

Helping Engineering Students in Malaysia Develop Positive Attitudes Towards Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract- Language, identity and attitudes are importantly interwoven concepts. While the role of language cannot be over emphasised especially in multilingual society like Malaysia thereby giving rise to diglossia, we cannot deny that our attempts to uphold a (our) particular linguistic identity also plays a significant role in the politics of language education. All this invariably tells on our attitudes; towards a linguistic community, towards language in general, towards a particular language and even towards our own (native) language. The consequence of this has been a dismal linguistic as well as academic performance of students. Since language is the vehicle through which they are to convey whatever it is they might have learnt, it thus becomes challenging and difficult due to inherent attitudinal issue. This is particularly worrisome considering the attitudes of engineering and generally science-based students to English who, besides the general attitudes arising from their individual loyalty to their respective mother tongues, usually do not see any nexus between their learning English and their future plans. The desire of this paper therefore was highlighting the role of attitudes in learning English as a second language with reference to the engineering students in Malaysia. Lastly, the paper gave some practical strategies for students, teachers, parents, and the schools at large to help ignite positive attitudes of the students towards learning English with a view to improving their overall performance.

Keywords- second language, attitudes, self-regulated learning, education

I. INTRODUCTION

English today is an important language. It is a language of modernity (May, 2001). We cannot, however, deny that the spread of English around the world has posed some challenges to several nations and countries especially a multilingual society like Malaysia (Rappa & Wee, 2006). Specifically, its hegemony is felt when we consider that it is competing for functionality with the indigenous languages. In most cases, it has achieved prestigious status far above the local languages. For instance, due to one obvious reason or the other, English is the language of instruction in most countries like Nigeria (NPE, 2004) and, to some extent, Malaysia (Rappa & Wee, 2006).

The consequence of this competition is mostly noticed in the attitudes of the people towards learning English as a second language vis-à-vis their loyalty to their native languages. In other words, we are constrained ideology conflict. By ideology here, it is meant presentation of “who we are, what we stand for, what our values are and what our relationships with others are” (Oktar, 2001, p. 314). That is, therefore, our individual or collective identity comes to the bear as we struggle to either swing to modernity or maintain our linguistic (or cultural) loyalty.

This ‘division’ comes in forms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘ingroup’ and ‘outgroup’ respectively (Abdullahi & Ameen, 2017). This is the situation when users of a particular language perceive the other languages and their users as being disloyal or inferior. This is a case of attitude: languages users’ disposition towards a particular language or the linguistic community (Bartram, 2010; Mahmuda, 2017). It is basically a question of feelings about one’s language as against others. It is thus a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular language with some degree of favour or disfavour.

However, in most of these countries where English is a second or foreign language, language policies have been formulated with a view to assigning functions to each of the competing languages. A perusal of those policies revealed that English is usually favoured as the language of instruction (Rappa & Wee, 2006) especially for the teaching of Mathematics and Sciences as in the case in Malaysia (Asmah, 2016) at the expense of the indigenous languages. In some settings, English is not only the language of instruction but also an official language. Here, we found countries like Nigeria (FGN, 1999).

This is not unconnected to the role of English as unifying factor in a multilingual society (Wong, 2010; Ammon, 2006), its economic values (Jenkins & Seidlhofer, 2001) and international prestige (Cholakova, 2015). Perhaps in recognition of the importance of English as an instrument state in Malaysian modernity, ‘it was announced on June 7, 2002 that the study of English would be made compulsory for all Malaysian students’ (Rappa & Wee, 2006, p. 37). The implication therefore is that all subjects including mathematics and sciences are expected to be taught in English language. By extension, engineering and technical students will learn in English.

However, considering that these students are of different linguistic backgrounds, many of them develop some kind of unfavourable attitudes towards English and this has had its effects on their linguistic performance and by extension their academic performance. Their use of English in virtually all domains reflects deficiencies as many have yet to realise the need to learn the language or see its relevance to their present and or future plans (Dashti&Aldashti, 2015).

The motive of this paper, therefore, is to explore the role of attitudes in learning English as second language with a view to suggesting some practical strategies to help the engineering students in Malaysia have positive attitudes towards learning and extensive use of English. This paper is not interested in the politics of language policies; it is rather geared towards helping the students in general and science-based learners have a positive disposition with the belief that it will help their overall performance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Education and Linguistic Situation in Malaysia

Malaysia is ethnically heterogeneous, the ethnic Malays (being the largest bumiputera i.e. indigenous community) are privileged as the original inhabitants of the land. For instance, in the 70s, the policies of the nation state had to be redirected towards providing protection for the Malays which ensures, among other things, that the Malay language and culture are given specific Constitutional safeguards (Rappa & Wee, 2006). Perhaps this has also affected the perceived 'poor' attitudes towards English language because the privileging of the Malay language means that the widespread use of English for official purposes is more problematic; it is seen as a threat to the Malay language. The use of English in official domains is therefore extremely sensitive and contested.

It was reported in *The Straits Times* (2002) that the proposal itself for the use of English was initially welcomed by stark criticisms. According to the newspaper, for example, a senator was reported to have said

I do not agree, and in fact, oppose the proposal because in our excitement to improve our English language usage, let us not belittle our own national language. We fought hard to raise the Malay language as the official language and had won (*The Straits Times* 25 November 2002).

According to the 2011 statistics released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Malaysia population consists of 67% Bumiputera (the term which translates to 'princes of the soil' is a Malay word used to refer to ethnic Malays and various indigenous groups such as the Bidayah, Dayak, Kadazan-dusun, Penan, and others (Samuel, Tee, & Symaco, 2017)), 25% Chinese, and 7% Indians. Although, there are no restrictions as regards the use or speaking of any the languages or dialects in existence, Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia enjoys hegemony.

Earlier in the history of the country, English was the medium of instruction, at least to a greater extent. However, by 1970s, there was a move to replace English with Malay as the medium of instruction and by early 1980s, it had yielded some results as virtually every public education centre began to use Malay as the medium of instruction (Gill, 2014; Samuel, Tee, & Symaco, 2017). As expected, there were some criticisms. That seems normal for, according to Watson (2017), "language policies, however laudable their purposes, are rarely harmonious and are usually contested" (p.).

So in 2003, another push for a return to English as the medium of instruction especially for mathematics and science subjects came (Asmah, 2007). As stated by Curriculum Development Centre (2001), English for Science and Technology syllabus would seek to:

lay the foundation in the use of English in the fields of science and technology not only for the present but also for further studies at the tertiary level. This programme does not aim to teach the subject matter of science, rather, it is designed to help students develop an ability to grasp basic concepts and ideas in science and to understand methods of scientific thoughts and enquiry in English common to all kinds of scientific and technical discourse. The knowledge gained will not only enhance personal learning but also enable learners to think critically of issues in science and technology.

However, around 2009, the policy was again reversed perhaps due to the belief that it "undermined the position of the Malay language (Ming, Abdullahi, Tee & Samuel, 2017, p.37), among other political reasons.

Perhaps due to these inconsistencies in policies, its education system has been heavily criticised considering the performance of students vis-à-vis the country's spending on each student. For instance, as reported by Ming, Abdullahi, Tee and Samuel (2017),

The quality of its education has come under heavy fire in recent years. One gross indicator of the deteriorating quality is reflected by Malaysia's performance in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). In the 2012 PISA, for example, Malaysia ranked 39 out of 44 countries in the problem-solving test for 15-year-olds. Malaysia also ranked in the bottom 25 per cent in the Mathematics and Science tests. Between 1999 and 2012, both the Malaysia's TIMMS and PISA scores have seen a consistent downward trend. This is despite the fact that Malaysia's per student spending on education ranked in the world's top 10 per cent (p.40).

This observation by Ming et al (2017) is in support of Rappa and Wee (2006) who had earlier reported a similar situation when they compared the performance of Malay and non-Malay students in Malaysian universities.

Table 1: Proportion of First Class honour for Malaysia and non-Malaysian students at UniversitiTeknologi Malaysia (UTM)

Year	Malay	%	Non- Malay	%
1994	3	6.3	45	93.7
1995	1	2.2	44	97.8
1996	1	2.7	36	97.3
1997	6	15.8	32	84.1
1998	10	16.9	49	83.1
1999	7	6.9	95	93.1
Total	28	8.5	301	91.5

(Rappa and Wee, 2017, p.41)

The implication of the narrative thus far is that the students' performance is not encouraging. This greatly has a significant relationship with attitudes. Hence, learning (or acquiring) a second language is a process that is affected by several factors one of which is the attitude. It is such an important concept in psychology with studies and research in individual differences (ID-research) (Donryei, 2006) exploring possible effects of attitudes (Capellan, 2017).

2.2 Second Language Learning

It may seem easy to describe second language and second language learning. It, however poses challenges to scholars. Scholars thus try to make distinction between second language acquisition and second language learning. However, according to Ellis (2003), the evidence to support making such distinctions is not strong and has been jettisoned by many scholars. 'Acquisition' and 'learning' are thus used interchangeably. A variety of definitions is presented to explain the concept of second language learning.

According to Ellis (2003), 'second' could refer to any language besides the mother tongue. In other words, it could refer to the learning of a third or even fourth language. Similarly, 'second' is not usually intended to contrast with 'foreign'. Whether one is learning a second language naturally by living in a country where the language is spoken or through a conscious formal instruction in a classroom, it is regarded as a second language (Shannon, 2012). Second language learning or acquisition can be defined as the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, either inside or outside of a classroom (Ellis, 2003).

Lakshmanan (2013) defined second language learning as the successive acquisition of a second language (L2) when the core aspects of the first language (L1) have been largely established.

In the view of Littlewood (2004), the term second language refers "to any language that is learnt when the first language system is already in place" (p.502). Here, no distinction is made between the second or third or even the fourth language that a person learns (Cenoz, & Jessner, 2000).

Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) stated that second language acquisition is, “the process by which people develop proficiency in a second or foreign language” (p.252). Ellis (1986) thus held that SLA is “a complex process, involving many interrelated factors. It is the product of many factors pertaining to the learner on the one hand and the learning situation on the other” (p.4).

To Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2002) stated that SLA is the acquisition of another language or languages after first language acquisition that is under way or completed. That is, second language acquisition is subconscious study through which a person acquires L2 or additional languages.

Debate about language learning has been going on for many years. The debates, however, have been very purposeful: they are meant to improve the success of learning and effectiveness of teaching English language. It is thus not shocking that scholarly interests and contacts have increased in the world and people more than ever before have needed to learn a second language. So today, the study of second language learning is an immensely rich varied enterprise (Littlewood, 2004) with the main goal of solving or at least ameliorating problems involving language (Davies, 2007).

2.3 Attitudes in Second Language Learning

In spite of the generally acknowledged importance of attitudes, there is much disagreement on their precise nature, their constituent components, classification and their status as a ‘free- standing’ concept in the field of language learning. A comprehensive definition of attitudes is offered by Allport (1954) as “a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response towards all subjects and situations with which it is related” (p.45).

Most definitions have stressed the central idea of an evaluative response towards the subject or situation. For example, Gardner (1985) defined attitude as “an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual’s beliefs or opinions about the referent” (p.9).

Similarly, according to Eagley and Chaiken (1998), “an attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (p.269).

In addition, Chambers (1999) held that attitude is taken to mean the set of values which a pupil brings to the FLL experience.

It is shaped by the pay- offs that she expects; the advantages that she sees in language learning. The values which a pupil has may be determined by different variables, such as the experience of learning the target language, of the target language community, experience of travel, the influence of parents and friends, and the attitudes which they may demonstrate and articulate (p.27).

Attitude is thus one of the most concepts in language learning. It is considered as tendencies or predispositions to respond to stimuli. The traditional model of attitudes consists of cognitive, affective and behavioural.

The concept of attitude in the context of Modern Foreign or Second Language Learning still requires further categorization. Gardner and Lambert (1972) in Bartram (2010) identified three categories of language- learning attitudes; those which relate to the target language community; those relating to learning a particular language; and those relating to language learning in general.

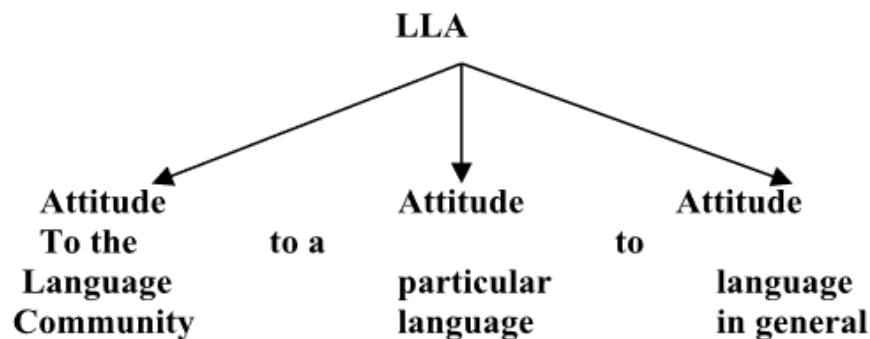


Figure. 1. Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) Model of Language Learning Attitude Classification (LLA) (Bartram, 2010) (adapted).

In sum, according to Melhimand Rahman (2009), attitudes can be classified into two: positive and negative. Having a positive attitude is taking a decision of acceptance. It is the attitude that reveals the advantages of the subject to take up its value. On the other hand, the negative attitude is the attitude that reveals the disadvantages of the subject to dismiss it and to weaken its strong attitude. In the study of Rula (2006), it was stated that positive attitudes towards a subject affect learning thereby making students view English as an easy language. This is also supported by the research other that positive attitudes and accommodating students' preferences in learning will be no doubt lead to more successful learning.

2.4 Strategies for Improving Engineering Students' Attitudes to English

The strategies presented in this paper are basically practical steps towards helping our engineering students have a positive attitude to learning of English. The bulk of the activities is on the students themselves. However, teachers, schools and parents are also taken into consideration as everyone has a role to play.

Tran and Duong (2013), quoting Zimmerman and Martiness-Pons (1986), suggested use of what is called self-regulated learning (SRL) in improving one's attitudes to learning English. According to Pintrich (2000), self-regulated learning "is an active constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behaviour, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment" (p.453).

In their contribution, Zumbunn, Tadlock and Roberts (2011), defined self-regulated learning as process that assists students in managing their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions in order to successfully navigate their learning experiences.

To that end, engineering students, according to Tran and Duong (2013), are expected to engage themselves in the following in order to improve their attitudes.

- a. Self-evaluation: they should, on their own, initiate evaluation or assessment of their work progress in terms of quality and conformity with acceptable standard.
- b. Goal-setting: they should set for themselves language achievement target and lay down the procedures to achieve the goals.
- c. Information seeking: they are expected to read extensively, outside the scope of examination.
- d. Record keeping: they should keep records of their progress or results for comparison with self and peers.
- e. Self-consequence: engineering students should make arrangement for rewarding or punishing self for success and failure respectively in achieving a set language goal.

Similarly, engineering students, and in deed all learners of English as a second language, should

- i. Be open: that is, they should be broadminded, creative and receptive to new ideas (Capellan, 2017).
- ii. Emotional stable: that is, they should adjust their emotion by learning English for knowledge sake rather than for examination purpose alone.

In the same vein, teachers too have enormous role to play in helping the student have a positive attitude. Hence,

- a. They should encourage the students by being models themselves in their language use.
- b. They should help and guide the students set and monitor linguistic goals.
- c. They should use effective methods as goad teachers are expected to provide the students with applicable background knowledge about each topic to be discussed by activating their existing knowledge on the topic. This will increase their interest and attention to focus on the tasks (Capellan, 2017).

This is applicable to both the teachers of English and other teachers as virtually all teachers are language teachers.

Also, the schools have enormous role to play by providing enabling and motivating environment for the students; providing relevant language materials; setting language achievement bar for the students; and rewarding success.

Lastly, the students' parents are also to encourage their children by being good language models and provide necessary assistance at home. This does not mean a preach for "straight-to-English" where learners are not exposed to their native languages from home but English. This has an enormous effect on its own.

III. CONCLUSION

We have seen that Malaysia is a multi-lingual nation comprising the dominant Malay community and significant minority communities largely constituting Chinese and Indians of immigrant ancestry and many smaller minority communities, comprising the Punjabis, the Sindhis, the Gujeratis and others (Gill, 2014). Largely due to the complex linguistic situation, learners are faced with challenges of learning English as a second language or aligning with their linguistic identity. Attitudes set in thereby affecting their linguistic performance in all domains. It is thus the conclusion of this paper that those strategies would be of immense help to the students in the quest to redirect and engineer their attitudes to English language.

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