

Bridging the Gap: The Role of Remedial Instruction in Improving English Language Skills among University Students with Low Second Language Proficiency

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1. Introduction

In the globalized world of higher education, English language proficiency has become a critical factor for academic success. Students in higher education face significant challenges when instruction is delivered in a second language, such as English. These students must grasp complex concepts and expand their vocabulary, which can be particularly demanding. This burden often leads to demotivation, even among diligent students, and can negatively impact their academic performance and grades (Shamim & Rashid, 2019). Furthermore, university students who lack strong English language skills often face significant challenges in understanding course content, participating in discussions, completing assignments, and achieving academic excellence. The transition to university-level education can be particularly daunting for these students, as it intensifies existing language barriers and leads to a cycle of academic underperformance.

To address these challenges, remedial instruction has emerged as a vital strategy for improving English language skills among low-proficiency students. Remedial programs are designed to provide targeted support, enabling students to build the necessary language foundation to succeed in their academic endeavors. Students felt more at ease and motivated when participating in remedial classes than in ordinary classrooms (Ghaithi & Behforouz, 2023). By focusing on both linguistic and academic skills, remedial instruction not only helps students overcome language barriers but also boosts their confidence and motivation, leading to improved academic performance.

The significance of remedial instruction in higher education is undeniable. Research indicates that students who engage in remedial programs often experience marked improvements in language proficiency and academic performance (Aldaihani et al., 2020; Yuliandasari & Kusriandi, 2018; Armita, 2019). Remedial English programs are particularly effective in addressing the gap between students' existing language skills and the rigorous demands of university-level coursework. Remedial programs are strategically designed to support low-proficiency students, offering targeted instruction that helps them meet the linguistic challenges of higher education. By doing so, they ensure a more equitable academic environment, giving all students the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their initial proficiency levels.

In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the value of remedial instruction is well-documented. Research consistently shows that well-designed remedial programs can significantly enhance students' language abilities, which in turn boosts their academic performance and confidence. However, the effectiveness of these programs is influenced by several factors, including the curriculum design, program duration, and the specific needs of the students they serve.

Low-proficiency ESL learners face a unique set of challenges in higher education. Beyond the academic difficulties, these students often experience psychological stress and social isolation, which can further hinder their academic progress (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Therefore, the need for effective remedial instruction is a matter of academic support and promoting student well-being and integration into the university community.

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the Remedial English Programme conducted at

the Faculty of Management Studies and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka for students with low English language proficiency. The program runs for three months, with classes held three days a week, and English is taught for two hours each day. It is designed to enhance students' language skills through targeted instruction and practical language exercises. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing literature on remedial instruction and provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve the design and implementation of similar programs. In doing so, the research aims to bridge the gap between students' current language abilities and the academic demands of higher education, ultimately supporting their journey toward academic success.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a quasi-experimental research design to assess the impact of a Remedial English Program. Quasi-experimental designs are often used to evaluate the effects of interventions or treatments in situations where random assignment of participants is not feasible. Among the various types, the nonequivalent comparison groups design is one of the most fundamental. Unlike the classic experimental design, this approach does not involve random assignment of participants to groups. Instead, it typically utilizes pre-existing groups, making it a practical choice for educational settings where such groups are already formed (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Participants: The study involved a selection of university students identified as having low English language proficiency at the semester-end ESL paper: 31 students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and 24 students from the Faculty of Management Studies. These students were enrolled in a three-month Remedial English Programme designed to improve their language skills. The selection criteria included students who scored low marks on a diagnostic test administered before the commencement of the program.

Pre-test and Post-test Design: The research utilized a pre-test and post-test design to assess the effectiveness of the remedial instruction. Before the commencement of the program, all participants took a standardized pre-test to measure their initial English language proficiency levels. This test covered key language skills, including reading, writing, and grammar.

Remedial Instruction Program: Over the course of three months, participants attended remedial English classes, which were tailored to address their specific areas of weakness. The instructional approach was intensive and focused on interactive learning, practical language usage, and targeted exercises. The curriculum was designed based on diagnostic test results and included activities aimed at enhancing grammar, reading comprehension, and written communication skills.

Post-test: At the conclusion of the program, participants took a similar standardised test (post-test) as the pre-test. This post-test was administered to gauge the progress made by the students over the three-month period. The test results were then compared to the pre-test scores to determine the efficacy of the remedial instruction.

Data analysis: The pre-test and post-test scores were statistically analysed to assess the improvement in language proficiency. A paired t-test was employed to determine whether the changes in test scores were significant, indicating the effectiveness of the remedial instruction.

3. Results And Discussion

The Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of the remedial instruction program in improving English language skills among university students with low English language proficiency. It summarizes the results of pre-test and post-test evaluations across four

key areas: Total Score, Grammar, Reading, and Writing. The table includes mean values, mean differences, standard deviations, p-values, and significance levels for each measure.

Table 1. Overall and Skill-wise Analysis

Measure/Skill	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	p-Value	Significance
Total Score	20.72	45.69	24.97	9.90	< 0.0001	Highly Significant Improvement
Grammar	8.72	23.66	14.94	5.52	< 0.0001	Highly Significant Improvement
Reading	10.69	15.75	5.06	5.00	0.00000269	Significant Improvement
Writing	1.31	6.28	4.97	2.47	< 0.00000000001	Significant Improvement

As indicated in Table 1, the overall score shows a significant improvement from a pre-test mean of 20.72 to a post-test mean of 45.69, resulting in a mean difference of 24.97. With a standard deviation of 9.90, the p-value for this improvement is < 0.0001, indicating a Very Highly Significant improvement. This suggests that the remedial instruction has had a substantial effect on the students' overall English language proficiency.

In the grammar component, the pre-test mean was 8.72, which increased to 23.66 in the post-test, showing a mean difference of 14.94. The standard deviation here is 5.52, and the p-value is < 0.0001, which falls into the Very Highly Significant category. This indicates a strong and statistically significant improvement in students' grammatical skills, underscoring the effectiveness of remedial instruction in this area. For reading, the pre-test mean was 10.69, with a post-test mean of 15.75, resulting in a mean difference of 5.06. The standard deviation is 5.00, and the p-value is 0.00000269, categorized as Significant Improvement. This reflects a meaningful improvement in reading skills, though not as pronounced as in grammar or overall score. The writing scores improved from a pre-test mean of 1.31 to a post-test mean of 6.28, with a mean difference of 4.97. The standard deviation for writing is 2.47, and the p-value is < 0.00000000001, which is a Significant Improvement. This indicates a significant enhancement in students' writing abilities, similar to the improvements observed in overall and grammar scores.

4. Conclusion

The remedial instruction program led to a significant overall improvement in students' English language skills, as evidenced by the substantial mean differences and extremely low p-values across all measured areas. The most notable gain was in grammar, where the improvements were highly statistically significant, highlighting the program's strong effectiveness in the area. Although reading and writing skills showed substantial progress, the improvement was slightly less pronounced, indicating a potential need for additional focus. The findings confirm the program's effectiveness in enhancing English language proficiency. Similar studies by Zhai and Skerl (2001) and Sheu et al. (2007) in remedial English Instructions have shown comparable results. However, similar studies conducted in the Sri Lankan context were not found in the literature.

5. Keywords

ESL learners, interactive learning, language proficiency, remedial instruction

6. References

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