

*Attitude, Motivation
and Proficiency Levels in ESL :
A Case Study Among Indian Urban and Rural Learners.*

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Introduction

There has been a decline in the standard of English among Malaysian secondary school students and there are differences in the proficiency levels of English between urban and rural school children (Gaudart, 1987). The decline in the standard of English has become a cause for concern to the Malaysian Ministry of Education, teachers and parents. According to Gaudart,

The acquisition of the English language to most of the Malaysian community is seen as a necessary evil. This attitude spills over to the children in school, making it more difficult to have any intrinsic desire to acquire English. (Gaudart, 1987 : 34)

Gaudart, (1987) also stated that :

Malaysian society is constantly regaled with opinions about falling standards of English. Falling where and in what way is seldom mentioned. (Gaudart, 1987 : 17)

The present study was undertaken to provide quantitative data to show the disparity between the Indian urban and rural learners of English as a second language and to see if this disparity is significant. The study was also aimed at determining whether the attitudes of these students towards the English language, towards the English - speaking groups and their cultures, as well as their motivation to learn English contributed to the differences in the proficiency levels in English of learners from both these areas.

Definition of terms

In Malaysia, schools are classified by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia as “urban” or

“rural” depending on their location. “Urban” schools are schools that are located in towns with a population of more than ten thousand people. “Rural” schools, on the other hand, are located in towns or districts with a population of less than ten thousand people. In this study, the “urban” schools were located in Klang while the “rural” schools were located in Batang Berjuntai and Kuala Selangor.

Proficiency here refers to the general linguistic ability of the students, that is his command of the language. In this study, the student’s proficiency level was gauged by his performance in a Diagnostic Reading Test administered to him by his teacher. This test was designed by the Schools Division, Ministry of Education, Malaysia and is used by teachers of upper secondary classes, in this case, Form IV, to gauge the proficiency level of the student in English. (The same test was administered by the teachers in the four selected schools). Students who obtained 0 - 40 marks in this test were placed in the elementary proficiency level category while those who obtained 41 - 60 marks and 61 - 100 marks were placed in the intermediate and advanced proficiency level categories respectively.

Allport defines attitude as,

..... a mental and neutral state of readiness, organised through experience exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related. (*Allport 1954 : 45*)

Attitude in this study refers to the states of emotions and thoughts of the student regarding the English Language and English and English-speaking groups and their cultures. English-speaking groups here refer to any speakers of English as a first language for example, native speakers of English from countries like America, Britain and Australia.

Motivation in second-language learning, according to Gardner refers to :

..... the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitude towards learning the language. That is, motivation to learn a second language is seen as referring to the extent to which the individual works and strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity. (*Gardner, 1985 : 10*)

Motivation here refers to the student’s desire and need to learn English. These emotions and needs constitute the source of his drive to expend effort to learn English.

Instrument

The data for this study was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. The question-

naire in English (Appendix A) was translated into Tamil. (Appendix B). Students were given the choice of selecting what language they wanted the questionnaire in. This was to facilitate them doing the questionnaire.

Attitude Measure

The attitude measure used here was a direct measure of attitudes based on the student's agreement or disagreement with certain statements about their attitude towards the English Language, towards the English-speaking groups and their cultures as well as their motivation for learning English. These statements were based on statements used in attitude questionnaire by Pierson et al (1980) and Surabayan (1986). Selected statements were modified where necessary to suit the Malaysian context and Indian students in particular.

In this measure the student had to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a 5 - point scale which was coded as follows : -

1	=	totally agree
2	=	agree
3	=	no opinion
4	=	disagree
5	=	totally disagree

The rationale for the 5 point scale is to increase the variations in the possible scores by coding from "totally agree" to "totally disagree" instead of merely agreeing or disagreeing. The questionnaire consisted of several parts. The questionnaire had questions (Part I) designed to elicit information on the students' personal and language background. It included the descriptive variables of name, location of school, parent's occupation, their monthly incomes, parents' educational status and the student's exposure to the English language through the various media. Parts II, III and IV consisted of 10 statements each to determine the student's attitude towards the English language, the English-speaking groups and their cultures as well as his motivation to learn English. (Questionnaires in English and Tamil are attached as Appendices A and B respectively).

Data analysis was carried out using frequency counts, percentages and the SPSS Pc + Version 6 program. Frequency distributions, Pearson product - moment correlation and Chi - square tests were used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussion

Analyses showed that **there was a significant correlation between proficiency levels of the students and location of their schools.** Students from urban areas do significantly

better in English than students from rural areas. These results are similar to those obtained by Subramaniam (1976), Chandrasegaran (1979) and Gaudart (1987) in their studies of urban and rural school students.

There are several possible reasons for disparity in results among the urban and rural learners of English as second language. The first possible reason is the socio economic status and educational levels of their parents (Subramaniam, 1986). As seen from the results, most of the parents of the rural students earn very much less than majority of the parents of the urban students. Hence, they would not be in a position to spend a lot of money on their children's education. If the children need extra tuition in certain subjects like English, for instance, parents might not be able to afford it. Insufficient finance might be the constraining factor. Unlike the rural parents, most of the urban parents are financially better off and are therefore in a better position to take care of their childrens' educational needs.

The next possible reason could be the difference in exposure to English in the urban and rural areas. Exposure to English is measured by how often the urban and rural students have contact with the English language through the various media. Studies by Chandrasegaran (1979) and Subryan (1986) have shown that students having a higher exposure to the English language have better proficiency levels in English. Results showed that the urban students have more contact with the English language via the various media than the rural students. Urban students tend to use English more frequently with their families, friends, teachers and neighbours when compared to rural students. English is widely used by them outside the classroom environment.

According to Asmah Haji Omar (1975) English has become a means of communication among educated people and a symbol of urbanisation. The majority of the rural students, on the other hand, do not use English as frequently. This could be the contributing factor to their lower proficiency levels in English compared to urban students. Urban students, by living in an environment where the opportunity for frequent contact with English is more readily available, experience wider contact with English and so become more competent (Chandrasegaran 1979). In the case of rural students, the learning environment itself might be discouraging for the learner (Lee, 1983). These students are living in an environment where most of them speak in their mother tongues or in Bahasa Melayu. Those who try to speak in English might be ridiculed (Balaetham, 1982) or might be looked upon as showing off (Ghani, 1979).

Another possible reason is on the part of the students themselves. They lack the confidence and are reluctant to speak English for fear of making mistakes (Balaetham, 1982, Ghani,

1979). It has been proven that shyness affects performance in the target language - the less shy the learners are, the better they perform (Hamayan et al, 1977). Furthermore, the majority of students in Malaysian schools are fully aware that they can survive well without having to know much English (Chandrasegaran, 1979, Anie Attan, 1982). Effective self-expression can be achieved in the language they are most proficient in. The Indian students, more so in the rural areas can get by very well by using their mother tongue. Effective inter-ethnic communication can be achieved by using Bahasa Melayu. In the case of the urban students, the living environment encourages the use of the English language. Hence, they are more proficient because of greater exposure to the language.

Another possible reason is on the part of the teachers' themselves in rural areas in this country. They may be ignorant about the learning environment of the rural students (Ismail, 1990). The teachers may have a low opinion and expectation of their students in these areas. However, it is unfortunate that the teachers are seldom aware of their own negative attitudes toward the students (Ghani, 1979).

Further, it has been the practice that newly trained young teachers are sent to serve in rural schools (Ismail, 1990). Those who continue to stay on in these areas are mostly locals who are from the rural areas themselves or those who have decided to stay on for other reasons such as marriage to the locals. Long-serving and experienced teachers prefer to serve in established schools in towns. Therefore, the rural schools, in remote areas of the country will continue to be staffed by new and inexperienced teachers who are unfamiliar with rural life.

Results also showed that the **attitude of the students towards the English language was not a good predictor of proficiency levels in English**, in spite of the fact that there was a significant difference in the proficiency levels in English of students from urban and rural areas. The results here coincide with several studies done in different countries and in different settings. Carrol (1965) found no significant correlation between the students foreign language scores and their liking for these languages. Other studies carried out in unicultural settings, namely, Gardner and Lambert's (1972) study in Connecticut and Savignon's study (1972) have yielded no significant correlations between attitudes and achievement. Naiman et al (1978), from their studies found that students having low proficiency levels in English had more positive attitudes to the language. According to them,

A positive attitude.... does not guarantee success.

(Naiman, frohlich, stern and Todesco, 1978:75)

Similar results were obtained by Teitelbaum et al (1975) in Mexico and Pierson et al (1980) in Hong Kong from their studies with American learners of Spanish and Chinese learners of

English respectively and Studies by Oller et al (1980) in Illinois showed that attitudinal variables had no significant correlation to second language achievement. Chandrasegaran (1979) from his study on urban and rural learners of English in Johore found similar results. Similar findings were obtained by Anie Attan (1982) in her study with Malay-speaking first year Universiti Teknologi Malaysia undergraduates and Subrayan (1986) with undergraduates from the Faculty of Islam, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Jayatilaka's (1982) study with Universiti Science Malaysia undergraduates showed that negative attitudes on the part of students was no impediment to successful English language learning.

Thus, it can be seen from this study that there is no significant relationship between the proficiency levels of Indian urban and rural learners of English and their attitudes towards the English language. Hence, prediction of English language proficiency is not possible based on the attitudes of the Indian students in urban and rural schools.

The favourable attitudes of the Indian students could be because the English language has imposed a pressure of importance and prestige among the people. Its pressure and importance are still felt even though Bahasa Melayu is the national language (Asmah Haji Omar, 1975). The lack of correlation with their proficiency levels in English could be because of the National Education policy. Students do not have to obtain a pass in English to obtain the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. Hence, a low priority is given to English. They devote more time, according to Rodgers,

to other compulsory and essential subjects which are prerequisites to certification.

(Rodgers, 1979:12)

Students are also aware of the fact that they do not have to know much English in order to achieve academic success in Malaysia since the medium of instruction at all levels of education from the primary to secondary and tertiary level, is in Bahasa Melayu. They need to be proficient in English only if they intend to pursue their further studies in English-speaking countries (Chandrasegaran, 1979).

Findings also showed that **there was no significant correlation between the proficiency levels of the students and their attitudes towards the English speaking groups and their cultures.** This was similar to results obtained by Oller et al (1977) and Pierson et al (1980), Chandrasegaran (1979), Annie Attan (1982) and Subrayan (1986). Teitelbaum et al (1975), Naiman et al (1978) and Jayatilaka (1986) also in their studies stated that favourable attitudes towards the English language community and their cultures were not a prerequisite for success in second language learning.

Data analysis showed that **there was no significant correlation between the proficiency levels of the students in urban and rural schools and their motivation to learn English.** Thus, motivation here is not a predictor of students proficiency levels in English. These results were in contrast of studies done locally and abroad. studies done in Malaysia by Subramaniam (1976), Chandrasegaran (1979), Vijchulata and Gan Siowck Lee (1985) and Subrayan (1986) showed motivation plays a significant role in English Language achievement. Studies done abroad Gardner and Lambert (1972) in Louisiana Maine, Tan (1978) in Singapore, Paitoonpong (1980) in Thailand and Theivananthampillai Baba (1984) in the Fiji Islands also showed similar results.

There are several possible explanations for there being no significant correlation between the motivation of Indian urban and rural learners of English and the proficiency levels. The first of these is that, in view of the shift in emphasis from English to Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction, students have realised that a high level of competence in the English language is no longer crucial for academic success in Malaysia. Moreover, as stated earlier, a pass in English is not essential for the all important Form 5 Certificate (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia). Students who fail to further their studies abroad are the ones who will have to strive to obtain good grades in English (Chandrasegaran, 1979).

Secondly, students are aware that English is not necessary for their upward social and occupational mobility in Malaysia (Solomon, 1988). This is different from the British era, when upward social and occupational mobility was confined to the English-educated for they were the ones who could be absorbed into the various administrative posts in the Malaysian Civil Service. Prior to independence, many were under the impression that one was a successful person if one speaks the English Language, the reason being that the major medium of instruction in most schools and colleges then was English.

Thirdly, students in general may place low priority in learning English and devote little time to the study of English. As seen, this might not be because of the lack of motivation but it might be just that they have to devote more time to other compulsory and essential subjects (Rodgers, 1979)

Further, students especially those in the rural areas are aware that they can successfully get by using their mother tongue and Bahasa Melayu. Their mother tongues can be used for effective intra-community communication while Bahasa Melayu can be used for effective inter ethnic communication (Anie Attan, 1982).

The pedagogic aspect of English language teaching could be another possible reason why there is no significant correlation between motivation and achievement in the English lan-

guage (Anie Attan, 1982). It could be possible that the teacher and his teaching technique could be at fault. If the teacher is not adequately trained to teach English, he might not be able to motivate his students to learn English. Hence, the students lack the proficiency in the language.

In addition, teachers who teach English might come from a variety of educational backgrounds and therefore might not have the expertise to teach English effectively. They might lack the linguistic and methodical aspects of English language teaching. The teachers themselves might not be proficient in English and are teaching the subject for "having to teach it" (Alptekin, 1981).

If a teacher himself has difficulty speaking the target language, he is not going to succeed in giving learners under him a good command of the spoken language (Anie Attan, 1982). What he will be able to achieve will be limited to his own command of the language. Even with modern day aids, it's the teacher's language which remains the model for the learners in that language. This is especially true in the rural areas where students are not exposed to much English outside the language classroom.

Another possible reason for the lack of correlation between motivation of students and their proficiency levels could be the teaching methods used by these teachers (Anie Attan, 1982). For teachers with little confidence in using English, they will be unable to use effective methods for which they have to have a language proficiency which they do not possess. Teaching, hence, would be unsatisfactory and not effective. The above, are several possible explanations as to why students in Malaysian schools lack the proficiency in English in spite of being strongly motivated to learn the language.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This study showed that most of the Indian urban and rural learners of English as a second language have favourable attitudes towards the English language and the English speaking groups and their cultures. They are also motivated to learn English. The following are some areas that could be looked into to help increase their proficiency in the English language.

1. Increased exposure to and practice of the English language

Studies by Tan (1978) and Chandrasegaran (1979) have shown that there is a definite link between the degree of exposure to English and competence in that language. If the favourable attitudes to the language and target language group are not backed up by sufficient exposure

to and practice in the English language, the students would not be able to improve their proficiency in the English language.

2. Learning Strategies

Another area that should be looked into is the learning strategies. The teacher should make the student aware of learning strategies that he (the student) could utilise to increase his competency in the language. In this way, students who are weak in English can improve their proficiency levels while the better students can further improve in their proficiency levels. A knowledge of learning strategies would enable the student to better himself independently.

3. Pedagogical aspects of language teaching

Teachers who teach the English language must have the command of the language as well as the expertise to teach the language. They must possess the linguistic knowledge and know the methodical aspects of English language teaching. Less skilled teachers should be provided with in-service training to improve themselves and achieve better and more effective teaching. The English teachers should also be sent for courses regularly to learn about new and more effective techniques of teaching English. All these will contribute to help improve the proficiency levels of English of their students for ultimately the teacher remains the principle model for learning a language especially in the rural areas.

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Part I

Instructions

Please put a circle around the numbers which indicate your answer except in Nos. 1, 5, 6 where the answers have to be filled in.

1. Name :

2. Sex : 1. Male 2. Female

3. Name of Present School :

4. Location of school : 1. Urban 2. Rural

5. Your father's occupation is (Please put down in detail)

.....
.....

6. Your mother's occupation is (Please put down in detail)

.....
.....

7. Income of parents. Tick appropriate box

Monthly Income (RM)	Father	Mother
Less than RM500.00		
RM500.00 - RM999.00		
RM1,000.00 - RM1,499.00		
RM1,500.00 - RM4,999.00		
More than RM5,000.00		

8. Highest education level of parents. Tick the appropriate boxes.

Education Level		Father	Mother
<input type="checkbox"/>	University		
<input type="checkbox"/>	College		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Secondary School		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Primary School		
<input type="checkbox"/>	No Education		

9. How often do you use English with the following people? Tick appropriate boxes.

	Always	Often	Occasionally	Not at all
Father				
Mother				
Siblings				
Friends				
Teachers				
Neighbours				

10. How often do you listen to or view the following in English? Tick appropriate boxes.

Times listened to / viewed	Television	Radio	Movies
Daily			
Weekly			
Monthly			
Occasionally			
None at all			

11. How often do you read the following in English?

When read	Newspapers	Magazines, Comics	Reference Books
Daily			
Weekly			
Monthly			
Occasionally			
None at all			

Instruction for Sections II, III and IV.

Do you agree with the following statements? Please indicate by ticking in one of the five boxes which stand for the following in each of the cases.

- 1 = Totally agree with the statements
- 2 = Quite agree
- 3 = No opinion
- 4 = Quite disagree
- 5 = Totally disagree

Part II

Attitude towards the English Language

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	An educated person is one who is good in English					
2.	When using English, I do not feel that I am an Indian anymore					
3.	If I want to impress someone I would speak English					
4.	If I use English my status is raised					
5.	I could communicate better if I use English					
6.	I feel uneasy when hearing an Indian speak English					
7.	English has contributed a great deal to Malaysian development					
8.	English is an international language of understanding and communication					
9.	Using the English Language makes me more confident					
10.	Science and technical terms are easily explained in English					

Part III

Attitudes towards the English-speaking groups and their cultures

	1	2	3	4	5
1. The English-speaking groups are more progressive in all fields					
2. The children of English - speaking groups are well mannered					
3. The families of English - speaking groups are more united					
4. English - speaking groups are more confident					
5. Western culture has a bad influence on our society					
6. RTM should stop screening films from the West					
7. English - speaking groups can learn about good values from the non English speaking groups					
8. English songs are more pleasant to listen to					
9. English speaking groups are not tied to any traditional values					
10. English - speaking groups are easily understood because they are frank.					