



ESL LEARNERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH: A STUDY BASED ON TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES IN THE SELECTED SCHOOLS IN THE TRINCOMALEE DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Learners' attitude has been a significant factor in language learning and acquisition. The ESL/ EFL learners' negative attitude towards learning English seems a primary barrier in ESL/EFL learning. This study aimed at investigating students' attitude towards learning English based on 20 selected schools in the Trincomalee District, Sri Lanka. This study was a descriptive survey and a qualitative approach was applied for both data collection and data presentation. In this study, 50 English language teachers from 20 selected schools in the research area were chosen as sample population through simple random sampling technique. The primary data were collected using a focus interview. According to the opinion survey through physical and telephone conversation, the major findings show that in general, majority of the students show negative attitude towards learning English. Among them, however, most female students show much interest in learning English and their performance and results production in English seems higher than male students. Moreover, urban school students' interest in learning English and performance seem to be higher than rural school students. The highlighted factors were due to lack of parental attention, insufficient basic knowledge in English, inadequate learning facilities, lack of motivation and poverty. Further, the highlighted major factors that contribute to students' negative attitude in learning English were: insufficient basic knowledge in English, lack of motivation, lack of parental attention for English subject, difficulties in understanding textbooks, over-crowded classrooms & use of traditional teaching/learning equipment and lacks in school ESL curriculum. Students' interest in learning English in both rural and urban schools can be drawn when the followings are implemented; distributing human and physical resources equally to all schools; establishing separate equipped language unit in each school; inclusion of new revise in the curriculum that at least a pass in GCE (O/L) English subject is mandatory to study GCE (A/L) and pass in GCE (A/L) General English is mandatory for university enrolment.

Keywords: Attitude, English as a Second Language, Interest, Learning English



1. Introduction

A large number of people speak and learn English as a first language (L1), second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) in most of the countries since it has been the global language. According to Crystal (2006), 1.5 billion people speak English around the world. As Sri Lanka is concerned, English language is spoken as a second language. English is spoken by approximately 23.8% of the population in Sri Lanka, and widely used for official and commercial purposes (Ruiz-Garido et al, 2010). According to school curriculum in government schools in Sri Lanka, English language is taught as one of the main subjects from grade 3 to 13. According to open source, Wikipedia, English is taught as a compulsory second language in local schools from grade one to thirteen, and Sri Lanka pays close attention on learning English both as children and adults (Source: Wikipedia, 2021). However, students' ultimate attainment and fluency in English have been beyond the expectation. Wijeskera (2011/2012) asserts that English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka has not been able to achieve its intended objectives.

Students' English language skills and performance vary from province to province, and district to district in Sri Lanka. Various factors may contribute to this variation in skills and performance. In particular, as far as the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka is concerned, there are three districts, namely: Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara. There is a significant distinction in students' English language performance and achievements at examinations in government schools in the Trincomalee district when it is compared to the other districts in the Eastern Province. According to GCE (O/L) – 2020 (English Subject) Results Report of Eastern Province, In the Ampara district, Akkaraipattu Education Zone – 80.63% and Kalmunai Education Zone – 77.11%. In the Batticaloa district, Batticaloa Central Zone – 70.59% and Batticaloa Education Zone – 71.08%. In the Trincomalee district, Trincomalee North Education Zone – 37.98% and Kinniya Education Zone – 42.47%. Thus, the above findings are obvious that the Trincomalee district is the lowest performing district in the Eastern Province. English language teaching (ELT) has been beyond the expected outcome and it can be obviously said according to the findings of previous studies that ELT is a failure in the government schools in Sri Lanka. Most of the students in schools fail to pick up the skills in English, and teaching English in school context seems very challenging for majority of the English language teachers.

Moreover, a very less priority is given to learn English unlike other subjects. There are various factors influence students ESL learning and performance. Students' negative attitude is likely that affect students' English language learning success. Most of the students give less attention and importance to English subject. A recent survey among the Rectors of private tuition centres in the Trincomalee district shows that a very few number of students go for English private classes whereas many number of students go for private classes to other subjects. Moreover, students' attention in English classes seems unsatisfactory. In particular, parental attention for developing students' skills in English has been inadequate. This is likely to be another factor for students' negative attitude towards learning English. Therefore, this study explores students' attitude towards learning English in the selected schools in the Trincomalee district, Sri Lanka.



1.1 Objectives of the study

The following objectives are addressed to investigate the problem of this study.

- To explore whether many number of students in the selected schools in the Trincomalee District express negative attitude towards learning English
- To investigate the factors that influence students' attitude towards learning English
- To identify the male and female students' attitude of the selected rural and urban schools in learning English

1.2 Research questions

The following questions are formulated according to the identified problem of this study

- Do majority of the students in the Trincomalee District express their negative attitude towards learning English?
- Why do many number of students fail to reach the expected learning outcomes and English language skills?
- Are female students optimistic than male students in learning English?

2. Literature Review

As far as second and foreign language acquisition and learning are concerned, learners' attitude play a vital role for second and foreign language learning success. There are several local and global research studies which were previously conducted on learners' attitude towards learning second/foreign language – English. According to the review of the previous studies, Bloom, (1995) says with regard to learners' attitude in learning that attitude has been regarded as a significant factor of academic success. Attitude is a cognitive behavior. Despite this, many number of ESL/EFL learners show negative attitude towards learning their second/foreign language. Learners' interest is pivotal in language learning.

In this sense, Rahimi & Hassani (2012) investigated the effectiveness of using learning materials in shaping in learners' attitude towards learning English. The findings of this study reveal that it is evident that students often develop negative attitudes towards learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) due to the lack of stimulating and authentic learning material and tasks. According to the above findings, it is obvious that use of innovative and interesting learning equipment can develop learners' interest in learning English. As we concern the government school setup in Sri Lanka, use of traditional teaching/learning methods and materials such as textbook and blackboard, over-crowded classes and insufficient basic English language skills as far as students are concerned lead to develop negative attitude towards learning English among most of the students.

Learners' disinterest is the primary barrier for ESL learning in Sri Lanka. As because of this factor, the English Language Teaching (ELT) seems to be a failure. As reviewing another local study regarding ELT in the Kinniya Education Zone, Trincomalee, Halik (2021) finds that students' lack of interest is one of the major factors for the failure of ELT in the Kinniya Education Zone. Moreover, according to the findings of a study on students' lack of interest in learning GCE (A/L) General English, Halik & Nusrath (2021)



conclude that several factors such as giving prominence only to the main subjects, lack of English background, use of traditional classrooms and teaching methodologies, use of advanced textbooks, lack of positive motivation and over-crowded classrooms contributed to students' lack of interest and to the production of lower results in A/Level examination.

Therefore, it is likely that most of the students do not give priority for English unlike other subjects. Further, Aliakbari & Gheitasi (2017) carried out a research about the relationship between learners' attitudes towards foreign language learning and test anxiety. The findings of this study show that there was a relationship between test anxiety and attitude. Female students expressed more optimistic attitudes towards learning English. As reviewed above, when male and female students are concerned in school context in Sri Lanka, female students show positive attitude in learning English, and their performance and results production seem higher than male students. There is a huge significance in the ultimate attainment of English language learning between the students who have positive and negative attitude. Accordingly, Ruzkina et al (2016) state that students who have natural dislike for English language learning will be less successful than with those with a positive attitude.

Moreover, Halik (2020) investigated the pronunciation challenges of the ESL learners at vocational training centre in Trincomalee District, Halik (2020) asserts according to classroom observation that positive attitude helps the learners learn correct pronunciation whereas negative attitude does not help them acquire pronunciation. In classroom teaching, most of the learners were observed that they are not interested in speaking English and learning pronunciation. Although several factors that affect English language learning and success, students' attitude is an important factor, particularly the students in school contexts.

3. Materials and Methods

This section presents the materials and methods used in this study.

3.1 Research design

Learners' attitude is a primary factor for English language learning. This study aims at exploring the attitude of students in schools in the Trincomalee District towards learning English. This study was a descriptive survey research. In this study, qualitative approach was applied in both data collection and data presentation. The data collection method and data analysis were qualitative. The sample for this study was selected using simple random sampling technique.

3.2 Sample size

In this study, 50 ESL teachers in twenty (20) selected schools in the Trincomalee District were selected as sample population. The selected schools include: ten (10) urban schools and ten (10) rural schools. Out of the ten (10) schools in each locale background, five (5) schools were girls' schools and five (5) schools were boys' school. Moreover, the urban schools include 6 national schools. The selected teachers were junior and senior teachers teaching English for primary and secondary classes.



3.3 Research instruments

In this study, a structured interview was used as the research instrument for primary data collection. The interview was a qualitative instrument which was used to gather opinion survey among the ESL teachers in the selected schools. The interview questions were set based on students' performance and results production in English, students' attitude towards learning English and the factors behind students' negative attitude in learning English.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

This study used qualitative method to collect both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected using a structured interview. The interview was conducted to the selected teachers through face-to-face interview and telephone conversation. Moreover, the secondary data were collected from the G.C.E (O/L) results report of the Provincial Department of Education, Eastern Province, Sri Lanka. Similarly, other secondary data were collected for review from some secondary sources such as journal research articles, dissertation, books and electronic sources.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the data analysis and discussion of the findings. The first subsection (4.1) gender wise students' attitude towards learning English and results production, second subsection (4.2) presents students' attitude towards learning English in rural and urban schools and third subsection (4.3) presents factors contributing to the negative attitude towards learning English.

4.1 Students' attitude in learning English and performance based on gender and locale background

According to the review of previous studies and opinion survey among the selected ESL teachers in the current study, the findings obviously reveal that most of the students in Sri Lanka show lack of interest in learning English. In particular, students who are in school contexts have negative attitude in learning English. They do not give priority to English language as if giving priority to other subjects. The results of the majority of the participants' opinion show that female students show much interest in learning English than male students. Accordingly, the findings of a previous study carried out by Aliakbari & Gheitasi (2017) reveal that female students expressed more optimistic attitudes towards learning English. This has been the reason for satisfactory performance and results production in female schools than in male schools.

Further, the opinion survey and analysis of secondary data reveal that GCE (O/L) results production seems higher in female schools than male schools. It is an evident that female students are much interested in learning English and they give importance to learn English language as if giving priority to other subjects. The following Table 1 shows 2020 GCE (O/L) results percentage (English subject) of some selected schools in the Trincomalee District.



Table 1: (2020 GCE (O/L) results percentage (English subject) of some selected schools in the Trincomalee District)

Male Schools			Female Schools		
Name of school	Locale background	Results percentage	Name of school	Locale background	Results percentage
T/Kin/Al-Aqsa College (National School)	Urban	22%	T/Kin/Girls College (National School)	Urban	70%
T/Kin/Arafa M.V	Urban	26%	T/Kin/Kurinchakerny Girls' M.V	Urban	53%
T/Mu/Al Hilal Central College	Urban	70%	T/Mu/Muslim Ladies' College (National School)	Urban	76%
T/Ki/Al Hiqma M.V	Rural	21%	T/Kin/Fathima M.V	Rural	43.75%
T/Kan/Al Tharik M. V	Rural	31%	T/Kan/Aysha M.V	Rural	44%

The above Table - 1 clearly depicts that the performance and results production seems higher in female schools when the male schools are compared to. According to participants' opinions, female students show much interest in learning English, and they are very supportive for English teachers which help the teachers to teach English effectively. Students' lack of interest and support discourage the teachers in their teaching activities. The female students are so dedicated to study all subjects equally. Most of the students go to private classes for English subject. In particular, parental attention is likely to be more for female students than male students. Another significant factor was peer group competition. As a result of the competition, they are dedicated to learn English hard in their class. On the other hand, most of the male students are uninterested in learning English, and they always fail to realize the importance of English. Particularly, many number of students are uninterested in learning any subjects. Their negative attitude towards learning affect English results production too. The drop out percentage for English private classes is higher in many parts of the district such as Kinniya, Kantale, thoppur, Mutur and Pulmoddai etc.

Further, as far as the students' attitude based on locale background is concerned, the above findings obviously show that whether male schools or female schools, rural schools' performance seems lower than urban schools. Due to lack of parental attention, inadequate learning facilities, lack of motivation and poverty, majority of the students show negative attitude towards learning English. Another significant factor highlighted by most of the participants that insufficient basic knowledge in English such as unable



to read and write contribute to the development of negative attitude. As concerning urban setting, competent and experienced teachers are appointed and there are adequate English language learning centres whereas in rural setting, incompetent and young teachers are appointed to rural schools. Moreover, modern teaching/learning equipment are not equally distributed to rural schools. Several rural schools do not have a separate language unit. As a result of these factors, students in rural setting are uninterested in learning English.

4.2 Factors contributing to the negative attitude towards learning English

Based on the opinion survey, the results is apparent that in general, majority of the students in the selected schools in the Trincomalee District show negative attitude towards learning English. There are various factors that contribute to the negative attitude towards students' English language learning. The factors are as follow:

- Uninterest in English language
- Giving less focus an priority for English language
- Students' inadequate awareness and knowledge about the significance of English in future
- Students drop out for English classes from private institutions
- Individual learners' difference
- Insufficient basic knowledge in English
- Difficulties in understanding school textbooks
- Lack of parental attention for English subject
- Lack of interesting and innovative teaching/learning equipment
- Drawbacks in the ESL curriculum in Sri Lanka

The above factors were highlighted by majority of the teachers in the opinion survey. In particular, the drawback in the ESL curriculum is one of the considerable factors for students' negative attitude towards learning English. According to school ESL curriculum, English language is introduced as a compulsory subject from grade 3 – 11. However, pass in GCE (O/L) English subject is not a mandatory requirement like First Language Tamil/Sinhala and Mathematics to study GCE (A/L). Moreover, General English subject is introduced in GCE (A/L) curriculum. Despite this, pass in General English in GCE (A/L) is not a mandatory requirement like General Test for university or other higher educational course enrolment. This is another reason for students' negative attitude towards learning English (Umashankar 2017).

5. Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of investigating the attitude of students in 20 selected schools in the Trincomalee District towards learning English. An opinion survey regarding students' attitude in learning English, their performance and results production were gathered among 50 ESL teachers in the selected schools. The conclusion is drawn based on the findings of this study several number of the students express their uninterest in learning English. According to gender and locale background of the students, most female students show much interest in learning English and their performance and results production in English seems higher than male students. Male students do not give importance to learning English as if focusing



on other subjects whereas female students do give equal priority to all subjects and they are so dedicated. Moreover, urban school students' interest in learning English and performance seem to be higher than rural school students. The reasons are due to lack of parental attention, insufficient basic knowledge in English, inadequate learning facilities, lack of motivation and poverty.

Further, as far as the factors that contribute to students' negative attitude towards learning English is concerned, the highlighted major factors were: insufficient basic knowledge in English, lack of motivation, lack of parental attention for English subject, difficulties in understanding textbooks, over-crowded classrooms & use of traditional teaching/learning equipment and lacks in school ESL curriculum.

Students' interest in learning English in both rural and urban schools can be drawn when the followings are implemented; distributing human and physical resources equally to all schools; motivating students and explaining the importance of English through continuous training programs and workshops to both parents and teachers; establishing separate equipped language unit in each school; inclusion of new revise in the curriculum that pass in GCE (O/L) English subject is mandatory to study GCE (A/L) and pass in GCE (A/L) General English is mandatory for university enrolment.

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