



Google Trends Analysis of Online Interest in English Language Learning in Sri Lanka (2011-2024)

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Abstract

Online search trends for English language learning may reveal evolving preferences and demands for language acquisition in the modern day. This study explored the online interest in English language learning among internet users in Sri Lanka from 2011 to 2024, utilizing Google Trends data to analyze search behaviors. Temporal and geographical variations in relative search volumes for selected search terms related to English language learning were examined. According to search trends, public interest in courses, classes, diplomas, and degrees in English has gradually increased over time, then dropped temporarily in the initial phase of the pandemic, only to rise again to a plateau between 2022 and 2024. Regional analysis highlighted disparities in interest levels across different provinces; interest in the term 'learn English' was most prominent in the Western Province; interest in English courses and diplomas was highest in Sabaragamuwa Province. In terms of seasonal variations, peak search volumes for most terms before the pandemic were in September and January, whereas after the pandemic, peak interest occurred in February and September. Concerning subject areas, a shift in interest towards English literature compared to English as a Second Language and Linguistics was seen. With regard to the English language proficiency tests, a clear drop in interest for IELTS occurred during the pandemic, but with the economic recession and the migration of professionals that followed, interest in the IELTS spiked in 2022 and 2023, only to decline again afterwards. This research contributes to the

understanding of how online resources and global events influence language learning trends, offering valuable insights for policymakers and educators.

Keywords: English language learning; online learning; google trends; education

Introduction

The growing interest in English language learning is a global phenomenon that is significantly influenced by the use of the internet and new technological advancements (Zheng, 2024). Proficiency in English opens opportunities in higher education, employment, and international communication (Akther, 2022). The online search trends related to English language learning would depict broader socioeconomic and cultural shifts (Jun et al., 2018), signifying changing preferences and demands linked to language learning in the digital age.

This study specifically explores the online interest in English Language learning among internet users in Sri Lanka from 2011 to 2014, utilizing Google Trends data to analyze search behaviors. Google Trends acts as a unique and valuable tool for understanding public interest on various facets by aggregating and normalizing search data across different time periods and regions (Mavragani et al., 2018). By systematically examining the popularity and regional interest in a variety of search terms related to English education, this study provides comprehensive insights about the trends in English language learning in Sri Lanka.

Methods

This study utilized Google Trends data to analyze the online interest in English language learning among internet users in Sri Lanka from 2011 to 2024. Google Trends is a public web facility that shows how often a particular search term is entered relative to the total search volume across various regions of the world (Mavragani et al., 2018). For this study, the researcher purposely selected search terms and topics that are relevant to English language learning in the Sri Lankan context. Monthly relative search volumes (RSVs) were extracted for the period from January 2011 to July 2024 to capture long-term trends. Google Trends data are normalized to the time and location of a query i.e., each data point is divided by the total searches of the geography and time range it represents to compare relative popularity. This is done to prevent places with the most search volumes from being always ranked highest. RSVs are presented on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 is the peak popularity for the term; a value of 50 means the term is half as popular, and a score of 0 means there was not enough data for the term. The year 2011

was chosen as the starting point as an improvement to the Google Trends data collection system had been applied since January 2011. As the COVID-19 pandemic would have changed the online activity among internet users, the average search volumes for 2011-2019 and 2020-2024 periods were compared.

Results

Firstly, five search terms related to English language learning were compared across the study period (2011-2024). Figure 1 shows how the search interest for each term has changed over time. 'Learn English' as a search term has been gradually declining over the years. Search interest in English courses, English classes, English degrees, and English diplomas has gradually increased over time, reaching a plateau between 2022 and 2024. Interest in English courses showed an initial peak in 2018, followed by a marked drop in 2020 and 2021 coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, and then rose again, peaking in February 2023. As shown in Table 1 there is a rising trend of interest in Apps for learning English, and quick and easy methods of learning English.

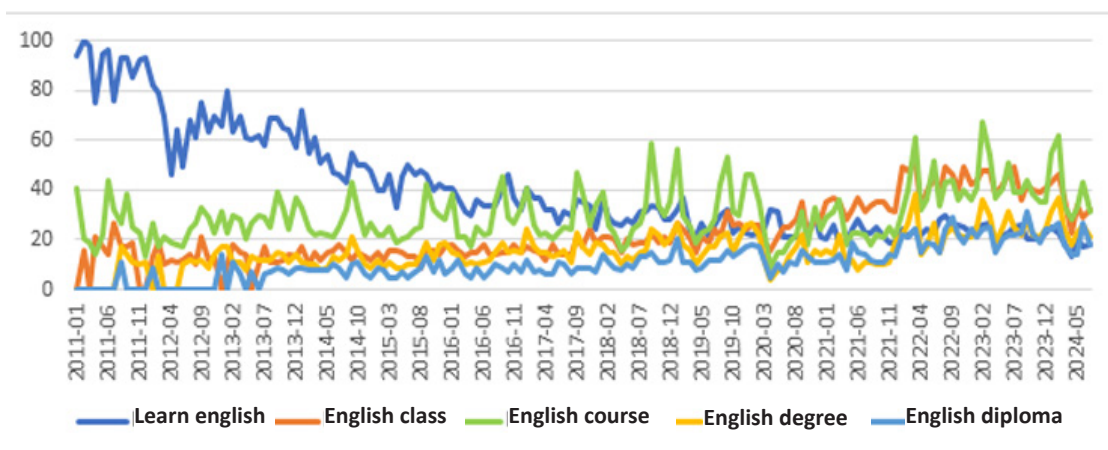


Figure 1. Trends in the search interest for terms related to English language learning, 2011-2024

Table 1. Search volumes, geographical distribution, and related search queries for search terms relating to English language learning

Note: Names of institutions are marked as ***

Search term	Average search volume		Most active provinces (2011-2024)	Top related search queries	
	2011-2019	2020-2024		Overall	Rising
Learn English	49.2	23	Western (100) Central (94) North Western (83)	(1) learn to English (2) how learn English (3) how to learn English (4) learn in English (5) spoken English	(1) learn English app (2) how to learn English fast (3) spoken English PDF (4) how to learn English easily (5) how to learn English at home
English class	15.6	36.1	Northern (100) Eastern (96) North Western (96)	(1) essay (2) English essay (3) English medium (4) spoken English class (5) English class online	(1) essay (2) English essay (3) English medium (4) online class (5) maths
English course	28.2	34	Sabaragamuwa (100) Uva (75) Southern (68)	(1) English course in Sri Lanka (2) British English course (3) English diploma (4) English course online (5) free English course	(1) *** college English course (2) *** English course (3) *** (4) *** courses (5) *** university English course
English degree	12.8	19.7	North Central (100) North Western (95) Uva (93)	(1) degree in English (2) English degree in Sri Lanka (3) external degree (4) English to Sinhala (5) English courses	(1) degree in English (2) external degree (3) English courses (4) English degree courses (5) *** university
English diploma	7.2	17.4	Sabaragamuwa (100) North Central (90) North Western (75)	(1) diploma in English (2) English diploma courses (3) diploma courses (4) English courses (5) *** university	(1) English diploma courses (2) diploma courses (3) diploma courses in Sri Lanka (4) English courses in Sri Lanka (5) *** English diploma

Figure 2. illustrates the proportional interest within each Province towards each of the five search terms. In four provinces, 'English course' was the most searched term, whereas in Northern and Eastern Provinces, 'English class' was the preferred search term.

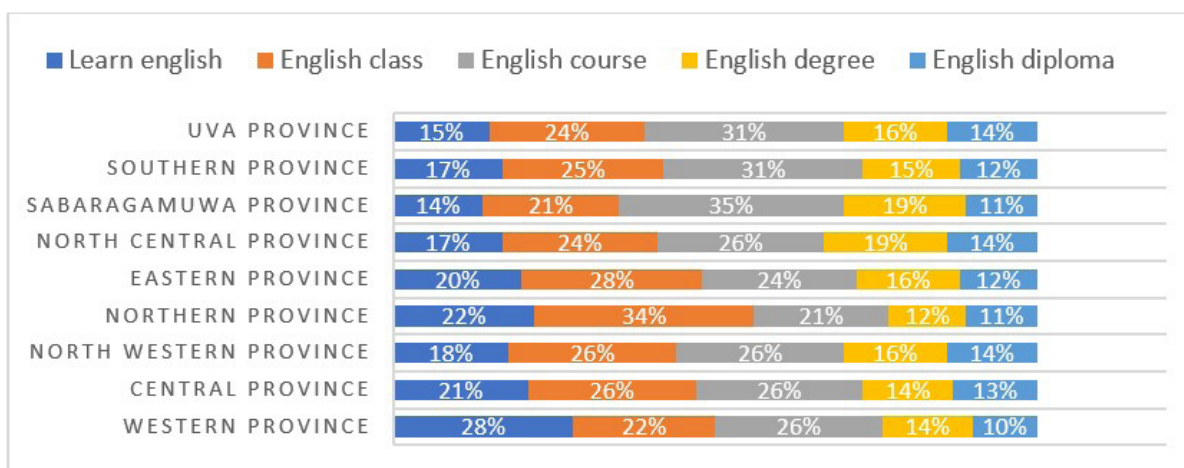


Figure 2. Proportional interest within different provinces in Sri Lanka towards specific search terms

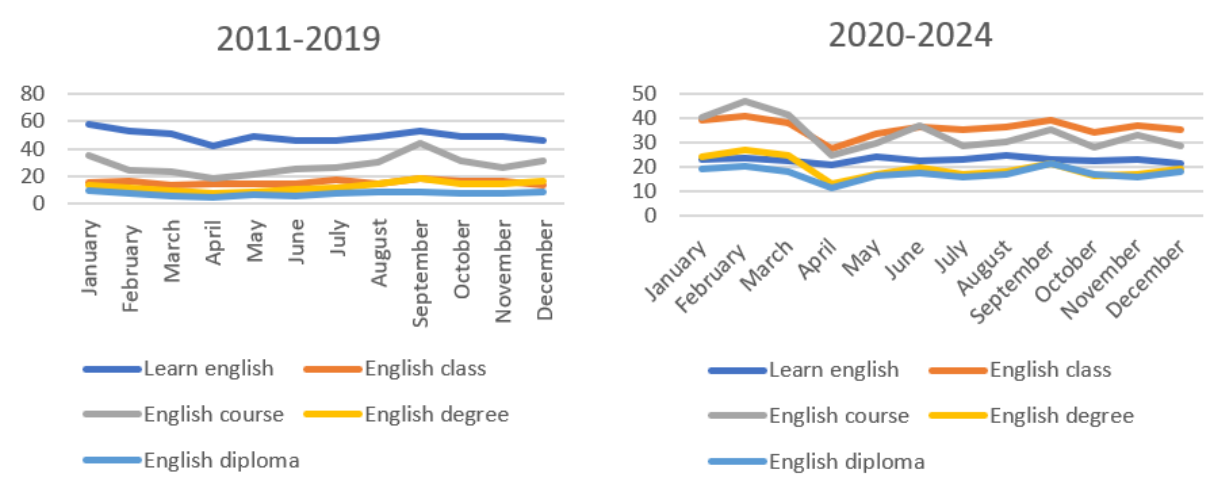


Figure 3. Seasonal variation in search interest for terms related to English language in two periods, (A) 2011-2019 (B) 2020-2024

As depicted in Figure 3, seasonal variations in search interest for different terms can be observed. Before the pandemic, peak search volumes for most terms were seen in September and January. After the pandemic, peak search interest is seen in February and September.

In addition to the 'search terms' used above, three 'search topics' representing three areas of study related to English language learning, namely, 'English literature', 'English as a Second or Foreign Language' and 'Linguistics', were compared. As shown in Figure 4, interest shown towards English literature has grown steeply after 2019. Overall, there has been a gradual decline in the interest shown towards English as a second or foreign language, but a minor

resurgence can be seen after 2022. Online interest in Linguistics has remained mostly below that of the other two topics throughout the period, with its peak seen in August 2022.

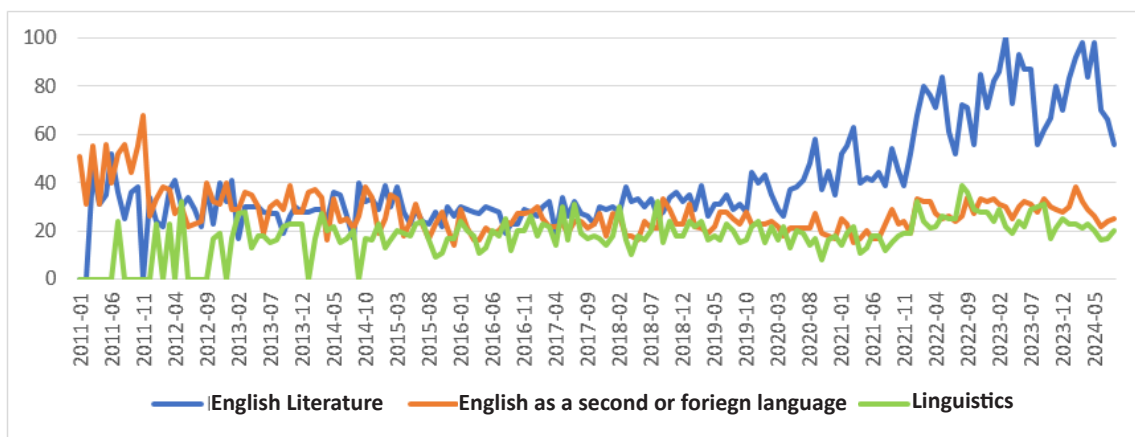


Figure 4. Trends in the search interest for Topics related to English language education, 2011-2024

According to the top related search queries, those who searched about English literature have frequently searched for past papers, the syllabus and textbooks related to English literature. Those searching about English as a second or foreign language have also searched for related terms such as ESL, ESOL, TESL, teaching English, learning English, ESL activities and games. Those who searched regarding linguistics have looked up the meaning of linguistics, applied linguistics, and MA in linguistics.

To identify trends in online search interest towards internationally recognized English language tests, 'International English Language Testing Systems'

(IELTS) and 'Test of English as a Foreign Language' (TOEFL) were compared. As shown in Figure 5, IELTS has attracted much more attention than TOEFL throughout the period. From 2011 to 2015, interest in IELTS has slowly dropped but then increased gradually until 2019. Coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the search interest has dropped drastically in 2020. Following this, the interest has risen again, reaching a peak in March 2023. After that, the interest has fallen again. The provinces with the strongest interests in IELTS and TOEFL were the Northern and Central Provinces, respectively.

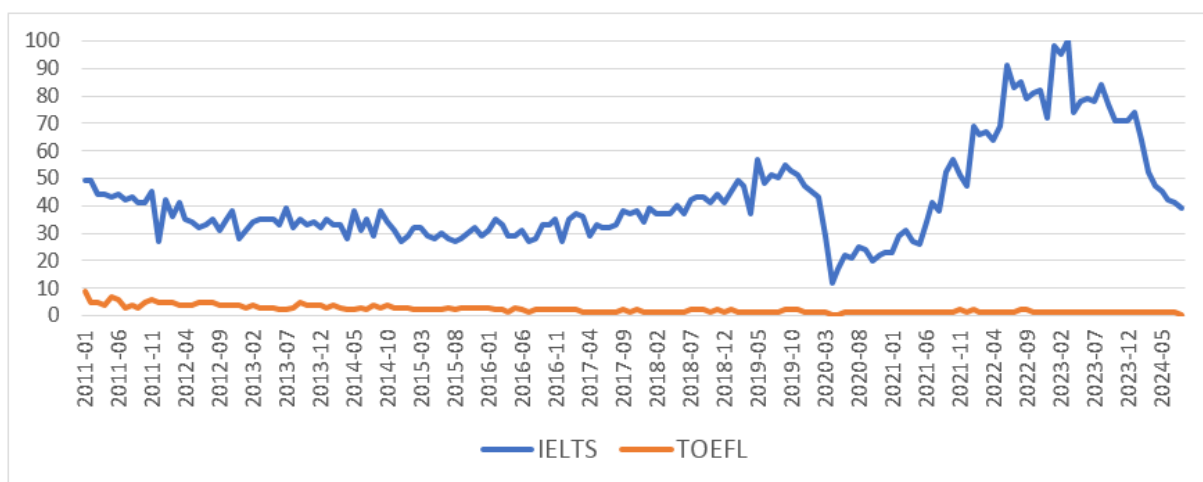


Figure 5. Online search interest variation in IELTS and TOEFL, 2011 - 2024

Discussion

The analysis of Google Trends data from 2011 to 2024 reveals important insights into the online interest in English language learning among internet users in Sri Lanka. The trends indicate fluctuating levels of interest in different aspects of English education with notable peaks and troughs corresponding to global and local events.

One of the key findings is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the interest in learning English. The data depicts a marked increase in searches related to English courses and classes during and after the lockdown periods, suggesting a shift towards online learning (Haththotuwa & Rupasinghe, 2021; Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). This is further evidenced by the observation that 'English class online' and 'English course online' were among the top related search queries. Moreover, 'Learn English app' being the top rising search query related to the 'Learn English' query signifies a current trend towards the uptake of mobile apps for learning English (Malintha & Gunawardane, 2024).

The search term 'Learn English' appears to have become less popular over the years. This may reflect a shift towards alternative terms when searching for information regarding English language learning, evidenced by the concurrent increase in search volumes for other terms such as 'English courses' 'classes' 'diplomas' and 'degrees'.

Moreover, regional analysis highlights disparities in interest levels across different provinces: 'Learn English' was searched the most by people in the Western Province, likely due to the higher concentration of educational institutions. One could argue that variations in search preferences may reflect cultural and educational differences across provinces. For instance, in Northern and Eastern Provinces, where Tamil populations predominate, 'English class' was preferred over 'English course,' whereas in most other provinces 'English course' was the preferred search term. Geographical disparities are unlikely to

reflect variations in internet accessibility as the RSVs have been normalized to the location.

Additionally, the seasonal patterns observed in the data reflect the influence of academic calendars and examination periods. The spikes in search interest during these times suggest that students are using online resources to supplement their studies and prepare for examinations. The changes in the academic calendars that followed the pandemic would have contributed to the change in seasonal patterns observed after the pandemic.

Furthermore, with regard to English language proficiency tests, a clear drop in search interest for IELTS occurred in the initial part of the pandemic, possibly related to the reduced accessibility and availability of IELTS and restricted opportunities for migration that resulted during the pandemic era (Clark et al., 2020). However, after the pandemic, and with the economic recession, the migration rate of professionals for overseas employment rose drastically (Abeysooriya et al., 2023). This rise is reflected in the spike of interest in the IELTS observed in 2022 and 2023.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study emphasize the evolving nature of language learning in the digital age. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have had a significant impact on English language learning trends in Sri Lanka. The increasing reliance on online resources and the varying regional interest levels call for targeted strategies to improve internet access and digital literacy across the country. Policymakers and educational institutions must collaborate to bridge the digital divide and create inclusive learning environments that cater to the needs of all learners. By understanding these dynamics, stakeholders can better support the language learning needs of Sri Lanka's diverse population.

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