

ATTITUDE AS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

English is considered as the Second language of Sri Lanka and in present competency in English is highly required in the country. However, even though the Sri Lankan students have been learning English as a Second Language for many years, majority of their competency levels in English are not satisfactory. Further, as to many researchers, attitudes play a vital role in mastering a second language. Hence, the prime objectives of this study was to explore Sri Lankan students' attitudes towards learning English as a Second Language. Moreover, the study also, intended to find out whether students' attitudes are either instrumentally or integratively oriented. The study was conducted in Uva Wellassa University, Badulla, Sri Lanka with the participation of randomly selected 69 undergraduates. The data was collected mainly by a questionnaire .The study revealed that majority of students possess positive attitudes towards learning English as a Second Language and it also ascertained that most of the undergraduates have instrumentally oriented attitudes.

KEYWORDS: *Competency, English as a Second Language, attitudes, instrumentally oriented, integratively oriented*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the key of communication and knowing a language enables anybody to develop wonderful relationships in the society. Mother tongue or first language (L1) is acquired by human beings from the beginning of the childhood and this is called one's native language. However, today people learn many other languages apart from their L1 for an array of reasons. For instance, Sri Lankans learn English as their second language (L2) and as the link language English plays a vital role almost in all the fields of the country. As a result, Sri Lankan government emphasizes the need of learning English, and time to time the importance of English as a school subject is elevated when educational reformations are done. Further, in present, all the school children in Sri Lanka learn English as their L2 initiating from grade three and they learn English as a compulsory school subject for more than ten years. Moreover, English as a second language (ESL) takes a prime place even in the tertiary education system including universities in Sri Lanka since it is needed to climb up the ladder of knowledge and skills that will enable young students to secure their future career in the competitive world of work.

Conversely, most of the L2 researchers in Sri Lanka have found out that even though students learn ESL for many years most of their competency levels in English language is not in a satisfactory level especially in the skill of speaking. Due to this reason majority of young and educated people fail to obtain a lucrative employments, as current job market highly demands for sound knowledge of English. This situation is common to Sri Lankan graduates and specially the private sector, which is considered as the engine of growth actively rejects qualified graduates with lack of English language skills and favors English speaking but sometimes less qualified students over those who are from national university system (Kelegama, 2007). Hence, this situation clearly elucidates the picture of demand for English

language skills in present Sri Lanka, while revealing the competency level of students who learn ESL for number of years.

1.1 Process of L2 learning

L2 learning or Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has become a significant topic in the research field of L2. In the words of Troike (2005), SLA refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their First Language (L1) as young children, and to the process of learning that language. This additional language is called a second language (L2), even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired. It is also commonly called a target language (TL), which refers to any language that is the aim or goal of learning. Further as to many researchers even though acquiring the mother tongue by an infant is inevitable, there is no such inevitability in learning an L2 and it begins only after a large completion of child's maturation process and many factors affect this process (Bot, et al, 2005). Thus, it is clear that L2 learning is a complex process and giving parallel views Ellis (1994) mentions that (SLA) is an enormously complex phenomenon that is not yet clearly defined. He argues that, "most theories of L2 acquisition are neither comprehensive nor truly modular. Rather they tackle a particular area or adopt a particular perspective (after derived from a parent discipline: cognitive psychology, social psychology, socio linguistics, neuro linguistics and education) without reference to other areas or perspective." Further, field of L2 is a vast area and most of its elements are complicated but interesting to research. In fact, the area of SLA is a vital topic to research since it deals with L2 learners and teachers with different backgrounds and characteristics together with the diverse factors which affect L2 learning process. Candlin and Mercer (2007) elucidate this, stating, "Language learning is clearly not just about processes. It involves learners. So, asking questions about who these learners are and what learner

characteristics and factors affect language learning, and in which ways, is a central question for teachers of language.”

1.2 Factors that affect L2 Learning

L2 learning process involves learners who come from an array of socio cultural backgrounds and these learners possess different characteristics and competency levels. Gardner (1985), proposes that “second Language Learning is a social psychological phenomenon, and it is important to consider carefully the conditions under which it takes place.” Further, Candlin and Mercer (2007), elucidate this, stating, “Language learning is clearly not just about processes. It involves learners. So, asking questions about who these learners are and what learner characteristics and factors affect language learning, and in which ways, is a central question for teachers of language.” Further L2 learner is a social being which is a result of the society that he is coming from. Moreover, introducing the L2 learner as a social being, Mitchell and Myles (2001), state, “the two perspectives on the learner which we have highlighted so far have concentrated first, on universal characteristics but is also possible to view the L2 learner as essentially a social being, and such an interest will lead to concern with learner’s relationship with the social context, and the structuring of the learning opportunities which it makes available. The learning process itself may be viewed as essentially social and, inextricably entangled in L2 use and L2 interaction.”

Talking more about social factors in L2 learning Ellis (1994), proposes that social factors help to shape learners’ attitudes which, in turn, influence learning outcomes. In addition, he says that these factors determine the learning opportunities which individual learners experience. Providing an example, Ellis argues that learner’s socio-economic class and ethnic back ground may affect the nature and the extent of the input to which they are exposed.

In the words of Sears (1998) factors that affect L2 learning can be divided broadly in to three categories. First category is the factors which are centered in the learners themselves namely personality, aptitude, ability and motivation. Second factors are those external to the learner and they include quantity and nature of exposure to the target language. Sears introduces third category as factors that are related to optimum age for learning an L2 and the length of time it takes to reach competence. However, different researchers have different views on the importance that these factors have on L2 learning. Moreover, Ellis (1994) proposes that social factors also have an indirect impact on L2 learning and they are likely to be mediated by the attitudes that learners hold. Further many researchers of this field have found out attitudes, motivation, age, cognitive ability, as common factors that affect L2 learning. Hence, it is evident that process of L2 learning is a complex phenomena and L2 learning is influenced by number of internal and external factors as explained above.

1.3 L2 Learning and attitudes towards learning an L2

It is a common belief that positive attitudes lead for positive outcomes in any work of life. This is a common truth for language learners and attitudes play a prime role in learning an L2. Similarly, Bot et al (2005) say that teachers, learners and researchers will believe that a high motivation and positive attitude towards a second language and its community help second-language learning. Further, researchers have concluded that student's attitude is an integral part of learning and that it should, therefore, become an essential component of second language learning pedagogy. Baker and Jones (1998) see attitude as both predisposing factor and also an outcome. In addition, they suggest that attitudes influence behavior. Providing an example for this, they say if someone has a positive attitude for learning an L2, they may well succeed in becoming proficient in that language and also at the end of

language learning, a desired outcome may be there for students who have positive attitudes. Thus attitudes are both an ingredient in language learning and also an important result.

Giving another view to attitudes, Ellis (1986) refers to 'attitudes' as sets of beliefs possessed by learners about factors such as the target language culture and the learners' own culture. Moreover Ellis (1986) suggests that Learners manifest different attitudes towards,

- i. The target language
- ii. Target language speakers
- iii. Target language culture
- iv. The social value of learning the L2
- v. Particular uses of the target language
- vi. Themselves as members of their own culture

Moreover, he goes on mentioning that learners' attitudes influence their level of L2 proficiency and hence learners with positive attitudes, who experience success, will have these attitudes reinforced while learners' negative attitudes may be strengthened by lack of success. Cames (2002) discusses relationship between attitudes and L2 learning as follows.

“What is important is the general acceptance which comes of the different studies of the role of attitudes in language learning and the proficiency level reached. Learners who have positive attitudes learn more, and also learners who learn well acquire positive attitudes. Given that there is a casual relationship between attitudes and learning outcomes.”

According to Baker and Jones (1988), attitudes can be discussed under five main characteristics namely,

- i. Attitudes are cognitive (i.e. are capable of being thought about) and affective (i.e. have feelings and emotions attached to them).
- ii. Attitudes are dimensional rather than bipolar – they vary in degree of favorability/unfavorability.
- iii. Attitudes predispose a person to act in a certain way, but the relationship between attitudes is not a strong one.
- iv. Attitudes are learnt, not inherited or genetically endowed.
- v. Attitudes tend to persist but they can be modified by experience.

Accordingly, it can be clearly noted that a learner's attitudes have an undeniable and significant importance in learning an L2.

1.4 Instrumentally and Integrative oriented attitudes

In the field of L2 learning, attitudes can be categorized in to two types namely instrumentally oriented attitudes and integrative oriented attitudes. Further, researchers' present different viewpoints on these attitudes and both type of these attitudes are important in L2 learning.

1.4.1 Instrumentally oriented Attitudes

Learners learn a second language with many purposes and with different attitudes. Some L2 learners may learn a second language for useful, utilitarian purposes. Further, these type of learners are governed by instrumentally oriented attitudes. Accordingly, these learners may want to acquire a second language to find a job, further their career prospects, pass exams, help fulfill the demands of a job, or assist their children in a bilingual education program. (Baker and Jones, 1988).

Besides, instrumentally oriented attitudes are characterized by desire to gain social recognition or economic advantages through knowledge of a foreign language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, cited in Baker 1992). Examples of these items from Gardner's (1985, cited in Baker, 1992) Attitude Motivational Test Battery (AMTB) considering L2 French are as follows:

“Studying French can be important to me because I think it will someday be useful in getting a good job.”

“Studying French can be important for me because it will make me a more knowledgeable person.”

Hence, instrumentally oriented attitudes towards learning an L2 are important to achieve learners' personal goals especially in his own context.

1.4.2 Integrative oriented attitudes

There is another category of attitudes towards learning an L2 introduced as integrative oriented attitudes. Gardner (2010), introduces integrative attitudes as mostly social and interpersonal orientated attitudes. Further, he says these attitudes have conceptual links with the need for affiliation and it has been defined as desire to be like representative members of the other language community. As to the AMTB one integrative test items is,

“Studying French can be important for me because it will allow me to meet and converse with more and varied people.”

Moreover, this group concerns a wish to identify with, or join another language group. Thus, learners may want to identify with a different language community, or join in with a second language group's cultural activities, or form new friendships. Further, the more a student

admires the second language people and its culture wants to read its literature, visit a particular area on holiday or find employment that requires a second language. This is termed an integrative language attitude.

In addition, according to Gardner's (2010) international AMTB, integrative items are as follows,

“Studying English is important because it will allow me to be at ease with people who speak English.”

“Studying English is important because I will be able to interact more easily with speakers of English.”

1.5 Influence of integrative and instrumentally oriented attitudes towards L2 Learning

Many researchers of second language field have ascertained diverse findings on these two groups of attitudes.

In fact, many researchers have noted that learners who are with integrative attitudes gain the success and proficiency in their second language. For example, Gardner and Lambert (1959 cited in Baker 1992) as to the findings of their study, conclude that the integrative oriented students are generally more successful in acquiring French than those who are instrumentally oriented. Similarly, Gordon (1980, cited in Baker and Jones, 1998) suggests that people with integrative attitudes tended to have more favorable attitudes to second language learning than those with instrumental attitudes. Presenting the same view Baker and Jones (1998) mention that integrative attitudes have a greater likelihood of aiding proficiency in the second language. On the contrary, they again argue that there can be occasions when instrumental

attitudes are more powerful than integrative attitudes in fostering language learning. For instance, they mention that in India, it has been found that school students tend to give instrumental rather than integrative reasons for learning English as it has important value in education, employment and entrepreneurship. Therefore, instrumental attitudes are seemingly dominant in the desire to learn English. Thus, it is evident that according to the contexts both integrative and instrumental attitudes are important in L2 learning.

Therefore, in fact, both instrumentally and integrative oriented attitudes can be named as a major factor that influences L2 learning of a student.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In Sri Lanka English is considered as the second language and similarly English has obtained its place as the link language of the country. As a result, competency of English Language is required almost for all the sectors of the country. Specially, English has become the key to explore new knowledge and consequently most of the higher education centers including Sri Lankan universities have now introduced English as the medium of instructions. Hence, many undergraduates have to learn English to achieve their goals even though they have different competency levels in English. Accordingly, the major objectives of the study were to ascertain

- whether Sri Lankan undergraduates have positive attitudes towards learning English as a second Language (ESL)
- whether undergraduates' attitudes towards learning ESL are either instrumentally or integrative oriented

3. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, sixty nine first year undergraduates representing eleven degree programs from Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka were selected as the research sample using simple random sampling method. Uva Wellassa University is an entrepreneurial university which conducts all its degree programs in the sole medium of instructions in English. Further, it is a university where students from diverse socio cultural backgrounds representing all the districts of the country get together and study for their respective degrees.

The primary data was collected from the informants mainly by a semi structured questionnaire adopted from Gardner's (2010) Attitude Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) which assesses attitudes and motivational variables in L2 learning. Further, the questionnaire included a five point Likert scale to measure students' attitudes towards learning ESL. Moreover, semi structured interviews and classroom observations were employed to collect primary data. In addition, secondary data for the study was collected using books, research articles, websites etc.

Moreover, mainly, descriptive methods namely graphical representations including graphs, charts and tables were used for the data analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the results of the study, interestingly, almost all the informants of the research sample processed positive attitudes towards learning ESL in the university. For instance, majority of them strongly agreed with the statements such as, "Learning English is very much useful", "Learning English is enjoyable", and "Medium of instruction in university should be English". Hence, this gives a positive picture of their attitudes towards learning ESL as undergraduates.

Moreover, it was discovered that students learn English at the university for an array of reasons as following graph depicts,

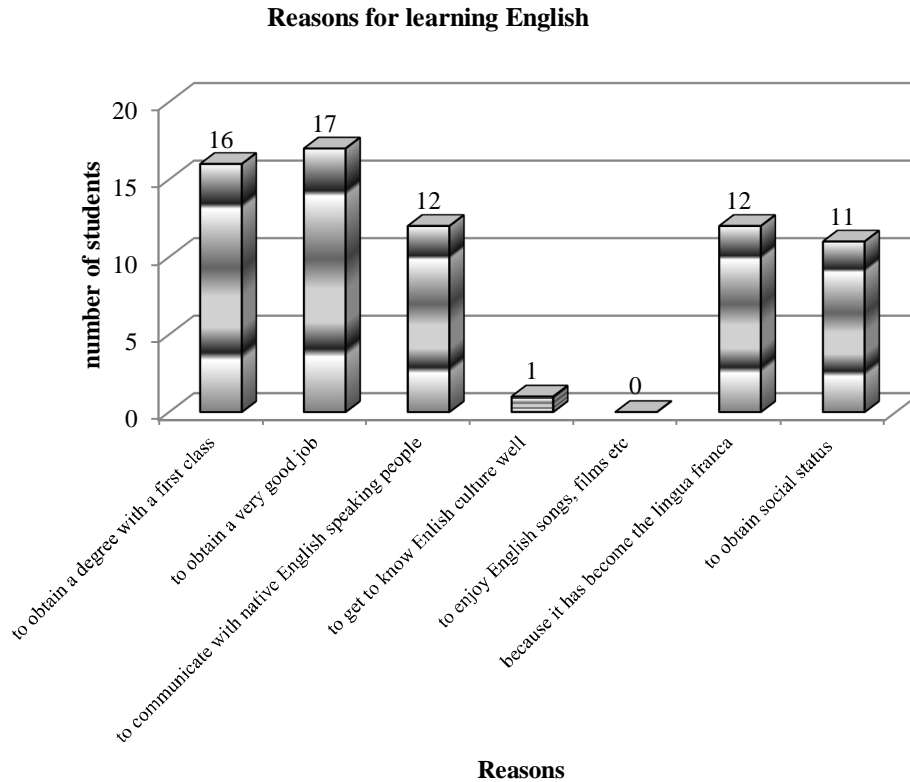


Figure 1 - Reasons for learning English

Source: Field Survey 2011

According to the above graph, students learn English for many reasons. Among them their prime objective is to obtain a very good job with the knowledge of English and 17 (24.6%) students carried this opinion. Nobody wanted to learn English to enjoy English films or songs and only one student wanted to learn English with the aim of knowing the English culture well. Further, 16 (23.2%) students learn English with the purpose of obtaining a degree with a first class while 12 (17.4%) pupils learn it since it is the lingua franca. Similarly, another

12(17.4%) students learn English to communicate with English speaking people and 11 (16.2%) students had the intention of gaining social status through English skills.

Thus, considering the views of the second language researchers on instrumentally and integrative oriented attitudes, obtaining a degree with first class, obtaining a very good job, and gaining the social status and learning English as it is the lingua franca can be considered as instrumentally oriented attitudes. On the other hand, communicating with native English speaking people, getting to know the English culture, enjoying English films can be categorized as integrative oriented attitudes. Accordingly, students' instrumentally and integrative oriented attitudes are clearly demonstrated in the following graph.

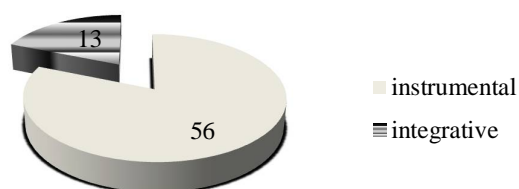


Figure 2- Types of attitudes

Source: Field Survey 2011

In accordance with the above graph, it is apparent that majority of students had the instrumentally oriented attitudes towards learning English and this was 56 students (81.2%). Conversely, 13 students were with integrative oriented attitudes (18.8%). Hence, it expresses that Sri Lankan students are motivated to learn English with the aim of fulfilling

their personal achievements rather than the desire of getting to know the culture of the target language.

Further, most of the students didn't have a clear opinion regarding English culture and its speakers and most of them were not interested in learning about the native English culture. This may be because that Sri Lankan students want to be good second language users in their same society where English is considered as the international language rather than being members of an English speaking foreign country. Presenting a parallel view, Gas and Selinker (2001,) mention that there may be different motivations and attitudes in different parts of the world and in fact they differ from culture to culture. Further, he mentions that local conditions play significant roles in motivation and attitudes for language learning. Elaborating more on this situation Littlewood (1998) says, "There is another type of learning situation in which attitudes to another community may be less decisive in influencing motivation and proficiency. This is when a second language is learnt primarily not for the sake of contact with the native speaking community, but for communication with others who have learnt it as a second language. English has increasingly taken on this function as an 'international' language in recent decades, serving as a lingua franca either within a multilingual country (such as India) or between people from different countries who do not speak each others' native language. When English is learnt primarily for this international function, we would not expect the learner's attitudes towards native-speaking English communities to exert such an important influence."

Thus, considering the results of the study, it is apparent that Sri Lankan students possess highly positive attitudes towards learning English as a second language and their attitudes are mainly instrumentally oriented to achieve their self development through the target language.

5. SUGGESTIONS

Even though the study revealed that majority of students have positive attitudes towards learning ESL, the following suggestions will assist to develop their attitudes more in an effective way.

Providing students an awareness of the English culture and native speakers even to some extent will assist them to get an understanding target language's culture. Further, as to many researchers such as Gardner have proved that positive attitudes towards the target culture and speakers facilitate language learners. Besides, L2 scholars including Valdes (1986), discuss that L2 learning is not just learning another language but also learning of another culture. Therefore, it will be important to give students awareness on the English culture by practicing various ways.

This can be done by practical events such as giving them opportunities to watch interesting English movies that express their culture, listening to English songs etc. Further, after engaging in these kinds of activities the class can discuss regarding them paying attention to the English culture with the help of teacher.

Moreover, interesting short stories and poems that reflect English culture can be discussed with the students, so that they may see the beauty of that language and culture while learning their L2. As a result they may develop positive attitudes towards the English culture

In addition, giving exposure to communicate with native speakers will create an interest in the learners' mind to learn the target language. For example, to make this task done the authorities can invite native English teachers for some English sessions in the schools or universities

However, before exposing the students to the target culture

At once, first the students should learn the language for a considerable period in related to Sri Lankan context with their society related lessons . For instance, teachers can take example sentences that are familiar to students and if the texts books can be designed with regard to Sri Lankan society students might understand the language easily .

Further, to promote students' attitudes more, it is better to have a rewarding learning system for students and it is advisable to conduct activity based student centered language classes rather than using traditional methods of teaching in order to motivate them and to create positive attitudes in them

Similarly developing teaching and learning materials to improve each and every English language skill namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking in order to develop students every aspect of target language will be beneficial for students.

To conclude, by practicing the above suggestions Sri Lankan students attitudes towards learning English as a second language can be developed more positively while providing them an understanding about the target culture.

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