectors represented in the interviews (see Table 6), there was great variety in the companies' main products and services:

- Agro-technology goods and services
- Automotive
- Client/customer support services
- Education providers (e.g., IT, hospitality)
- Financial services; Banking
- General consumer goods
- Hospitality goods and services
- IT products and services
- Maritime
- Manufacturing (e.g. construction goods)
- Logistics; Distribution; Sales
- Pharmaceutical products
- Telecom services
- Textile; Garments
- Wellness products and services

Also, the interviewees reported **fairly standard company structures and staff roles**:

- Top management body with Executives/Country Heads/Directors
- Middle and lower management body
- HR Division
- Finance Division

- IT Division
- Systems management
- Marketing Division
- Sales Division
- Logistics Division
- Manufacturing/Production/Technical Division
- Customer Services/After sales Division
- Retail outlets

3.3.2 English and the workplace

Language use guidelines

The majority of the represented companies have **no formal language policy** in place, except for two which require the use of English in ‘front house’/customer communication and one where English is stipulated as the ‘preferred language’. All other interviewees, however, reported that there were **informal guidelines/practices** at their companies **with respect to language use**. The choice of language was often also simply **pragmatic**, i.e. depending on the language background of the client/customer/colleague. Generally, however, the interviewees reported that **English** was typically (expected to be) used for:

- Formal communication
- Executive level and (main) office communication
- Administration, programmes and systems
- Communication with Government agencies
- International client communication
- Job interviews
- Performance reviews, training and career-related communication
- Written communication such as e-mails and letters
- Written documentation such as company information, employment handbooks, job advertisements

According to the interviewees, **Sinhala, Tamil, or a blend of languages** were typically used for:

- Communication with/between labourers (e.g., factory workers, manufacturing staff, field engineers)
- Communication with/between staff in caretaking roles (e.g., nurses)
- Communication on the shop floor or “behind the scenes” (e.g., kitchen staff)
- Communication with customers/clients depending on their language background
- Communication with the Government’s Labour Department
- Informal communication among colleagues

English and the interviewee’s job

In their own professional role (see Section 3.2), the default language for the majority of interviewees was **English**. Two interviews said that they “couldn’t operate without it”. This was reflected in the fact that **56%** of the interviewees reported using **only English for their job**, **a quarter** reported using it **90%-95% of the time**, and one said 70%. Only two interviewees, active in the Textile & Garment sector, reported lower usage of English (40% and 20% of their time).

Within their company, the interviewees themselves especially used English with Executive staff, Head Office, high-end managers and other superiors, international staff within the company, but also with subordinates. However, English was reported to be crucial for communication with **externals** such as: Head Hunters, job candidates, vendors, external stakeholders, training partners, service providers, consultants, banks and financial institutions, external lawyers, their professional federation, university and academic staff, and local and foreign customers. As **examples of purposes for which they used English in their job**, they mentioned:

- Policy formulation
- Business pitches & advertisements
- Interviewing & recruitment
- Internal communication and meetings
- Company materials
- Regional and global networking

In terms of the **variety of English they use in their professional role**, 69% of the interviewees reported using **Standard English**. One commented to do this especially in the context of more formal meetings, and another interviewee mentioned the context of international customers/clients. One interviewee felt that using Standard English was necessary “to appear professional”. One other person commented that it was nevertheless important to be “concise and brief, and clear” in English. One interviewee said that s/he used a mixture of Sinhala and Standard English in meetings. **Nineteen percent** of the interviewees, however, reported that they also use **Singlish** in their job, for example, for informal communication with colleagues, for systems assistance of subordinates depending on whether the latter “feel comfortable” with English, for training colleagues, or for communication with university interns. One interviewee emphasized using the “simplest possible” variety of English.

At the same time, several interviewees also stated that they sometimes use **Sinhala, Tamil, or a blend of languages** for: communication with lower levels of staff (e.g., in operational/labourer roles, shop floor personnel), with customers/clients, or with Government departments; for in-depth or technical explanations; or – as mentioned by one interviewee – for disciplinary action.

English and other jobs in the company

With regard to the English language proficiency of staff at their company, the interviewees acknowledged that there was **variation between people in different professional roles** (and also in the need of English for those roles). For example, several mentioned that Head Office, top management staff typically had a higher level of English proficiency. Some also judged that people in support services, innovation, and so-called ‘front line’ workers tended to be more proficient. On the other hand, they thought that lower-level jobs, technical staff, stewarding and ‘behind the scenes’ staff (e.g. kitchen personnel) were generally less proficient in English. At the same time, several interviewees commented that there were **also differences between staff in similar roles**, with some being more and others less proficient in English. Most interviewees seemed to agree that colleagues were often better at reading and especially listening (“enough to do the job”) than in producing oral or written English. One-third of the interviewees specifically raised **issues around colleagues’ writing ability in English**, pointing to problems with grammar, spelling, word order and style. Similarly, one-third of the interviewees expressed **concerns regarding colleagues’ speaking ability in English**, raising issues around fluency, pronunciation, appropriateness of tone, and confidence to speak.

A number of interviewees stated that **colleagues' limited English proficiency sometimes caused issues or extra work** for them – some said 'a bit', one said 'a lot'. In particular, one-third of the interviewees raised issues with written work (e.g., HR letters, adverts) which meant that they needed to check things going out from their Department (internally or externally). They were particularly concerned about **negative impact on the company brand, its public image and reputation** due to English language errors in documents. On the other hand, 38% of the interviewees indicated that they took a **pragmatic approach in practice**, and switched to Sinhala or allowed multiple languages to be used (although one interviewee pointed out that this is more costly, in particular for written work and translations) if communication in English was challenging. One interviewee said that the key was to "get the point across" in communication. Another one stated that English proficiency issues needed to be pointed out, even though this risked a negative effect on the colleague's confidence. At the Executive level, however, a high level of English was felt crucial. As one interviewee stated: "You wouldn't survive in the company without English because it's our operating knowledge".

English and the Sri Lankan economy

The interviewees emphasised the **advantage and importance of good English communication skills for key existing sectors** in the Sri Lankan economy such as tourism, the private sector, and finances – acknowledging that the economy was importantly based on foreign visitors (within the country), as well as exports (clients/customers abroad), and also depended on imports (e.g. supply chains from abroad). In the case of multinationals, they also recognised the importance of English to be able to work with their mother company and other international branches. At the same time, a number of interviewees argued that **English was vital to expansion**, not only within the existing sectors, but also to attract and develop **new sectors** (e.g., Sri Lanka as an IT hub). They discussed the role of English in international communication and as the language of business and corporates. One interviewee labelled English "the common language". This ranges from the ability to attract foreign investors, do business across the border, learn and improve through international consultancy, or avoiding mistakes and "getting things done more quickly and accurately" without a "language barrier".

Apart from oral and written skills in English, two interviewees also highlighted the importance of **good reading skills in English**, since this for example allows employees to **keep up-to-date with trends and innovations** in industry, for instance via information that is made available online. In other words, they said, English is **key to staff development**, and by extension companies and the economy.

Another advantage of English, as argued by two interviewees, is that the language can **unify across ethnic divides** within the country, and thereby help maintain a stable environment for business and increase efficiency and productivity within and across businesses and sectors. English acts as a lingua franca that helps respect diversity in Sri Lanka.

Several interviewees furthermore put forward **advantages at the level of the individual**. Namely, being proficient in English would mean having vital **transferrable employment skills** such as presentation skills, ability to communicate, leadership skills, team work, general knowledge, ability to initiate conversation. One person called it "a primary skill". In this manner, English could increase one's **employability chances** and enable one to **do all aspects of one's job** (e.g., note taking/reporting for labourers). Without sufficient English, one interviewee argued, one would not be able to **reach one's full potential** as one would not be able to express ideas on the workforce. In addition, one interviewee argued that, from an HR perspective, lack of English hindered **talent identification**.

Increasing English proficiency of the Sri Lankan workforce

Several interviewees problematized **potential employees' English language ability**. Some of these argued that the **G.C.E. O/L and A/L English training** was **only rudimentary**, and that **certification** in English in practice clearly was **not necessary equal to ability to communicate** in English. One interviewee also felt there is a lack of language teaching quality within the country, and the Government needs to **make the teaching profession more attractive**. Others also recommended that the Government gives **more attention to the development of young people's English proficiency** in schools and universities.

Two interviewees also talked about the need for action regarding **awareness of young people about the role of English for employability and the labour market**. They emphasized that students need to be given a clearer idea of how important English is for their future careers and prospects, and that outreach programs should be set up to explain the importance of being proficient in English.

A number of interviewees proposed running on-site English courses for their employees (or were already doing so), ideally sponsored by the company and offered during working hours or immediately after that. One interviewee also referred to online English courses. Many also talked about the need of such courses to be tailor-made and relevant to business, with some recommending that the Government allocates resources to English for Business Purposes development.

4 Summary

This research paper reported on an empirical study, using questionnaires and interviews, which aimed to provide insights into the Sri Lankan economy and labour market, and the role of English within this.

The findings represent data from 21 different employment sectors, ranging from very small sectors (less than 1,000 employees) to the largest employment sectors in Sri Lanka (up to 1 million employees). Approximately 40% of the companies represented in the study are branches of international companies, whereas about 60% are Sri Lankan companies. For about half of the companies their main market is at the international level, while for the other half it is at the national level. They typically employ people across the job hierarchy, ranging from unskilled workers to top-level managers, and have conventional company structures.

Particular growth is expected in sectors such as: Engineering & manufacturing, Energy & utilities, Information technology, Property & construction, Ready-made garment industry, Education, and Sales, marketing & distribution. Consequently, the sectors and companies represented are developing new job requirements in areas such as: R & D, Engineering, manufacturing & construction; ICT & AI; Digital commerce; and Sales & consumer services. However, companies appear to struggle considerably with recruiting people with sufficient communication skills, and also in many cases with the 'right' cognitive, management/leadership, and/or technical skills.

While in some companies English proficiency is needed for all jobs, in others English is needed for a selection of jobs only – typically more so for higher-level jobs, and, in those roles, comparatively higher levels of English proficiency are also required. Participants' examples of what English is used for on the workforce illustrated that all four skills are needed, although it seems 'standard' to particularly use English in formal business communication (oral and written), in recruitment contexts, and in international contexts. Also, English is used for company-internal as well as company-external communication (e.g. with customers, suppliers, guests, business partners, regulatory bodies – whether national or international). At the same time, hardly any companies have a formal language policy. Instead, staff adopt informal guidelines and practices, whereby a pragmatic stance is often taken, i.e. the language used being dependent on the language background of the client/ customer/colleague.

In terms of employees' level of English language proficiency, there is variation between people in different professional roles, but also between people in similar roles. Gaps seem to exist particularly in the productive skills (speaking and writing), and employees' limited English proficiency was reported to sometimes cause issues or extra work, and risks having a negative impact on companies' image and reputation. Participants expressed the need to increase young people's English language skills, as well as their awareness of the role of English for employability and the Sri Lankan labour market. Good English communication skills were not only seen as key to Sri Lanka's existing economic sectors, but also for expansion of the Sri Lankan economy and labour market (existing and new sectors). In particular, English skills could enable delivering, maintaining and expanding in terms of customer service, international trade, foreign investments, supplier relationships, marketing, overseas bids, innovations, standards, competitiveness, etc. It could also enable talent identification, and play a neutralizing role in cross-ethnic communication within the country.

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6 Appendices

6.1 Participant information sheet: Employer survey

Lancaster
University



Project: Sri Lankan labour market and the role of English Participant information sheet for employer survey

We are researchers at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom, and we would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the Sri Lankan labour market and the role of English within this. **Our research is funded by the TRANSFORM programme of the British Council and Sri Lankan Ministry of Education.**

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study aims to gain insights into the Sri Lankan labour market and economy, and also on the role of English within this.

Why have I been invited?

We have approached you because you are an employer / senior leader in a Sri Lankan company, and have valuable insights into this topic. We would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve completing an online questionnaire about your employment sector, your company, and the role of English within these. We will also ask you to complete a couple of questions about yourself (e.g. gender, nationality, place you live in).

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this study will allow you to share your knowledge and insights into the Sri Lankan labour market and economy, and the role of English within these.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your job.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw until two weeks after completing the questionnaire. We will then remove your information and responses from our dataset. Please contact the lead researcher, Dr Tineke Brunfaut, in that case (see the contact details below).

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. Taking part will mean taking 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Will my data be identifiable?

Only we will have access to the data you share with us. We will keep all personal information about you (for example, your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is we will not share it with others. We will anonymise all responses and hard copies of any data. This means that we remove any personal information.

How will my data be stored?

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than the researchers will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers.

We will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in our office.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

We will use the data you have shared with us for academic purposes only. This will include a research report and potentially academic and professional journal or book publications. We may also present the results of our study at academic and professional conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, we will mainly report the results at the general level, for all participants together. We might also like to add illustrations by reproducing some of the views and ideas you shared with us. When doing so, we will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from the open-ended answers), so that although we will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications. For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection.

Who has reviewed the project?

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact the lead researcher, Dr Tineke Brunfaut, [e-mail], [telephone number], Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, County South, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, United Kingdom.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact our Head of Department, Professor Uta Papen, [e-mail], [telephone number], Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, County South, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, United Kingdom.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project!

Dr Tineke Brunfaut, Dr Rita Green, Dr Luke Harding, Dr Bimali Indrarathne

6.2 Employer survey

Survey on the Sri Lankan labour market



Dear employer,

Thank you very much for taking part in our research! For more information, please read this Information Sheet.

We would be grateful if you could share your insights into the **Sri Lankan labour market, and the role of English within this**. The questionnaire consists of the following four parts:

- A. About yourself
- B. About your employment sector
- C. About your company
- D. About the role of English for your company

We will not use your name in any publications.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Tineke Brunfaut, Dr Rita Green, Dr Luke Harding and Dr Bimali Indrarathne

Before proceeding, please confirm that you agree with the following:

- I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet and have had the opportunity to consider the information. I have read the contact details in the Information Sheet for any questions I may have. If I asked questions, I have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I also understand the information on withdrawing as described in the Information Sheet.
- I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic/professional articles, publications or presentations by the researchers, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.
- I understand that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure. I understand that data will be kept according to Lancaster University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.
- By clicking here, I confirm that I agree with the above statements and that I agree to take part in this study.

A. About yourself

Q01 Your first name _____

Q02 Your last name _____

Q03 Your gender

Male

Female

Q04 Your nationality

Sri Lankan

Other (*Please specify*) _____

Q05 Which province do you live in?

Central

Eastern

Northern

North Central

North Western

Sabaragamuwa

Southern

Western

Uva

Q06 What kind of area do you live in?

urban

rural

B. About your employment sector

Q07 What is the employment sector of your company?

- Accountancy, banking & finance
- Automotive industry
- Business, consulting & management
- Creative arts and design
- Education
- Energy & utilities
- Engineering & manufacturing
- Environment & agriculture
- Healthcare
- Hospitality
- Information technology
- Law
- Law enforcement & security
- Leisure, sport & tourism
- Marketing, advertising & PR
- Media & internet
- Property & construction
- Public services & administration
- Ready-made garment industry
- Recruitment & Human Resources
- Retail
- Sales
- Science & pharmaceuticals
- Social care
- Transport & logistics
- Other (*Please specify*) _____

Q08 What is the size of your sector overall in Sri Lanka?

- Less than 1,000 employees
- 1,000 to 9,999 employees
- 10,000 to 49,000 employees
- 50,000 to 99,000 employees
- 100,000 to 499,999 employees
- 500,000 to 999,999 employees
- 1 million employees and above

Q09 What is the annual turnover of your sector overall in Sri Lanka? *Please indicate the currency (e.g. Sri Lankan rupees, USD, EUR,...).*_____

Q10 What are the predictions of growth in your sector as a whole in the next five years?

- No growth expected
- Up to 2% growth expected
- 2-5% growth expected
- 5-10% growth expected
- More than 10% growth expected

Q12 Is your sector developing new job requirements for future growth?

- No
- Yes

Skip To: Q14 If Is your sector developing new job requirements for future growth? = No

Q13 Please provide examples of the new job requirements for future growth in your sector.

C. About your company

Q14 Name of the company/institution/organisation you work at: _____

Q15 What type of company do you work at?

- Local/regional company (up to provincial level in Sri Lanka)
- National company (Sri Lankan)
- Branch of an international company

Q16 What is your role in the company?

- CEO (Chief Executive Officer) or similar role
- COO (Chief Operating Officer) or similar role
- CFO (Chief Financial Officer) or similar role
- HR director / workforce planning (Human Resources) or similar role
- Other (*Please specify*) _____

Q17 What is the size of the company?

- 1-9 employees
- 10-49 employees
- 50-249 employees
- 250-499 employees
- 500-999 employees
- More than 1,000 employees (*Please specify*): _____

Q18 What is the annual turnover of your company? *Please indicate the currency (e.g. Sri Lankan rupees, USD, EUR,...).* _____

Q19 Where is your company registered?

- in Sri Lanka
- Abroad (*Please name the country*): _____

Q20 What is your company's main product/service?

Q21 Where is your company's main market?

- Sri Lanka - up to provincial level
- Sri Lanka - national level
- International

Q22 Does your company work across multiple sites?

- No
- Yes (*Please list the sites*) _____

Q23 What are the predictions of growth for your company in the next five years?

- No growth expected (1)
- Up to 2% growth expected (2)
- 2-5% growth expected (3)
- 5-10% growth expected (4)
- More than 10% growth expected (6)

Q24 How is your company structured? What are the main roles in your company?

For example, management, operations, finance, sales, research, HR, marketing, legal, distribution, etc.

Q25 If possible, please share a functional diagram of your company here.

Q26 What are the levels employees at your company work at? *Tick all that apply.*

- Unskilled worker
- Semi-skilled worker
- Technician
- Technical expert
- Administrator
- Low-level manager (e.g., supervisor, section lead, foremen)
- Middle-level manager (e.g., general/branch/department manager)
- Top-level manager (e.g., CEO, Board of Directors, (Vice-)presidents)
- Other (*Please specify*) _____

Q27 Are specific qualifications required for the jobs in your company?

Please give examples of different jobs in your company and their required qualifications.

Q28 Does your company carry out workforce planning?

- No
- Yes

Skip To: Q30 If Does your company carry out workforce planning? = No

Q29 For what time frames does your company carry out workforce planning?

- 0-6 months (1)
- 7-12 months (2)
- 1-2 years (3)
- 3-5 years (4)
- Longer than 5 years (*Please specify how long*) _____

Q30 Where do you recruit potential employees from? (i.e., What are your recruitment sources?)

Q31 How big is the pool of your potential employees?

Tick as many options as apply. Name the type of jobs for the option(s) you have selected.

E.g., Hardly any potential employees: truck drivers, accountants

Some, but not enough potential employees: production managers

- Hardly any potential employees (Please specify the jobs) _____
- Some, but not enough potential employees (Please specify the jobs) _____
- Sufficient number of potential employees (Please specify the jobs) _____
- Plenty of potential employees (Please specify the jobs) _____

Q32 Are there any particular labour market shortages?

No

Yes

Skip To: Q34 If Are there any particular labour market shortages? = No

Q33 Please list the specific areas of labour market shortages.

Q34 What are the priority jobs that need to be filled at your company?

Q35 Does your company experience difficulty recruiting people with the right skills?

No

Yes

Skip To: Q38 If Does your company experience difficulty recruiting people with the right skills? = No

Q36 Which skills are hard to recruit people with?

Tick as many options as apply, and give examples.

- Cognitive skills (*Please specify*) _____
- Communication skills (*Please specify*) _____
- Computer & IT skills (*Please specify*) _____
- Numeracy skills (*Please specify*) _____
- Management & leadership skills (*Please specify*) _____
- Organizational skills (*Please specify*) _____
- Technical skills (*Please specify*) _____
- Other skills (*Please specify*) _____

Q37 If employees do not have the right skills, do you train them?

- No
- Yes, in-house training
- Yes, external training
- Yes, both in-house and external training

Q38 Does your company have a budget to support staff development?

- No
- Yes

Skip To: Q41 If Does your company have a budget to support staff development? = No

Q39 What kind of staff development does your company spent money on?

Q40 What is your reason for spending money on this staff development?

D. About the role of English for your company

Q41 Do your employees need some level of English language proficiency to effectively carry out their job?

- No
- Yes, for some jobs (*Please list the jobs*) _____
- Yes, for all jobs

Skip To: Q52 If D. About the role of English for your company Do your employees need some level of English langua... = No

Q42 **What** do employees at your company need to use English **for**?

Please give a range of examples of specific jobs and their language needs.

E.g., machine operator - understanding manuals; HR manager - report writing, etc.

Q43 **Who** do your employees need to use English **with**?

Please give a range of examples of specific jobs and the type of people they need to communicate with.

E.g., hotel receptionists - international guests; HR manager - international head office, etc.

Q44 What **level** of English proficiency do different jobs in your company require?

Tick as many options as apply. Name the type of jobs for the option(s) you have selected.

- Basic level of English (*Please specify the jobs*) _____
- Intermediate level of English (*Please specify the jobs*) _____
- Highly proficient in English (*Please specify the jobs*) _____

Q45 What **tools** do you use to find out whether potential employees have the required English skills for the job they are applying for? Please give examples.

Q46 Once people are employed in your company, does their level of English meet your expectations?

- No
- Yes, but only of some employees
- Yes, of all employees

Skip To: Q48 If Once people are employed in your company, does their level of English meet your expectations? = Yes, of all employees

Q47 What are the gaps in your employees' level of English? Please specify the type of employee.

Q48 What **tools** do you use to evaluate your employees' level of English? Please give examples.

Q49 When do you evaluate your employees' level of English? *Tick all that apply.*

- At the recruitment stage
- As part of ongoing performance development
- At the promotion stage
- Other (*Please specify*) _____

Q50 How important is English to the growth of your company?

- Not important at all
- Somewhat important
- Moderately important
- Very important
- Extremely important

Skip To: Q52 If How important is English to the growth of your company? = Not important at all

Q51 In what ways is English important to the growth of your company?

Q52 In your view, what are the benefits of having good English communication skills for the Sri Lankan economy and labour market?

Q53 In your view, what are the risks of NOT having good English communication skills for the Sri Lankan economy and labour market?

Q54 Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the Sri Lankan economy and labour market, or the role of English within that?

6.3 Participant information sheet: Employer interviews



Project: ENGLISH in the WORKPLACE in SRI LANKA Participant information sheet for workplace focus groups

We are researchers at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom, assisted by a local Sri Lankan interpreter, and we would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the role of English in the workplace in Sri Lanka. Our research is funded by the TRANSFORM programme of the British Council and Sri Lankan Ministry of Education. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study aims to gain an idea of the use of English in the workplace in Sri Lanka.

Why have I been invited?

We have approached you because we are interested in the use of English at your workplace, and your views on this. We would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve taking part in a group discussion with 4-6 employers in Sri Lanka. The discussion will last approximately half an hour, and will be audio recorded. We will also ask you to complete a short questionnaire about yourself. This will ask questions such as how old you are, which employment sector you work in, and whether you speak English.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences and views on the role of English in the workplace in Sri Lanka.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your job.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before the group discussions have started. Since the group discussions involve a number of people, it will unfortunately no longer be possible to withdraw or remove your parts of the conversations once the discussions have taken place. If you want to leave the group and the room during the recording, what you have contributed up to this moment will remain in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. Taking part will mean investing 30 minutes for a group discussion we will ask you to take part in.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the group discussion, only we will have access to the data you share with us. We will keep all personal information about you (for example, your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is we will not share it with others. We will anonymise any audio recordings and hard copies of any data. This means that we remove any personal information. Other participants in the group discussion will be asked not to disclose information outside of the group and with anyone not involved in the group without the relevant person's express permission.

How will my data be stored?

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than the researchers will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. We will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in our office.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

We will use the data you have shared with us for academic purposes only. This will include a research report and potentially academic and professional journal or book publications. We may also present the results of our study at academic and professional conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, we will mainly report the results at the general level, for all participants together. We might also like to add illustrations by reproducing some of the views and ideas you shared with us. When doing so, we will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from our group interview with you), so that although we will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications. For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection.

Who has reviewed the project?

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact the lead researcher, Dr Tineke Brunfaut, [e-mail], [telephone number], Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, County South, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, United Kingdom.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact our Head of Department, Professor Uta Papen, [e-mail], [telephone number], Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, County South, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, United Kingdom.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project!

Dr Tineke Brunfaut, Dr Rita Green, Dr Luke Harding, Dr Bimali Indrarathne

CONSENT FORM for WORKPLACE focus groups



Project Title: English in the workplace in Sri Lanka

Name of Researchers: Dr Tineke Brunfaut, Dr Rita Green, Dr Luke Harding and Dr Bimali Indrarathne
[Email]

Please tick (✓) each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I also understand the information on withdrawing as described in the information sheet.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. If I am participating in the group discussion I understand that any information disclosed within the group remains confidential to the group, and I will not discuss the discussion group with or in front of anyone who was not involved unless I have the relevant person's express permission.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic/professional articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I understand that discussion groups will be audio-recorded and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that data will be kept according to Lancaster University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____

Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

6.4 Employer interviews: Personal background questionnaire



English in the workplace in Sri Lanka

Workplace background questionnaire

Dear participant,

Thank you very much for taking part in our research! We would be grateful if you could tell us a bit more about yourself. We will not use your name in any publications.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Tineke Brunfaut, Dr Rita Green, Dr Luke Harding and Dr Bimali Indrarathne

1. First name: _____ Last name: _____
2. Age: _____ years' old
3. Gender: male female
4. Nationality: Sri Lankan other: _____
5. Language(s) you speak at home: _____
6. Which province do you live in?
 Central Eastern Northern North Central
 North Western Sabaragamuwa Southern Western Uva
7. What kind of area do you live in?
 urban rural
8. What is the highest level of education you passed?
 Grade 5
 G.C.E. (O/L)
 G.C.E. (A/L)
 higher education: a. undergraduate postgraduate
b. Subject field of your degree(s): _____
 other: _____

9. In which employment sector do you work?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy, banking & finance | <input type="checkbox"/> Leisure, sport & tourism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Automotive industry | <input type="checkbox"/> Marketing, advertising & PR |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business, consulting & management | <input type="checkbox"/> Media & internet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creative arts & design | <input type="checkbox"/> Property & construction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Public services & administration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Energy & utilities | <input type="checkbox"/> Ready-made garment industry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering & manufacturing | <input type="checkbox"/> Recruitment & Human Resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Environment & agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Retail |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healthcare | <input type="checkbox"/> Sales |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality | <input type="checkbox"/> Science & pharmaceuticals |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Information technology | <input type="checkbox"/> Social care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Law | <input type="checkbox"/> Transport & logistics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Law enforcement & security | <input type="checkbox"/> other (please specify): _____ |

10. Your current job title: _____

11. Company/institution/organisation you work at: _____

12. Do you speak English?

- no a little bit well very well

13. Do you understand English?

- no a little bit well very well

14. Did you ever study English?

- No Yes, for _____ years
- In: *(Tick all that apply)*
- Grade 1-5
- Grade 6-11 (G.C.E. O/L)
- Grade 12-13 (G.C.E. A/L)
- higher education
- other: _____

15. Did you ever live in an English-speaking country?

- No Yes In which country/ies? _____
- For how long? _____ years

6.5 Employer interviews: Interview guide

Intro

Thank you very much for your willingness to participate in this interview. I will ask you questions about language use in the workplace in Sri Lanka. I will also specifically ask you about the role of the English language (not Sri Lankan English/Singlish). [If more than one interviewee] Please exchange your views on this within the group. It is absolutely fine if you have different experiences or hold different views – I am interested in hearing about all of them.

Please do not hesitate to ask if you have any questions or anything is unclear.

Questions

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about your company? What kind of company is it? How big is it? What is the profile of your clients? (What companies do you get your resources from?) ...
2. At your workplace, are there formal guidelines on:
 - a. Which language(s) to use?
 - b. On when to use which language(s)?
 - c. On with whom to use them?
3. Which language(s) do you use in your job?
4. How important is English for your job? [*to get the job; for daily tasks; for promotion*]
5. If you sometimes use English,
 - a. Who do you use it with?
 - b. How often?
 - c. For what purpose(s)? [*Probe about oral and written communication.*]
6. When you use English, what variety do you use? [*Sri Lankan English, Singlish, 'standard' British English,...*]
7. What are the advantages for your job/workplace of having good English communication skills?
8. How proficient are your colleagues in English? [*Why?*]
 - a. In reading?
 - b. In writing?
 - c. In speaking?
 - d. In listening?
9. What impact do the English language skills of other employees have on your day-to-day work?
10. What are the advantages for the Sri Lankan economy of having good English communication skills?
11. Do you have suggestions for increasing employees' English proficiency in the workplace?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the role of English in the workplace in Sri Lanka?

Thank you very much for your time! This has been very useful for our research.