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THE EFFECT OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

It has been observed in literature related to ESL context that less attention has been placed on learning environment. However, the available studies done on learning environment have shown prospective benefits of different variables in the area. The paper presents some of the findings of a PhD study of which learning environment is a major component. This study is a survey of student perspectives on the learning environment which include areas; convenience of lecture room facilities, availability of technology and other resources, availability of language laboratory facilities, and convenience of library facilities. The sample of the study comprised selected students of Science-based and Non-science based faculties of Metropolitan universities of Sri Lanka. The data were collected online using a Google Form and were analyzed with SPSS software. Results indicated that students of Non-science based faculties need improvements in most of the variables while Science-based faculties need improvements in selected cases particularly library facilities as per students' perspectives.

KEYWORDS:

Academic success, activity-based learning, e-learning, English-specific library, learning environment, students' perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of learning environment in second language learning has begun to showcase its immense contribution to academic performance of ESL learners and researchers in education and second language learning have shown the impact of learning environment on students' achievement in academic success. In the case of second language learning, the change of the role of learner from being a passive recipient who takes down notes in the classroom environment to active participant engaged in activities is a predominant factor. As such, both the teacher and the learner could not cope up with the traditional classroom setting. Hence, learning environment equipped with conducive resources or determinants would allow learners to handle and manipulate learning tasks more effectively. Learning environment is believed to be a determinant factor that contributes to stimulate the outcomes of learning that facilitate academic performance by encouraging effective teaching and learning [1] (Duruji et al., 2014). The determinants of the learning environment may vary on the context of learning. Thus, researchers have identified determinants such as student motivation [2] (Mitchell, 1992), family [3] (Rollins & Thomas, 1979; [4] Cassidy & Lynn, 1991), School climate and family [5] (Niebuhr, 1995), parental education and social economic status [6] (Phillips, 1998), classroom learning environment [7] (Knight & Waxman, 1991), architecture of the school and classrooms [8] (Higginus et al., 2005), learning resources and technology [9]

(Study.com, 2018), and the whole range of activities in which learning happens [10] (Basque and Dare, 1998). Deviating from the traditional assumption that intelligence is the sole determinant of academic success, studies have shown ([11] Dhanapala & Premaratne, 2021; [12] Brooks, 2010; [13] Softa, 2011) that conducive learning environment would help improve academic success in learning. Literature on learning environment can be categorized into three broad aspects: academic environment (learning strategy or academic performance), physical environment (materials, building, classrooms) and psychological environment (attitudes and values) and all these affect the overall academic success in acquiring second language [14] (Lizzio et al., 2002). However, this paper places its emphasis mostly to physical environment that helps to facilitate language learning.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The university ESL programmes and the relevant curricula of such programmes in Sri Lanka have not placed due concerns over the learning environment in which students' study. Although there is evidence of substantial influence of learning environment on academic performance of ESL learners, due attention has not been paid to incorporate the contributory factors that enhance ESL learning through proper identification of most appropriate determinants of learning environment. In the Sri Lankan context, research on learning environment in the ESL context is relatively new. The scarcity of studies done on learning environment in the Sri Lankan university sector is a significant drawback in terms of research.

In line with learner- centered curriculum development, [15] Nunan (1991) has stressed the need to embark on learner perspectives, as learners' contribution of ideas to curricula and ELT programmes would yield better prospects in ESL programmes for the fact that learners are major stakeholders in university curriculum development and programme improvement. This paper confines its scope to students' perspectives on selected determinants of learning environment that would create avenues to design proper and fruitful factors to upgrade learning resources, design or revise curricula, and shape up ESL courses that would help facilitate academic performance in university ESL context. This study is a part of PhD research aimed at identifying ESL learner perspectives on learning environment of Science-based and Non-Science based faculties of selected Metropolitan universities (universities located in city areas which are very well established in the system) of Sri Lanka.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning environment of educational programmes can be defined as diverse physical locations, contexts and cultures in which students learn. Learning environment also encompasses how students interact with and treat one another in the pedagogical setting. Further, the educational setting (learning environment) which is conducive for effective learning includes the natural ecosystem, grouping of students, arrangement of desks and seating order in specific ways, audio, video and digital technologies. The qualities and characteristics of learning environment are also determined by a wide variety of other factors such as policies of the institution, governance structures and financial stability.

Literature on learning environment can be categorized into three broad aspects; academic environment, physical environment and psychological environment and all these affect the overall academic success in acquiring second language [14] (Lizzio et al., 2002). Some experts in education distinguish learning environment as positive or negative. Positive learning environment includes conducive physical and social settings that facilitate effective learning. Learning environment that has filled with sunlight, facilities of seating arrangements, conducive light, podium and the white and black boards in addition to digital and electronic equipment in the classroom such as multimedia and sound systems belong to positive learning environment while classroom environments with bare minimal facilities of accessibility with congested student numbers can be termed as negative. The concept of learning environment as perceived by [16] Balog (2018) consists of people, teaching materials, technical tools, learning resources, curriculum, training and instruction, and physical learning space.

[17] Malik & Rizvi (2018) segregate learning environment as physical and human. All the physical objects that aid to teaching and learning are termed as physical environment while students and teachers in the classroom are considered as human environment. Scholars in the field of education have highlighted that the concept of traditional learning environment of the classroom concept be replaced with the wholistic "study labs and exploratory centers" ([18] Stevenson,2007; [19] Bunting ,2004). The era of communicative Language Teaching has placed much emphasis on classroom interaction. Deviating from the traditional teacher-centered classroom to learner-centered environment in the educational setting, second language teaching methods such as Communicative Language Teaching have identified the pivotal roles of teacher-student and student-student interaction to facilitate communication from wider perspectives. Scholars like [20] Ellis (1991), [21] Larson-Freeman & Long (1991), and [22] Swain (2000) have come out with concepts like input, output, and comprehensible input -all of which help to pilot interaction in second language learning classroom.

In order to facilitate interaction in the classroom, the effect of learning environment is very important. Learning activities such as group work, pair work, presentations, and activity-based learning require conducive physical environment in the classroom. Space for student and teacher movement, flexibility of desks and chairs to form groups, facilities for individual presentations are some of the determinants of the learning environment. Further, availability of technology and other resources in the classroom would enhance the effect of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Learning environment is so important that it helps students to have maximum effectiveness in the learning process. The importance of learning environment in achieving success in learning has been highlighted by many scholars in education. Educationists such as
[23] Ashton (2001) and [24] Umar (2017) have stressed the necessity to safeguard the learning environment with adequate resources in learning contexts. [25] Kilei (2012) asserts that sufficient learning facilities and instructional materials in the learning environment are important factors which lead to gain an impact on teaching and learning.

The quality of education in second language does not solely depend on the effectiveness of the teacher and the intelligence of students alone. It also depends on how learning environment of the classroom has been designed with adequate and effective determinants and resources that are important to achieve academic success. The benefits of having conducive learning environment in ESL context can lead to enormous advantages for learners and some of which are listed below.

2.1 Theatre Effect

Effective learning does not take place in a vacuum. Facilities such as sound systems, multimedia, podium, flexibility of desks and chairs with adequate provisions for movement and arrangements are contributory factors that create theatre effect. In theatre setting, what we see or experience is not in the authentic or real manner but enhanced. When talking to an audience, the effect of using a sound system is more attractive than making a speech without any device. This effect can be termed as 'theatre effect'. Classrooms with enhanced facilities or resources in the learning environment would lead to better impact on students' learning.

2.2 Student Motivation

Studies have proved that there is a positive correlation between student motivation and enhanced learning environment ([26] Mathews, 1991; [27] Knight & Waxman, 1990). Learning environments with facilities for audio-visual study conditions, well organized classrooms with adequate learning spaces, and e-learning facilities enrich student motivation which subsequently lead to academic achievements. [28] Alzubaidi et al., (2016) examined the association between students' learning environment and their level of motivation. They found that there are strong correlations between students' learning environment and their motivation and self-regulation related gains. Further, [29] Baeten et al., (2013) showed that students' autonomous motivation can be influenced by the enhanced learning environment.

2.3 Accessibility for Materials

Enhanced learning environment ought to include learning and self-access resources such as task sheets, activity cards, reference books and software developed for e-learning which would subsequently help to improve academic performance in ESL context. Since the act of learning cannot be fulfilled with the sole functions of the teacher, students need avenues and resources such as library books and similar resources for learning. Hence, the universities and educational institutes ought to be aware of the materials and resources to be included in the learning environment meant for students for easy access.

2.4 Environment for Interaction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been regarded as an influential and effective teaching methodology in Second language teaching and CLT created a great deal of enthusiasm in the 1970s and 1980s [30] (Richards, 2006). In this approach, communicative competence in language learning was regarded as a prime objective. In order to facilitate communication, CLT as an approach to language teaching emphasized the provision of interaction as a unique requirement for students to practice and communicate using the target language by way of pair work and group work. Since the learning environments in traditional classrooms could not cater to the physical classroom requirements demanded by the CLT, it was deemed necessary for experts in the ESL context to think of enhanced learning environments with adequate space for students to move and think of the flexibility of desks and chairs to facilitate pair and group work.

2.5 Technology Embedded Enhanced Learning

The area of digital technology is a convincing requirement of the learning environment to facilitate enhanced learning. Basic facilities starting from sound systems to multimedia projectors and computer aided learning resources come under the concept of learning environment. Such learning environments allow students to learn on their own pace by accessing learning software, make presentations in the classroom in the presence of others, listen and learn conversations of foreign accents, and do tasks and assessments on the computers and submit them.

3. METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study was to find out the perceptions of students towards the ongoing ESL programmes conducted by the Metropolitan universities in Sri Lanka. The term 'Metropolitan' is used to refer to universities that are well establish in the system and located in the main cities of the country. The focus of students' perceptions was on the learning environments of Science-based and Non-science based faculties of Metropolitan universities with regard to ESL programmes.

The study was a survey in nature and the approach used for data collection and analysis was quantitative. [31] Singleton & Straits (2009) are of the view that surveys are used in social and psychological research and they facilitate both qualitative and quantitative research. Also, survey studies can be defined as collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses [32] (Check & Schutt, 2012). In the study, data were collected through strategic approach with the help of a questionnaire administered online using a Google Form. The sample of the study included two Metropolitan universities of Sri Lanka namely; University of Kelaniya and University of Colombo. As shown in the Table 3.1, the sample included 224 respondents, out of which 114 were from University of Kelaniya and 110 from university of Colombo. The sample from university of Kelaniya included 48 from the Science-based faculties and 66 from Non-science based faculties while there were 52 respondents from Science-based faculties and 58 from the Non-science based faculties of university of Colombo.

University	**Science-based faculties**	**Non-Science based faculties**	**Total**
1. Kelaniya	48	66	114
2. Colombo	52	58	110
Total	100	124	**224**

Table 3.1: Population of the study

The analysis of data was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, IBM Version 21) software. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data. The study used five-point Likert scale to measure variables ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree; Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly agree (5). The five-point mean values were condensed and assigned vales with three scales in order to interpret data. The mean values from 1 -2.33 were interpreted as "Low", values from 2.33 -3.67 were considered as "Moderate", and mean values from 3.67 -5 were interpreted as "High".

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire on learning environment contained four variables namely; convenience of lecture room facilities, availability of technology and other resources, availability of language laboratory facilities, and convenience of library facilities. In the study, the total respondents of the Science-based faculties were 100 subjects while in Non-science-based faculties there were a total of 124 respondents.

As per the data, the standard deviations of all the cases in the tables are less than 1. This value indicate that the mean values are homogeneously distributed and the reliability of such mean values are adequately maintained. Table 4.1 shows the student perspectives of convenience of lecture room facilities. The 1st variable of the table focuses on the availability of space in the lecture rooms. In both the Science-based and Non-science based faculties, students have indicated that their satisfaction is high with respective mean values of 3.970 and 3.439. The 2nd variable of the table refers to seating arrangements suitable for activity-based learning. In Science-based faculties (Mean=3.800), student satisfaction is high while in Non-science based faculties (Mean=3.621) student satisfaction is moderate. The 3rd variable refers to light and ventilation for which the mean value indicated by students is 4.220 which is high in satisfaction in Science-based faculties. In the case of Non-science based faculties, the mean value 3.268 indicate a moderate perspective.

	Science-based faculties			***Non science- based faculties***			***Total***		
	Mean	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**
1. The lecture rooms have sufficient space and have the convenience for students to move and work.	3.970	100	.9151	3.439	124	.6988	3.897	224	.6811
2.The lecture rooms have convenient seating arrangements suitable for activity-based learning	3.800	100	.7445	3.621	124	.7305	3.701	224	.7941
3. The lecture rooms have sufficient light and ventilation.	4.220	100	.8113	3.268	124	.6035	4.080	224	.9292

Table 4.1 : Convenience of lecture room facilities

The data represented in Table 4.2 deals with students' perspectives on availability of technology and resources. The 1st variable is about facilities of multimedia and sound systems. In Science-based faculties, students' satisfaction is high with a mean value of 4.210 and in Non-science based faculties, the mean value is 3.194 which is moderate in satisfaction. The next variable deals with the importance and the availability of digital smart boards. Both the student categories in Science-based (Mean=3.660) and Non-science based (Mean= 3.194) faculties have indicated moderate satisfaction over them as per the mean values. The next variable is the internet facility. The mean value, 4.440 of the Science-based faculties indicate a high satisfaction. However, in Non-science based faculties, internet facility seems to be not freely available or accessible. Hence, students have indicated a moderate satisfaction with a mean value of 3.256.

	Science-based faculties			*Non science-based faculties*			*Total*		
	Mean	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**
1.Classrooms have multimedia and sound systems.	4.210	100	.9460	3.210	124	.9219	4.210	224	.9306
2.Digital Smart boards are very useful for us and the classrooms have them.	3.660	100	1.1639	3.194	124	.8897	3.960	224	.8517
3.Internet is a useful facility for language classrooms and we have the facility.	4.440	100	.6715	3.256	124	.9648	4.509	224	.8470

Table 4.2: Availability of technology and resources

The availability of language laboratory facilities is a variable that constitute learning environment of ESL study programmes. As it can be noted from Table 4.3, there are five sub variables under language laboratory facilities. The 1st sub-variable is the usefulness and availability of e-learning software. In Science-based faculties and Non- science based faculties, students perceived this facility as high with mean values of 4.370 and 4.516 respectively. The 2nd sub-variable which focuses the allocation of periods for e-learning has a high mean value of 4.290 in Science-based faculties. However, the students in Non-science based faculties, the indication is low (Mean= 2.327). The third area of the questionnaire is the availability of facilities to practice speech for which students of Science-based faculties have indicated the importance as low with a mean value of 2.230 while the students in Non-science based faculties, indicated its importance as high (Mean= 4.129). The next area of concern is the availability of e-resources to practice tests. According to the data, the respondents of Science-based faculties indicated it as high (Mean= 4.290) while in Non-science based faculties, the indication of the availability is moderate (Mean= 3.534). The final sub-area of concern is the availability and importance of resources to learn and practice different English accents, for which the data interpreted a low value with a mean of 2.316 in Science-based faculties contrary to a high mean value of 4.347 for the other group.

	Science-based faculties			*Non science-based faculties*			*Total*		
	Mean	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**
1. E-learning software packages are useful resources for students and they are available.	4.370	100	.7740	4.516	124	.6179	4.451	224	.6942
2.We have some periods allocated for e-learning in a place like Language Laboratory.	4.290	100	.8680	2.327	124	.7120	4.366	224	.7866
3.Availability of podium and facilities to practice speech is available.	2.230	100	.8876	4.129	124	.9280	3.161	224	.9089
4.E-resources to practice tests and language exercises are available for us.	4.290	100	.8324	3.534	124	.7235	4.326	224	.7729
5.Availability of facilities and software to learn different English accents is available.	2.316	100	.6249	4.347	124	.8169	3.192	224	.9297

Table 4.3: Availability of Language laboratory facilities

The convenience of library facilities was taken as the last sub-variable under learning environment considered for this paper. Availability and access to: learning materials, e-resources and English-specific library sections are the areas in the study as indicated

in Table 4.4. As regards learning materials, the perceived satisfaction of respondents from Science-based faculties is moderate with a mean value of 3.550 while in Non-science based faculties the mean was 3.847 which indicates high satisfaction. Similarly, for the second area, that is e-resources, moderate mean value of 3.380 was indicated by Science-based faculties whereas in Non-science based faculties, the mean value is 4.016 indicating a high perception. The last sub-variable, English-specific library sections, Science-based faculty students indicated a moderate mean value of 3.420 contrary to a high mean value of 3.774 by Non-science based faculty students. The overall data reveal that students are not very much happy with the library facilities provided for ESL programmes.

	Science-based faculties			***Non science-based faculties***			***Total***		
	Mean	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**	**Mean**	**N**	**SD**
1.There are enough learning materials of English language for us to use.	3.550	100	.7839	3.847	124	.7898	3.714	224	.7398
2.Students have adequate e-resources to use.	3.380	100	.7702	4.016	124	.8552	3.732	224	.0544
3.Students have access to English-specific library sections for learning.	3.420	100	.9554	3.774	124	.9698	3.616	224	.9773

Table 4.4 : Convenience of library facilities

5. CONCLUSION

This paper reports the perspectives on learning environment of ESL students studying in Metropolitan universities in Sri Lanka. As per the data, students' perspectives indicate that the Science-based faculties have been provided with adequate lecture room facilities. However, in Non-science based faculties, student satisfaction is not so good. Hence, authorities have to think of further improving lecture room facilities in Non-science based faculties. The data derived in reference to technology and other resources, the indications are similar except the facility of smart boards in Science-based faculties. There is a satisfactory indication for language laboratory facilities by both the segments of faculties. However, e-learning facilities provided for Non-science based faculties is poor and resources to practice speech and different accents be improved in Science-based faculties. Finally, as per students' perspectives, library facilities will have to be improved in Science-based faculties as they indicate an average satisfaction compared to others.

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