

**FACTORS AFFECTING LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND
LANGUAGE AMONG UNDERGRADUATES: AN
EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA**

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Introduction

English is seen very much as a core skill that all undergraduates should acquire as a part of their degree program. This is largely fueled by the perception that employability is correlated with a student's mastery of the English Language. Regardless of the veracity of this claim, much attention is being paid to ESL within the Sri Lankan public university system. At the Arts Faculty of the University of Peradeniya, ESL is considered a core course, which all students should complete in order to graduate. Some students also express the inability to cope with this ESL requirement. Hence, there is a continuing discussion about the nature of the ESL courses that are offered and student involvement and participation in and commitment to them. Given this background, it is imperative and timely that this research is conducted to better understand students' engagement with the ESL program.

The aim of this research is to understand factors that are related to learning English as a Second Language (ESL) at the undergraduate level. This study frames ESL learning as a planned behavior, suggesting that an individual does it in a rational and organized manner. Therefore, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985), which links attitudes with behavior is the framework that is used to examine the aforementioned relationship. The TPB has been widely studied in many different contexts to examine how attitudes relate to behavior (Armitage and Conner, 2001). This model has also previously been used to understand engagement with ESL in other contexts as explained by Zhong. Drawing on Ajzen's TPB, Zhong (2013) conducted a naturalistic inquiry to investigate five Chinese immigrant learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) in ESL classrooms, and found that attitudes, self-efficacy, learner beliefs, linguistic factors, socio-cultural factors had joint effects on their WTC. Primarily, in this relationship of TPB is behavioral

intention (the intention to engage in a particular behavior). The theory posits that behavioral intention mediates the relationship between attitudes and behaviors. In addition to attitudes, subjective norms (significant others' opinions about the particular behavior) and perceived behavioral control (how much agency an individual feels he / she has in executing a behavior) also impact behavioral intention. High levels of behavioral intentions are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in the said behavior. In understanding ESL related behavior, the study examines students' engagement with ESL and are operationalized in this study as class participation and grades.

Methodology

This exploratory study used a survey design with a convenient sample. A total of 58 Participants were selected from 100, 200 and 300 level undergraduates of the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, who take basic level ESL as a compulsory non-credit subject. The questionnaires consisted of several different sections. The primary measures of TPB, as mentioned below, were modeled after measures used by Aizen (1985) in previous work. The section measured attitudes (the cognitive, emotional and behavioral components), subjective norms, control beliefs, intentions of the students. In addition, to evaluate the behavior, students' end of semester examination results and attendance were measured.

A total of 22 questions to measure Attitudes, 10 questions to measure Subjective Norm, 13 questions to measure Perceived Behavioral Control, and 6 questions to measure Intentions were used. The questions were both open and closed ended in nature. Demographic information was also gathered. The main analyses for this study were correlational.

Results and Discussion

It was found that students on average had strong positive attitudes towards learning ESL. The cognitive component of the attitudes was particularly potent, meaning that they truly believed that learning English was important and was a valuable skill to develop. It was also found that the cognitive component of attitudes was also highly associated with stronger behavioral intentions, meaning that the intention to engage with ESL was very much a planned behavior. In other words, students who believed that learning English was worthwhile and valuable were likely

to have stronger intentions to participate in classes. Despite this association, it appears that students do not perceive themselves as having high levels of support. Perceived behavioral control was found to be positively correlated with the behavioral intention. However, the proposed relationship between subjective norm and behavioral intention and behavioral intention and behavior were not detected in this study. The questionnaire also collected qualitative data regarding how students perceive the English program that is conducted. In analyzing the written comments, 50.9% of the students who commented said that English grammar should be taught in a systematic manner starting from the beginning with a strong focus on teaching grammar and written language. Additionally, 41.8% of the students have said that there should be more emphasis on spoken English. Only 12.7% of the students said writing activities should be included. 27.2% students have said that the time allocated for ESL in the University should be shortened.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the importance of learning English is not lost on students. However, it appears that students prefer learning English in a more 'traditional' structured format which is not accommodated in the ESL classroom. This may lead to frustration and a belief that they are not learning as much as they should. A discussion with students regarding teaching methods and expectations might benefit perceptions and thereby increase engagement with ESL.

References

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