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Attitudes and Motivation Towards Learning English Among FELDA School Students

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ABSTRACT

Attitudes and motivation are key factors to successful second language acquisition. The rising importance of English as evidence in the new National Education Blueprint (2013-2025) calls for immediate attention to students' low proficiency problems especially among FELDA school students. The problem could stem from primary school students having a lack of motivation and poor attitude towards English and learning of the language. This study investigates FELDA primary school students' attitudes and motivation towards English and the learning of the language. A total 40 respondents, age between 10-12 years old took part in this preliminary study. Data was collected via a questionnaire survey and interviews and was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings suggest that students are highly motivated, have positive attitudes towards learning English and are extrinsically motivated although it does not necessarily translate into favorable efforts in improving proficiency. Based on the findings, some recommendations are presented.

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INTRODUCTION

English is a language spoken and written by billions of people around the world. Being proficient in the language is undeniably important, especially in Malaysia's context where the language has been accorded as a second language status (Gill, 2002). In Malaysia's context, most of Malaysians receive up to eleven years of education in primary and secondary schools (The Malaysia Government Official Portal, 2012) with English as one of the compulsory subjects taught in schools. The growing importance of English in Malaysia is evident in the tertiary education and job entry requirements (Nich, 2005; Shanti, 2000; Ball and Chick, 2001). The government has recently launched the new National Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2012) as one of its commitments in creating awareness about the importance of mastering English. The blueprint outlines 11 shifts that would be needed to transform Malaysia's national education system. English is placed in the second shift, which suggests that government is serious in putting efforts to elevate the status of English in this country.

Malaysia consists of different ethnics which provides a favorable environment for second language learners. While multicultural society suggests advantages to students in developing their proficiency, this situation however is unlikely to occur to students living in rural area. Since FELDA areas are located in remote regions and are largely occupied by the Malays, the needs of English as a second language in everyday activities seems to be least important. The problem of low proficiency in English is especially prominent in rural areas where the failure rate in the English language subject is rather high (Rahimah *et al.*, 2004). Attitudes and motivation of students towards learning English is said to be among the factors to low proficiency and passing rates in schools (Thang *et al.*, 2011). While vast studies covered the similar ground of motivation and attitude towards learning English, limited study, (such as Melor and Nur Rashidah, 2011) is devoted towards primary school students living in rural areas.

This paper will describe the results of a preliminary study that looks into the attitude and motivation of primary school students towards learning English. Data were gathered through surveys to the following research questions: what are the FELDA students' attitude towards the learning of English, what motivates FELDA students to learn English, and what efforts have they put into the learning of English.

Literature Review:

Second language acquisition is the process of learners acquiring one or more second or foreign language (Nunan, 1999). Research has shown that individuals use different ways when it comes to learning a second language (Skehan, 1989). The success in learning a second language depends upon many factors such as learning style, motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985), and attitude towards the language (Walqui, 2000; Lightbown and Spada, 1993). Achievement in a target language as proposed by Mohamad Jafre (2012) relies not only on intellectual capacity, but also in the learner's attitudes towards language learning. Positive attitude will significantly contribute to the success of second language learning (Gardner, 1985; Reid, 2003; Samsiah *et al.*, 2009). Conversely, negative attitudes may lead to class anxiety (Ratnawati and Ismail, 2003), low cognitive achievement, and low motivation (Victori and Lockhart, 1995).

Motivation, which is the drive to initiate actions as according to Dornyei (1998) can be classified into two types; intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The former is the learner's desire for achievement to get an external reward (Pitmann and Boggiano, 1992) and the latter refers to the desire to perform an action without external inducement or reward (Bandura, 1977). Studies in the Malaysian context suggest that Malaysian students are generally more extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated (Ainol Madziah and Isarji, 2009; Samsiah *et al.*, 2009; Parilah, 2002; Thang, 2004). Studies carried out in another part of the world yield similar results too (Liu, 2007; Gayton, 2010).

Attitude and motivation towards language learning are interconnected (Ellis, 1997). Both motivation and positive attitude need to coexist in order to achieve a successful language learning experience (Gardner, 1985). This ideal relationship is further highlighted by the researchers (Samsiah *et al.*, 2009; Thang *et al.*, 2011) who propose that students with positive attitudes and high level of motivation will be more successful compared to those with negative attitudes and low motivation. As Littlewood (1983) claims, students will lose interest towards learning since attitudes produce an obstacle in the learning process and prevent them from obtaining new second language knowledge. Thus, it suggests that attitude has direct consequence of students' performance in second language acquisition. On the other hand, motivation does not directly influence students' English language performance. Students' attitudes towards learning English in contrast, did affect their language performance (Samsiah *et al.*, 2009; Saemah and Phillips, 2006; Racha, 2003).

Poor English command among Malaysian students is not something new. English proficiency among students in rural area especially the FELDA settlements does not differ much from the urban and cities. Several attempts have been initiated by FELDA to solve the academic problem of the FELDA children (Sulong, 1985) such as the establishment of FELDA's Tuition Scheme 2008 (STF) on 1st February 2008 (Official Website of FELDA, 2012). Several factors might contribute to low proficiency in English among FELDA students. Limited exposure to the second language is identified to be among the factors which may result in lack of interest to learn the language (Jamali, 1991). As supported by Normazidah (2012) in her research, learners need adequate support in terms of supportive and conducive learning environment and meaningful language experience to help instilling interest in English. Despite being in rural areas, environmental factors have shown a little influence on students' attitude and interest towards English. Findings from several researchers (Melor and Nur Rashidah, 2011; Adnan, 1985; Nor Azmi, 1995) suggest that students in rural areas generally have positive attitudes in learning the second language. A study conducted by Noraini and Noorizah (1999) interpreted that many students are aware of the importance and advantages of learning English. They however do not generate enough efforts to improve their learning. Motivating the students therefore, should be a primary concern of teachers as it is the key factor to help students improve their proficiency.

Method:

A survey questionnaire adapted from Gardner's (1985) Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) was employed in this study. The questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Malaysia since the respondents were considered 'weak' based on their End of Year Examination result. The questionnaire contained 25 items and was divided into three sections. The first part consisted of five items which seek information on students' background. The second part contained ten items to draw out information regarding their attitudes towards learning English and the final section contained ten items aimed at extracting students' level of motivation and efforts taken towards improving their English proficiency. The questionnaire was designed using 4 Likert scale where 4 indicated respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 3 agree, 2 slightly disagree and 1 strongly disagree. Data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed using frequency counts, which were converted to percentages and means.

The research was also carried out using data collected through interviews with the respondents. Selected items from the adapted questionnaire were used in a one-to-one interview which aimed to seek better clarifications pertaining students' motivation to learn English. Each interview lasted about ten minutes. The interview was conducted in Bahasa Malaysia to ease the respondents' anxiety and to encourage them to be more expressive. The interviews were recorded and the extracts were transcribed for analysis.

40 students from a FELDA primary school in Negeri Sembilan participated in this survey and 5 students picked out randomly from the sample were interviewed. The respondents chosen were from the upper primary level. They were 25 Malay girls and 15 Malay boys aged between 10 to 12 years old took part in this study. The respondents were all Malays since the Indian students refused to take part in this study. There were only two Indian students in the upper primary and no Chinese student in this particular school. The selected respondents were chosen from a random sampling process and they had just received their End of Year examination results, where they were considered “average” to “weak” students based on their results. The questionnaire was administered after the students were briefed on the purpose of the research and the scale used. Participants were required to answer all the items honestly.

Results:

Results focusing on students’ attitude and motivation towards learning English are presented here in three subsections. The first section describes the students’ general attitude towards English and the learning of English. The second section describes the students’ level of motivation and their orientation. Meanwhile, the third section presents the efforts taken to improve the learning of English. The result also identifies some problems that the students face while learning English.

General attitude towards learning English:

This section presents the students’ attitude towards English and the learning of English. Table 1 shows that students generally like and are interested to learn English. The majority of the students finds learning English is great. Students generally show positive attitudes towards English, as most of them disagree with a statement about not paying attention to the teacher in English class. A small number of the students however admitted they paid less attention in class. When they were asked to clarify this further, a respondent admitted that she “was distracted by the noise and students walking outside their class”, two respondents said that “I did not understand what the teacher is teaching” while another two respondent told that he found the lesson was “not interesting and boring”.

In greater detail, 96% of the respondents agreed they were “interested to learn English” and 88% of them found “learning English is very great”. The high percentage of the students (86%) disagreed they “don’t pay much attention in English class” and correspondingly 100% of the students disagreed that they “hate English”.

Table 1: Attitudes towards English and learning English.

Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
I do not pay much attention in English class	27 (68)	7 (18)	6 (15)	-
I am interested to learn English	-	2 (5)	17 (43)	21 (53)
Learning English is very great	-	5 (13)	9 (23)	26 (65)
I hate English	32 (80)	8 (20)		

Motivation:

This section analyses students’ level of motivation and their motivation types. Table 2 presents items that indicate students’ intrinsic motivation while Table 3 presents items that indicate students’ extrinsic motivation. In Table 2, the majority of the students agreed that learning another language is positively to their self-development as they would like to learn English to become multilingual speakers. Learning English is driven by their strong desire and wish to be fluent in English. Another reason to learn English is because it is their favorite subject back in school. When students were asked the importance of being able to communicate in more than one language, two students said that having the ability to speak in many languages “enables me to make more friends with other people”. Another student fancied the idea of being “able to speak to other people in their own language” and another student reported that “it is easier for me to understand what other people are talking, especially on television and radios”.

The survey results, in detail, indicate that 93% of the students have a strong desire to learn English. 90% of the students “wish they were fluent in English” and that they “wish they could speak many languages perfectly” (63%). Their intrinsic motivation is further supported as students perceive “English as favorite subject in school” (50%).

Table 2: Intrinsic motivation

Item	Strongly disagree	Slightly disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
I wish I could speak many languages perfectly	13 (33)	2 (5)	10 (25)	15 (38)	2.68
English is my favorite subject in school	5 (13)	15 (38)	4 (10)	16 (40)	2.78
I have a strong desire to learn English	-	3 (8)	20 (50)	17 (43)	3.35
I wish I were fluent in English	1 (3)	3 (8)	6 (15)	30 (75)	3.63

Table 3, on the contrary, shows how students are extrinsically motivated when it comes to learning English. External factors such as the teachers and the benefit of learning English are identified in this section. In general, a large number of respondents agreed that a great English teacher is what keeps them looking forwards to come to school. A strong teacher-students relationship might influence students' perception of teachers as their inspirational source. Stronger extrinsic motivation is also highlighted as students agreed to the benefit of learning English to get better jobs and being respected by others who are less proficient in the language.

In details, 73% of the respondents agreed that they "look forward to going to class because their English teacher is good" and 80% of them reported that their "English teacher is a great source of inspiration". When students were asked how good were their English teachers, a student informed that "my teacher cares about me and never humiliate me in class". Another student reported that "I like it when the teacher explains the lesson well" while another student said that "my teacher is very good in English and I learn new words from her everyday".

Meanwhile, the majority of the respondents (93%) agreed that "studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job and being respected by others". When students were asked which job they think requires English the most, three out of five respondents said "doctors and engineers", while a respondent said "pilot" and another respondent said "banker". The fact that students associate English with high ranking jobs indicates that students are aware of the job requirements and the importance of English in that particular field.

Table 3: Extrinsic motivation.

Item	Strongly disagree	Slightly disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
I look forward to going to class because my English teacher is good	3 (8)	8 (20)	7 (18)	22 (55)	3.20
Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job and respected by others	2 (5)	1 (3)	6 (15)	31 (78)	3.65
My English teacher is a great source of inspiration to me	1 (3)	7 (18)	16 (40)	16 (40)	3.18

The higher mean score of above 3.65 for item 2 (Table 3) suggest students are more extrinsically motivated and have a strong desire to learn English for a future career as compared to slightly lower mean score of item 4 (Table 2) of 3.63. However students seem less influenced by their teachers as shown by the slightly lower mean scores for items 1 and 3.

Efforts taken to improve English:

This section lists out the efforts taken by the respondents to improve their English proficiency. Data in Table 5 shows a variation in students' effort towards improving their English proficiency, inside and outside the classroom. The majority of the students reported they would try to understand all the English words they see and hear in class. When they were asked to further clarify this, three students told that "I often look up for the meanings of words in the dictionary", while another two students reported that "I will ask my teacher or simply guess the meaning based on the text and pictures that teacher gave me". These findings support students' intrinsic orientation to learn English and the efforts taken contribute to students' improved proficiency and personal development.

Similarly, a large number of students also reported that they seek help whenever they encounter problems in understanding English, while they are in the classroom. For example, a student admitted that "I often stop the teacher while she is explaining and ask her to explain more". Meanwhile, another student told that "I asked a friend sitting next to me if I did not understand because my partner knows English better than me". The findings suggest that respondents have taken initiatives to improve their understanding of English while in class.

Table 4: Efforts in improving English.

Item	Strongly disagree	Slightly disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I make a point trying to understand all the English I see and hear	-	4 (10)	12 (30)	24 (60)
I would rather see a TV program dubbed in our language than in its own language with subtitles	4 (10)	9 (23)	5 (13)	22 (55)
When I have a problem understanding something in my English class, I always ask my teacher for help	1 (3)	5 (13)	6 (15)	28 (70)
I watch cartoons, and listening to songs in English	9 (23)	13 (33)	14 (35)	4 (10)

On the other hand, an opposite result was recorded when students are outside their classrooms, at the comfort of their homes. A large number of them confessed that they preferred to watch a dubbed television program as compared to the shows in its own language (English) and a significant number of them also agreed that they do not watch or listen to materials in English language. When they were asked why they did not prefer

watching television programs in its original language (English), the respondents informed that “It’s difficult to understand what they (actors and actresses) are speaking because they speak too fast”. Another respondent said that “when at home, it is my leisure time, so I just want to enjoy the show”. Similar responses were also recorded when students were asked why they did not prefer listening to English radio stations. Among the responses were “I don’t understand the songs”, “the singers were singing too fast... I can’t hear the words they speak” and “my parents were listening to the Malay radio station so I was not allowed to change the station”. These findings suggest that while students consider efforts in school are important to improve their English proficiency, they however fail to recognize that similar efforts should be taken when they are at home because learning takes place both in formal and informal situations.

In greater detail, a high percentage of the students (90%) agreed that they “make a point trying to understand all the English they see and hear”. A high percentage of the students too (85%) agreed that “when they have a problem understanding something in their English class, they always ask their teacher for help”. On the contrary, 68% of the respondents preferred to “rather see a TV program dubbed into their own language (Bahasa Malaysia) than in its own language (English) with subtitles (Bahasa Malaysia)”. Similarly, quite a number of respondents (56%) also did not prefer to “watch cartoons and listening to songs in English”.

Problems in learning English:

Students were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statement about the problems they face in class on a Likert scale. Analysis of the result shows that a large number of students felt nervous when they were asked to speak in English class. When students were asked to explain why they get nervous while in English classes, the students reported that “I run out of words when the teacher asked me to answer in English”, “I don’t know how to pronounce English words correctly”, “I’m afraid other students will laugh at me” and “I don’t understand the lesson”. Students’ anxiety level could be a possible factor in their ‘fear’ of learning English at school. A large number of the students however claimed that the homework given by their teachers were not that difficult as a high number of them admitted they completed the homework given on time. Thus, it can be said that students’ anxiety has greater influence on their attitude and motivation to learn English, as compared to the difficulty of the tasks given.

Table 5: Problems in learning English.

Item	Strongly disagree	Slightly disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I get nervous when I am speaking in my English class	7 (18)	4 (10)	25 (63)	4 (10)
The homework given by my teacher is usually difficult	15 (38)	6 (15)	12 (30)	7 (18)
I always complete the tasks given by my English teacher on time	4 (10)	7 (18)	9 (23)	20 (50)

In detail, Table 5 identifies anxiety as the obstacle to learning English as 73% of the respondents agreed that they “get nervous when speaking in English class”. Generally, most of the students (53%) disagreed to the statement “the homework given by my teacher is usually difficult”. The data gathered suggests a positive attitude as most of the students (73%) “always complete the tasks given by my English teacher on time”.

Discussion:

The results indicate that generally students in rural areas have positive attitudes towards the learning of English. They realize the importance of English and they have the desire to learn and improve their proficiency in the language. The results confirm other researchers’ findings (Melor and Nur Rashidah, 2011; Thang *et al.*, 2004; Noraini, 1999, Adnan, 1985; Nor Azmi, 1995) that students have positive attitudes towards English and the learning of the language. The findings also yield similar results of other researchers, which even though students were highly motivated to learn English, but they tend to labor minimal efforts in their learning process (Melor and Nur Rashidah, 2011; Noraini, 1999).

In general, the results confirm Racha’s (2003) finding that the majority of the students were highly motivated to learn English. The findings also support the findings of other researches that Malaysian students are more extrinsically motivated than intrinsically motivated (Ainol Madziah and Isarji, 2009; Samsiah *et al.*, 2009; Liu, 2007; Thang *et al.*, 2004). As agreed by several researchers (Ainol Madziah and Isarji, 2009; Samsiah *et al.*, 2009; Thang, 2004), this phenomenon is a common practice among Malaysian students and the issue should be immediately addressed so as to encourage students to take greater responsibility for their own learning and not taking learning process for granted.

Meanwhile, students’ anxiety level could be a possible factor in FELDA school students’ fear of learning English at school. In a study that looks at language anxiety among learners in higher education, Noor Hashimah (2007) found out that language anxiety is experienced by learners, and that learners face great difficulty to express themselves in English. This anxiety could originate from the learners themselves, negative attitudes towards the language learning, motivation factors (Victori and Lockhart, 1995), school instructional practices

and social and cultural influences that are isolated from English language use (Rosemala, 2008). The geographical setting of the FELDA settlement in remote areas is a disadvantage to the students despite rapid development in technology which enables knowledge to be shared all around. As agreed by Ratnawati and Ismail (2003), many rural school students have difficulty understanding English, and few are able to use English in simple conversation. Thus, making them speaking in English class would definitely make them feel nervous as they hardly speak English. What else, as proposed by Ratnawati and Ismail (2003), English is used usually in response to their teacher's questions. A student with limited exposure to English therefore, would be less successful in language acquisition (Jamali, 1991).

Implication:

There could be a number of reasons why a person is eager to learn English as a second language. These reason will provide numerous benefits to the learners in the future. The findings of this study suggest that there are some serious implications that students themselves, as well as teachers and parents should consider about. As for the students, having the awareness of the importance of English should motivate them to master the language. The best way to get on top of the English language is to read regularly as reading will expose them to new words that eventually will make their way into everyday vocabulary. Being well spoken is a great help in any field and knowing that they can speak to other people who share the language with self-confidence can be an enormous boost to their self-esteem. Besides that, reading will also open the doors to knowledge that are abundant in English medium. The more knowledge they have, the better-equipped they are to tackle any challenge in the future.

The teachers on the other hand should always look for ways to improve their classrooms and language instructions. The best way to do this is by creating a comfortable environment for students to learn the language at their own pace. Classroom arrangement, language tasks and activities, and materials chosen should provide students with opportunities to explore and view the language being used in authentic situations. Teachers should also personalize their teaching using materials selected to suit different needs of the students. Students should be given the opportunities to use the language and express themselves in the classroom without being threatened and humiliated. Students who are different individuals implies that teachers should therefore respect their unique personalities while at the same time encourage them to become intrinsically motivated by becoming good role models of the language users. They should also guide the students towards becoming autonomous learners, which is required of them in order to become lifelong learners.

Parents too, should play active role in encouraging their children to do well in the language. They should exhibit a positive attitude towards the language by providing good examples and support their children learning by providing enough support materials to reinforce their children's interest. Parents should also help teachers to make a connection between the learning experience at school and the learning experience outside the school. They can do so by helping their children to organize their time and support their desire to learn new things in and out of school.

Conclusion:

The respondents' obvious positive attitude towards English may lead to conclude that students are well aware of the importance of English, besides learning it as a compulsory subject in school. Having the right attitude towards English will eventually motivate students to learn the language, inside and outside the classroom. Students' desire to learn English either intrinsically or extrinsically is an important factor to become successful language learners. Helping these students improve their language acquisition should be the responsibility of all. Students should realize that sufficient efforts are what they need to help master the language apart from having the right attitude and motivation. As for teachers, teaching English should not be just for the sake of completing the syllabuses, instead, it should be carefully planned to incorporate more meaningful learning experiences that would challenge their knowledge and maximize the opportunity for real language exposure. As the conclusion, positive attitude, motivation and efforts determine successful language learners.

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