

Attitudes of Undergraduates towards Improving English Language Skills and Influence on Business Productivity: A Case Study of Faculty of Applied Sciences, USJP.

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Abstract

Many large and medium scale businesses operating in Sri Lanka at present have a global aspiration. Even if a company has a domestic focus, the employee base may comprise of individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, with globalization having gathered pace, the customers being those from around the world and different language originations is often inevitable and beyond the control of a business entity. Hence, there is an immense significance in the use of a common language in business interactions. English is used as a lingua franca among most of the business communities today. In this regard, it is a pre-requisite for potential employees in similar contexts to have English language competency.

However, a considerable percentage of the Sri Lankan undergraduates, who will soon become internal stakeholders of various businesses have a tendency to lack the desired level of English language skills. Assessing the attitudes of undergraduates is vital in this regard. This study aims at understanding the perceptions of the undergraduates towards improving their English language skills exploring the views and practices of the undergraduates of the Faculty of Applied Sciences in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The study obtained primary data via observations and a questionnaire survey; a statistical analysis was carried out to analyze any gaps in the attitudes of the undergraduates. Detailed findings of the study are discussed in the research paper. The analysis revealed a clear excuse-making attitude among the undergraduates. This gap in their attitudes needs to be closed and their minds need be nurtured to achieve enhanced business productivity in the future through an employee base with improved linguistic capacity.

Keywords: Business Productivity, English, Common Language, Attitudes, Undergraduates

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the high connectivity in the modern world, information flow through all the corners of the world reaching the entire Earth's population. Further, the internet which is the global connectivity platform has most of its content in English. The language is ranked first among the top ten languages in the internet (Anon, 2016). Hence, it is evident that English has become the common language that connects people worldwide. In this context, any randomly selected person around the globe is bound to come across at least one English word a day.

Thus, the current background has been created in such a way that English serves as a pre-requisite for entering the employment market. An employee's competency in English language is seen as a significant attribute in the modern business environment. Clark (2012) highlights that English will maintain and grow its dominance moving from "a marker of the elite" in years past to "a basic skill needed for the entire workforce, in the same way that literacy has been transformed in the last two centuries from an elite privilege into a basic requirement for informed citizenship." The aforesaid being only a few evidences, the factors that stress on the importance of being a competent user of the language are many. In this context, learning English and developing English language skills related to various aspects such as reading, writing, speaking and listening is important. Motivation, attitudes, anxiety, learning achievements, aptitudes, intelligence, age, personalities, etc. are commonly identified as factors that influence the language learning process (Gardner, 1960; Lehmann, 2006; Schmidt, Borai & Kassabgy, 1996, cited in Shams, 2008). A learner's attitude is acknowledged as one of the most important factors that influence the learning of the language despite all these influential factors.

Development in the diversified fields of technology has also had a significant impact on the attitudes of young adults in learning English as a second language. This fact is evident for Sri Lanka as well; however, the extent to which the language is learnt and practiced at higher educational institutions is yet a debatable topic. This study is mainly focused on the attitudes of students in tertiary education institutions towards learning English language. More specifically, the study investigates the attitudes of the students of the FAS, University of Sri Jayewardenepura towards learning English language and the influence of their attitudes on future business productivity.

Undergraduates will join the workforce soon after graduation. Lack of required level of language skills in these potential employees will act as a silent force that will hamper the

business productivity of entities. Attitudes of the undergraduates towards learning English, the significance of English language skills of the employees of a business and how English language skills influence business productivity are explored in the forthcoming sections of the paper.

The following chapters will discuss the methodology, the current situation, the constraints and challenges and conclusion derived from the study.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed method in conducting the research: Qualitative and Quantitative. Respondents were selected from the Faculty of Applied Sciences using random sampling. Observations, interviews and focused group discussions were held within the university as part of the qualitative study. Opinions and behaviour of undergraduates towards English language learning were recorded (unstructured records) for 6 weeks. The sample for interviews (individual) comprised of 30 random students who were present at the faculty canteen between 8a.m to 5p.m on randomly selected days between the 6 weeks. An online questionnaire was developed on a Google form in order to obtain benefits such as effective circulation among undergraduates, cost effectiveness and ease of creating the database. It was distributed via e-mail, social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber) and field observations. A total of 132 respondents have filled the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered for 5 weeks starting from 19th of May. Further, observations and online research were used to identify the importance of English in the business sector. Frequency checking, percentages and cross tabulations are the techniques used for analysis of data. An auto generated summary of descriptive statistics was obtained from Google forms. The cross tabulated analysis of the responses was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Current Language Practices

University of Sri Jayewardenepura consists of four faculties: Management, Arts, Applied Sciences and Medicine. This study as stated is focused on the attitudes of undergraduates of The Faculty of Applied Sciences (FAS) towards English Language and its influence on business productivity in the long run. The faculty has approximately 2000 students coming from different parts of the country with various socio-cultural backgrounds. Medium of studies in terms of lectures and examination is English in the Faculty of Applied Sciences and 'English' is a mandatory subject to pass in order to obtain the degree. There are lectures conducted by the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) for these students throughout all

the four academic years. However, it is commonly seen that students of FAS rarely attend English lectures although they have difficulties in communicating and comprehending in English.

The study comprised of two components: qualitative and quantitative. As stated above, opinions and behaviour of the respondents were recorded and observed (unstructured records). The quantitative study comprised of a sample survey of 132 respondents. The sample comprised of male and female students out of which majority are females (56.10%). The qualitative study records indicated that undergraduates are aware of the fact that competency in English language skills is essential for their career advancement. However, they lack a strategic perspective to acquire the necessary skills. According to the sample, respondents come from a science background which requires a logical approach in the learning process. Their opinions and behaviours recorded indicated that they do not apply the same approach in learning English. Significantly undergraduate opinions reported that interacting in English differentiated purely based on their language competency. Some of their behaviours highlighted their tendency to discriminate the students who come from an English speaking background and corner them from the rest of the crowd.

Significance of English Language Skills to the Workforce

It is evident that competence in English language opens multiple avenues to undergraduates as fresh employees. The influence on language competence in English is found to be significant in career enhancement in many countries across the world. This phenomenon is common to the Sri Lankan context as well. Moorthy (2015) highlights that “A majority of Sri Lankans who have chosen ICT as their future career have ended up in failure for the simple reason that they have (English) language constraints”. In this regard, it is evident that undergraduates who do not make an effort to learn English are at a disadvantage in career enhancement and that indirectly affects the overall productivity of the company.

Further, Bernoff (2016) highlights that, “Entry-level employees get little training in how to write in a brief, clear, and incisive way. Instead, they’re immersed in first-draft emails from their managers, poorly edited reports, and jargon-filled employee manuals. Their flabby writing habits fit right in. And the whole organization drowns in productivity-draining blather”.

As such it is seen that the organizations worldwide are beginning to identify the importance of the language skills of the workforce as a factor that influence business productivity. The companies may even embark on introducing company-wide language strategies in order to realize the full productivity levels.

Attitudes and Behaviours and their Influence on Business Productivity

Analyzing results of both quantitative and qualitative data of the study showed that there are multiple dimensions related to business productivity of undergraduates as potential employees of the corporate sector. Accordingly results indicated that there exist constraints and challenges in the attitudes of undergraduates towards English which retards the business productivity of organizations in the long run. This section of the paper aims to discuss these constraints and challenges in detail. Respondents were asked to rate their English speaking and writing skills; Figure 1 represents the findings.

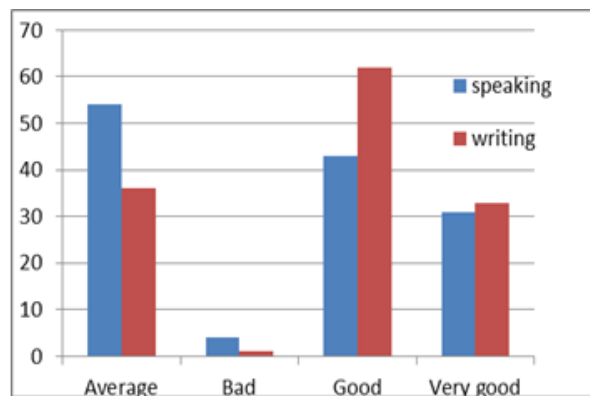


Figure 1: Respondents' Rating of Their Language Skills

Accordingly, it indicates that majority of the respondents rated their speaking skills 'Average' whereas a majority rated their writing skills 'Good'. The graph also indicates that the next highest responses for speaking and writing are 'Good' and 'Average' respectively. Figure 1 also indicates that the count for speaking is higher than for writing

There are equal counts for ‘very good’ speaking and writing skills. These results were similar to the responses which were found from the interviews and focus group discussions in which respondents stated that they can manage to write in English (particularly in writing assignments, exam papers etc.) but are facing an issue with speaking in English. Idris et al (2015) mentions that “Even among different non-native users of English language, there are still some variations, some are better English users as a result of their exposure to the language, while others still have some difficulties in using it in communication.” Thus, it is clear that exposure to the language is important and these undergraduates who are potential employees of the corporate sector feel that their speaking ability is not up to the required standard. Hence, they will not be able to function as effective communicators in business encounters. Further, it has to be noted that with regard to the writing skills too, an average level would not suffice as highlighted earlier in this paper.

Respondents were asked to select (multiple responses) the alternatives followed when they don’t understand lectures conducted in English. Accordingly, it was revealed that nearly 84% of the respondents take some action to overcome issues of learning in English (ask from a friend (22.7%), use a dictionary (18.18%), use Sinhala or Tamil medium text books (7.57%)). Significantly it was indicated that nearly 16% of the respondents are not making an effort to overcome difficulties in the use of English Language. This is significant as the extent to which they understand cannot be measured and the accuracy of their learning could also be questionable when the language competency of peers cannot be measured. In this regard, it is evident that undergraduates tend to rely on surface level understanding on certain subject matters when there is a language barrier. However, percentage of respondents who stated that they do not do anything to overcome language barriers is relatively significant. This indicates that there is relatively significant number of students who do not sought alternatives when they face language difficulties.

Higher percentage of respondents (59.80%) indicated that they are currently taking actions to improve their English language competencies; results also indicated that 40.20% of them do not take any actions. Respondents were requested to specify reasons as to why they do not take any actions to improve competencies in English language. Respondents indicated that they watch TV series (49.04%) in English and learn new words they come across using different mechanisms

specifically in digital platforms. Considering the latter responses (40.20%) for the actions taken to improve English results majority of the respondents (37%) stated that they are focused on their academic enhancement in terms of their main discipline than improving English skills even though language competence is important for employment; results also indicate that 24.10% of respondents stated they are lethargic to take any actions to improve their English although they know the importance of language competencies. Accordingly, it is clear that majority of students are well aware of the significance in English language competency. Noticeably, relatively significant percentage (16%) of the respondents indicated that they can manage their university work with the current level of English knowledge. These three percentages imply that majority of the undergraduates do not consider English language skills as a priority. Furthermore, responses gained through interviews indicated that the respondents intend to improve their English after entering the corporate sector. A major concern arises in this regard. Entry level jobs for fresh undergraduates mainly lie in the operational level of business entities. Operational level accomplishments determine the productivity of any business. Therefore, employees at this level are significant in terms of business productivity. If undergraduates as potential employees are competent in language skill they have access to wider range of sources to enhance their working potential. Hence, lack of English language competency in the operational level workforce results in non-achievement of the full productivity level.

The study intended to investigate the motivational factors to learn English. Respondent interview results indicated that 'English is mandatory to get a good job post-graduation'. They also stated competence in English language is one of the main criteria through which employability is assessed. Thus, it is clear that undergraduates consider English as a prerequisite to enter the corporate sector. Quantitative results too reinforced the same where 62.9% of the respondents marked that response. Moreover, significant percentage of respondents 55.5% indicated that knowing English helps them to gain better recognition in the society. (Respondents were allowed to mark multiple responses). Respondents' use of English in day today life was measured using a checklist of multiple responses. Accordingly, majority of the respondents (54%) have indicated that they speak in English with lecturers and friends. Results also indicated that the respondents use English at restaurants and work place (in plant training/internship). Noticeably, a relatively

significant percentage of the respondents (17%) indicated that they never use English in daily routine.

The study also focused in investigating self-confidence of the respondents using a 5 point Likert scale, where they were asked to rate their level of confidence in speaking. Self-confidence in this regard is referred to as the confidence to use the language in social domains such as university, work space, friends etc. Results indicated that majority of the respondents (35.6%) are confident in speaking in English. Further, the interview records of the study indicated that the respondents can manage to communicate in English to a certain level; they also stated that they are making an effort to speak in English though they know that they would make errors. This finding was confirmed by the quantitative study where 31.1% of the respondents marked 'moderate' as a response. There was a considerable percentage (20.5%) of responses for 'less confident' response as well. This was confirmed when analyzing the interview records in which respondents have stated that they find it uncomfortable and are nervous to speak in English fearing that they would be humiliated. They also stated that this makes them feel inferior. The ability to communicate effectively in business platforms is essential in the world of business as everything is interrelated through communication. Some of the interview respondents (who are currently engaged in internships) confirmed this claim. They also highlighted the fact that, inability to communicate successfully in business meetings and discussions restrict their working potential and it prevents them from successfully highlighting the operational issues which they identify while on the job. This clearly indicated that lack of confidence to communicate in English has a negative influence on individual performance causing under productivity of business entities. Therefore, results prove that it is essential for the undergraduates to have confidence to communicate in English as potential employees.

CONCLUSION

English as the lingua franca of the modern business world has become a prerequisite skill for employees and potential employees of that space. Majority of the Sri Lankan undergraduates too enter the corporate sector. Therefore, competence in English language is essential for them to perform better which will directly affect business productivity of business. In this regard it is vital to explore the attitudes of undergraduates who are potential stakeholders of business. This

study thus focused on exploring the attitudes of undergraduates in the Faculty of Applied Sciences in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

According to the findings of the study it is clear that majority of the students rated their language skills above 'average' (i.e. good and very good) in the questionnaire where majority of interview respondents indicated that their language skills are average. This therefore conflicts as respondents' responses seem to be biased with respect to the channel of data collection. Thus this concludes that the ability to comprehend in English is low in written discourses though it is rated high. Written discourses are of equal importance to spoken discourses in the world of business. Therefore, undergraduates have a higher tendency to fail in their career without the capacity to comprehend written discourses properly.

Lack of competence in English speaking hampers the effectiveness of undergraduates as potential employees of business encounters which indirectly will influence negatively on business productivity. Issues related to English for the undergraduates are being solved using multiple alternatives. Asking from a friend and using a dictionary are the two main alternatives in this regard. Relatively significant percentage stated that they do not take any actions to overcome such issues. Responses indicated that students tend to rely on their peers when they face issues related to language. This therefore has a high impact on business productivity as the cognition of potential employees is highly dependent on the language competency of peer groups when learning happens in a second/foreign language context. In general majority of the students were found to be taking initiatives to improve their language amidst their day today work. Noticeably, it was seen that 'watching TV series' is reported as the main method to improve language and any difficult word or phrase found is understood using a dictionary. Respondents who stated that they do not take any actions reported priority given to academic work related to main discipline, being lethargic to learn English and confidence of current language as the main reasons for their claim. In this context, it is clear that undergraduates are focused on their main discipline and subordinate disciplines are disregarded frequently. Language learning is given the least priority in their priority checklists. Not taking any actions to improve and watching TV series as a mode of learning therefore had become prominent among undergraduates.

Competency in English language skills is reported to be one of the essential skills for employability and also that it helps to gain better recognition in the society. However, majority of the respondents rated average or below when they were asked to rate their self-confidence when speaking in English. Thus, it is evident that English language has a relatively higher impact in the social context in Sri Lanka where it acts as a marker of different identities in the society.

This study depicts a situational analysis of the attitudes of undergraduates towards English and the significance of their attitudes to business productivity. Accordingly, it is evident that results highlight different aspects of the attitudes of undergraduates towards English language and its effect on business productivity. The influence these attitudes reinforce on the business productivity is too discussed in the above sections of this paper. Therefore, it is justifiable to say that there exists a relationship in the attitudes of undergraduates as potential employees of the corporate sector. Finding alternatives to bridge the gap between positive and negative attitudes is vital for a productive growth in future business ventures. In this regard, the university and the faculty (FAS) in particular initiate different alternatives to develop attitudes of students towards English language. This is significant because these attitudes have a direct impact on business productivity in local and global platforms.

However, there are few limitations of this study: students were not familiar with online surveys inside the university and as the questionnaire was administered in English there were groups of students who were left apart (the research team managed to neutralize the effect of these limitations through the findings of the qualitative study). Therefore, a tri-lingual study is recommended for repetition of this study in future circumstances.

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