

# **A CASE-STUDY OF SECRETARIAL SCIENCE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although there has been a considerable research undertaken elsewhere to analyse the English achievement of the college students, not many studies have been carried out as far as Malaysia is concerned.

This study apart from attempting to examine the nature of the students' attitudes towards English also tries to fill in the vacuum created.

The subject for this study consisted of 45 Part III and Part IV Secretarial Science students randomly selected from the population. The attitudinal variables incorporated into the analysis are measured through the following components: i) students' perception of English as a subject; ii) profitability of learning the language; iii) whether it is boring or not; iv) studying English because of no choice; v) to secure good jobs; vi) its relevance to the course; and vii) the usefulness of the language to be learnt by everyone. The results indicated that the role of the attitudinal variables was more dominant for the final year students but not for the semester III group. In the latter case it seems that other factors might have played a part in affecting their achievement in English.

## **INTRODUCTION**

English is regarded as a second language in Malaysia and continues to play an important part in partnership with Bahasa Malaysia. As a language of wider communication, it plays a vital role in higher education and in the instruction of students especially those in business, science and technology.

As for the Secretarial Science course, the importance of English cannot be denied. In order to become Private Secretaries and to a lesser extent as Personal Assistant, the potential graduates have to be conversant in this language. As a Secretary in the private sector, one is required to take dictations, to type reports, documents and letters, taking minutes of meeting and to communicate all in English. All these activities require both written and oral skills on the part of the students.

However, in spite of the 11 years of exposure to this language plus and additional two-and-half years of training at Mara Institute of Technology, it has been observed that the majority of the students still could not master this language both written and oral effectively, as reflected in their English Shorthand results. Although the reasons are numerous, this study only concentrates in examining the students attitudes towards the English subject offered by the course. This is based on the assumption that English performance of the students is also greatly influenced by the nature of the attitudes that they have towards the language.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of attitude has been variously defined and characterised by almost every theorist or researcher. A typical mentalist definition suggests that attitudes are a mental and neural state of readiness. This implies that they are not directly observable but have to be inferred from the subjects introspection . On the other hand, the behaviorist definition defines attitude in actual overt behaviour or responses. Such an approach therefore faces few or no problems at analysis since attitudes have been defined in terms of observable data (Agheyisi and Fishman, 1970).

According to Encyclopedia Britannica (1969), attitude in a general way refers to inclination presumed to be enduring, to react in a certain way in response to certain kinds of situations, to see and interpret events according to some predisposition and to organise opinions into coherent interrelated clusters. Thus, for example, if a person is presumed to have a "hostile attitude" towards some organization, this person is expected to show evidence of hostility in his overt behaviour in connection with this organization, to interpret facts about the organization's structure and activities in a negative manner and to hold a variety of opinions about issues and events which are consistent with his hostile attitude.

In an activity such as a piece of learning, attitude and motivation appear much the same thing, because an individual with favourable attitude towards the activity in general is one who may be easily motivated or is already adequately motivated to undertake a particular piece of such activity. But unless the underlying attitude is favourable to learning in that situation, say, there can be little effective positive motivation at any given time.

Although attitudes are in general presumed to be enduring, they can be changed, and indeed are changed gradually as the person's experience proceeds. The way he sees the objects of his world and his wishes, feelings, and knowledge about them can develop and change so that he is as ready as can be to cope with those objects fittingly at any time. The fact that most attitudes are resistant to change but nevertheless are capable of being changed is one of the chief reasons for studying them.

## METHODOLOGY

Numerous attitudinal variables in fact have been used as predictors of English achievement<sup>1</sup>. However, the selection of variables vary from one researcher to another depending upon the nature of the background situation of the problem and another the hypothesis set.

In this study student's attitudes are measured through the following components:

- i) students' perception of English as a subject
- ii) profitability of learning the language
- iii) whether it is boring or not
- iv) studying English because of no choice
- v) to secure good jobs
- vi) its relevance to the course; and
- vii) the usefulness of the language to be learnt by everyone.

English achievement however, is measured by combining student performance of the English examination both at the final semester and the monthly test. In other words the students are continuously assessed of their performance and this is more reliable when compared to other testing techniques used by other researchers where students are normally asked to answer a set of prescribed questions during the survey period and out of which inferences are made on their levels of achievement in the language.

The data used in this study are derived primarily by interviewing the students who were pursuing the Secretarial Science course at Mara Institute of Technology, Pahang Branch Campus. Out of a total of 152 students (as of January 1988), only 45 students were selected for the purpose. In this study it was decided to choose only the semester III and IV students by virtue of the fact that since they have been at the Institute for a period of 2 to 2 1/2 years, the information obtained could provide a clearer picture of their attitudes towards the English subject provided by the course.

## RESULTS

In this section the nature of relationship that exists between some of the attitudinal variables with English achievement are presented. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the semester IV students who rated English as one of their favourite subjects tend to have high achievement in the language. On the contrary, those who did not like English as a subject seem not to make any difference on its achievement since the margin between the two categories is very small. Only a small percentage rated English as their favourite subjects and this falls in the high achievement group. However, we cannot determine its relationship with English achievement as the number of response involved was negligible.

1. (a) For details see Gardner, R.C. and Lambert W.E. (1972) (b) Pierson et. al. (1980)

**TABLE 1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTITUDINAL VARIABLES WITH ENGLISH ACHIEVEMENT - SEMESTER IV STUDENTS**

Variables	English Achievement	
	High (No. of Students)	Low (No. of Students)
<b>1) Students' Perception of English as a subject</b>		
a) My favourite subject	1 (4.5%)	
b) One of my favourite subjects	11 (50%)	5 (22.7%)
c) Don't like as a subject	2 (4.5%)	3 (13.6%)
<b>2) Non-profitability of Learning English</b>		
a) Yes	-	2 (4.5%)
b) No	14 (63.6%)	6 (27.3%)
<b>3) English is boring all the times</b>		
a) Yes	-	2 (4.5%)
b) No	14 (63.6%)	6 (27.3%)
<b>4) Studying English because of no choice</b>		
a) Yes	4 (18.2%)	4 (18.2%)
b) No	10 (45.5%)	4 (18.2%)
<b>5) Study English in order to get a good job</b>		
a) Yes	13 (59.1%)	5 (22.7%)
b) No	1 (4.5%)	3
<b>6) Usefulness of English</b>		
a) Yes	13 (59.1%)	8 (36.4%)
b) No	1 (4.5%)	-
<b>7) Non-relevancy of English to the Course</b>		
a) Yes	-	1 (4.5%)
b) No	13 (59.1%)	8 (36.4%)

It is also revealed from the table that majority of the students who disagreed that English is not profitable to learn have high achievement in the language. On the other hand, those who gave affirmative answers that it is not profitable, have low achievement. This shows that there is a positive relationship between students' attitudes towards the profitability of learning the language and its achievement; those who believe that it is profitable will have high achievement and vice versa.

Further analysis shows that those who agreed that English is boring all the times tend to have low achievement in the language. On the contrary those who showed disagreement, the figures are higher in the high achievement bracket. This points to the fact that there is a positive relationship between students' achievement in the language and the perceptions that they have as to whether English is boring or not. Those who stated that it is boring all the times tend to have low achievement and vice versa.

In addition to this, students who did not agree that they study English because they have no choice tend to have high English achievement as reflected by the higher percentage in this particular category. Nevertheless, those who showed affirmation tend to make no difference in the level of achievement as the number is similar for both groups.

In this study it seems that students who study English in order to get a good job tend to have high achievement in English as indicated by the high response. On the other hand, low achievement prevails for those who disagreed. This reveals that English achievement has a positive relationship with the utilitarian value that the students have on the discipline. Similarly Table 1 shows that those who agreed that English is valuable and useful to be learnt by everyone and is relevant to the course, obtained high achievement in the language.

Thus based on the overall analysis of the attitudinal variables as outlined in Table 1, we can be quite certain that there is a close association between these variables with English achievement for the semester IV students. In the case of semester III students, it was found that most students who do not like English as a subject have low achievement in the language as shown in table 2. On the other hand, those who rated English as one of their favourite subjects seem to have no relationship with English achievement as the figures in both groups are similar. This also applies to those who considered English as their favourite subject.

As far as the profitability of learning English is concerned, the results seem disturbing. Surprisingly, those who disagreed that it is not profitable to learn English have low achievement as shown by the higher percentage of students in this group. However, those who gave affirmative answers that it is not profitable, seem to have no clear relationship with English achievement as the margin between the two groups is very insignificant. This shows that these students still have not realised the profits derived from learning English at the institute.

Furthermore, it is also found that those who gave affirmative answers that the study of English is boring all the times were low in their English achievement. However, those who disagreed also tend to produce the same outcome. Students who study English because of the fact that they have no choice were found to have low English achievement. On the other hand similar results exist for those who believed otherwise.

Table 2 also shows that those who study English in order to get a good job tend to have low achievement as indicated by the large number of students in this group. This gives the indication that at this stage students did not see the practical values attached to the learning of the language. However, those who disagreed did not show any relationship with English achievement since the number is the same for both categories. However, it is surprising to find that although, the majority agreed that English is useful and valuable to be learnt by everyone, their achievement in this language tend to be low. And the same result applies to those who agreed that English is relevant to the course.

Thus from the overall analysis of Table 2 it seems that the attitudinal variable that has close relationship with English achievement is the students' perception of English as a subject, that is, if they do not like English as a subject they tend to have low achievement in it. Other attitudinal variables do not have any relationship and do not play a part in determining the students achievement in the language.

**TABLE 2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTITUDINAL VARIABLES WITH ENGLISH ACHIEVEMENT - SEMESTER III STUDENTS**

Variables	English Achievement	
	High (No. of Students)	Low (No. of Students)
<b>1) Students' Perception of English as a subject</b>		
a) My favourite subject	2 (8.7%)	2 (8.7%)
b) One of my favourite subjects	4 (17.4%)	4 (17.4%)
c) Don't like as a subject	1 (4.3%)	10 (43.5%)
<b>2) Non-profitability of Learning English</b>		
a) Yes	1 (4.3%)	2 (8.7%)
b) No	6 (26.1%)	14 (60.9%)
<b>3) English is boring all the times</b>		
a) Yes	-	7 (30.4%)
b) No	7 (30.4%)	9 (39.2%)
<b>4) Studying English because of no choice</b>		
a) Yes	1 (4.3%)	10 (43.5%)
b) No	5 (21.7%)	7 (30.4%)
<b>5) Study English in order to get a good job</b>		
a) Yes	2 (8.7%)	11 (47.8%)
b) No	5 (21.7%)	5 (21.7%)
<b>6) Usefulness of English</b>		
a) Yes	7 (30.4%)	16 (69.6%)
b) No	-	-
<b>7) Non-relevancy of English to the Course</b>		
a) Yes	-	1 (4.3%)
b) No	7 (30.4%)	15 (69.6%)

## CONCLUSION

Between the two groups of students studied, each with different levels of English achievement, it seems that the role of the attitudinal variable was more dominant for those in the semester IV group only. Whereas in the case of the semester III students, other factors might play a part in affecting their English achievement.

It is suggested that further investigation should be carried out in the future by incorporating more variables (both attitudinal and non-attitudinal) into the analysis to indicate causality rather than relationship and to employ other statistical techniques that have more inferential power to generalise. It is hoped that, the findings from this preliminary study will provide ways as how to take the appropriate remedial measures in an effort to achieve excellence in the subject offered.

## REFERENCES

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