

Crossing over to the other side: attitudes held by Sinhala medium Humanities and Social Sciences undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities towards English

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Abstract— *In Sri Lanka, the necessity of a lingua franca like English is highly felt, specially in view of the country's vision to become a knowledge hub in Asia. Consequently English is taught to the youth at secondary and tertiary levels as a second language. English has been made accessible to undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities by successive governments in view of its significant value.*

This research analyzes the different attitudes towards English held by Sinhala medium Humanities and Social Sciences undergraduates. It is conducted on the basis that attitude is one of the key variables affecting the language learning process of a student. The research, has taken into consideration the emotional and cognitive aspects of attitude. It further focuses on whether these attitudes were acquired as a result of university education alone or whether there is any correlation between their present attitudes and satisfaction level regarding English education during school years, and also whether there are any gender wise attitudinal differences.

The researcher selected a sample of 80 undergraduates (male/female) from the Arts Faculties of 4 national universities whose medium of instruction with regard to their degree subjects is Sinhala. The undergraduates belong to several streams of academic study.. Further, the researcher used questionnaires as her principle data collection tool while conducting face to face interviews of 20 randomly selected undergraduates. The Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) designed by Gardner (1985) was taken as a guideline in formulating the questionnaire. Six subscales, namely interest in foreign languages, attitude towards learning English, attitude towards foreign native speakers of English, attitude towards local native speakers of English, integrative orientation, instrumental orientation of English were chosen and adapted from the test battery in order to test the general attitude of undergraduates. Each subscale comprised four to seven variables.

The findings appear to be complex in terms of the emotional aspect of undergraduate attitudes. While the undergraduates express a very high interest in foreign languages and a positive attitude towards learning English, they do not harbour a positive attitude towards either foreign or local native speakers of English. This juxtaposes with the results of their integrative orientation towards

English which indicates a relatively strong attitude towards knowing English for integrative purposes. At a cognitive level, the undergraduates project a strong instrumental orientation towards English. The overall data analysis leads us to a dichotomy in undergraduate attitude, where the undergraduates while perceiving fluent speakers of English negatively, desire to be fluent in English in their own rights.

Keywords— Attitudes, Undergraduate, Second language learning

I. INTRODUCTION

This study is conducted on the basis that attitude is one of the major factors affecting the language learning process of a student. More specifically, it investigates the attitudes held by Sri Lankan Sinhala medium university undergraduates in the Humanities and Social sciences stream towards English language. It takes into consideration the two emotional, and cognitive, aspects of attitude. It further attempts to determine whether these attitudes were acquired as a result of university education and immersion in the university sub culture or whether they were already inculcated in the students before coming to university. Whether undergraduate attitudes differ in terms of year of study and gender would equally be looked into. The research attempts to discover whether the attitudes of the undergraduates towards English are positive or negative. It also attempts to determine whether their attitudes are a product of university education and environment or whether they have been passed down from primary and secondary education.

When the future of a country and its development depend on its youth and their ability to face and cope with the various challenges of a globalised world, proper education becomes an indispensable component in their upbringing.

Hence the necessity of a lingua franca like English is highly felt and English is taught to the youth at secondary and tertiary level as a second language in Sri Lanka. English has been made accessible to undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities by successive governments in view of its significant value.

However in a student community such as that of the university undergraduates where nationalistic feelings seemingly run high and where many politicized factions pose as an anti-western force, it seems that English as a foreign language with its colonial connotations has evoked varying perceptions. This becomes apparent through some of the terms this particular subculture, which the researcher was once part of, employs to refer to English and the English speaking groups. "Kadda polishda?" is a commonly used question inquiring as to whether an individual is fluent in English. The question also assimilates English to a double edged sword which yields power.

Thus there can be seen a certain prejudice in terms of English language usage within university. Moreover, "People think that their language is the best. Tamil people think that Tamil is the best language. The Sinhala people think that Sinhala is the richest language"(Prof. Jayawardhane,2012).

More importantly, these undergraduates of Humanities and Social Sciences streams who offer their degrees in the Sinhala medium, lack vital exposure to English. While being inside the university, they get less chance to recognize the value of English compared to their peers in other streams (IT/Commerce/Science). Therefore they are more prone to be drawn towards various nationalistic campaigns that operate in the university political arena. English as the language of colonials seems to raise questions of national identity among university students of Sri Lanka.

In a research titled "Ideology and English: A Structure of Assumptions" Prof. Manique Gunsekara(2006) analyses poetry written by a Sri Lankan undergraduate and comments "This poem symbolizes the discomfort of the post colonial in a world of conflicting values compounded by the role of English in globalization". This adds a new dimension to the situation where the university undergraduate seems to realize the instrumental value of the English language that many senior undergraduates seem to scorn so openly during the rag season.

Hence, the question as to what attitudes the Sinhala medium undergraduates really hold, whether they, like their English medium undergraduate counterparts realize the value of English, is something that hasn't been researched so far. If they do realize the value of English language, then the question is as to why these undergraduates openly scorn the use of English within the university and why they do not attend English lectures(in not registering for any English courses or not appearing for lectures after having registered themselves.)

II LITERATURE REVIEW

When it comes to language teaching, or the teaching of any subject for that matter, the psychological factors play a major role in the educational process of students. Ivan

L. Russell in his chapter on "Development of attitudes, interests and values"¹expounds:"*Education functions in an atmosphere largely determined by the attitudes, interests, and values of pupils, teachers, administrators, parents, and school board members*"(p 325), thereby highlighting the importance of the psychological component of education.

Furthermore Lester Anderson(1959) has identified the teacher's task under three broad categories: (i)Selecting and organizing material, (ii)Guiding and directing learning and (iii)Evaluation. Out of these, the second category, which focuses on the dissemination of knowledge, refers to an academic dimension where the teacher has passed the level of "assign-study-recite-test", and tries to understand the student psychology in order to better impart knowledge. Therefore an understanding of how individuals learn and what facilitates their learning is required of a successful or skilled teacher.

Due to this reason researcher considers student attitude towards a specified subject as a discerning psychological factor which can considerably influence the learning process of the student. Hogg and Vaughan (2005, p.150) define "Attitudes" as "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols". The statement makes it clear that not only do attitudes have a psychological function on the individual, but it equally carries a behavioural function that directs the individual holding a particular attitude to behave in a certain manner. According to Gardner(1980, p 265), attitude is "the sum total of a man's instincts and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, fears, threats and convictions about any specified topic". Mouly (1968, p.452) further sheds light on this matter by illustrating three basic components of attitudes:

- *The affective component- focuses on what a person feels be it rational or not, regarding a certain person thing or concept.(like undergrads' attitudes towards native /foreign speakers of English, integrative orientation/about learning English)

- *The cognitive component-focuses on the knowledge a person has in terms of intellect regarding the particular object towards which he holds the attitude(instrumental orientation/about learning English)

- *The action/behavioural component-deals with how the person reacts at a physical level to the object because of his attitude.

Furthermore and most importantly, attitude is considered to be an essential factor that influences language performance (Visser, 2008). Due to all these facts it can be assumed that an attitude held regarding a particular subject and which can be termed as positive might enable

the student to acquire knowledge in that field of study faster or in an easier manner compared to an area of study in which the student holds a negative attitude. As a result, a teacher may try as hard as he/she can to give knowledge to his/her students and fail drastically, not for want of knowledge or enthusiasm in imparting that subject related knowledge, but simply due to the reason that the attitude of the student towards a particular subject impedes the effective absorption or reception of what he/she is being taught. Therefore in order to facilitate the effective learning of a subject, a teacher would have to go beyond the scope of simply transmitting subject based knowledge (teaching) to the student.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Thus this research aims to find out and analyze the different attitudes held by Sri Lankan undergraduates towards English. It remains to be seen through proper research as to whether the attitudes projected by some undergraduate groups are really those nurtured by humanities and social sciences undergraduates in general. An in depth analysis of the attitudes of students towards English will be of utmost help to the teacher and to the curriculum designer. The researcher believes that the teachers' attention to the attitudes of the undergraduates who are learning English as a Second Language would positively contribute towards their English language acquisition. This happens by the teacher having a better understanding of the student and therefore of how to deliver lessons in a more custom made manner in order to better fit student requirements.

Firstly, if most of the undergraduates of the Humanities and Social Sciences stream are found to hold negative attitudes towards English, the teacher may then want to delve into the possible causes for nurturing such negative attitudes and attempt a modification of such attitudes through various class room activities and setting fresh perspectives. If most of the undergraduates hold positive attitudes towards English, the teacher will be able to harp on those attitudes to formulate plans to bring about a reform of negative attitudes in a minority of undergraduates.

The survey of student attitudes is also conducted with the intention that through a better understanding of one psychological element that influences student learning, the educators would be better able to plan and design language lessons/materials and adapt the existing methods of language teaching to cater to student requirements in order to produce better results in second language acquisition. The gender focus would equally help in any curricular reforms that the government might bring about in the future. The understanding of Sri Lankan Sinhala medium undergraduate attitudes towards English as a Second Language(ESL) would not only help reform current education programmes of the country, but it would also contribute to building and enriching an existing global corpus on attitudes held by ESL speakers of English.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The researcher selected a sample of 84(46 female, 38 male) undergraduates from the Arts Faculties of 4 national universities whose medium of instruction, with regard to their degree subjects, is Sinhala. The undergraduates belong to several streams of academic study. Questionnaires were used as the principle data collection tool while conducting face to face group interviews of 20 randomly selected male undergraduates. The Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) designed by Gardner (1985) was taken as a guideline in formulating the questionnaire. Six subscales, namely

1. Interest in foreign languages
2. Attitude towards learning English
3. Attitude towards foreign native speakers of English
4. Attitude towards local native speakers of English
5. Integrative orientation in learning English
6. Instrumental orientation in learning English

were chosen and adapted from the test battery in order to test the general attitude of undergraduates. Each subscale comprised four to seven variables. The variable statements were adapted to the Sri Lankan social context and the adapted questionnaire was translated to the first language (Sinhala) of the undergraduate participants of the research. Due to the changes that were made to the original test battery, the data collection instrument was measured for reliability and with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.937, the tool was affirmed to be highly reliable.

The data collection tool consisted of four main sections apart from a preliminary section on personal information. Section 2 and 3 covered the subscales of questions to measure undergraduates' attitudes towards English. While section 1 comprised several questions on student perception of their school English language education, section 4 comprised several supplementary questions on undergraduates' desire to learn English.

V. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

A. Based on Questionnaire

In order to test the cognitive aspect of undergraduate attitude towards English, the subscale of instrumental orientation was utilized. Local researchers (Kandaiah, Samarakkody) admit to the desire of Sri Lankans for learning English for instrumental purposes. Whether the results are still valid were also put to the test.

At an emotional level, several subsections were selected to obtain a comprehensive idea of the attitudes of the undergraduates since the emotional aspect of attitude of ESL speakers in general towards English (as postulated by Kandaiah) seems to conflict with the perception of attitudes of university undergraduates of the Sinhala Medium as indicated by researcher in the literature survey.

Attitude towards foreign languages	AVG	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
I wish I could speak many foreign languages	6.48	6.59	6.39	6.49
I wish I could read newspapers and magazines in foreign languages	6.29	6.24	6.33	6.28
I enjoy meeting people speaking foreign languages	5.03	4.79	5.20	5.00
My interest in foreign languages is	5.78	6.00	5.61	5.80
Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7				
High	5.89	4.00	5.88	5.89

Table 1. Attitude towards foreign languages

The selected subscales for the purpose are attitude towards foreign languages, attitude towards learning English, attitude towards foreign native speakers of English, attitude towards local native speakers of English, instrumental orientation and integrative orientation.

The findings for each subscale are as follows:

Overall attitude of undergraduates towards foreign languages is positive (nearly 6 on a Likert scale of 1 to 7). However, there is a clear difference between males and females. It is therefore to be surmised that females have more linguistic interest than their male counterparts (Table 1).

However the attitude of both male and female undergraduates towards learning English language is positive (5.59 on Likert scale) despite the males' low score on linguistic interest (Table 2).

In sharp statistical contrast to these attitudes mentioned above are the attitudes towards foreign native speakers

of English and local native speakers of English. Attitudes towards foreign native speakers are negative (both male and female) with an average of 3.84 on the Likert scale (Table 3).

Consequently, although they have a positive attitude towards foreign languages and the learning of English, the positivity is not extended to its native speaker. This can be termed as a post colonial mentality as some researchers have termed it a couple of decades ago, except for the findings related to Attitude towards local native speakers of English.

Contrary to above findings, statistics indicate that although the Sinhala medium undergraduates' attitudes are negative towards both foreign and local native English speakers, they display a high score for integrative orientation on the Likert scale, thereby displaying their desire to integrate with the very groups they feel negatively about (Table 5).

At the same time, the undergraduate participants highly recognise the value of English language for practical

Attitude towards learning English	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	AVG
Learning English is really great	4.55	4.18	4.83	4.50
I really enjoy learning English	5.25	5.48	5.07	5.28
I don't think that learning English is dull	4.95	4.95	5.43	5.19
English is a very important part of our education	6.36	6.21	6.48	6.34
I plan to learn as much English as possible	6.68	6.68	6.69	6.68
English medium instruction in Sri Lankan academic institutions is not a harm to nationalism	5.05	4.94	4.94	4.94
My attitude toward learning English is	6.20	6.21	6.20	6.20
Unfavourable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7				
Favourable	5.58	5.52	5.66	5.59

Table 2. Attitude towards learning English

Attitude towards foreign native speakers of English	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	AVG
Foreign native English speakers are very sociable and kind	3.23	2.52	3.76	3.14
I would like to know more foreign native English speakers	5.31	5.35	5.28	5.32
You can always trust foreign English speakers	2.44	1.84	2.90	2.37
My attitude toward foreign native English speakers is	4.54	4.68	4.43	4.56
Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7				
Favorable	3.88	3.60	4.09	3.84

Table 3. Attitude towards foreign native speakers of English

purposes such as career development, improvement of social status, a desire more pronounced in males than in females (Table 6.). With reference to a question separate from the test battery, on the satisfaction level of students about their English language education during school years, on a scale of 1 to 5 from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, the undergraduates scored 2.67. Equally they displayed 3.275 on a scale of 1 to 5 from very negative to very positive attitude, about the English language. Their attitude is between neutral and positive.

The satisfaction level regarding English language education during school time averaged 2.67 out of 5 on the likert scale. On the contrary, nearly 74 percent of the participants profess to have felt the necessity of learning English even when they were schooling.

B. Based on group interviews

Most of the undergraduates, upon being questioned on their opinion on English language learning, the use of English and its importance, openly acknowledged the importance of English language in education and its necessity to succeed at a professional level. Some participants remarked on how they wanted to speak in English although their present skills prevent them from using it. One participant referred to occasions when he strongly felt a need to know correct English and cited moments of feeling shame during public

speaking events and being scorned at by even teachers due to inability to speak good English. They acknowledge to a growing awareness (compared to school years) that in a globalised world, a person cannot be ignorant of an international language such as English. Upon being asked about the use of English within university, the participants professed to the necessity of English for referring books and further reading. They stated that those who knew English could get better grades. The participants project a strong desire to learn English and some of them even take private classes to achieve this end.

Upon being questioned on the use of English during the first year first semester of academic life of undergraduates (commonly known as "Rag season"), the participants stated that the use of English was prohibited during the time period. The reason given was that all undergraduates should learn to speak fluently in their L1, feel equal to their batch mates and be treated equally. Therefore it is to be understood that the Sinhala medium undergraduates regard English as a tool that undermines social equality.

Further, regardless of their interest in learning English, the undergraduates are dissatisfied with the English language teaching offered to them at university level. The reasons given are:

Attitude towards local native speakers of English	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	AVG
Local native English speakers are very sociable and kind	3.25	2.18	4.04	3.11
I would like to know more local native English speakers	5.14	5.44	4.91	5.18
You can always trust local English speakers	2.59	2.00	3.04	2.52
My attitude toward local native English speakers is	4.28	4.12	4.39	4.25
Unfavourable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7				
Favourable	3.81	3.43	4.10	3.77

Integrative orientation								MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	AVG
Studying English is important because it will allow me to be more at ease with people who speak English								6.44	6.53	6.37	6.45
Studying English is important because it will allow me to meet and converse with more and varied people								5.93	6.03	5.85	5.94
Studying English is important because it will enable me to better understand and appreciate the English way of life.								4.41	4.62	4.26	4.44
My motivation to learn English in order to communicate with English speakers is								6.11	6.47	5.85	6.16
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7				
Strong								5.72	5.91	5.58	5.75

1. English language lessons at university level do not commence from the very 'beginning' assuming that all students have a certain level of proficiency in English. Therefore weaker students find it hard to work and learn English.

2. Although initial tests are conducted to test the proficiency level of undergraduates, the same materials and lectures are delivered to all students disregarding the students' proficiency.

3. Everything is taught in the target language medium in the English class. There is no use of the L1. Undergraduates suggested the use of L1 in explaining some grammar forms to ease their understanding of the concepts (example given was 'present continuous')

4. Lecturers who conduct language classes change from term to term. Therefore lecturers have little time to identify the personality or requirements of students and address them.

VI. CONCLUSION

The positive attitude towards English at a cognitive level (seen through the instrumental orientation subscale) is perhaps not an area of much doubt since succeeding governments have tried various policies over the years to improve English. Researchers for decades profess through their research findings, the awareness of Sri Lankans as a whole of the importance of learning English for functional purposes.

The findings appear to be complex in terms of the emotional aspect of undergraduate attitudes. While the undergraduates express a very high interest in foreign languages and a positive attitude towards learning English, they do not harbour a positive attitude towards either foreign or local native speakers of English. This juxtaposes with the results of their integrative orientation towards English which indicates a relatively strong attitude towards knowing English for integrative purposes. At a cognitive level, the undergraduates project a strong instrumental orientation towards English.

The overall data analysis points towards a dichotomy in undergraduate attitude, where the Sinhala medium undergraduates of Humanities and Social Sciences faculties, while perceiving fluent speakers of English negatively, desire to be fluent in English in their own rights. And till they become members of the community of proficient speakers of English, and as I term it, till they CROSS OVER TO THE OTHER SIDE, the other side is considered as hostile ground.

Thus the university undergraduates are highly aware of the value of English at a cognitive level and are very interested in learning the language. The fact that they do not want to learn English is a mere fallacy. Equally the assumption that the undergraduates hold negative attitudes towards foreign languages is disproved from

the results of the research. Due to these reasons the nationalistic connotations that are associated with university education have to be disregarded. The fact

Instrumental orientation								MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	AVG
Studying English is important because I will need it for my career								6.83	6.94	6.74	6.84
Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a job								6.80	6.88	6.74	6.81
Studying English is important because people will respect me more								4.33	4.03	4.56	4.29
My motivation to learn English for practical purposes is								6.44	6.35	6.50	6.43
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7				
Strong								6.10	6.05	6.13	6.09

becomes clearer if student response to questions regarding nationalistic feelings and the effect of English on national identity is regarded. The undergraduates do not consider English language, at an emotional level, as a threat to nationalism but rather as a threat to social status.

More importantly, improvement of student attitude towards English language education should commence at school level. It is suggested that extensive inquiry be conducted to find out possible reasons for the dissatisfaction of students about English language education despite continuous attempts of the Ministry of Education to promote English language education at school level.

Considering these facts, the policy making including the latest developments in the form of the Tri Lingual language education policy should take into consideration the social dimension on language learning as much as or even more so than merely methods of teaching English (I say more so because the attitude towards and desire to learn English is no more a matter of doubt). The negative attitudes towards all fluent English language speakers would raise the apprehension levels of the English language learners in conversing with proficient speakers. Further, according to the Input, Interaction, Output model of language learning developed from theories of researchers such as Long, Swain and Lapkin, language production and interaction play a major role in language development with language learning instances occurring through comprehension checks, clarification requests, hypothesis formulating and testing and metalinguistic functions.

Hence environments where speaking is stunted by the apprehensions nurtured by these undergraduates, where there is no alleviating of negative attitudes held by the Sinhala medium undergraduates towards the speakers of English, where they try their best to project themselves all of a sudden as perfect English language speakers after learning everything theoretically for years, is merely encouraging and perpetuating a vicious cycle of non learning, leading to the failure of any policy whatsoever.

Further the English language lecturers should be sensitive to the emotional needs as well as the cognitive needs of their students. They should not come to the English language class of Humanities and Social Sciences undergraduates with the assumption that the undergraduates do not want to learn or are not interested in learning. In fact the undergraduates who have had dissatisfying experiences of English language education and who project much more

positive attitude towards English language learning during their university education, should be treated very gently and carefully so as to nullify any negative experiences and rekindle a love for the language. In the language classroom, the lecturers, who represent native speakers of English, while being aware of the undergraduates' negative attitudes towards fluent speakers, should definitely devise teaching methods to build trust and positive attitudes towards native speakers of English.

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