



# UKM TESL Undergraduates Motivation & Attitudes towards (ESL): An overview

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Objective of this paper is to identify the learner's motivation and attitude towards English as second language (ESL) among the TESL undergraduates in the vicinity of the national University of Malaysia (UKM), Bangi. In relevance to the current study, numerous studies have investigated the relationship between students' motivation and their attitudes towards language learning. However, very few research studies focus on learner's motivation and attitudes in the tertiary education especially in the Malaysian context. The rising importance of English as evidence in the new National Education Blueprint calls for immediate attention to students low proficiency problems. In this study, a total of five undergraduates who were from the TESL program were randomly chosen from different year of study. A qualitative methodology was employed. The findings from the study suggest that the motivation and attitudes plays a critical role in determining the how the success rate of a learner in the process of language learning. Apart from that, the findings from this suggest that the demographic background influences on their motivation and attitudes towards learning the English language.*

## **Keywords:**

Attitudes; motivation; English as Second language (ESL); language learning; undergraduates

## Introduction

The current study is heavily centralized on the two influencing psychological factors towards the school of thought and language acquisition, which is motivation and attitudes. Learner's motivation and attitude factors have been studied intensively and excessively over the past century, dating back the time of renaissance. It has been discovered that motivation and attitude play a pivotal role towards the learner's language learning process (Gardner & Lambert 1959). Gardner (1985) initially proposed on the idea that behavioral and psychological factors such attitudes and motivation influence how well an individual learns a second language. He further adds that, it is not equally possible that the experience of learning a second language influences attitudes and motivation whereby he concludes by highlighting that a few innovations in the classroom can lead to changes in the attitudes and motivation of the learners. Innovations present to the current classroom language learning setting highly influence attitudes and motivation of a language learner, who engage actively towards the experience of obtaining new knowledge and the educational experience itself (Gardner 1985).

English is currently is considered as the most important and used language globally, and is placed as the second language in Malaysia (Gill 2002) which is in line with the current



education blueprint. Over the past years we have seen reports regarding the lack of English mastery among the Malaysian graduates, and it also been reported that the employers in Malaysia are in the state of grievance towards the lack of communication skills among the country's graduates (Star 2010). It also reported that some of the Malaysia graduates suffer immensely when it comes to able to hold a conversation in English, and some can hardly communicates when they attend for job interviews (Thang 2004). Graduates who have low mastery in the English language would definitely left behind when it comes to generating essential soft skills in the future for career enrichment programs (Mohammad Amin Embi, Juriah Long & Mohd Isa Hamzah 2001). The current scenario in Malaysia gives an indication there is need to tackle the current situation for the sake of our graduates.

### Research Question(s)

The present study intends to investigate these issues further by carrying out a questionnaire survey on attitudes and motivation of a group of secondary school students in East Malaysia towards the learning of English to seek answers to the following research questions

1. What are the attitudes of learners towards L2 learning?
2. What are the motivations towards the L2 learning?

### Objective

This study aims at identifying an exploring on the issues concerning UKM TESL undergraduate's motivation and attitudes towards learning the English language in their

course package. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify what are the learning motivation of the undergraduates (motivation towards learning the English as second language)
2. To determine the type of attitude the undergraduates have towards learning the English language in the classroom.

### Purpose of the study

The Language learning of English in Malaysia has seen to be given importance by the MOE (Ministry of education), as there have been recent calls to enhance the language proficiency among the university graduates in the country. There has been an alarming indication that the Malaysian undergraduates still lack in mastering the English language although being provided with many education programs to enhance the learning possibilities. It is also reported that the Malaysian graduates are unable to find a better job prospects due to this lack of English proficiency and communication skills. Thus, it is hoped in this research study certain aspects of the declining factors of the English language proficiency among the Malaysian graduates would be highlighted. It is necessary to study the current education state under the Malaysian context, especially targeting the higher education intuition as these young adults are the pioneer of the country's frontier generation. Also it is hoped that this study would shed some light on the current learner's perception of motivation and attitudes aspects in learning English as a second language in the Malaysian context.



## Motivation

The theories of motivation has been studied profusely and can be traced back in the early eighteenth centuries whereby most renowned philosophers as Plato and Aristotle and conceived of the mind as comprising knowing (cognition), feeling (emotion), and willing (motivation). Thus it is not surprising on the relevance of motivation towards acquiring knowledge. Although the term Motivation has been studied extensively over the past few decades in the field of education yet it remains difficult to define the nature of the universal meaning it signifies. As Gardner himself (2006,) describes that *"motivation is a very complex phenomenon with many facets... Thus, it is not possible to give a simple definition"*. This is due to the fact that the term motivation itself carries different perceptive of meaning from different field of education all over the world. Motivation has been widely used in the education field especially in the language acquisition of a second language and also foreign language learning. Dörnyei (1998) describes on the importance of the motivation factor seen to be the most influential essence towards learning. The motivation factor plays a pivotal role towards the process of learning a foreign and second language. Lifrieri (2005) affirms that out that motivation is known to play an important role in determining how an individual is able to learn and acquire a language successfully. Brown (2000) from his study asserts that *"it is easy in second language learning to claim that a learner will be successful with the proper motivation"*. Gardner (2006) clarifies that a language learner's motivation has seen to be influential towards their language acquiring process in

terms of if the learners has an higher level of motivation, the learners is reported to be more successful at acquiring the language compared to others who have lower motivation towards learning a language. He also claims that if an individual shows positive motivation together with interest, they would put more effort, desire and determination towards achieving the task at hand. (Gardner 2006)

## Attitude

Attitude is defined as a manifestation of the behavioral aspects which desired or undesired by an individual, an event or an organization Ajzan (1988). In another claim by Baker (1992) concludes that attitudes as seen as unproven constructs which is persistence in the presence of the human behavioral aspects and nature of the universe. Also Gardner (1985) describes that attitude are similar to the reaction of perceptive of an individual which involves their attitude with the individuals set of beliefs, opinion of the reaction. Learning a language as a second language (ESL) or learning it as a foreign language (EFL) is hugely influenced by the attitude factor (Starks & Paltridge 1996). In a related a study done by Karahan (2007), devotes that having positive attitudes toward language learning enables the learner to inhibit a positive outlook and perceptive towards mastering the language at an optimum level. It is important to identify that attitude plays an pivotal role in determining the successful of learning a language.

## Methodology

In this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative methodology was employed to collect data. The procedure was carried out in the vicinity of the National University of



Malaysia (UKM) Bangi campus. The instrument used in the study comprised a set of semi structured interview questions which has three sections. The questionnaire was comprised with Section A that describes the demographic information of the participant, followed by Section B and C that evaluates the level of motivation and attitudes towards the ESL classroom learning respectively. An interview protocol was administered before each interview session was conducted to follow the ethical guideline aspects of the research procedures.

### *Sampling*

A total number of five TESL undergraduate students, irrespective of their level of English proficiency participated in the survey. The sampling method employed for this research study is convenience sampling to enable the researcher is able to carry out the study in time. The whole population was made up of Malaysian undergraduate students who were compromised from different ethnicity backgrounds such as Chinese, Malay and Indian students.

### FINDINGS

From the interview session conducted, overall it was seen that the TESL undergraduates of UKM showed positive motivation and attitudes towards learning English as Second Language (ESL) courses, in comparison to negative impulses of motivation and attitudes. However, students who are in their first semester showed a more negative attitude toward English learning than their senior peers. This may be due to their initial perception towards learning ESL, which might be influenced by other

factors such as the new learning environment, adaptability, unfamiliarity and among others. The findings from this study is consistent with traditional perception of the Malaysian higher educational system as learning a foreign language such as the English language is considered out of the norm.

This sub-section presents the interview findings related to the students' motivation and attitudes towards the English language (ESL) classroom learning. The first phase of the findings focused on the undergraduate's motivation level, while the second phase focused more on their attitudes. The findings were analyzed using the coding methods, and subsequently picked on the important emerging themes. Below are some of the direct quotes from the interview session that was analyzed using coding method,

#### *1. Motivation to learn English as a Second language (ESL) in a classroom setting*

*For me, learning English is important as it is important when it comes to finding a reputable job when I graduate. Also there has been an increase of employers to seek graduates who excel at speaking and communicating using the English language. (S1-year2 undergraduate)*

*English is not only important, but I personally think it is essential now as everywhere you go English is being used widely as a communication medium.. So I believe there is a need to master the language. (S2- year 3 undergraduate)*

*Learning English as a second language to me is a bit difficult, as I am more*



*comfortable using my mother tongue (L1) when it comes to communicating with friends and family. Also I think it maybe because I consider myself as not so much into the western culture (S3- year1 undergraduate)*

*I would say that when it comes to language learning, I consider myself as an avid user of the language itself. The most important factor for me to master and polish my English is that I know somehow in the future being proficient in the English language would be beneficial for me during job interviews.(S4- year 2 undergraduate)*

*It is undeniable on how important it is for undergraduates in Malaysia to be able to communicate and converse using the English language as it is essential for job seekers nowadays. It also means a better job prospect and better future for career development.(S5- year1 undergraduate)*

It can be concluded for the first phase of the interview session it was found that all of the participants acknowledge on the importance of acquiring and mastering the English language as seen to be essential when it comes to job placement. Majority of them agreed that they are aware of the importance of mastering the English language and also it is important for them to be able to converse and communicate the language confidently to secure a better job placement when they graduate. Motivation is a combination of condition, which resulted from the effective instruction in relevance to the human behavior (Winne & Marx 1989).

## 2. Attitudes towards learning English as a Second language (ESL) in a classroom setting

*Personally I think learning English at university is better for me, although I find it difficult when it comes to presentation as I am not comfortable with my proficiency level. I still am not confident with my English usage.*

*I know many would assume that being TESL undergraduates you are required being fluent when it comes to using the language. But sometimes it is difficult to use the language in use in practical, when you are only used to write in English.*

*My attitudes towards learning English are that I find it fun and interesting to learn another language. Overall I can say my English language proficiency is not that bad and I am confident with my usage.*

*No offense but I think I don't really agree that learning English is really that important, as for me I think people are so into the western culture that they are so fascinated by the western culture. I believe other language also as important like English such as mandarin, French and Spanish etc..*

*I think it's ok to have good attitudes towards learning any language, as learning a different language is always beneficial. But sometimes I wonder myself why are the Malaysian are obsessed with the idea of mastering the English language and living their western culture.*



From the findings collected, it was found that gender played a role towards the undergraduate's attitudes in ESL classroom learning, as most of the female participants showed positive attitudes in comparison to the male participants. This is also confirmed by a study done by (Burstall, 1975 Gagnon 1974, Gardner and Smythe 1975) that the female learners tend to inhibit more positive attitudes than males counterpart. Also it was observed that other contributing factors could be influencing towards learners attitudes towards ESL classroom learning Gardner (2000), such as the learning environment itself, the learner's socio economic background, and the location of their living place whether in city or rural areas, their initial experience of learning English in primary and high schools.

### *Conclusion*

For the first research question, results show that the majority of UKM TESL undergraduates have a strong motivation and determination towards the learning of English as second language (ESL) in classroom. They are really interested in studying English effectively. For them, English is both a proper means and an end they are aiming at. The majority of companies, enterprises, branches as well as representative offices under licenses and conducts of big either domestic or foreign companies or multinational corporations in Malaysia have put English the first employment requirement. For the second research question, the most profound attitude that was seen influential among the undergraduates at UKM is that they have more positive attitudes towards English learning at their institutions. Besides these major findings analyzed in the above sections, it is interesting

to recognize that students at UKM still expect their teachers to do too much for them in learning English. Students are still learning English language passively in higher education institutions in Malaysia; it is a continuation from what they have experienced in high schools.

Also other interesting factor was found to be influencing the undergraduate's motivation and attitudes towards learning English as a second language was their demographic factors. It was seen that those who were from the rural areas showed more negative attitudes and motivation towards the language learning process, in the contrary to those undergraduates who were from the urban city as they showed more positive attitudes and motivation. This is also supported by Gardner who claims that attitudes are also influenced by factors like students' upbringing and the demographic background. Adding to this notion is that a study by Gagnon (1974) affirms that attitudes toward learning English as a second language varied appreciably from one geographical area to another in general.

### *Recommendation for future research*

The present research study was conducted to explore the current research questions at a minimal scale, also to highlight some of the surface issues regarding language learning at the higher education under the Malaysian context. The methodology employed in the current study still unable to provide clear significant towards the motivation and attitudes issues faced by the Malaysian graduates, as it only provides description. It is hoped that future research studies in relevance



with the current study would incorporate methodology at a bigger scale and also incorporating quantifiable data findings to provide a more realistic conclusion.

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