

Voices of ESL learners: Factors Influencing English Language Proficiency

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Abstract:

This abstract presents the findings of a study that explored English as a second language (ESL) learners' perceptions of the factors that influence learners' English language proficiency. The research study followed a non-experimental quantitative research design using a questionnaire survey. 538 ESL learners from senior secondary classes from 12 schools in three provinces of Sri Lanka participated in this study. We administered a 43-item structured questionnaire and conducted several interviews to collect data. We subjected the collected data to several statistical measures. The research findings showed that ESL learners placed great importance on the activities in the textbook and co-curricular activities done in English. The students believed that if exposure to the English language was maximized, they could learn by participating in those activities. They cited pre-primary English education as a requirement. The attitudes the learners hold towards English language learning were considered a contributing factor. They regarded the school as one of the major influences in the inculcation of right attitudes towards learning English. Overall, ESL learners view the teacher, school, and education system as the most significant contributory factors in their learning. We propose a longitudinal research study with a large sample of participants in an experimental research design and combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis.

Keywords —English, learning, motivation, perceptions, proficiency.

I. INTRODUCTION

Due to globalization, the English language is the

most prized possession of communication. English language acts as a repository of modern knowledge, wisdom and social mobility and is

the catalyst for career advancement and a machine to mint money across the modern world. The English language is a telescope to view the vision of the future and its progress. In the modern world, communication in English is recognized as an inseparable part, and it is the lifeblood of every activity which occurs in everyone's life.

English language proficiency means a full command of the language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. English language proficiency may be defined operationally as the passing score on an English language proficiency test. English has become the world's lingua franca (Villar, 2018). It is the leading international language for commerce, medicine, science, diplomacy, aviation, trade, peacekeeping, the Internet and technology. Therefore, every non-English speaking country has recognized the necessity and importance of incorporating English into their education systems (Graddol, 2003).

In Sri Lanka, students begin learning English from primary school (grade 3 onwards). It is officially recognized as a compulsory subject, and schools are encouraged to promote its practical usage and streamline it (M.O.E. Report, 2019). Circulars have been issued to focus on streamlining the issues that have been revealed. Sri Lankan students spend around ten years learning English from

grade 3 onwards to the university level. Nevertheless, students still struggle with the four skills—speech, writing, reading, and listening. Proficiency in speaking is comparatively low (Karunaratne, 2003; Perera, 2001). As there is a demand for English and that English is a requirement for every aspect of life. In addition, we investigated this area as we wanted to explore the factors that influence learners' proficiency and find solutions to help learners become proficient in English to secure employment, engage in higher education, and participate in any social activity once they leave school.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language learning is described as one of the most complex psychological operations of the human mind given the complexities of grammatical structures, size of the mental lexicon, and the multiple functionality language learners of any language are confronted with (Holme, 2012: pp. 6-29). As a result, controversies have arisen as to how a language can be learned. Various theories of learning, as well as cognition, have influenced numerous approaches to language learning. Situations around acts of learning as opposed to acquisition processes have dominated language learning, starting from Chomsky's ideas. Knowledge construction as a further aspect was only recently added to the concepts discussed. However,

cognitive approaches have already been started to build learners' experiences and provide challenging learning tasks that can function as intellectual scaffolding (Xu et al., 2019).

Hence, given the importance of teaching the English language in schools, this study explores the E.S.L.(English as a second language) learners' perception of the factors that influence their four skills in English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Using various activities in teaching to improve language skills is necessary for a secondlanguage (L2) context. Cooperative learning is a method in which students gettogetherandworkin smallgroupstocompleteaprojectorsolveaproblem. Thisenvironment will help the students to contribute positively to the activities that are assigned to their group(Abedi et al., 2019; Ning, 2011). Teachers use group activities such as role-play,groupdiscussions,debates, anddramatohelpstudentsfurtherpracticewhattheyalreadylearned in the classroom (Li, 2015; Wang, 2013; Lev, 2014). In learning an L2, the learning with peers' approach allows the students and teachers to cooperate with their usually separate communities to experience their roles in supporting their language learning(Ning,2011).

Furthermore,languagelearningstrategiesareusedfor activeimprovementinlanguage learning (Shinozuka

et al., 2017). Language learning strategy types are classified in severalways (Gan et al., 2004; O'Malley et al., 1985). O'Malley and Chamot (1985) divided thesetypes into three main types. Meta-cognitive strategies include selective attention, planning, self-monitoring and self-assessment. Cognitive processes include steps or operations that are included in analyzing the materials used for learning. Social and effective strategies include interactionwithpeers and ideationalregulation over emotions. Getie and Popescu (2020) reported that "attitude has recently received considerable attention from both first and second language researchers" (p. 3). Elaborating further, they concluded that "most of the research on the issue has concluded that students' attitude is an integral part of learning. That it should, therefore, become an essential component of language learning pedagogy" (ibid).

Motivation is an internal stimulus that describes the reasons for human needs and desires. Itcanbe definedas a directiontobehaviouror why anindividualwouldwanttorepeat a specific behaviour (Elliot & Covington, 2001). The self-determination theory of Deci & Ryan(1985) divides learning motivation into three types: No motivation, intrinsic motivation, andextrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation explains learners' desire to study aforeign language due to their interest and curiosity. Still, extrinsic motivation is when

learners learn a foreign language to gain praise or avoid punishment.

Barcelos (2003) argued that learner specific beliefs about learning a language is dependent on the nature of the language. Parents have critical roles in motivating their children to learn and want to improve their language skills and proficiency (Hanus, 2016). Their involvement shows that motivation plays a role in learning English. Sung (2014) concluded that “teachers must create positive teacher-student relationships because many E.L.L.s depend more on their teachers for academic support than their parents”. Cultural factors affecting the four skills in English language proficiency were investigated in another study. Ler (2018) reported the involvement of a complex interplay of personal and social variables such as motivation and attitude in learning English, the limited exposure to the target language, and the influence of peers in his study (p. 4).

III. OBJECTIVES

The following four objectives guided the study.

1. To explore the activities that help students be motivated to learn the English language
2. To investigate the attitudes of students towards learning the English language
3. To compare the contributory factors that affect learning the English language
4. To examine the practical approaches adopted by teachers in teaching English

IV. METHOD

This research study used a non-experimental quantitative research paradigm using a questionnaire survey. The survey aimed to identify cognitive factors, methods and materialsthat are used in the classroom, outlook on the textbook, teaching process, and their socialfactors that influence English language proficiency of E.S.L. learners from 12 different schoolsin Sri Lanka. Overall, the survey investigated the factors that could affect the low proficiencylevels shown at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level Examination (G.C.E. O/L). The study further explored how these factors influence learning strategies, beliefs on learning English,student motivation and teaching strategies.

A. Research Design

The research team developed a sample based on the population—the most resourceful province, least resourceful and the province between. The same conceptwas employed to select districts, zones, divisions and schools to determine whether all threesocioeconomic divisionscould be located in the same proximity. Schools were chosen according to their types: Type 1AB, Type 1C and Type 2. Schools were selected within those selected divisions.

We collected data from the following provinces.

1. Western Province—Borella Division
2. Uva Province—Badulla Division
3. Central Province—Gangawata Koralaya Division
4. Additional Districts –Nuwara Eliya, Kurunegala, Bandarawela.

B. Sample

A total of 538 ESL learners from 12 schools in different districts in Sri Lanka participated in this study. The participants were from senior secondary classes aged 15 – 16 years, who were to sit the 2020/2021 G.C.E. O/L Examination. Out of the 538 students who participated in this study,

274 female students accounted for 51 per cent of the sample, and the rest were male students (264, 49%).

C. Materials

Primary data were collected through a questionnaire it consisted of 43 questions. It contained Likert scale type open and close-ended questions and was divided into five parts. Questions under Part A collected non-sensitive personal information about the students. Part B inquired about their academic background. Under Part C, data on cognitive factors were collected, and Part D collected methods and materials that are used in the classroom. Part E collected data on teaching methods, and Part F gathered data on the social factors.

V. RESULTS

We analyzed the data in SPSS version 26 using descriptive analysis, *T-test*, and *multiplex regression*. The English proficiency of E.S.L. learners is measured from the results of the term examination.

A. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The data below show the school term-end examination results of 251 male and 259 female E.S.L. learners. There were 192 males and 133 females who got the grades 'A' and 'B' group; 75 females and 29 males in the 'C' grade group and 16 male students and 30 female students in the 'S' grade group, and 14 females and 21 males in 'W' group (See Table 1).

TABLE I
Gender Wise Distribution of Term-End Examination Results

| Gender | N | A/B Grade | C Grade | S Grade | W Grade |
|--------|-----|-----------|---------|---------|---------|
| Female | 259 | 133 | 75 | 30 | 21 |
| Male | 251 | 192 | 29 | 16 | 14 |
| Total | 510 | 325 | 104 | 46 | 35 |

Note. N=Number of Respondents

Based on the students' backgrounds, they were grouped into three groups considering the school type. Students were also grouped into two groups based on if they knew English before starting school or

not. Students who started learning English before they attended school had more than ten years of the learning experience.

Students who began learning English starting school had ten or fewer years of learning the language.

Table 2 shows 346 students started learning English before school, and 120 students started learning English after school. It was revealed that those students who had been exposed to English wanted to learn it and improve their skills in English.

TABLE III
Distribution of Students' English Learning at School

| Before/After School | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Before School (>10 years) | 346 | 74.2% |
| After School (≤ 10 years) | 120 | 25.6% |
| Total | 467 | 100.0% |

Participants were also requested to select the reasons for studying English. Five statements were given as reasons, and Table 3 entries indicate the expressions of the E.S.L. learners.

The reasons are: (1) They needed English for higher studies, (2) They were learning because it was required to learn, (3) require English for a future career, (4) need the English language for day-to-day communication, (5) They think being fluent in English has high social status. Most students believed that they learned English because it would help them find employment in the future (91.7%), followed by the reason that the knowledge of English is essential for their higher studies (86.3%). About 51.7% believed that being fluent in English had high social status, 63.7% thought it would help

them engage in day-to-day communication. About 6.4% of respondents expressed that they were learning English only because it was on the timetable. These findings showed that the students regarded the four skills in English. Further, they needed English for career prospects, as the results indicated.

TABLE IIII
Reasons for Learning English- Frequency and Percentages

| Statements | N | Percent |
|--|-----|---------|
| Knowledge of English is important for my higher studies. | 416 | 86.3% |
| I am doing English only because it is on the timetable. | 31 | 6.4% |
| English will help me to find a good job in the future. | 442 | 91.7% |
| It will help me to carry out day-to-day communication | 307 | 63.7% |
| Being fluent in English is high social status. | 249 | 51.7% |

E.S.L. learners regarded the activities in the textbook that help them learn the English language as the highest ($M=3.56$, $SD=0.725$). The standard deviation and mean of the beliefs about learning the English language stood at $M=3.43$ and $SD=0.692$. The mean and standard deviation of motivation of teachers were ($M=3.39$, $SD=0.763$), respectively. These results are given in Table 4.

TABLE IVV
Distribution of Mean and Standard Deviation

| Factors | Mean | Std.Deviation |
|---|------|---------------|
| Co-curricular activities/classroom activities | 3.56 | 0.72 |
| Beliefs about learning English | 3.43 | 0.69 |
| Motivation | 3.39 | 0.76 |

Hence, this indicates those different types of activities and co-curricular activities have importance in learning English.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

Changes should be made in the pedagogy of English language teaching and curriculum design that consider learner requirements. The emphasis placed on communicative activities by the students should be considered as necessary preconditions in teaching English.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that E.S.L. learners place great importance on the type of classroom activities in English. The attitude of students towards learning English was also considered a contributing factor. The teachers could design and develop interesting and innovative activities to encourage and get students to engage more in the English language. This could be achieved by encouraging them to do drama, public speaking, and essay competitions. Consistent with the results of Marie and Snell (2020), we conclude that providing quality primary and pre-primary English education teachers can improve the English language proficiency of E.S.L. learners. However, the study only included the findings from a group of E.S.L. learners in Sri Lankan schools. This should be further developed and expanded from the perspective of other stakeholders such as teachers, principals, and parents. From the instrument that was used, not all the data was reported due to practical reasons, only fitting variables were extracted. For future research

, we propose a longitudinal research study with a large sample of participants in an experimental research design and combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis.

On a final note, studies have been conducted to investigate and explore the factors that influence English language proficiency. We recommend future research studies to investigate language aptitude, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and anxiety.

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