LANGUAGE PERCEPTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE

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Second language acquisition in Sri Lanka is deeply influenced by learners' and teachers' perceptions, which shape classroom interaction, motivation, and overall performance. Despite the centrality of English in higher education and employment, many students encounter barriers rooted not only in language competence but also in their attitudes and beliefs about learning. This study examines how such perceptions affect the teaching—learning process, arguing that psychological and socio-cultural dimensions are as important as pedagogical strategies. By exploring both the student and lecturer perspectives, the research highlights the need to prioritize belief systems and attitudes in curriculum design and classroom practice. Addressing these factors is essential for fostering more effective and sustainable second language acquisition, thereby contributing to educational improvement and broader social mobility in the Sri Lankan context.

Keywords: Beliefs, attitudes, motivation, classroom interaction, social mobility

1 Introduction

Second language learning is challenging because altering the cognitive dimension of knowledge is not an easy task. Motivation, which 'gives rise to the actions of the people', is considered to be directly linked with people's beliefs, attitudes and goals. It is obvious that people behave according to their beliefs and the attitudes (Getie, 2020). This is a crucial factor when it comes to the language beliefs of the people. All over the world people have a different technique when it comes to study a different language. Beliefs of the language learners directly affect the approach they select in the language learning. There is a vast difference in the attitudes of the learners in learning English as a second language when compared with their attitude towards first language learning (Yuwita & Ambarwati, 2023). This directly affects the behavior of the students or the language learners in the class room.

English language learning has been more learnercentered in the present language learning context. Language learners have enough chances to select the way of learning as there are different strategies and ways of learning a language. There are different beliefs and concepts on language learning according to Arivaratne and Marikar (2019). The beliefs of the students are influenced by the previous language learning experience of the students and other beliefs are shaped by their cultural backgrounds. In their analysis of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire, it assesses a wide area of aspects to identify and give a concrete measure why learning a new language is difficult. Lack of English language competency is still a constant problem for educators and students, particularly when learning English as a second language, claims Iswati (2020). A more complete image of students' attitudes regarding language learning inventories can be obtained by triangulating data sources, such as interviews, diaries, or even observations, as Liu and Rutledge (2020), suggested in their study.

According to the declaration of the Ministry of Higher Education, the tertiary education system in Sri Lanka is student oriented (Liyanage, 2021). Although some university students hold misconceptions about learning English, the

language continues to play a vital role in Sri Lanka's tertiary education system. The crucial factor is that all the degree courses that are conducted in Sri Lankan universities are offered in English medium. Therefore, it is a necessity of the Sri Lankan university students to learn English in order make their studies successful and also to be efficacious in the future careers. Knowledge of most of the students in English language is not in a satisfactory level in order to carry on with their academic work. This can be specially identified in the students those who have selected to the universities from the areas that are deprived of infrastructure facilities and necessary guidance in English language learning. For example, Mulualem et al. (2022) investigated how students' beliefs, aptitude, personality, and sense of identity influence their perceptions of both the learning environment and their self-concept (Mulualem et al., 2022).

The students those who have given up learning English in the two years when they studied for the Advanced Level Examination have the same attitude they had even in the university. Therefore, it is necessary to find learner's beliefs about English language learning among the university students. Then only the competency levels of the students can be understood and lecturers will get the understanding on how to design materials or the modules and how lectures should be planned in order to cater the needs and interests of the students. When teaching English as a second language in tertiary level education, especially in universities, English is taught as it is important for the academic purposes as well as the courses are designed in a way that will be helpful for the students in the future careers (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2020). Therefore, while teaching English in universities it is essential to consider the requirements of the university students. According to the exposure of the students to the English language beliefs, motivation and expectations are different. Final aim of this research is to identify the beliefs of the undergraduates about English Language Learning. This will lead to an effective teaching and learning process in the Sri Lankan University System.

2. Methodology

Language beliefs of the students play a major role in language learning and teaching process in the second language classroom. The objective of this research is to find out the beliefs of the university students in English language learning process. This study also explores the attitudes of the lecturers those who teach the particular group of students and their behavior in the second language classroom. Final objective of this study is to find the effect of the beliefs of the university students in English teaching and learning process.

2.1 Research design

The study most likely uses a qualitative approach. A modified version of the BALLI was given to 40 first-year undergraduate students in the Faculty of Business Studies and Finance at Wayamba University of Sri Lanka in order to collect data for the study topics. The gathered data were analyzed using statistical methods.

2.2 Data collection

Data collected in this study composed of the beliefs of the first year undergraduates according to the given questionnaire regarding the beliefs of the first year undergraduates.

2.3 Population

The population of the study was the first year students of the faculty of Business Studies and Finance of the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka. According to the random sampling method forty students from the first year were selected including both male and female. The students were form different parts of the country comprised of both urban and rural areas. The districts were Kurunegala, Puttalam, Matale, Kegalle, Colombo and Gampaha. Majority of the students have ignored English during their Findings from the questionnaire indicate that during their Advanced Level studies, most students do not devote sufficient time to improving their English language skills. Most of the students are also not confident enough about their English language skills. Therefore, the target of the researcher is to identify the beliefs and the

attitudes of the students regarding learning English as a second language.

2.4 Research instruments

A questionnaire is used to find the beliefs of the first year students in English language learning. Beliefs and attitudes of the lecturers those who teach English for the first year students are found by an informal interview with the lecturers. The secondary data is collected by books, journals, e books, newspaper articles, blogs, and web sites etcetera. Horwitz's 1987 Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) in a modified form (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006) and an individual background questionnaire prepared by the researcher to collect information regarding demographic information and current and previous language learning experience were used as research instruments.

Questionnaire Part A -Individual Background Ouestionnaire

The researcher created an individual background questionnaire since more information about the participants needed to be gathered. It includes the participants' demographic data, such as age, gender, self-rated language ability, language use, prior language-learning experiences, years of English study, etc. The researchers' primary research instrument was the questionnaire. There were two sections to it. They are the modified BALLI and the individual background questionnaire.

Questionnaire Part B -Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

The first-year students' beliefs were determined using a modified version of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). The ESL/EFL in its original form BALLI contains 34 items. But in the modified version the researchers used 30 items only. The items in BALLI review learners' beliefs in five areas. They are

- I. Learning difficulties in second language
- II. Test of foreign language
- III. Methodology of learning

IV. Strategies of learning and communication

V. Motivation and expectations

The questionnaire is based on the scales of 1-5. It represents the opinions of the students from strong agreement to the strong disagreement. In all the thirty questions students were asked to circle the number from one to five to reflect the beliefs of the students accurately. The five-point Likert –scale was used for access about language learning BALLI is the most widely used tool for measuring learner beliefs. This has been adopted to numerous studies throughout the world.

Informal interviews with the lecturers of English

Informal interviews were conducted with the lecturers of English who teach at the Faculty of Business Studies and finance for the 1st year students. Their beliefs regarding the language learning and teaching process were collected from some of the questions discussed with them.-

3. Results

The people those who are good at learning mathematics and science are good at learning English is another belief that derives from the society. According to the opinions of the students only three students strongly disagree with the opinion that people who are good at mathematics or science are good at learning English. But contrary to that opinion twenty one students from the selected sample disagree with the opinion that people who are good at mathematics are good at learning English.

According to the data analysis 7.5% of the students strongly disagree with the opinion that people who are good at math and science equally good in English. Among them 52.5% of the students disagree with this opinion. From the students, 20% of the students neither agree nor disagree with this opinion. 17.5% of the students agree with this opinion. Only 2.5% of the students strongly agreed with the opinion that proficiency in science and mathematics supports quicker language learning. (See Figure 1).

According to the language beliefs of the people, they think who speak more than one language are born to be intelligent (Figure 1). Given data analysis, 2.5% of the students strongly disagree with the above belief. Among them 30% of the students disagree with this belief. From the these students 32.5% of the students neither agree nor disagree with the belief that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent.30% of the students agree with this belief and 5% of the students strongly disagree with this belief.

This is another common belief in the society that women are talented in learning languages than men. In English language teaching and learning context the same belief exists. The main target of this question is to find whether there is a gender difference in learning English. Two students strongly disagree with the opinion that women learn faster than men. The data analysis reveals that a small proportion of students (5%) strongly disagrees with the belief that women are better than men at learning English, while 35% disagree. A larger group (42.5%) neither agrees nor disagrees with the opinion that women learn English more quickly. In contrast, 17.5% of the students agree with this belief, whereas none of the respondents expressed strong agreement. (Figure 1).

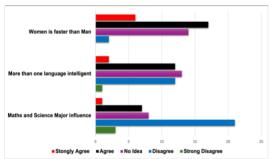


Figure 1: Learning English based on mathematical, more than one language and women.

Humans are talented in learning languages because the human brain is naturally trained for language acquisition. Therefore, there is a belief among the students which has derived from the society that everyone can learn to speak English even though anxiety is attached to it. According to the analysis of data 62.5% of the students agree that everyone can learn to speak English. Among them 37.5% of them strongly agree with this belief. Therefore, 100% of the students agree with this belief (Figure 2).

According to this data analysis it is clear that none of the students strongly disagree with the opinion that English is an easy language to learn. Among them 2.5% of the students disagree with this opinion.10% of the students neither agree nor disagree with the opinion that English is easier to learn than other languages. 45% of the students agree with the opinion that English is easier language to learn and 42.5% of the students strongly agree with this opinion (Figure 2).

The major skills that should be improved in English language learning is reading, writing and speaking. There are different beliefs regarding the difficulty of improving these skills. The difficulty of these skills totally depends according to the level of the understanding of students, exposure they have in the language and their social background. Zero percent of the students strongly disagree with this belief.40% of the students disagree with the opinion that learning reading and writing is easier than speaking English. From the selected sample 30% students do not have any idea regarding the skill which is easy for learning. 25% of the students agree that learning reading and writing is easier than speaking English. 5% of the students strongly agree that learning reading and writing is easier than speaking English (Figure 2).

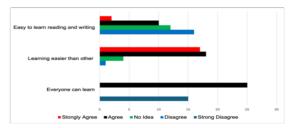


Figure 2: Easy to learn reading and writing, easier than other, and everyone can

If students practice speaking English they get the ability to speak English very soon. Therefore, spending one hour per day will improve the

speaking skill of the students. According to the data analysis,0% of the students strongly disagree with the opinion that if a student spends one hour a day speaking English, he or she will be able to speak English. Among them 7.5% of the students strongly disagree with this belief.22.5% of the students neither agree nor disagree with the belief that by spending one hour a day the students will be able to speak English very well within a year. 60% of the students agree with this belief and 10% of the students strongly agree with this belief.

In the Sri Lankan context, students do not get the exposure to learn English language. Therefore, the students get the opportunity to learn the language in a theoretical manner inside the second language classroom. But learning a language is totally different from learning an academic subject. Exposure to the language plays a major role in the language learning process. Students should use modern technology: internet, skype, social media networks to improve their language skills. According to the above bar chart none of the students strongly disagree with this opinion. Only 2.5% of the students from the selected sample of the students disagree with the opinion of practicing English with audio and video clips is essential. 5% of the students do not have any opinion regarding this matter. 55% of students strongly agree with the effectiveness of practicing English with audio and video clips.37.5% from the selected sample of students strongly agree with this opinion (Figure 3).

To continue English language learning students should improve their ability in guessing the meaning of the unknown words they encounter with. It is taught as an ability that should be improved in the second language class room. English word is okay if you are not aware of the meaning of the word. 12.5% of the students from the sample do not have any idea regarding the importance of guessing the meaning of the words. 67.5% of the students agree that it is important to guess the meaning of the words that they are not aware of when English Language (Figure 3).

There are different beliefs regarding the way the language should be learnt and the most effective ways of learning. When students get to know the cultural background of the English speaking people they get the exposure to the language. The reason is to get to know the culture students should search more information about English speaking people. According to the data analysis 0% of the students strongly disagree with this opinion that it easier to learn English if students know the cultural background of the English speaking people.20% of the students disagree with this opinion. Among the students, 27.5% of the students neither agree nor disagree with the belief that culture of English people can affect the language learning process. Among them 37.5% of the people agree with this opinion.15% of the people strongly agree with this opinion (Figure 3).

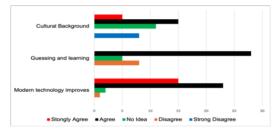


Figure 3: Cultural background, guessing and learning and modern technology improves their learning styles.

In the current global job market there are unlimited numbers of jobs for the students those who follow management related degrees. But to get the opportunity the graduates must have English language skills. If students improve their language skills, when they follow their first thev will have numerous opportunities. All the students from the selected sample of the students agree or disagree with this belief. None of the students strongly disagree, disagree or neither agree or disagree with this belief. Sixteen students agree that by learning English well the students can have better job opportunities. Twenty four students strongly agree with this belief. All the students from the selected sample agree or strongly agree with this opinion.

4. Discussion

When considering the influence of the sociocultural factors in the Sri Lankan context, most of the students have come from various backgrounds in terms of English proficiency. Methodologies used in English language teaching also have affected to create English language learning beliefs among the students (Karunaratne, 2009). The creation and execution of English language learning curriculum at the national level is crucial since English language proficiency is highly valued in the graduate context. Publishers of educational resources for students at all competence levels in English should be wellaware of the attitudes and various methods that undergraduates use to study the language.

In the tertiary level education system in Sri Lanka, it is necessary to pass English language proficiency courses in order to complete the course requirements of a first degree. Therefore, learning English as a second language is an essential requirement that students cannot give up. Encouraging students to improve their language skills is a current requirement in the university system (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2014). It is clear from the researches carried out that cognitive aspect of language learning plays a major role in determining the language beliefs of the students.

When learner's beliefs are considered it is very difficult to find which beliefs affect to mold the attitudes and behavior of the students. It is really difficult to find what shapes and changes the beliefs of the learners and it is difficult to find what psychological mechanisms involve in creating, shaping and changing these beliefs. There can be several other internal factors and external factors that cannot be tackled in identifying the beliefs of the learners. The aim of this paper is to highlight the major facts and findings of the study. It is clear from the given responses by the students that they have realized the value of learning English by being a undergraduate. university Students understood by learning English they will get better opportunities in the foreign context apart

from the academic success they gain within their university life.

Even though there is a common idea in the university sector that undergraduates have negative attitudes towards learning English, the given questionnaire proves that students have positive attitudes towards English Language Learning. The opinion of the students shows that they have understood that to become talented learner they have to put great effort and must spend time in achieving the target.

In the Sri Lankan University System a lot of money is spent on teaching and learning English. Even though English is taught in a structured manner and serves as an essential course requirement for degree programs, many students remain reluctant to attend the lectures. This study depicts the attitudes of the students towards learning and teaching process in the Sri Lankan University system and how the beliefs of the students affect the teaching and learning process (Zuhairi et al., 2020).

There are different language beliefs that can be seen in the society about learning English as a second language. There is a direct influence of these beliefs in the language beliefs of the undergraduates. Agnafors et al. (2021) have declared that there is an influence of the students for intellectual performance. In the first stage of the life it is really easy to learn a language (Agnafors et al., 2021). Another common belief that can be seen in the society that affects the language beliefs of the students is the students those who are good at learning Mathematics and science are good at learning English (Li, 2021). This belief can demotivate the students those who are not good at learning mathematics and science. If students think that there is a special ability to learn English for a particular group of people, it can affect language learning process of the students. These kinds of beliefs can motivate students as well as demotivate some students in learning English. The students those who take the idea positively will improve their English language skills. Horwitz (1987) declares that the students those who are unsuccessful in learning think that there is a special ability for some people to learn a language (Abdullaev, 2021). It is true that if a person can learn more than one language it is a special skill of a person. But deciding whether they are intelligent is not important. If students can take these ideas positively it will be beneficial for their future language learning.

One of the common beliefs in the society is that according to the gender differences the ability of language learning differs. This is another belief that can affect the language teaching and learning process. University students are positive about this belief. They do not try to make it an issue for their second language learning process. But Alam (2022) has found significant differences based on the gender and the target language. Language learning is a special skill that that human beings have when compared with the other animals (Alam, 2022). If a person can learn one language they have the capacity to learn another language. Therefore the common belief among the students should be that everyone can learn to speak English.

Riadil in 2020 says learners also show different perceptions of what is considered easy and difficult in language learning. When considering the four skills of language learning, less number of students believe that reading and writing is easier than speaking English (Riadil, 2020). The teachers those who teach these students also believe that speaking is easier than reading and writing as less complex structures are used. But writing requires complex structures than in speaking. Even though students believe that learning speaking is easy, most of the university students are reluctant to speak in English.

Opinions of the students are divided whether English is about acquiring grammar, and vocabulary. Most of the students believe that learning grammar is really important when learning English. Chand (2021) has proved this in his study.

Most of the students believe that learning environment plays an important role in second language learning. Students have a proper understanding that it is really easy to learn

English in an environment where English is used in a practical context. To improve all four skills in English language it is really essential to have exposure to English language. A lot of students agree that it is better to learn English in an English speaking country.

But the students those who learn English as a second language in the Sri Lankan University system do not get enough exposure to the language except few people. The group of people those who have exposure to the language are a privileged group in Sri Lanka. Due to that reason 'power' is attached to this language. Even in the Sri Lankan University system English is referred as "Kaduwa". As most of the students have a less exposure to the language they are motivated towards learning the language by using audio and video clips. Students can have the exposure to the language by watching English movies, watching English Television channels, listening to English radio channels, listening to songs, by video chats etcetera. By the usage of internet, Email, Skype and social media also play a major role in improving English language skills of the students.

From the given opinions of the students it is clear that students have a proper understanding that vocabulary of them must be developed in order to improve the language skills and also to perform better in their disciplines. But from the ideas of the lecturers it was clear that even though students have a proper understanding on language beliefs they do not take necessary actions to improve their vocabulary. According Setiawan and Wiedarti in 2020 it clear that students must have extrinsic motivation towards improving the vocabulary of them rather than intrinsic motivation as extrinsic motivation will maintain the consistency of the task. It is obvious that within a limited lecture hours, the teachers cannot spend much time in the improvement of the vocabulary (Setiawan & Wiedarti, 2020). According to the guidance given by the teachers the students must take their own time and effort on vocabulary building.

Motivation of the students towards language learning also plays a key role in second language learning. Most of the students agree with the belief that they can learn to speak English very well. But in the tertiary level education system most of the students do not have an interest in improve their English language skills. According to Teravainen-Goff (2025) unmotivated students do not engage in language learning in a sufficient manner (Teravainen-Goff, 2025).

Due to the inadequate facilities for a large group of students, only reading, writing and grammar are taught for the students. But most of the students believe that it is essential to improve their speaking and listening skills in the class. Therefore, it is clear that there is a mismatch between the expectations of the students and what is provided by the second language teachers.

5. Limitations of the research

This research directly focuses on the beliefs of the undergraduates Learning English as a second Language. It depicts the beliefs of the language learners in a broader perspective. Forty first year students from the Faculty of Business studies and finance of Wayamba University of Sri Lanka are selected by using random sampling method. Though the setting of this research belongs to Wayamba university of Sri Lanka bit far away from the urban context, still the selected group of students are from various parts of the country. Therefore, the sample is a mixture of both urban and rural students from different parts of the country.

6 Recommendations

The beliefs of learners regarding language learning, as well as those of teachers, should be understood. Steps necessary to maintain students' interest, motivation, and confidence should be taken. Classroom activities based on the principles of communicative teaching and learning should be prioritized. Practical practice of the language should be encouraged to develop communicative competence. A culture of student-centered learning should be fostered within the Sri Lankan university system. Students should be categorized based on the marks of a common English test conducted at the beginning of the language course, and courses should be designed

to align with the students' proficiency levels as determined by this categorization.

7. Suggestions for future research

But the beliefs that were captured from the questionnaire may not depict the general beliefs of the language learners as the research was conducted by representative group of learners with a limited sample of study. The same study can be done with a larger sample of study to identify whether learner beliefs are a prominent factor in determining the effectiveness of teaching and learning process. Therefore, this research can be carried out in other Sri Lankan universities.

8 Conclusion

The major focus of this study was to investigate the learner beliefs of the first year students of the Faculty of Business Studies and finance at the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka. According to the findings of the study, these students have a proper understanding about the importance of learning English in the tertiary level education Majority of the students are not influenced by the negative beliefs of the society even though they are not taking necessary measures to improve their English language skills. Moreover, students have understood that they have to use information technology in the second language class room in order to get the exposure to English language. And also these students have suggestions regarding the way the future language learning and teaching should be done. Even the teachers of English those who conducted first year lectures for the faculty of Business Studies and finance agree that English language teaching should be done in a more innovative manner in the tertiary level.

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