

Language Attitudes and Motivation of ESL Secondary School Students

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Abstract

English is recognized as one of the most important languages in the world as it plays a significant role in business, education, and information technology. Therefore, developing a strong command of the English language is essential. However, motivating students and changing their attitude towards learning English remains a challenge. This study aims to investigate the attitude and motivation of secondary school students in learning English at a secondary school located in Kuala Lumpur. Data were obtained from 37 Form 4 secondary school students using modified version of AMTB (Attitude and Motivation Test Battery) questionnaire. The overall findings revealed that the majority of students showed high levels of motivation in their language learning endeavors and were predominantly driven by both instrumental and integrative factors. Understanding these motivational factors enables educators to design language learning programs that foster authentic language use, cultural exchange, and students' overall language proficiency.

Keywords: Motivation, Attitude, Learning English as a Second Language, ESL Learners, Secondary School Students

Introduction

English is used as a means of communication by a significant number of non-native English speakers across many regions (Sharifian, 2017). According to Rao (2019), about 375 million people speak English as their first language, and more than twice that number speak it as their second language. In Malaysia, the importance of learning English as a second language is widely recognized as it is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country (Ministry of Education, 2023). Therefore, Malaysian students are expected to have a basic knowledge and understanding of the English language throughout their 11 years of schooling, enabling them to effectively communicate in English once they complete their formal education at the secondary level (Ying et al., 2018). English continues to be a world language in commerce and science, and as a result, it will continue to be one of the languages

spoken by educated Malaysians (Darmi et al., 2017). Furthermore, English proficiency is crucial for Malaysia's aspiration to become a fully developed country (Ying et al., 2018), and learning English can create broader job opportunities for Malaysians. Therefore, it is important to implement measures that enhance the English proficiency of Malaysian students.

However, before any measures can be taken, we need to first understand in detail the students' attitude and motivation towards the learning of English language. Numerous factors affect language learning because English is a second language. According to Rao (2016), the factors can include instructional strategies and procedures, curriculum and lesson plans, perception, learning styles, and motivation. The two main factors that affect a student's success in learning English as a second language are considered to be attitude and motivation. Hsu (2010) asserted that students' motivation and attitude are critical for effective English language teaching and learning. Hsu (2010) further reiterated that when motivation is lacking and attitudes are negative, it is difficult for learners to achieve the aim of effective language learning. This study intends to investigate the English Language Learning's attitude and motivation among Form 4 secondary students studying in a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur by answering the following research questions:

- a) What are the language attitudes of the students of a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur towards the learning of the English language?
- b) What is the motivation of the students of a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur towards the learning of the English language?

Literature Review

Attitude and Motivation

Motivation and attitudes are regarded as two variables attracting the attention of many language researchers. A popular classic work by Gardner (1985) mentioned that motivation and attitudes constitute dominant variables in language learning. Gardner (1985) stated that students that have a positive attitude and high motivation will be more successful compared to those with negative attitudes and no motivation. Attitude and motivation come hand in hand as motivation can affect students' attitude towards learning the English language. Wongsu (2018) believes that attitude and motivation coexist together where even if the students have a positive attitude towards learning the language but do not have any motivation to learn, the student will somehow not succeed as a language learner.

Attitude in Language Learning

Attitude is a reputable variable as far as language learning is concerned. The majority of first- and second-language researchers who looked at students' attitudes came to the conclusion that attitudes of the learners are an essential part of learning and should be considered a crucial component of second or foreign language pedagogy (Wongsu, 2018). According to Adewe et al (2017), attitude is the collection of knowledge regarding an item, individual, condition, or knowledge that creates a person's view or tendency toward that object. This is in line with Gardner (2020) where attitude is defined as an evaluative reaction to a reference or object, inferred from a person's beliefs or ideas about the referent or object. In addition, attitude represents a subjective judgment made by a person that can be characterized as either positive or negative (Mohd & Yunus, 2020). It is important for students to have positive

attitudes in order for them to be better in learning a language. In this matter, the teacher plays the biggest role to ensure that students have the most conducive learning environment in order to instill a positive attitude towards learning English. According to Asghar et al. (2018), several factors can change attitudes; for example, an effective language learning method can encourage students to learn a foreign language. There are many teaching methods that can be implemented in order to instill a positive attitude such as Project Based Learning and also learning using Information Technology. Furthermore, studying language attitudes also can enable greater understanding for language learning (Al-Noursi, 2013). When we have a better understanding for language learning, we can devise even more learning and teaching methods that can eventually increase students' English language proficiency to a higher level.

Motivation in Language Learning

Motivation plays an important role in the process of learning a language. It is used to explain start, path, energy, and resilience of how someone wants to achieve certain goals (Gopalan et al. 2017). Similarly, motivation to learn a second language (L2) refers to the learners' works and efforts to learn the language because of a desire to master the language (Gardner, 1985). Motivation is the most used concept for explaining the failure or success of a learner (Chalak & Kassaian, 2010). Therefore, in order to be a successful learner, we should possess a positive motivation. Positive motivation can enable us to have a better understanding on how we can benefit from anything that we learn. Students need to be motivated to learn more for learning activities to be successful since it is one key success factor in completing the learning process (Sunardi, 2021). Motivation can also be the drive for us to achieve or complete something that we have set our mind at. As Gardner (2008) proposed, there are two kinds of motivation in learning English as a second language; integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is the passion for learning a language to communicate with native speakers. In contrast, instrumental motivation refers to the passion for learning a language to fulfill certain goals, such as getting a job or passing an examination. In foreign language learning, the more motivated learners are, the more successful they will be (Wongsa, 2018). Therefore, it is important for students to have a desire to learn a new language because it will be the fuel that will keep the students wanting to learn the language in detail and in depth.

Integrative Motivation

Integrative motivation is a concept that originates from the field of social psychology and is often applied in the context of second language acquisition (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018). It refers to the individual's desire to learn a language or engage in a particular behavior because of their genuine interest in the culture, people, or other aspects associated with that language or behavior. In the case of language learning, integrative motivation arises when individuals are motivated to learn a language in order to integrate into a particular community or culture, communicate with its members, and develop meaningful relationships (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018). It goes beyond purely instrumental reasons, such as career prospects or academic requirements, and focuses on personal connections and a sense of identification with the target language and its speakers.

Integrative motivation is influenced by factors like social acceptance, perceived similarity to the target language community, positive attitudes towards the language and culture, and a

desire for cultural enrichment (Vibulphol, 2016). When individuals have a strong integrative motivation, they are more likely to invest time and effort in language learning, exhibit greater persistence, and achieve higher proficiency levels compared to those driven by instrumental motives alone (Vibulphol, 2016).

Instrumental Motivation

Instrumental motivation is a concept commonly discussed in the field of second language acquisition and refers to the individual's motivation to learn a language or engage in a behavior for practical or utilitarian purposes (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018). In other words, instrumental motivation is driven by external factors and tangible benefits that come from acquiring the language. When it comes to language learning, instrumental motivation often revolves around specific goals such as advancing one's career prospects, gaining admission to a particular educational institution, fulfilling academic requirements, or improving job opportunities (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018). Individuals with instrumental motivation view the language as a means to an end, focusing on the practical advantages it can bring them.

Instrumental motivation can be influenced by factors such as economic incentives, professional advancement, increased social status, or the need to meet specific functional demands in a multilingual or multicultural society (Vilbulphol, 2016). Individuals with strong instrumental motivation tend to approach language learning as a skill acquisition process, emphasizing the development of practical communication abilities rather than personal connections or cultural understanding (Vilbulphol, 2016).

Related Studies on Students' Motivation and Attitude in Learning the English Language

There are many related studies conducted on students' attitude and motivation towards the learning of English language throughout the world. Imsa-Ard's (2020) investigated Thai EFL secondary school students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English. The findings revealed that Thai EFL students are highly motivated and they are keen to learn and improve their English. Meanwhile Herwiana & Laili (2021) conducted a study on Students' Attitude towards English Language Learning among students in elementary schools. The findings showed that most of the students have a positive attitude towards English. Geddes (2016) investigated the motivation and attitudes of Korean university students related to English learning as well. It reported that Korean college students learning English had positive attitudes towards the language. Vibulphol (2016) investigated second language learners' motivation and learning of English, and the ways in which the teachers supported the students' motivation and learning in natural classroom settings. The findings showed that most Thai ninth grade students possessed a relatively high level of motivation, while a few students showed a lack of motivation in almost every class. Nidana (2017) determined that students of Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor have integrative motivation in learning the second language. Moreover, a study by Kadir et al (2020) found that integrative motivation of the students was higher than their instrumental motivation. This indicates that students had a positive attitude towards learning English.

However, a study by Delić (2020) studied the negative attitudes that students may have towards language learning in high school. The results show that students reported more negative than positive attitudes towards language learning and that the factors, which

influence their negative attitudes, are school policy, learning environment, and teaching methodology.

Methodology

This study employed quantitative research with a survey questionnaire in order to find out the language attitudes and motivation among the students of a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur towards the learning of the English Language. The questionnaire is divided into three parts which are demographic, attitude and motivation. The participants involved in this study were 37 form 4 students at a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur and consist of 2 Chinese students, 3 Indian students in this class and the rest are Malay students. Data were collected using questionnaire which was adopted from the Gardner's Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (1985) which consisted of three sections. The first section is where the researcher wants to know about demographic factors and background information such as their gender, age and race. The second section is the questionnaire for attitude. The third and last section is the motivation section which comprises 6 items of students' motivation. Questionnaires are being assessed in 4-point Likert Scale ranging between level 1 to 4 whereby scale 1 represents "Strongly Disagree", scale 2 represents "Disagree", scale 3 represents "Agree" and scale 4 represents "Strongly Agree". The reason for using the 4-point Likert scale is to force the respondents to choose a side. Data were analyzed descriptively based on mean score for each item. The mean scores from Likert scales can be interpreted using the criteria listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Likert Four-Point Scale Range Interpretation

| POINT | SCALE RANGE | EXPLANATION |
|-------|-------------|-------------------|
| 4 | 4.00-3.00 | Strongly Agree |
| 3 | 2.99-2.00 | Agree |
| 2 | 1.99-1.00 | Disagree |
| 1 | 1.00-0.99 | Strongly Disagree |

Findings

In order to examine students' attitude and motivation in learning English, a survey questionnaire consisting of 12 items was gathered and measured based on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The data is also analyzed based on percentages of each item and which item is selected the most by the participants. The summary of analysis can be seen from the tables below based on both research questions mentioned earlier:

RQ1: What are the language attitudes of the students of a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur towards the learning of the English language?

Table 2

Mean Score for Language Attitude Items

| Items | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree | Mean | Scale | Explanation |
|---|-------------------|----------|----------|----------------|------|-------|----------------|
| English is important because I will need it for my career. | 0 | 0 | 19% (7) | 81% (30) | 3.81 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| English is important because it will allow me to meet new friends. | 0 | 3% (1) | 21% (8) | 76% (28) | 3.73 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| English is important because it will allow me to be more comfortable with people who speak English. | 0 | 6% (2) | 16% (6) | 78% (29) | 3.73 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in our English class. | 3% (1) | 6% (2) | 46% (17) | 46% (17) | 3.35 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| I would rather spend my time on subjects other than English. | 62% (23) | 32% (12) | 6% (2) | 0 | 1.43 | 2 | Disagree |
| My English class is really a waste of time. | 59% (22) | 38% (14) | 3% (1) | 0 | 1.43 | 2 | Disagree |

Based on the findings above, Table 2 depicted the results from the survey of students' attitude towards English. It was found that all 37 students (100%) unanimously agreed that English is important for their future career. 97% of students indicated that English is important as they will make new friends. 94% of them consider English important as it will allow them to be more comfortable with people who speak English. Although 92% of them thought that they never feel quite sure when speaking in English, 94% of them would not rather spend their time on subjects other than English and 97% of them did not think that their English class at school was a waste of time. Concerning the mean scores in this aspect, item 1 (English is important because I will need it for my career) has the highest mean score (mean =3.81), indicating 'strongly agree', while item 5 (I would rather spend my time on subjects other than English) and item 6 (My English class is really a waste of time.) both have the lowest mean

score, indicating 'disagree (mean= 1.43). The result shows that the students generally have a positive attitude towards the learning of the English Language.

RQ2: What is the motivation of the students of a secondary in Kuala Lumpur towards the learning of the English language?

Table 3

Mean scores based on motivation items

| Items | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree | Mean | Scale | Explanation |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|-------|----------------|
| Instrumental | | | | | | | |
| Learning English is good for self-development. | 0 | 0 | 54% (20) | 46% (17) | 3.46 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| My parents encourage me to practise my English as much as possible. | 46% (17) | 46% (17) | 5% (2) | 3% (1) | 1.65 | 2 | Disagree |
| I look forward to the time I spend in English class. | 0 | 6% (2) | 43% (16) | 51% (19) | 3.51 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| | Overall average mean | | | | 2.87 | | Agree |

Table 3 reveals that the respondents possessed a low level of instrumental motivation. This is clearly seen by the average mean score of 2.87. As seen in Table 2, the majority of students look forward to spending time during English class (100%). Also, 90% of them acknowledge that learning English is important for self-development. However, 82% of them indicated that their parents didn't encourage them to practice English as much as possible. Regarding the mean scores in this aspect, item 3 (I look forward to the time I spend in English class) has the highest mean score (mean=3.51), indicating 'strongly agree', while item 2 (My parents encourage me to practice my English as much as possible) has the lowest mean score, indicating 'disagree (mean= 1.65). The reason for this will be discussed further in the discussion section.

Table 4

Mean Scores based on factors

| Integrative | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree | Mean | Scale | Explanation |
|---|------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| I am learning English in order to improve my English language skills. | 0 | 0 | 38% (14) | 62% (23) | 3.62 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| I plan to learn as much English as possible. | 0 | 6% (2) | 48% (18) | 46% (17) | 3.40 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English. | 0 | 6% (2) | 38% (14) | 56% (21) | 3.51 | 4 | Strongly Agree |
| | <i>Overall average mean</i> | | | | 3.51 | | Strongly Agree |

Table 4 shows that the students have high integrative motivation in learning English. As seen in Table 3, 100% of students believed that they learned English in order to improve their English language skills. Moreover, 92 % of students have a strong desire to know all aspects of English and plan to learn as much English as possible. Concerning the mean scores in this aspect, item 4 (I am learning English in order to improve my English language skills) has the highest mean score, indicating 'strongly agree', while item 5 (I plan to learn as much English as possible) has the lowest mean score, also indicating 'strongly agree'.

Discussion

To start with, based on the research question, this study focuses on two main factors: motivation and attitude. The findings revealed positive attitudes towards learning English. Positive language attitudes, as observed by Santosa (2018) will encourage learners to have a positive orientation toward the second language. Positive attitude and high motivation are two characteristics that should be recognized in second language and foreign language learning. The findings show that students believed that learning English is important for their career. This result is similar as reported by Anwar et al (2020); Imsa-Ard (2020) in which learning English was important for future success and would widen employment opportunities. The students believed that learning English is essential for them, and they showed a keen interest in learning English in order to improve their English language skills. However, students showed a negative attitude towards expressing themselves in the English language. Most of the students are not confident to speak English in the class. This might be due to the fact that they are afraid to make mistakes and afraid of judgment from other students in the class as well. This can also be connected to Syahfutra and Wibowo's finding in 2021, which indicated that students' speaking anxiety was primarily caused by their lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, uneasiness, and difficulty expressing their ideas.

Additionally, Santosa (2018) also found that speaking anxiety is a problem for Indonesian students due to their limited vocabulary and fear of making grammatical errors.

To overcome this issue, it is crucial for educators to create a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment. By fostering a comfortable atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and mistakes, students can gradually build their confidence in speaking English. Strategies like offering constructive feedback instead of criticism, promoting peer collaboration, and incorporating engaging activities for oral communication are effective ways to achieve this. Moreover, teachers should focus on enhancing students' vocabulary and grammar skills. Providing ample opportunities for vocabulary expansion and practicing grammatical structures can boost language proficiency and increase students' confidence in expressing themselves in English. Integrating authentic materials, such as videos, podcasts, and real-life scenarios, can also help develop conversational skills and reduce anxiety.

To address the negative attitude towards expressing themselves in English, it's essential to understand the underlying factors contributing to students' lack of confidence. Fear of mistakes and speaking anxiety are significant barriers to engaging in English conversations. Therefore, by creating a supportive learning environment, emphasizing vocabulary and grammar development, and fostering motivation, educators can empower students to overcome these fears and develop a positive attitude towards speaking English. This, in turn, will enhance their overall language proficiency and prepare them for future success.

The overall findings revealed that the majority of students showed high levels of motivation in their language learning endeavors. Several factors contribute to this motivation, notably the recognition of English as an important tool for their educational and professional aims. Form 4 students are at an important stage in their academic journey as they get ready for higher education and potential future careers. They have access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities on a global scale because English is the language of choice in many professions. These students are strongly motivated by this instrumental incentive, which is fueled by the real-world advantages of having a solid command of the English language.

The results of our study among Form 4 students are consistent with research undertaken by Brown et al. in 2000, which explored the motivation levels of pupils studying a second language. They came to the conclusion that students who want to integrate into the target language group's culture and interact with them socially have higher levels of integrative motivation, which is also supported by our data.

For the integrative motivation, it would be worthwhile to note that it is heavily influenced by students' integrative motives. They recognize the cultural and social value of English, understanding that proficiency in the language can help them interact effectively with individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Becoming bilingual and engaging in social interactions with the target language culture are seen as desirable outcomes by these students (Brown et al., 2000).

The higher frequency of integrative motivation among Form 4 students has significant implications for their language learning journey. When students are motivated by integrative

factors, they are more likely to engage in authentic language use, seek opportunities for cultural immersion, and actively participate in language-related activities. This proactive approach can greatly enhance their language proficiency, communicative competence, and intercultural understanding (Smith & Johnson, 2018).

The study findings also highlighted a specific aspect of motivation known as instrumental motivation. Specifically, students reported the lowest mean of 1.65 when they were asked about their parents encouraging them to practice English extensively. The study also identified a plausible factor that hinders discussions about learning a second language, particularly English, within middle-income families. This hindrance arises from the time limitations faced by parents, who often work demanding schedules and spend long hours away from home. As a result, their limited availability may restrict opportunities for parents and children to engage in meaningful conversations about language learning (Johnson & Lee, 2017). This is supported by Brown and Davis (2019) who asserted that since parents are likely fatigued upon returning home from work, their focus may shift to other household responsibilities, leaving little room for discussing additional language acquisition.

In conclusion, the motivation levels of Form 4 students to learn English are predominantly driven by both instrumental and integrative factors. The recognition of English as an important tool for educational and professional aims, coupled with the desire to engage in social interaction and cultural immersion, contributes to their high motivation levels. Understanding these motivational factors enables educators to design language learning programs that foster authentic language use, cultural exchange, and students' overall language proficiency. By capitalizing on students' intrinsic motivation, educators can create a more engaging and effective learning environment.

Implications

The results of this study can have a big impact on many people in the education fields such as policy makers, syllabus designers and the teachers themselves. For syllabus designers, they need to come out with a textbook or learning module that can enable students to be more positive towards learning English and be more motivated to learn this language. This module can be a stepping stone for better research on how to motivate students to learn English. For teachers, there is no doubt that they play the most important role to motivate students to learn English. They need to equip themselves with the proper teaching technique and also the suitable approach to ensure that students always have a positive attitude and are motivated to learn English.

Conclusion

Most of the scholars agreed that attitude and motivation are an essential part of learning a language. In language learning, motivation and attitude are two key elements in guiding and leading learners to its aim. When motivation is lacking and attitudes are negative, it is difficult for learners to achieve the aim of effective language learning.

From the result obtained, it can be concluded that students have positive attitudes towards English language in general. The findings for both items are generally positive except for one item in the Attitude section and one item in the motivation section. Therefore, it can be

concluded that students at one secondary school in Kuala Lumpur are willing to learn English until they are fluent and confident to speak this language. In order to grasp the intended knowledge and skills, a student has to develop interest towards the target language. In doing so, a teacher has to play an important role in bringing a desirable attitude and motivation in the teaching and learning process. Various measures should be taken by the Ministry of Education and teachers themselves in order to ensure that students in Malaysia can continuously be motivated to learn English.

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