



UNRAVELING ZERO PERCENT ESL PASS RATES: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND SYSTEMIC ANALYSIS OF UNDERPERFORMANCE IN SRI LANKAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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This study investigates the persistent phenomenon of zero percent pass rates in English as a Second Language (ESL) at the G.C.E. (O/L) examination in selected government schools within an Education Zone (EZ) in Sri Lanka. Despite nine years of formal English instruction through the national curriculum, certain schools consistently fail to produce a single passing candidate in ESL. This research seeks to understand the root causes behind this alarming trend and identify actionable strategies for educational reform. Guided by Collier's Conceptual Prism Model (CPM) of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which emphasizes the interconnected roles of sociocultural, cognitive, academic, and linguistic processes, the study explores how factors at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels collectively influence ESL outcomes. A mixed method approach was employed using an Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods Design. The qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews with educational administrators, focus group discussions with teachers, and school-based observations. These insights informed the development of structured questionnaires used in the quantitative phase, which involved students, parents, and teachers. Five major themes emerged: (1) Socio-economic disadvantage, where limited parental education and household instability restricted linguistic development; (2) Low student motivation, with many students unable to see the value of ESL due to immediate economic pressures; (3) Teacher competency gaps, including demotivated instructors with limited pedagogical innovation; (4) A lack of L2-rich environments in schools, where English exposure was confined to formal lessons; and (5) Systemic inefficiencies, including ineffective supervision, outdated training, and poor teacher deployment. A notable finding was the impact of localized subcultures that devalue formal education and ESL proficiency. The study concludes that these interlocking barriers severely restrict students' capacity to succeed in ESL. It recommends implementing ESL immersion programs tailored to low-socio-economic state learners, restructuring teacher training and deployment, revamping supervision mechanisms, and initiating community-based outreach to challenge limiting cultural narratives. These interventions aim to create equitable opportunities for English acquisition and broader academic success across marginalized school contexts.

Keywords: ESL, G.C.E. (O/L), Sri Lanka, second language acquisition, Collier's model, socio-economic disadvantage, student motivation, teacher competency, L2 exposure, educational reform

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INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study investigates a critical issue in Sri Lanka's education system: the consistent zero percent pass rates in English as a Second Language (ESL) at the G.C.E. (O/L) examination in certain schools. Despite nine years of formal English instruction, some schools have repeatedly failed to produce a single student who meets the minimum pass mark. This raises the central research question: Why do all students in certain schools fail to pass ESL at the G.C.E. (O/L) despite prolonged exposure to the subject?

In Sri Lanka, English proficiency is widely seen as essential for academic advancement and economic mobility (Karunaratne, 2003; Gunsekera, 2005). While national policies promote bilingualism (Ministry of Education, 2009), a gap persists between policy and implementation, especially in low-income and socially marginalized schools (Aloysius, 2015; Ekanayake & Wishart, 2013).

The study is guided by Collier's Conceptual Prism Model (CPM) of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which emphasizes the interplay between sociocultural, cognitive, academic, and linguistic processes (Collier, 1995). According to the model, failure in any of these areas; particularly due to emotional or socio-cultural challenges can significantly obstruct language learning.

Focusing on three schools within Negombo Education Zone (NEZ) that reported zero ESL passes over four consecutive years, this study captures the perspectives of the stake holders of the respective schools. The goal is to uncover the root causes of this persistent failure and propose evidence-based, context-sensitive interventions to enhance ESL outcomes in similarly disadvantaged educational settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Mixed Methods Research (MMR) approach, specifically the Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods Design (ESMMD), to examine the factors behind persistent zero percent pass rates in ESL at the GCE O/L examination. Study sites were selected using results analysis reports of the NEZ across four years to avoid sampling errors caused by rare anomalies. Ten schools recorded 0% passes at least once during this period, but only three showed this outcome consistently across all four years. These three state schools were purposively selected to ensure representativeness and exclude one-off irregularities.

The first phase of the ESMMD design comprised qualitative inquiry. Data were collected through:

Semi-structured interviews (SSI) with seven educational administrators, including English directors, school principals, Regional English Support Centre (RESC) staff, and teacher educators.



Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with six English teachers from three selected schools, held at the Teacher Center

Classroom and school observations in the three selected schools, which documented teaching practices, student participation, resource availability, and the overall English learning environment.

This phase aimed to capture lived experiences and contextual realities, producing rich, exploratory insights. Findings from this phase informed the design of structured questionnaires, administered in printed form to 27 students, 27 parents, and 6 teachers. The questionnaires focused on home support, teacher motivation, and school culture.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages: thematic analysis of qualitative data to identify patterns and descriptive statistical analysis of quantitative data using SPSS to establish trends and correlations. The participants of both SSI and FGD shared similar views as the factors that have affected the situation and they were narrowed into five predominant areas and discussed and exemplified with participants' comments sequentially;

- 1) The socio-economic status of the parents
- 2) Self-motivation and the linguistic ability of the students
- 3) The teachers' competencies and attitudes
- 4) The L2 rich school environment
- 5) The service of the administrators

The data and the analysis of the three questionnaires, are presented under the following five sub- sections:

- 1) The socio-economic status (SES) of the parents
- 2) The autonomy of the students
- 3) The rapport between the teachers and the students
- 4) The subject related extra activities operated in the school.
- 5) The support of the administrators

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Triangulation of both datasets enhanced validity and provided an integrated interpretation. The analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data revealed five interrelated themes as critical contributors to the persistently zero percent ESL pass rates in selected schools within the EZ. These themes closely align with the dimensions outlined in Collier's CPM of SLA; particularly the interdependence between sociocultural, cognitive, academic, and linguistic processes. Each of the following factors emerged as a decisive barrier to ESL success;

1. **Socio-Economic Background (SES)** - Students came from low-income households with limited parental education and employment in low-wage jobs. This lack of home support and English exposure hindered academic reinforcement. The absence of role models using English for advancement further reduced its perceived value (Akram & Ghani, 2013; Aloysius, 2015). This supports Collier's (1995) view that sociocultural conditions deeply affect L2 learning.



2. **Lack of Student Motivation** - Although students liked English, many felt passing was unattainable due to fatalistic beliefs and a lack of visible benefits. Motivation was further weakened by peer influence, low parental expectations, and few extracurricular opportunities (Perera, 2006; Gardner, 1988).
3. **Teacher Competency and Attitudes** - Despite formal qualifications, teachers showed limited pedagogical skill, relying on textbook-driven lessons and rarely using English beyond class scripts (Canagarajah, 2014). Low motivation, poor lesson planning, and inadequate assessment practices were common. Absenteeism and long commutes worsened the issue (Wenglinsky, 2000).
4. **Lack of a L2-Rich School Environment** - English programs like Literary Associations and English Days were either rare or superficial. No dedicated spaces or school-wide English practices existed, limiting immersion and authentic use (Ekanayake & Wishart, 2013; Wijesekera, 2018).
5. **Administrative and Systemic Failures** - Key issues included ineffective teacher deployment, outdated in-service training, and compliance-focused supervision. Teachers lacked constructive feedback, timely resources, and consistent support, impacting morale and instruction quality (Wijesekera, 2008).

Unexpectedly Emerged Factor: Influence of Subcultures

A novel and unexpected finding of the study was the influence of localized subcultures; community norms and occupational patterns that indirectly discourage academic advancement and language learning. In particular, students from families involved in daily-wage labour, slaughterhouse work, or shift-based factory employment often viewed formal education; especially in English—as irrelevant to their socio-economic realities. These subcultures perpetuated a mindset where immediate financial contribution outweighed long-term educational gains, a phenomenon not directly accounted for in Collier’s original CPM but highly relevant to the Sri Lankan context. These cultural patterns pose deep-rooted emotional and cognitive barriers to ESL learning, as they shape the child’s sense of identity and perceived purpose in schooling.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the persistent zero percent ESL pass rates in certain schools within the EZ result from a convergence of home, school, and systemic factors, rather than a single cause. The findings align with Collier’s CPM, which emphasizes how unaddressed sociocultural barriers can hinder emotional stability, cognitive development, and language acquisition.

Key contributing factors include low SES, lack of student motivation, ineffective teaching practices, absence of English-rich school environments, and administrative failures. An additional insight was the impact of local subcultures that undervalue education and prioritize short-term income over long-term learning goals.

To address these challenges, the study proposes the following strategies:

1. **Contextualized ESL Immersion Programs** - Create ESL initiatives for LSES learners that emphasize practical language use, including drama, storytelling, peer interaction, and school-wide English activities.



2. **Strategic Teacher Deployment** - Appoint teachers based on proximity and cultural fit, ensuring continuity and long-term commitment to underserved communities.
3. **Improved In-Service Training** - Focus on practical, context-aware methods in teacher training, including peer mentoring, demo lessons, and collaborative planning.
4. **Supportive Supervision Models** - Shift from compliance-based oversight to development-focused supervision, with RESC officers and ISAs offering feedback and modelling inclusive teaching strategies.
5. **Community Engagement to Shift Cultural Narratives** - Launch awareness campaigns and parental workshops that promote education and ESL as viable paths to upward mobility, supported by local role models.

By implementing these evidence-based, multi-level interventions, stakeholders can begin to dismantle the entrenched barriers to ESL success, promoting more equitable and inclusive learning outcomes across Sri Lanka.

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