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ALIGNING ESL CURRICULUM AND ACADEMIC LITERACY: A SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE ON SECONDARY EDUCATION CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Academic reading proficiency is critical for students' success in secondary and higher education, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts such as Sri Lanka. Despite the growing importance of English for academic and professional development, a significant gap exists between the ESL curriculum and the actual academic reading demands placed on students. This article investigates the underlying challenges and offers strategic pathways to bridge this gap. Using a qualitative, document-based approach, the study analyses secondary data, national curriculum guidelines, and classroom observations to explore the linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, and pedagogical barriers that impede the development of academic reading skills in Sri Lankan secondary schools.

Findings reveal that inadequate vocabulary acquisition, lack of exposure to academic discourse, low reading motivation, and insufficient teacher training are key factors contributing to this gap. Moreover, the curriculum often emphasizes general language proficiency over discipline-specific academic literacy, leaving students underprepared for the demands of university education. The paper argues for the explicit integration of academic reading strategies into the ESL curriculum, advocating for curriculum redesign, teacher professional development, and the adoption of contextually appropriate materials.

By interconnecting academic reading with content-based instruction across the school curriculum, this study highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms. The recommendations provided aim to support curriculum developers, policymakers, and educators in fostering a more inclusive and effective approach to ESL education in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Academic reading, ESL curriculum, academic literacy, secondary education, Sri Lanka, language proficiency, teacher training, curriculum development, reading motivation, content-based instruction, educational reform.

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1. Introduction

In Sri Lanka, English functions not only as a second language but as a critical academic and socioeconomic tool. Despite its widespread recognition as a gateway to global communication and higher education, English proficiency among secondary school students—particularly in academic reading—remains insufficient. The acquisition of academic literacy in English is essential for student success in tertiary education, yet the existing school curriculum often fails to provide the linguistic scaffolding required to bridge everyday English with academic demands.

Academic reading goes beyond decoding texts; it involves the ability to interpret, evaluate, and synthesize discipline-specific material. In Sri Lanka's ESL classrooms, this skill is often overlooked or inadequately addressed, especially in under-resourced rural areas. While

students may perform well in rote memorization or grammar drills, they frequently struggle with reading comprehension tasks that require higher-order thinking. This disconnect reflects a broader pedagogical challenge: the failure to align the ESL curriculum with the academic literacy demands of the university context.

This paper investigates the barriers that obstruct academic reading development in ESL learners in Sri Lanka's secondary education system. It examines linguistic, psychological, socio-cultural, and pedagogical factors and argues for a curriculum reform that emphasizes academic reading as a foundational competency. The study draws on current research and contextual analysis to offer targeted recommendations that can improve academic outcomes and bridge the existing gap between school-level ESL instruction and university-level expectations.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

A growing body of research highlights the multifaceted nature of second language acquisition (SLA), particularly in multilingual societies such as Sri Lanka. Scholars like Ellis (2005) and Kumar et al. (2013) emphasize that language learning is influenced by a combination of cognitive, socio-cultural, and affective factors. In the Sri Lankan context, students are often taught English as a subject rather than as a medium of thought and inquiry, which undermines their capacity to engage with complex academic texts.

Studies by Rathnayake (2013) and Silva & Palihakkara (2020) suggest that curriculum design in Sri Lankan secondary schools rarely accommodates the development of academic reading skills. Instead, it emphasizes structural aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, leaving little room for inferential reading, critical thinking, or content analysis. This approach does not adequately prepare students for the reading demands of higher education, where comprehension of disciplinary texts is critical.

In addition to pedagogical limitations, socio-economic disparities contribute to unequal exposure to academic reading materials. As noted by Delport and Mangwaya (2008), rural students often lack access to well-equipped libraries, digital learning platforms, or trained ESL educators. Furthermore, culturally rooted attitudes toward English as a colonial language can foster resistance among learners, particularly in communities where indigenous languages dominate the linguistic landscape (McGinley, 1982).

The literature underscores the need for learner-centered, culturally relevant pedagogical strategies that integrate academic reading into the broader ESL curriculum. It also calls for a

shift in assessment practices—from purely memorization-based exams to formative evaluations that reflect real-world literacy needs. This paper builds on these insights to advocate for systemic reform in ESL education in Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on preparing students for academic success at the tertiary level.

3. Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in the analysis of secondary sources, curriculum documents, and relevant policy reports from the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education. The objective is to synthesize existing research with contextual observations to identify structural and pedagogical barriers impeding the development of academic reading skills in ESL classrooms.

Rather than primary data collection through fieldwork, this paper applies a document-based methodology, drawing on scholarly literature, national curriculum frameworks, and teacher training manuals. These sources are critically examined through thematic coding to identify gaps in current pedagogical practices, particularly those that relate to academic literacy. This analytical method is suited for exploring how educational policy and practice intersect in multilingual postcolonial contexts where English functions as both a utilitarian tool and a symbol of socioeconomic mobility.

In addition, comparative references to ESL frameworks from other South Asian countries help contextualize Sri Lanka's educational challenges within broader regional dynamics. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the constraints facing both teachers and learners and supports the formulation of grounded recommendations aimed at curriculum reform.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis reveals that academic reading is inadequately addressed within Sri Lanka's secondary ESL curriculum. Several interlinked barriers—linguistic, psychological, socio-cultural, and pedagogical—contribute to this gap.

4.1 Linguistic Barriers:

Students face challenges with syntax, unfamiliar vocabulary, and complex sentence structures typical of academic texts. These difficulties are intensified by the influence of Sinhala or Tamil, which follow different grammatical conventions and often lack direct equivalents for

English academic terminology. The absence of explicit instruction in decoding, summarizing, and analyzing academic texts further compounds these linguistic obstacles.

4.2 Psychological Factors:

Many students experience anxiety when engaging with academic English. The high-stakes nature of exams and the social stigma associated with low performance contribute to diminished motivation and self-efficacy. Students from rural areas, who often lack exposure to English outside of the classroom, report even greater levels of linguistic insecurity. Without consistent reinforcement, academic reading becomes an intimidating and alienating task.

4.3 Socio-Cultural Dimensions:

English continues to function as a marker of elite status. This perception fosters resistance in some communities and reinforces inequalities in English language acquisition. Rural schools frequently lack qualified ESL teachers and access to reading materials aligned with academic purposes. Consequently, learners are not given equitable opportunities to build foundational reading skills.

4.4 Pedagogical Shortcomings:

The ESL curriculum is primarily examination-driven, with a focus on grammar drills and rote learning. Textbooks rarely include authentic academic texts or tasks that require critical engagement. Teachers, particularly in under-resourced schools, often lack training in strategies that promote reading comprehension. The absence of formative assessment tools and reading-focused lesson planning limits students' exposure to the skills needed for success in higher education.

These findings underscore the urgent need to reorient the ESL curriculum toward academic literacy. Interventions must include professional development for teachers in reading instruction, incorporation of academic texts into teaching materials, and the redesign of assessment systems to value comprehension and analytical thinking. Without such measures, Sri Lankan secondary education will continue to fall short in preparing students for the academic demands of tertiary institutions.

5. Interconnecting Academic Reading with the School Curriculum in Sri Lanka

In the Sri Lankan educational context, academic reading plays a pivotal role in supporting students' learning across diverse subjects and curricular frameworks. Given the bilingual nature of education, with English as a second language (ESL) for many students,

effectively integrating academic reading within the school curriculum is essential to bridge language barriers and enhance comprehension skills necessary for academic success.

5.1 Curriculum Structure and Language Policy

Sri Lanka's school curriculum is primarily based on the National Institute of Education (NIE) frameworks, which emphasize proficiency in all three languages—Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Academic reading, especially in English, is critical for accessing knowledge in science, social studies, mathematics, and other subjects taught in English-medium schools or through the Edexcel curriculum. The curriculum must therefore explicitly connect academic reading development with subject learning outcomes to support ESL learners in comprehending content-area texts.

5.2 Challenges for ESL Learners in Academic Reading

Many Sri Lankan students face linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, unfamiliar academic discourse, and cultural differences embedded in texts. These challenges necessitate that the curriculum includes targeted strategies for teaching academic reading skills that consider students' language proficiency levels. Without this integration, students may struggle to engage meaningfully with subject matter, leading to gaps in understanding and lower academic achievement.

5.3 Contextualized Reading Strategies in Curriculum Delivery

To address these challenges, the Sri Lankan curriculum should incorporate reading strategies tailored to the language demands of each subject. For example, teaching students how to decode scientific terminology, interpret data from charts in mathematics, or critically analyze historical texts must be embedded in the regular classroom practice. These strategies should be scaffolded gradually, aligned with the students' language development stages, and reinforced across subjects to build academic literacy.

5.4 Use of Curriculum-Based Reading Materials

The selection of reading materials aligned with the NIE curriculum and examination syllabi is crucial. Incorporating bilingual glossaries, annotated texts, and culturally relevant examples can make academic reading more accessible. Additionally, using graded readers and supplementary ESL resources in tandem with subject textbooks supports comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

5.5 Assessment and Teacher Roles in Promoting Reading

Assessment methods in Sri Lanka are evolving to include evaluation of academic reading skills within subject examinations. Teachers play a critical role in monitoring students' reading progress and providing constructive feedback that links language skills with curriculum

goals. Professional development focusing on integrating academic reading instruction with subject teaching enhances teachers' capacity to support ESL learners effectively.

5.6 Promoting Inclusive and Lifelong Learning

By interconnecting academic reading with the school curriculum, Sri Lankan schools prepare students not only for national examinations but also for higher education and global opportunities. Strengthening academic reading skills fosters critical thinking and independent learning, which are key for success in university settings and professional life. This integration ultimately contributes to reducing the language barrier and educational inequalities faced by many ESL students in Sri Lanka.

6. Recommendations

To address the misalignment between the ESL curriculum and the demands of academic reading, several targeted recommendations are proposed:

6.1 Curriculum Reform:

The national ESL curriculum should integrate academic reading competencies as a core objective rather than a peripheral skill. This includes introducing content-rich texts from various academic disciplines, teaching explicit reading strategies (e.g., skimming, scanning, inference), and designing learning outcomes that focus on comprehension, analysis, and synthesis.

6.2 Teacher Professional Development:

Continuous teacher training programs should prioritize the pedagogy of academic reading. Educators must be equipped to model higher-order reading skills and scaffold students' progression from surface-level comprehension to deeper engagement with texts. Training should also address the psychological and socio-cultural barriers learners face in diverse classroom settings.

6.3 Equity in Resource Allocation:

The disparity between urban and rural schools can be reduced by investing in school libraries, digital infrastructure, and mobile learning tools that support reading across contexts. Access to multilingual academic materials, especially in under-served regions, is essential for inclusivity.

6.4 Formative and Authentic Assessment:

Assessment models must evolve to measure academic reading proficiency through real-world tasks such as essay writing, group discussions, text analysis, and presentations. This shift

from summative to formative practices allows learners to receive feedback that nurtures confidence and skill.

6.5 Integrating Reading across the Curriculum:

Academic reading should not be confined to English classrooms alone. Subjects like science, history, and geography must embed reading tasks that promote language development and critical literacy, fostering cross-disciplinary engagement.

7. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a critical yet underexplored issue in Sri Lanka's secondary ESL education system: the disconnect between school-level English instruction and the academic reading demands of tertiary education. Rooted in linguistic, psychological, socio-cultural, and pedagogical challenges, this gap continues to disadvantage students—particularly those from marginalized communities—who require strong academic literacy skills to access higher education and employment opportunities.

Bridging this divide necessitates more than superficial adjustments. It calls for systemic transformation: curriculum reform that prioritizes reading, professional development for teachers, inclusive resource distribution, and assessments aligned with communicative and cognitive goals. Crucially, students must be viewed not merely as exam candidates but as emerging scholars, capable of engaging with complex texts and constructing knowledge across domains.

As Sri Lanka continues to modernize its education system in the context of globalization, ensuring equitable access to academic reading skills will be a decisive factor in enabling all learners to participate meaningfully in academic, professional, and civic life. A reimagined ESL curriculum—infused with linguistic rigor, cultural relevance, and academic purpose—holds the key to unlocking this potential.

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