

Learner Beliefs and Expectations of English Language Usage

P.C. Wathuge

General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University

charuhasiniw@kdu.ac.lk

Abstract

In countries where English is not the national language, adapting English-medium instruction into the study programmes offered by the higher education institutes has created many unfavourable consequences to the undergraduates amidst all the other emotional turmoil they have to undergo as a result of the process of acclimatization from the school culture to the university culture. It was expected to investigate how learner beliefs and expectations of using English language, in a situation like this, impact on learners who have learnt in vernacular medium schools. Data for this purpose were gathered through interviews from eight participants from a Sri Lankan university. Findings were summarized into five major themes which are discussed in detail. Implications for teachers are also provided.

Key Words: *English-Medium Instruction, Transition from School to University, Learner Beliefs, Expectations, English Language Usage*

Introduction

Students in transition from school to the university are frequently subjected to emotional upheaval due to the difficulty in adjusting to the new environment (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt and Alisat, 2000). Especially, significant numbers of first-year students report moderate to high levels of loneliness (Cutrona, 1982), homesickness (Fisher and Hood, 1988), anxiety and depression (Regehr, Glancy and Pitts, 2013), stress (Campbell, Svenson and Jarvis, 1992) and difficulties in keeping up with their academic work (Levitz and Noel, 1989 as cited in Pancer et al., 2000). This transition from school where most of the students learnt in their mother tongue to the university where the medium of instruction is usually English¹ except

¹ Premarathna, A., Yogaraja, S. J., Medawattegedara, V., Senarathna, C. D., Abdullah, M.R.M. (2016). *Study on Medium of Instruction, National and International Languages in General Education in Sri Lanka*, National Education Commission. ISBN 978-955-9448-46-4

for a few degree programmes in Humanities and Fine Arts has made the life of undergraduates even more complex. In many countries where English is not the national language, there has been a shift towards English-medium instruction in higher education (Altbach, 2004; Hughes, 2008). Vidanapathirana and Gamini (2009) claim that adapting English-medium instruction into the study programmes is discriminatory not only to the learners who are socially and educationally deprived but also to the language teachers from whom an unrealistically high level of competency is expected in many countries where English is not the national language. This unfavourable condition has created many issues to the students and also to the teachers especially in higher education institutes. Regardless of those consequences, however, English is predominantly used and accepted as the academic language of the current period across the globe (Altbach, 2004).

In such a situation, beliefs and expectations of using English language within the university setting are said to have helped undergraduates survive and progress in their chosen field of study as well as in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. It is also believed that learner beliefs and expectations of using a language make an individual a confident user of that language, thereby, making the individual perform better than those who are less likely to believe in their ability to use the language or have less or no expectations of using the language better.

There have been many factors that affect performance. Among them, efficacy beliefs and expectations are said to have a greater impact on student performance. Beliefs are accepted as true by the individual and they serve as a guide to thought and behaviour (Borg, 2001). Bandura (1977) claims that self-efficacy affects an individual's choice of activities, effort, and persistence. He further states that different levels of self efficacy may have different outcomes— those who have high sense of efficacy for accomplishing a task would participate readily whereas those who have a low sense of efficacy may avoid it. Individuals who have high efficacy beliefs are assumed to work harder and persist longer when encounter difficulties than those who doubt their abilities (ibid). Research findings of many scholars including Bandura (1986); Multon, Brown and Lent (1991); Schunk (1995) show efficacy beliefs and expectations influence performance. For instance, a meta-analysis of research in educational settings found that self

efficacy was related to academic performance and persistence (Multon, Brown, and Lent, 1991). Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) have also investigated that self-efficacy directly and indirectly has shown a strong association to academic performance and personal adjustment of the first year college students. Further, the teacher expectancy effect on student performance is also associated with self-efficacy or competence which may influence academic performance of the students (Tyler and Boelter, 2008). Particularly, in relation to the English language usage, beliefs and expectations are considered having a larger impact on the language proficiency and performance of the university students. For example, Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1988) witness that views about language learning held by students may influence learner effectiveness in increasing their language proficiency.

Therefore, the worth of investigating the impact of learner beliefs and expectations of the first year undergraduates, whose medium of instruction changed from Sinhala to English, on their academic performance and successful usage of English can be highlighted. From this study, it was expected to investigate how the transition from school to the university impact on student learning in terms of the change of medium of instruction, how efficacy beliefs and expectations influence learning and performance and finally, how beliefs and expectations about the usage of English language help undergraduates survive and progress.

Methodology

This study was an up-close and a detailed examination of a common and a contemporary phenomenon among most of the fresh undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it was established in a strong qualitative epistemological position. Furthermore, responses from a very few number of participants in a university which has a very unique environment were utilized to answer the research questions. Therefore, the inferences made from the study were found to be very much contextual. Also, due to the exceptional nature of the selected university, the findings from this study may not be generalizable to the undergraduates in other typical state universities. Hence, the study took the form of a case study. Case studies are generally used when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has

little control over events and when the researcher aims to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2011).

Self-efficacy researchers typically have adapted quantitative methods using between-conditions comparisons in short-term studies, thus, there is a need for data collected using other approaches: longitudinal studies, case studies, and oral histories (Schunk, 1991). The use of qualitative approach has continuously been neglected over the years in the field of research into the efficacy beliefs of the teachers which has unfortunately led to various misconceptions and misapplications of theory (Wheatley, 2005; Wyatt, 2014, 2015). If any particular methodological approach to research in efficacy beliefs is allowed to be dominant over the years, only certain kinds of explanations and interpretations may be established. Since this problem is widespread already, it was decided to deviate from the norm and utilize the case study method to conduct the research which produced a lot of rich data gathered through interviews.

The setting was a university in Sri Lanka where both fee-levying and non-fee-levying students read for their degrees. This study considered only the fee-levying undergraduates because there is a remarkable difference between the lifestyles of the two student categories. The non-fee-levying students are residential students and are governed by a set of rules pertaining to the military in addition to the rules stipulated by the university. These undergraduates read for their bachelor's degrees while undergoing a military training. Ultimately, they would join the military after the successful completion of their degrees. The fee-levying students, on the other hand, are non-residential students and are only governed by the regulations of the university. Therefore, the students belong to two different worlds and are less likely share similar characteristics. Hence, only the fee-levying students were considered for this study.

Due to the inconvenience of gathering data from the students of other faculties, the undergraduates only from each of these four Faculties: Computing, Engineering, Management Social Sciences & Humanities and Law were considered as the sources of information for the study. Two undergraduates from each of the said four faculties were selected using purposive sampling technique —only the first year fee-levying undergraduates who had learnt in Sinhala, their mother tongue, in the school were selected as participants. Taken together,

there were eight participants from whom the data were gathered through in-depth interviews.

Gathered data were coded, categorized and reported thematically. After the initial coding of interview data gathered, several codes were dropped and several were combined to create categories. Then, based on the interrelationships among the categories, themes were created to elicit the essence of the experiences of the respondents which will be explained in detail in the findings and discussion section.

Findings and Discussion

Five dominant themes emerged from the interview data analysis; adjusting to the new environment, teacher expectations on student performance, determination & willpower, emulating role models and transforming mistakes into learning opportunities. Findings are reported and discussed under each sub section.

Adjusting to the new environment

It was observed that all eight participants got adjusted to the university environment with difficulty and time. A majority (five) of the participants got adjusted with a moderate level of difficulty and the rest (three) with great difficulty. For those three participants, entering the university was a major life change. It was very difficult for them to cope with and get adjusted to the new change. In terms of time spent for adjustment, those five participants got adjusted within four to ten weeks whereas those three participants took almost a year to get adjusted to the new life. Amidst all the other reasons such as culture shock, homesickness, work overload, relationship issues, financial difficulties, family problems, the act of learning from a non-native language had negatively caused almost all the students at least to a certain extent. Most of them were with the view that learning from the mother tongue would have been more convenient than learning from a non-native language— especially they were discontent about their performance being affected just because of a language. They also stated that they liked when the lecturers used Sinhala to explain a subject matter. Irrespective of the faculties, all participants also liked when lecturers provided the Sinhala translations of the technical terms. Similarly, some of the participants in a study done by Nhapulo (2013) also have felt translation may help although in the same study, it is stressed that only English should be used as the language of instruction in advanced English classes. In contrast to the responses regarding the

use of mother tongue in the classroom, all respondents had a dream to speak 'fluent English' and write 'good English' which showed their preference to learn English.

The students also claimed that they have sufficient English language skills to understand a lecture but not to write properly or to do presentations which affirms the findings of a study conducted by Sercu (2004). The respondents further stated that their classroom interactions with the teacher and peers have become lesser when the English medium instruction is used. Klaassen (2001) has investigated how teaching style is affected when English-medium instruction is used and has generated quite similar results where it was found that the students change their study habits as a result of the use of relatively less interactive teaching style when the English-medium instruction is used. This finding of Klaassen suggests that teachers may also be affected by the change of medium of instruction into English. Therefore, the change of medium of instruction seemingly had a considerable impact on the poor learning and performing of the respondents which affected the smooth transition from school to the university. Seemingly, the change in the medium of instruction has affected the process of acclimatization of almost all the participants.

Teacher expectations on student performance

It has been found that the teacher expectations on student performance have made an impact on the English language usage of the students. For example, responses of the students, irrespective of their faculty, revealed that high teacher expectations on students lead to high student performance. High expectations of teachers were likely to motivate students to have high efficacy beliefs. This was evident from the responses of almost all the participants. Respondents revealed that the teachers' low expectations on students made no difference to their performance relative to the previous instances or they affected almost negatively resulting in even low performance.

According to the responses, it was noted that there is a remarkable difference between the teachers' expectations which were clearly declared and the expectations implied. When teachers declare their expectations on students in front of the other class, students very much likely consider it as a challenge. However, the expectations implied were sometimes not understood by the students or most likely were ignored since they were not overtly expressed. It was also found

that the teachers are more likely to overtly declare their expectations on the students who have comparatively high level of language proficiency. The students said that the teachers seemingly believed in the capability of the students who had high language proficiency levels. Apparently, those students who had to struggle with the English language quite often have felt that they are weak. It was evident from the responses because a majority of the respondents mentioned about at least one instance that they suffered due to low proficiency levels. Four respondents stated that they have felt so embarrassed at times when they were unable to speak in English in front of the class and that made them believe less about their capacity to present something in English in front of an audience.

The findings of a study done by Vidanapathirana and Gamini (2009) also show that there is a direct and significant association between proficiency in the English language and learner performance. Their assumptions; the level of English proficiency influences the level of success of the learners; the level of proficiency in English generates social differentiation confirmed the findings of their study as well as the findings of the current study.

These findings suggest that teacher expectations on student performance have a link with the efficacy beliefs of the students.

Determination & willpower

It was obvious that determination and willpower were directly linked with the efficacy beliefs of the students within this setting. Irrespective of the faculty, all respondents liked and seemingly were motivated and determined to develop English language skills though almost all of them struggled with English as a medium of instruction. However, in their longitudinal study of first year student attitudes and motivation towards learning English, Berwick and Ross (1989) identified that upon entering university students are rarely motivated to learn English because motivation gradually diminishes once the primary objective; passing the examinations in college, was achieved. This scenario is quite similar to the situation of the selected set of students and generally to all the university students in Sri Lanka, because the students are really motivated to learn English towards the final years in the university. During the first year, though the need for English is very much known, the effort to develop English language skills is apparently less.

However, students related their experiences of feeling determined and persistent with their efficacy beliefs of performing better. The more they are confident about using English language fluently, the more they are determined and purposeful. This experience was said to be helpful in successfully conducting a presentation or writing an exam. The respondents also talked about how they were unsuccessful as a result of less or no motivation and determination. It was found that goal setting also played a part in having high self-efficacy beliefs. Both respondents from the Faculty of Engineering talked about the occasions where they believed highly about their ability since they had set clear and specific goals.

It was investigated that the personal factors such as determination and willpower moderated by the situational factors affect real learning. Therefore, real learning can be hampered from taking place not only due to the impact of personal factors but also due to the situational factors. Feeling of determination and willpower are mostly subjective, but, there is a possibility of a change of thoughts based on the attitudes of the in-group that the students belong to. This fact was affirmed when one student from the Faculty of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities disclosed that she once doubted her ability to speak in English without any fare reason from her side but solely because of the convictions shared within the members of the in-group that she belonged to.

Emulating role models

Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters (2015) claim that role models are often viewed as a way of motivating individuals to set and achieve ambitious goals, especially for members of stigmatized groups in achievement settings. Though the students who are with less proficiency levels in English were not as stigmatized as stated above within the university setting, the respondents said that they have sometimes felt that they were marginalized when they were grouped with the students who have high proficiency levels in English. A majority of them also said that most of the English teachers encourage them to have role models. They even talked about the instances where teachers showed videos of the speeches delivered by those role models to motivate students to follow role models as a means of developing English language skills.

Emulating role models were commonly seen among the relatively high performing students and seemed a very interesting thing to do. A majority of students had role models within the university; high performing seniors, teachers and outside the university; political leaders, actors, presenters, scholars. Emulating role models was remarkably had an impact on the better performance in speech activities and oral presentations. Respondents further spoke about how they imitated their role models when getting ready for speech activities.

Transforming mistakes into learning opportunities

This was observed as common to all respondents. A majority of the respondents were highly likely to convert their mistakes into learning opportunities. But there were instances where students got hurt as a result of the mistakes made by them. One student from Faculty of Law became emotional when she was recalling an instance where she was embarrassed for a mistake she made. But she stressed the way she converted it as a learning opportunity considering it as a challenge.

It was revealed from the responses that mistakes made in front of an audience activate emotional disturbances in the short run but in the long run they can be viewed as learning opportunities.

Conclusion

The inferences indicated that efficacy beliefs and future expectations of undergraduates play a major role in adjusting to the university environment, enhancing the level of confidence to use English and in performing well in English at oral and written examinations. Therefore, the change of medium of instruction seemingly had a considerable impact on the learning and performing of the respondents. On the whole, results indicated that the efficacy beliefs in performing well in English as well as in other modules and the future expectations of using English assisted all respondents irrespective of their field of study and the Faculties.

Further, implications for teachers such as maintaining healthy classroom emotional climate; declaring the expectations to the students; giving learning outcomes for each lesson; using different strategies to motivate and encourage students; telling success stories of famous or successful people; creating opportunities to learn from

mistakes and giving corrective feedbacks to students can be derived from the study for action.

References

- Altbach, P. G. (2004). Globalisation and the university: Myths and realities in an unequal world. *Tertiary Education & Management*, 10(1), 3-25.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Berwick, R., & Ross, S. (1989). Motivation after matriculation; Are Japanese learners of English still alive after exam hell. *Jalt Journal*, 11(2), 193-210.
- Borg, M. (2001). Key concepts in ELT. Teachers' beliefs. *ELT journal*, 55(2), 186-188.
- Campbell, R. L., Svenson, L. W., & Jarvis, G. K. (1992). Perceived level of stress among university undergraduate students in Edmonton, Canada. *Perceptual and Motor skills*, 75(2), 552-554.
- Chemers, M. M., Hu, L. T., & Garcia, B. F. (2001). Academic self-efficacy and first year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational psychology*, 93(1), 55.
- Cutrona, C. E. (1982). Transition to college: Loneliness and the process of social adjustment. *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy*, 36, 291-309.
- Fisher, S., & Hood, B. (1988). Vulnerability factors in the transition to university: Self-reported mobility history and sex differences as factors in psychological disturbance. *British Journal of Psychology*, 79(3), 309-320.
- Horwitz, E. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *Modern Language Journal*, 72, 283-294
- Hughes, R. (2008). "Internationalisation of higher education and language policy: questions of quality and equity". *Higher Education Management and Policy* 20: 1-18.
- Klaassen, R. (2001). *The International University Curriculum: Challenges in English-medium Engineering Education*. Doctoral Thesis, Department of Communication and Education, Delft University of Technology.

- Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., & Peters, K. (2015). The motivational theory of role modeling: How role models influence role aspirants' goals. *Review of General Psychology, 19*(4), 465-483.
- Multon, K. D., Brown, S. D., & Lent, R. W. (1991). Relation of self efficacy beliefs to academic outcomes: A meta-analytic investigation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 38*, 30-38.
- Nhapulo, M. A. (2013). Teacher and learner beliefs and expectations about English language teaching and learning at a Mozambican university. *Afrika Focus, 26*(2).
- Pancer, S. M., Hunsberger, B., Pratt, M. W., & Alisat, S. (2000). Cognitive complexity of expectations and adjustment to university in the first year. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 15*(1), 38-57.
- Regehr, C., Glancy, D., & Pitts, A. (2013). Interventions to reduce stress in university students: A review and meta-analysis. *Journal of affective disorders, 148*(1), 1-11.
- Schunk, D. H. (1991). Self-efficacy and academic motivation. *Educational psychologist, 26*(3-4), 207-231.
- Sercu, L. (2004). "The introduction of English medium instruction in universities. A comparison of Flemish lecturers' and students' language skills, perceptions and attitudes" in R. Wilkinson (ed.), *Integrating Content and Language. Meeting the Challenges of a Multilingual Higher Education*, 549-557. Maastricht: Maastricht University Press.
- Tyler, K. M., & Boelter, C. M. (2008). Linking black middle school students' perceptions of teachers' expectations to academic engagement and efficacy. *Negro Educational Review, 59*(1/2), 27.
- Wheatley, K.F. (2005). The case for reconceptualizing teacher efficacy research. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*(7), 747-766. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.05.009>
- Vidanapathirana, U., & Gamini, L. P. S. (2009). Medium of instruction, language proficiency and learner profiles: Impact of English proficiency on the performance of learners following the BA degree in Social Sciences.
- Wyatt, M. (2014). Towards a re-conceptualization of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs: tackling enduring problems with the quantitative research and moving on. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 37(2), 166-189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2012.742050>
- Wyatt, M. (2015). Using qualitative research methods to assess the degree of fit between teachers' reported self-efficacy beliefs and their

practical knowledge during teacher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(1), 7.

Yin, R. K. (2011). *Applications of case study research*. Sage.