

*Full Length Research*

## **Student perceptions on learning English for personal and career development**

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The primary concerns of this research paper are to examine the ways that students who follow Higher National Diploma in English at Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education- Kandy Campus, look at learning the English language and to see if it is possible to influence those perceptions in a more optimistic manner. This research paper starts with a general discussion of the role of English in the developing world paying attention to four poignant roles which the English language play in developing countries. They are: English as a pathway for success in Academic affairs, as a pathway for obtaining international job opportunities, as a way of facilitating international communication and as a medium for achieving global education. The section which follows discusses the position of English in Sri Lanka. Next, the methodology of the research report is described and this is followed by a detailed discussion of research findings. The paper ends with a summary and conclusions.

**Key words:** perceptions, optimistic, communication, global, international

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The students who follow the Higher National Diplomas at the above mentioned institute are mainly from lower middle class families, most of whom have attended government schools. They have selected these Higher National Diplomas as a second option for university entrance, mainly due to their inability to enter into a National University in Sri Lanka. Even though they have learnt the language in schools for over more than ten years, learning the language has still become a challenge for most of them. At the same time in competing with the

current job opportunities and with the other candidates who are taught in 'private English medium schools', these students face more challenges and at the same time they have come to understand the value of learning and being fluent in the English language. Since almost all the Higher National Diplomas offered at the said institute are conducted in the English medium as well as the other Diplomas and degrees offered by other educational bodies, locally and internationally, the students have come to understand that English is one of the most

needed tools to excel and succeed in academic affairs. They also understand that English is a 'must have' for foreign job opportunities, for international communication and for global education as well. Thus the researcher has investigated student perspectives on learning English under four poignant areas namely; learning English for as a pathway for success in Academic affairs, as a pathway for obtaining international job opportunities, as a way of facilitating international communication and as a medium for achieving global education.

### **Learning/teaching English in the developing world**

In most of the developing countries learning and teaching English as a foreign language has faced many problematic issues due to the student perceptions on the language. They have been blind towards their future prospects and have given the priority to learn English only to pass examinations. Many students climb the ladders of their respective educational careers by learning the necessary subjects in their mother tongue or a language in which they are proficient, ignoring or paying little attention to English language. Yet with the current trends, proficiency in English has become a must on the road to career and personal development.

The perception of development can differ across nations and cultures. The general view is that it is the reduction of poverty which incorporates the enhancement of human rights, universal freedom and self-esteem (Markee 2002, Coleman 2010). This implies the general wellbeing of the individual, economically, physically, socially and psychologically.

Education as a whole contributes enormously to the development of individuals and countries. Each subject in the school curriculum, including English has a major role to play in this process. This view is illustrated by Ekpoki (2009) who states that the target objectives of Millennium Developmental Goals (United Nations-2010) are underdeveloped countries, many of which treat English as a communication tool due to the multilingual nature of their cultures and societies. He observes that English plays an important role in supporting nations to engage with these Millennium Developmental Goals and to achieve them.

According to Graddol (2000) English is the language of global economy, international banking, most scientific publications, advertising for popular brands, internet communications, and international law. According to Seidlhofer (2003), English is the language of science, technology and economics worldwide. Researches like Grin (2001) demonstrate that salaries increase with proficiency in English. The current trends of globalization encourage the migrant workers to look for better paid jobs abroad mainly in English speaking countries like USA, UK, Australia and Canada. The multinational

companies opening branches in developing countries due to cheap labour demand workers to have some proficiency in English. As Hasman states (2004), English has a very important role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century since governments, industries, corporations and international organizations need the language to succeed. Coleman (2010) provides the role of English in development in a nut shell: English for employability, English for international collaboration, English for access to research and information, English as an impartial language and English for facilitating international mobility of students, tourists and workers.

### **Learning English for success in academic affairs**

All over the world, in most of the countries, English is the medium of instruction for many of the subjects taught in schools, or English Language is taught as a subject. The importance of English lies not only in passing examinations but in researching books and internet too (Graham 1987). Hansman (2004) contends that English is established as the language of science and technology and it has become the language of internet since 90 percent of information in electronic systems are stored in English. According to crystal (2006) English still plays a dominant role, compared to other languages.

With the increasing number of student migration, Coleman (2010) states that about forty five percent of students around the world study in USA, UK, Australia and Canada. All over the world, even in non- English speaking countries, the most popular foreign language is English for many students. Even in many Universities around the world, the medium of instruction is English for many of the courses offered. Thus the proficiency in English is needed. As a requirement to enter into these Universities, the foreign students need to have taken an international English language test such as TOEFL (Test of English as a foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System)

Thus proficiency in English has become a must for students who seek a university education abroad and it is valued and recognized as a 'must have' in the current job market locally as well as internationally.

### **Learning English for obtaining International job opportunities**

Employability can be viewed as the ability to get a job, maintain it or get a new one (Kirubahar et al., 2010). There is a very close relationship between English and Employability. 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by globalization of economies and high job mobility. Thus there is a trend for a more positive relationship between English and employability. In most of the foreign and

newly industrialized countries like China, Japan and India, millions of non-native speakers of English are employed and English is becoming more important and necessary at work.

As Warschauer (2000) observes, many non-native speakers of English need to use English in workplaces for presentations, negotiations and international collaboration. English plays a central role because it acts as a link language among migrant workers.

Many international companies and organizations pay the best salaries for workers who are bilingual. In China for example, proficiency in English helps find a better paid job (Cortazzi and Jin 1996). Similarly, Kossoudji (1988) demonstrates that in the United States, deficiency in English has a negative impact on migrant workers, where they tend to pay lower salaries.

The current job market for both migrant and international workers is highly competitive due to the large number of workers who are proficient in English. There is an increasing emphasis on English at the workplaces and even special courses are designed to improve English for professionals such as: businessmen, doctors, nurses, those who are in the fields of aviation, agriculture etc. Thus the demand for English language is high because people are aware of its importance for job mobility, socializing and travel.

### **Learning English for facilitating international communication**

As an international language, across the world, English is used by many people as a native language (ENL), second language (ESL), a foreign language (EFL) or lingua franca (ELF). Kachru (1992) categorizes the use of English into the inner, outer and expanding circles. The inner circle is made up of those who use English as a native language like UK, USA, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. The outer circle includes commonwealth nations who use English as an official language though it is a second language to its citizens. This includes countries like, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Philippines and South Africa. In the expanding circle English has no official role but is important for business. Countries like, China, Japan and rest of the countries fall into this section. Thus it justifies the status of English worldwide.

Hansman (2004) observes that one out of five people in the world speak English and 85 percent of mails are in English. According to him, pilots, executives, tourists, pop singers, actors, and many other famous personnel who speak other languages use English to communicate with colleagues. Jenkins (2006) states that English is a means of international communication across linguistic boundaries. At the same time, the most popular international films, music and even television channels are in English. Other than these, many radio stations,

magazines, newspapers and journals are also in English. Thus it has already made clear that English is the prominent language for international communication.

### **English as a medium for achieving global education**

Development incorporates personal enhancement. Knowledge is a power in gaining positive self-image and confidence. A global education paves the way for such knowledge and empowers students with cross cultural awareness, global issues, universal values, leadership skills and experiential learning (Focho, 2010).

Roux (2001) states that students must be aware of traditions and beliefs which are different from their own. Such understanding furthers cross cultural co-operation, tolerance and peace.

The human values applied for the whole universe include truth, honesty, love, sacrifice, hard work, and striving for excellence. These factors contribute to peace and development. The goal of global education should be to develop social responsibility and global citizenship (Merrified and Kai, 2004).

The English class in any school or an institution is an ideal place for developing afore mentioned knowledge. Interesting topics taken from global issues can be used in students' reading, writing, speaking and listening activities. Activities and topics like, debates, poster presentations, discussions, essay writing could be used for such purpose.

In mention in a nut shell, there are many reasons for considering that English is valuable for students. It helps them to achieve academic success, to find employment, enables them to communicate internationally and gives them a broader perspective on global issues.

### **English in Sri Lanka**

The native language of most of Sri Lankans is either Sinhala or Tamil. English is learnt and taught in Sri Lankan schools as a second language. English was brought to Sri Lanka by the British who succeeded the Dutch in 1796 as colonial masters of the island. In 1802 a proper civil administration was set up when, as a result of the treaty of Amiens, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was officially declared a British crown Colony. A process then began whereby English displaced both Dutch and vernaculars, Sinhala and Tamil, as the state language. It became the major language of administration, of law, of secular education, and of commerce. (Chitra Fernando, 2010).

English, in time, also came to be adopted as a virtual mother tongue by a section of the multiracial non-European population of Sri Lanka, comprising the Sinhalese, the Tamils, The Moors and the Malays, and as such became in varying degrees the language of their

domestic and social intercourse and of their entertainment.(Chitra Fernando, 2010)

From the 1920 onwards, particularly with the grant of universal adult franchise in 1931, the rumblings of nationalism grew louder and louder and finally culminated in Independence in 1948. Independence led to sweeping political, social, and linguistic changes. In 1956, English officially ceased to be the language of administration and was replaced by Sinhala and a restricted use of Tamil. Later on, it ceased to be the major language of education as well.

In pre-independent Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil had been used as media of instruction only in the primary vernacular schools. Secondary and tertiary education as well as primary education in non-vernacular schools had been solely in English. Not only teachers, but also students still require a working knowledge of English, at least in the area of reading comprehension. (Haas, 1953) As far as employment goes, A knowledge of English is still essential for most professionals, ranging from lawyers, doctors, engineers, and accountants to pharmacists, technicians, surveyors, nurses and so on. Though Sinhala is the official language of administration, a fair amount of departmental as well as intradepartmental work is 'unostentatiously done in English' and preference unostentatiously given to employees who know some English (de Souza, 1969).

Most of the students following Higher National Diploma in English at Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education, belong to lower middle class families and learning English has become a priority for most of them, especially English is the most striking indicator of differences in educational and social background and is thus the single most powerful class indicator in present day Sri Lanka.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH**

This survey examined the perceptions of a class of 43 students who follow the Higher National Diploma in English. The class consists of three boys and forty girls ranging from 20-23 years. (The number of boys in the class itself reveals the gender wise interest in learning English). These are final year students who follow specialized subjects in English. They have 12 hours of study per week and have limited opportunities to speak English out of the classroom. Data on student perceptions of learning English for personal and career development were collected using a structured questionnaire (Annexure 1) designed by the investigator. Descriptions for the questionnaire were generated under four different factors discussed afore. The questionnaire used a scale requiring respondents to choose from four options to indicate the degree of their perception. Responses were graded from 4 to 1. (Very great extent,

great extent, little extent, very little extent). The mean for each description for all respondents was obtained by summing the numerical value of each and dividing by the number of respondents. After whole class, group and individual discussions plus activities, further data was collected by monitoring class participation, attitude towards homework, and scores in assignments. Direct and indirect method of observation has also been used inside and outside the class room environment .The study took place during June 2013 to June 2014. Extra activities were designed to increase student motivation in learning of English. Such activities included group discussions, internet searches, exposes, debates, interviews, and essays on the four main research questions mentioned above. Some topics are mentioned in Annexure 2.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The responses to the questionnaires before and after making them aware of the importance of English, were analyzed as below.

The data on student perceptions on learning English for academic success indicate that students' views of English as important for academic success strengthened on all the items. The most important role of English for the students was success in exams and enabling promotion to next semester of studies. With regard to studying abroad many students first were demotivated because of the poor economic status of their parents. But after discussions with them, they recognized that they could apply for scholarships for universities where the medium of instruction would be English. Views here were strengthened by 30 percent. In relation to library and internet research, they had understood that English is a must though nowadays some softwares are available in Sinhala language. After a discussion the view strengthened by 11 percent.

With regard to learning English for obtaining foreign job opportunities, the students did not have a clear ideas as to how this would help in finding a job abroad with the subjects they had learnt. But after an awareness meeting this strengthened by 25 percent.

The nearest reason for the students to not to seek international employment is that, living in rural areas and coming from lower middle class families, they do not believe in doing international jobs. A very few students had the desire to be an international diplomat or engage in any other international employment. Many of the students wanted to pass the examinations, get their diplomas, complete a degree and do a local job and earn a living.

Regarding their perceptions on learning English for international communication, it appeared that for most of them English is significant for communicating with non-

native speakers, watching television stations, listening to popular music and the largest increase in perceptions was on watching popular movies. In discussion with students, most of the students revealed that they understand the value of formal, Standard English. Although they use English for social networking, they accept that the language that they use is not the standard.

The results regarding the perceptions on learning English for global education showed that most of the students did not have any knowledge on human values around the world, but after studying literature in English, they revealed that it improved their knowledge on human values significantly. At the same time, when the researcher had discussions with students, they revealed that, before following the course, they never watched international news or any other media. But when following the course, they had to watch them in order to do their assignments, which paved them the way of understanding the language better.

### **Motivation**

A checklist was used to monitor student participation to record the students who participated orally, who finished written tasks in class and who handed in the assignments and projects on time. This was carried out for three semesters. And the results show semester by semester. In semester one, low motivation was observed in their poor performances in class. However, gradual improvement took place. Students' oral participation was 26 percent in semester 1 and it improved to 64 percent in semester 2, which showed a vast improvement in semester 3 which was 91 percent. To improve their motivation, activities such as dramatizations, exposes, use of internet, listening to television and radio clips, interviews and conducting a speaking club with collaboration of British Council, Kandy, were used.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

At the completion of the research, it was found that three areas were more significant for the students in learning English: learning English for promotion to next semester, for studying in a Sri Lankan University for further studies, and for communicating with non-Students came to understand that one person in every five in the world speaks English. (Hansman, 2004) native speakers.

The students actively followed lectures in the 'Effective Communication Skills' lecture than before. In the above subject the speaking skills and activities are done to improve students speaking ability. After the awareness discussion, they eagerly waited for dramatizations, role plays, skits and especially for discussions on current issues. In the areas with least changes such as learning English for foreign employment, the students were in the view that however good they are in English, only the children of the rich would get better chances in such areas.

By the end of the research programme, the students had acquired a a more positive attitude on learning English for different purposes. The role of the teaching approach in making the students aware of learning English for different purposes cannot be ignored because the activities to motivate students to learn English as well as to make them aware of different purposes of learning English have been ignored by many teachers and lecturers due to difficult teaching conditions. Apart from success in examinations and course objectives, teachers or lecturers should educate the students on achieving personal goals and the importance of English in achieving personal goals and career goals.

Therefore if English helps students to progress academically, it will definitely get them good jobs and empower them to groom themselves personally and socially. Thus learning English plays an important role in a student's personal and social life.

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**Annexure 1****PART A-Personal information**

Name of Student:

Sex:

Age:

Level of English: Oral (Poor, average, good)

Written (poor, average, good)

**PART B-Learning English for academic success**

Please use the rating scale below

VGE- Very great extent (4 points)

GE- Great extent (3 points)

LE- Little Extent (2 points)

VLE- Very little extent (1 points)

No	Description	VGE	GE	LE	VLE
01	English is important for promotion to next semester				
02	English is important for university studies in Sri Lanka				
03	English is important for university studies abroad				
04	English is important for internet research				
05	English is important for library research				

**PART C- Learning English for obtaining international jobs**

No	Description	VGE	GE	LE	VLE
01	Learning English helps you to get an international job in Sri Lanka				
02	English helps your service in a diplomatic career				
03	English helps you for obtaining international job overseas				
04	English helps you for obtaining a job in an English speaking country				
05	Being proficient in English helps you getting promoted at your job				

**PART D: Learning English for international communication**

No	Description	VGE	GE	LE	VLE
01	English is important for speaking with non-native speakers				
02	English is needed for watching popular TV channels				
03	English is important for listening to popular international musicians				
04	English is important for reading popular international magazines and newspapers				
05.	English is important for playing popular international video games				
06	English is important for popular social networking such as Facebook, Twitter etc...				

**PART E: Learning English for achieving global education**

No	Description	VGE	GE	LE	VLE
01	Learning English gives opportunities to know about other cultures				
02	Learning English gives opportunity to know more about global issues				
03	Learning English paves the way to know more about universal human values				
04	Learning English provides opportunity to experience learning through varied projects				

**PART E: Global perceptions (optional)**

**Please give your opinion by stating YES or NO**

01. Do you think English is important for development?

.....

02. Are you willing to make a fruitful effort to be proficient in English?

.....

**Annexure 2****Topics for activities**

1. Why are Sri Lankan students not interested in learning English?
2. Many Sri Lankan parents now send their children to 'International schools', find out why.
3. If you were given an American scholarship and a Chinese scholarship, which would you choose? Why?
4. Interview some lecturers on following topics.
  - a. Their dream for Sri Lanka
  - b. Natural hazards in Sri Lanka
  - c. Rising prices of goods in Sri Lanka
5. Interview ten students on 'their aims and ambitions for future'.