

# English Language Proficiency And Challenges of Employees In Performing Duties At Government Sectors: A Study Based On Sammanthurai Divisional Secretariat

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the challenges encountered by the employees of Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai in performing their duties with lower English Language proficiency. English Language has been a significant factor for employees at government departments in Sri Lanka. It is needed in several occasions such as reading and understanding letters, e-mails, forms, documents etc. And drafting letters and E-mails and filling in forms. However, due to the lack of English Language skill, most of the employees face challenges in completing the tasks in those occasions. Therefore, this study was carried out. This study is a survey research and data collection methods are quantitative. In this study, 40 employees were randomly selected as sample population and a questionnaire was used as the research instrument for data collection. According to the analysis of primary data, the findings show that most of the participants (77.5%) agree that English Language is very important for employees at government departments and 82.5% of participants agree that a large number of employees encounter challenges in performing their roles and responsibilities effectively due to the lower English proficiency in certain occasions when English is needed. Likewise, a large number of participants (67.5%) do not have sufficient English Language proficiency. As a result, they rely on others to complete the tasks in English. These challenges and problems can be overcome when useful English training programmes and workshops could be conducted to improve the employees' English Language proficiency. The employees are requested to speak English at least one day in a month to develop communication skill and English Language

proficiency should be one of the mandatory requirements for any government posts in Sri Lanka because the need of English Language proficiency will be increased in future too.

**Keywords: Development Officer, Divisional Secretariat, English Language proficiency, Sammanthurai, Management Assistant**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The English language in career advancement plays a significant role in the era of globalization. It has been the language of administration, law, education, business and religion in most of the countries around the world. English Language has the huge demand in the labor market since most of the tasks are interconnected with English. However, according to Sri Lankan recruitment procedure for government posts, English Language proficiency is not considered as a mandatory requirement when the recruitment is made for government posts. As a result, the employees in departments, boards and authorities do not possess English Language proficiency. It is so obvious that lack of English language proficiency affects the career of many employees in both government and private sectors. At government institutions, the employees are engaged in various roles dealing with English Language such as drafting English letters, filling forms, translating letters and documents, drafting emails, responding to emails, official presentations, communicating with multicultural people etc. However, due to the lack of English proficiency, they encounter a number of challenges and difficulties in performing their roles and duties at their workplace.

The findings of several previous studies show that English Language skill helps to improve employees' job performance. Miina (2014) points out that lower English language proficiency disrupts flow of effective communication which causes misinterpretation and misunderstanding among the employees and public. In this modern world, English Language is widely used and the English Language proficiency has become one of the most significant skills of the employment in government departments in Sri Lanka. There are several government departments in Sri Lanka, in this sense, Divisional Secretariats are government departments which functions under the Ministry of Public Administration. Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai is one of the divisional secretariats in Sri Lanka where the employees encounter a number of difficulties and challenges in performing their duties due to the lack of English Language proficiency. They are unable to deal certain tasks such as letter drafting, responding to emails, translation, filling in forms, replying for the foreign documents, reading and understanding documents, which are given in English. Although the official languages are Sinhala and Tamil at government institutions in Sri Lanka, English Language is needed in several occasions at government institutions since it has been the global language. Therefore, this study was carried out to investigate the challenges faced by the employees in performing their roles and duties due to the lack of English Language proficiency.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Most of the employees at Divisional Secretariat-Sammanthurai encounter numerous challenges in performing

their roles and responsibilities effectively due to the lack of English Language proficiency. With regard to the reading and understanding English letters, statements, circulars, laws, rules and regulations and forms, most of the employees struggle to read and understand them. Likewise, they are unable to draft even a single letter or E-mail in English. In these occasions, they do relay on others to finish the works. As a result, they face difficulties in performing their roles and duties on time. It has been a challenge for the most of the employees at government departments.

### **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

- To identify the challenges encountered by employees in performing their roles and duties in their workplace.
- To explore the reasons for possessing lower English Language proficiency.
- To suggest suitable remedies and recommendations to improve employees' English proficiency and to overcome the challenges that they encounter in performing their duties.

### **1.3 Hypotheses of the Study**

- Most of the employees at Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai possess very lower English Language proficiency.
- Government employees do not give importance to learn English since it is not a mandatory requirement for recruiting most of the government posts in Sri Lanka, Especially in government sectors.
- A large number of employees rely on others to finish English Language related their works. As a result, it affects their roles of effective performance and duty at workplace.

### **1.4 Limitation of the Study**

Due to lower English Language proficiency, employees in several government departments in Sammanthurai, boards and authorities encounter challenges in performing their duty effectively. However, to limit this study, the Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai was selected as research setting since the problems and challenges were identified in performing duty due to the lack of English language skill. There are 120 employees at Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai. Out of them, 40 employees were selected for data collection to limit the participants. Moreover, there are several research instruments. However, only a questionnaire was selected based on the problem of this study.

### **1.5 Significance of the study**

This study will be beneficial for the employees of the Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai to improve their English Language proficiency as well as to overcome the challenges they encounter in performing their roles and duties. Further, this study will be significant to all the employees who perform their services at government institutions in Sri Lanka. In particular, this study will be useful to the recruiters of government posts. This study will be significant for private sector employees too.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language proficiency is significant for all the employees at work places to perform their duty effectively. However, a large number of government employees at departments, boards and authorities in Sri Lanka encounter difficulties and challenges in performing their duty effectively due to lower English Language proficiency. Several previous studies had been carried out related to the current study locally and internationally. According to the review of the previous studies, Clement & Murugavel (2018) point out that in countries like India, lack of English language skills affects the career prospects of many young graduates. They further state that though low-paying jobs may not require advanced level of English proficiency, many organizations expect the graduates to possess intermediate level of language proficiency to carry out their responsibilities. According to Clement & Murugavel (2018), both government and private sectors require English Language as a basic requirement in India. However, the government sectors do not require English Language skill for government posts. It affects their work performances. In other international study, Khadria (2001) says that globalization has an enormous impact on the labour market by generating the flow and mobility of skilled labour from one place to another, one country to another country, one part of the world to another part. As he stated the above, English Language proficiency is one of the skills that the employees should possess.

Similarly, in another study, carried out in Australia, Roshid & Chowdhury (2013) concluded that language indeed seems an essential capital and since English language is the global language, it has been the most important linguistic capital in today's world where sound skills in English work as a vehicle to sound opportunities and economic benefits in career, not only in Australia but also all over the world. Moreover, According to Erling (2014) in a report of British Council, he states that English Language skills are extremely rewarded in the labor market. It also emphasizes that skills in English have a constructive impact on economic growth. However, as far as Sri Lanka is concerned, according to the demand of labour market, private sectors only require English Language proficiency. On the other hand, government departments, boards and authorities do not strictly require English Language proficiency for most of the posts such as Management Assistant, Development Officer, Field Officer, Grama Nilandari (GS), Project Assistant and other government officer posts.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out with the aim of exploring the challenges and difficulties faced by the employees of Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai in performing their roles and responsibility due to lower English Language proficiency. This study was a survey research and quantitative method was used to collect primary data. The research setting was Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai and the total population of this study was 120 employees. Out of them, 40 employees were randomly selected as sample population for investigation. In this study, a questionnaire was used to collect the primary data. The questionnaire was used to gather information about participants' position, section of performing the position, service period and participants' first language and opinions regarding importance of English Language at government departments and challenges faced by the employees in performing duty due to lack of English Language proficiency. Later, the data

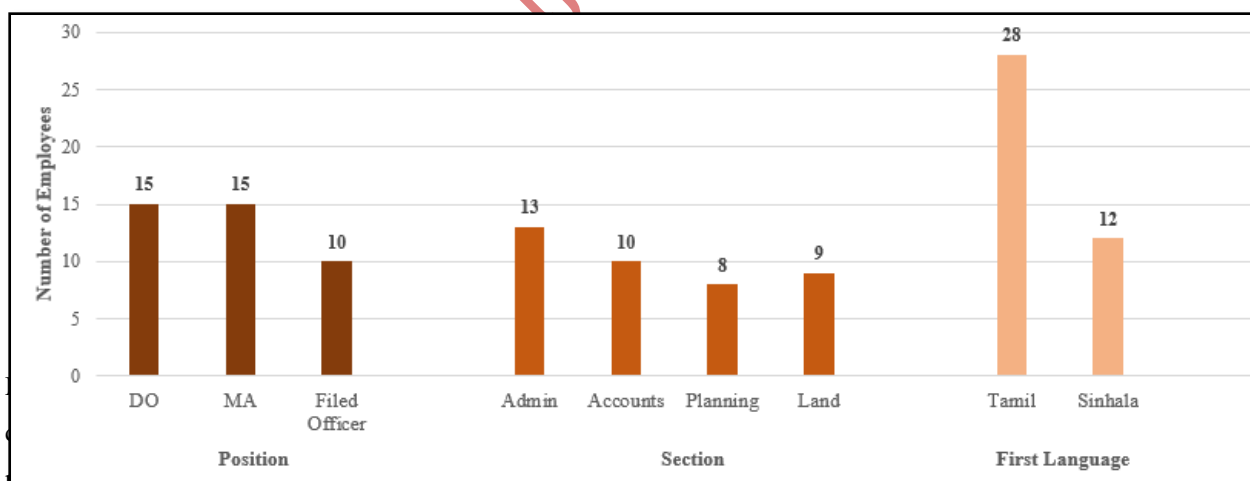
regarding participants' information and opinions were analyzed for findings based on the problem and hypotheses of this study.

#### 4. FINDINGS

This part presents the findings of the data collection. Accordingly, the primary data were collected using the questionnaire. Based on the findings of the data analysis, the findings regarding the participants' position show that 15 participants (37.5%) are Development Officers (DO), 15 participants (37.5%) are Management Assistants (MA) and 10 participants (25%) are Field Officers. Both DO and Field Officer posts are given for bachelor degree holders and MA post is given for G.C.E (A/L) qualified people. Likewise, the findings regarding participants' working section show that 13 participants (32.5%) have been deployed in Administration Section, 10 participants (25%) have been deployed in Accounts Section, 8 participants (20%) have been deployed in Planning Section and 9 participants (22.5%) have been deployed in Land Section. All these sections are important segments of the Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai where English Language is needed in several occasions such as drafting English letters and E-mails or responding to the letters and E-mails, reading and understanding English letters, documents, circulars and forms and filling in forms.

Further, the finding regarding the participants' first language show that the first language of the 28 participants (70%) was Tamil whereas the first language of the 12 participants (30%) was Sinhala. Most of the Tamil speaking employees can speak Sinhala and Sinhala speaking employees can speak Tamil although they are not fluent in written communication. However, both communities are poor in English orality and written communication. As a result, they struggle to complete tasks in English. The following graph shows the position, working section and the first language of the participants.

**Fig. 1 (Participants' position, section and the first language)**



roles and responsibility at work place. To which, 85% of the participants responded 'yes' whereas 15% of the participants responded 'no'. Likewise, the participants were asked whether English Language proficiency is important for employees at government and private sectors in Sri Lanka since most of the written communications are transmitted in English Language. To which, 77% of the participants agreed with the statement and 23% of the participants disagreed with the statement. Another statement was given as whether

most of the employees at government departments in Sri Lanka encounter numerous challenges in performing their duties due to lower English Language proficiency. To which, 83% of the participants agreed with the statement whereas 17% of the participants disagreed with the statement.

Further, another question was asked as whether the participants have sufficient English Language proficiency to manage your roles and responsibility in English effectively. To which, 67.5% of the participants responded 'yes' and 32.5% of the participants responded 'no'. Similarly the next question was asked whether the participants face any challenges in performing their roles and responsibilities due to lower English Language proficiency. To which, 62.5% of the participants responded 'yes' while 37.5% of the participants responded 'no'. A statement was given regarding English proficiency of the employees as whether English Language has been very important to read and understand English letters, documents, circulars and forms at government departments. To which, 92.5% of the participants agreed with the statement while 7.5% of the participants disagreed with it. And, the other question was asked whether the participants face difficulties and challenges in drafting English letters or E-mails. To which, 70% of the participants responded 'yes' whereas 30% of the participants responded 'no'. The last statement was given as whether the most of the government employees have very lower English Language proficiency. As a result, they rely on others to finish the works in English. To which, 65% of the participants agreed with the statement and 35% of the participants disagreed with it. The following graph shows the clear picture about the response to the questions and statements of the questionnaire.

**Table 1. Participants' responses to the questionnaire**

| No | Questions and statements in the questionnaire  | Number of participants who responded |    |       |          |
|----|--|--------------------------------------|----|-------|----------|
|    |  | Yes                                  | No | Agree | Disagree |
| 01 | Do you think that English Language is important to perform your roles and responsibility at work place?  | 34                                   | 06 |       |          |
| 02 | English Language proficiency is important for employees at government and private sectors in Sri Lanka since most of the written communications are transmitted in English Language. |                                      |    | 31    | 09       |
| 03 | Most of the employees at government departments in Sri Lanka encounter numerous challenges in performing their duties due to lower English Language proficiency.                     |                                      |    | 33    | 07       |
| 04 | Do you have sufficient English Language proficiency to manage your roles and responsibility in English effectively?  | 27                                   | 13 |       |          |

|    |   |    |    |    |    |
|----|---|----|----|----|----|
| 05 | Do you face any challenges in performing your roles and responsibilities due to lower English Language proficiency?                             | 25 | 15 |    |    |
| 06 | English Language has been very important to read and understand English letters, documents, circulars and forms at government departments.      |    |    | 37 | 03 |
| 07 | Do you face difficulties and challenges in drafting English letters or E-mails?   | 28 | 12 |    |    |
| 08 | Most of the government employees have very lower English Language proficiency. As a result, they rely on others to finish the works in English. |    |    | 26 | 14 |

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study was carried out with the aim of investigating the challenges faced by the employees of Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai in performing their duty due to lower English Language proficiency. There are several occasions when English is needed for employees to finish the work at departments. They are: reading and understanding letters, E-mails, forms, documents and drafting letters and E-mails and filling in forms. Therefore, in this study, 15 Development Officers, 15 Management Assistants and 10 Field Officers at Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai were selected as sample for data collection. They were from different sections such as Administration, Accounts, Land and Planning. According to the findings of the data collection, 28 Tamil and 12 Sinhala speaking employees had been included among the participants. Further the findings show that most of the employees (31) agree that English Language is important for employees at government departments and 33 employees agree that a large number of employees encounter challenges in performing their roles and responsibilities effectively due to lower English proficiency in certain occasions when English is needed. Likewise, most of the employees (27) do not have sufficient English Language proficiency. As a result, they rely on others to complete the tasks in English.

This problem can be overcome and English Language proficiency of the employees of Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai and other employees at government departments, boards and authorities in Sri Lanka when the following are implemented. They are as follows:

- Useful English training programmes and workshops should be conducted by the head of the Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai and other heads of the departments, boards and authorities in Sri Lanka with the aim of improving the employees' English Language proficiency.
- The head of the Divisional Secretariat, Sammanthurai should declare a day in a month, called 'Day for Speaking English' when all the employees should speak English. Therefore, their oral communication will be developed.



- English Language proficiency should be one of the mandatory requirements for any government posts in Sri Lanka because the need of English Language will be increased in future.

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