Research on Attitudes of Students to the GCE General English Course with Special Emphasis on Schools of the Balangoda Educational Zone, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Today, educators are faced with the challenge of addressing the needs of the growing number of students whose primary language is not English. While mastering other skills and content in other subject areas, there is the necessity for these learners to gain proficiency in English. Teaching English as a second language to all Sri Lankan school children irrespective of their social, economical or geographical background has been a major educational policy of successive governments in Sri Lanka since the early 1950s. This continues to be the declared government educational policy as in recent years more than ever, the country's need for English-speaking citizens has come to be realized.

Teaching of English at the Advanced Level is considered an appropriate means of achieving the goals to equip them with the necessary knowledge and technical skills required for the modern employment market.

The results of this cross sectional survey analyses the attitudes of students to the GCE AL General English course in four state schools. This paper further attempts to develop a model for building a direct relationship between student aspirations and English studies in order to achieve greater relevance in the GCE AL General English programme.The findings made in this study regarding the attitudes of students to General English in the Balangoda Educational Zone may provide useful insights for improving educational policy with regard to English education, as well as the quality of the English course offered by schools.

Key words: Second Language, Teaching, General Education

Introduction

During British rule, the English language was extensively used in Sri Lanka but in the late 1950s language changes took place and all this resulted in a complex linguistic situation. Initially back in 1948 and in 1956 the Sri Lankan Government imposed the dominance of Sinhala without any formal recognition for Tamil. As a result, Sinhala became the leading language with English being used side by side as a second language. Fortunately, this linguistic anomaly was finally addressed and Tamil gained its recognition

only in the late 1970s as an officially recognized language of Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka.

Teaching of English as a second language in Sri Lanka has been reinforced especially since the 1990s in order to find a solution to the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict. Today, fluency in English in Sri Lanka is an inevitable social requirement. English language is considered as a highly prestigious language which provides access to all kinds of privileges. So the importance of acquiring competency in a foreign language, namely English in the context of Sri Lanka has been recognized by society. Accordingly changes to the A/L syllabus were introduced in 1998 and the first batch of students sat the exam under the revised version in 2000. The primary change was the reduction of the number of subjects from 4 to 3. Two core subjects, namely, The Common General Paper (CGP), evaluating the candidate's general knowledge and IQ and a General English paper were introduced. To be eligible for admission to university under the new scheme, a student must pass all three subjects as well as the CGP. However, marks obtained for the General English paper is not considered for university admission.

By introducing the General English syllabus and a text book in 1998 for GCE (General Certification of Examination) Advanced Level, it was expected that the students would be able to obtain a reasonable command of the target language in the areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing and further to acquire language and communicative competency in English that facilitate employment in contexts in which the language is actively used.

Even though learners of English language spend a great amount of time learning English, their mastery of the language is not very successful. Therefore the effectiveness of the school English language programs has been the research theme of many educationists, linguists and sociologists since the early 1950s. Researchers have pointed out that the programs are only minimally successful compared to the large investments made on it. They argue that the majority of Sri Lankan youth do not possess the required English proficiency to compete in the private sector oriented job market.

This study would enable the academic researches, language teachers, and linguists to build up further discussion of the attitudes towards General English in Sri Lanka.

Methods

It is evident that most of the students, who offer General English at the GCE Advanced Level, in the Balangoda Educational Zone, Sri Lanka belong to the Upwardly Mobile Middle class. From infancy they have been exposed

to an extensive use of Sinhala and frequent Code-Mixing involving a few English expressions. Their primary and secondary levels of education have been in Sinhala. At the same time some have more opportunities to use the English language from their infancy than the students of Upwardly Mobile Middle class.

Since the students come from diverse backgrounds, some students have needs that make the task of learning much more difficult. Some have large gaps in their schooling while others lack important native language literacy skills that one would normally expect for students of their age.

For the survey one girls school and one boys school belonging to the highest rank of the school hierarchy in the Balangoda Educational Zone – Sri Lanka and two mixed schools in the rural localities of the zone were selected. In order to collect findings a questionnaire which included both open ended questions and questions with fixed alternatives generated for students' answers was administered to 40 students.

Results

This section which highlights the findings of the research shows several controversial attitudes of the students to the GCE Advanced Level General English.

Table 1 shows the percentages received for the attitudes to General English Text on a scale of 5 (excellent) to 1 (very poor).

Table 1: Attitudes to General English Text

	Excellent (5) %	Good (4) %	Fair (3) %	Poor (2) %	Very Poor (1) %
Lesson materials distributed in class	32.5	52.5	12.5	2.5	0
Reading component	30.0	57.5	5.0	5.0	2.5
Speech and listening component	41.6	41.6	8.33	4.16	4.16
Writing component	22.5	47.5	27.5	2.5	0
Grammar and Language component	30.0	45.0	17.5	7.5	0
Appearance and the size of the General English book	32.5	27.5	15.0	17.5	7.5
Clarity of the audiocassettes	0	56.2	12.5	18.75	12.5.

Further more figure 1 shows the overall evaluation of the General English Text. It is almost certain that students have confidence with the four components (4 or above) in the text and especially satisfied with the materials distributed in the class. (4.175) However, the students seem to have less satisfaction regarding the clarity of the audio cassettes (3.125) and appearance and size of the text (3.625).
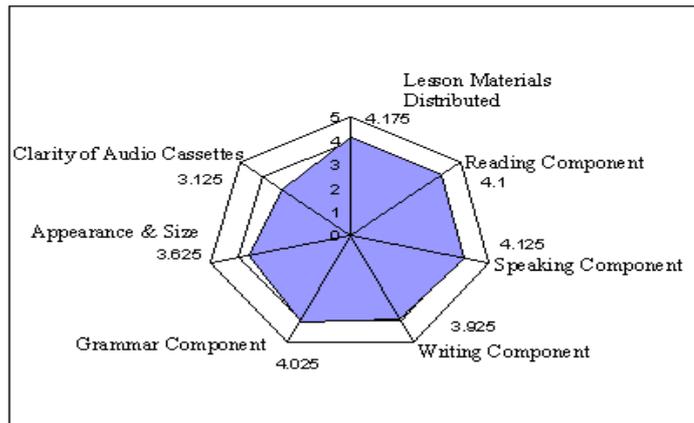

Figure 1: Attitudes to General English Text

As can be seen from figure 2, nearly 80% of the subjects stated learning General English 'Useful' or 'Interesting' whereas only 20% found it either 'Boring' or 'Useless'
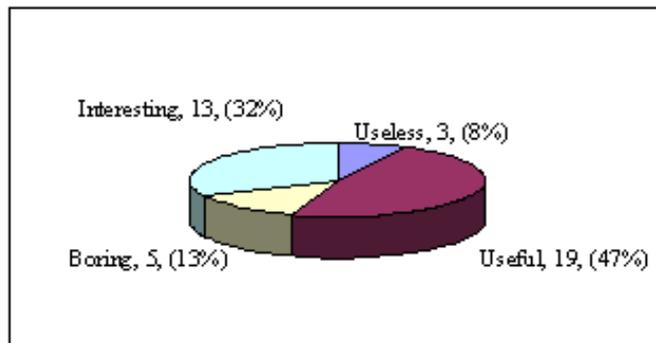

Figure 2: Attitudes to Learning General English

As revealed by the table 2 and 3, out of the 32 respondents who mentioned either 'Useful' or 'Interesting' majority of them(10) identified finding a job and maintaining social status as the most important necessities of the General English course. In fact the views of the respondents those who identified learning General English 'Boring' and those who felt 'Interesting' seem contradictory.

Table 2: Reasons for Their Attitudes

Useful (47%)	No: of Students	Useless (8%)	No: of Students
For higher education and foreign employment	2	Less attention of the teacher to General English course	2
To acquire global knowledge	6		
To find a job and maintain social status	10		
For technical education	1		
Total no: of respondents	19	Total no: of respondents	2

Table 3: Reasons for Their Attitudes

Interesting (32%)	No: of Students	Boring (13%)	No: of Students
Content	7	Less proficient learners	2
Practicability of activities	1	Activities not interested	1
Job oriented nature of the activities	5	Content easy	1
		Content difficult	1
Total no: of respondents	13	Total no: of respondents	5

As shown by the figure 3, only 3% of the students learn General English in order to get through the examination while the rest (97%) noted three different reasons.
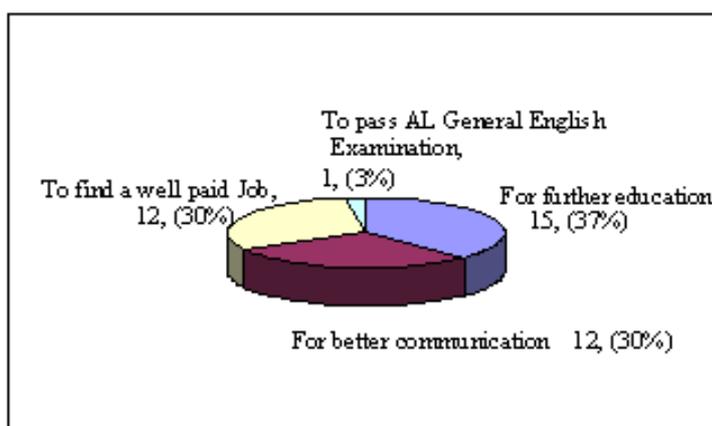

Figure 3: Reasons for Learning General English

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the views of the subjects regarding the requirement and non requirement of adding marks obtained for General English Paper to the aggregate of the university entrance. Nearly half of the respondents strongly recommended that General English marks should be added. Out of the 21 respondents who stated impracticability of adding marks, the largest number of respondents (15) indicated that less proficient learners, who come from diverse backgrounds, would find it difficult to enter the university due to the language barrier.
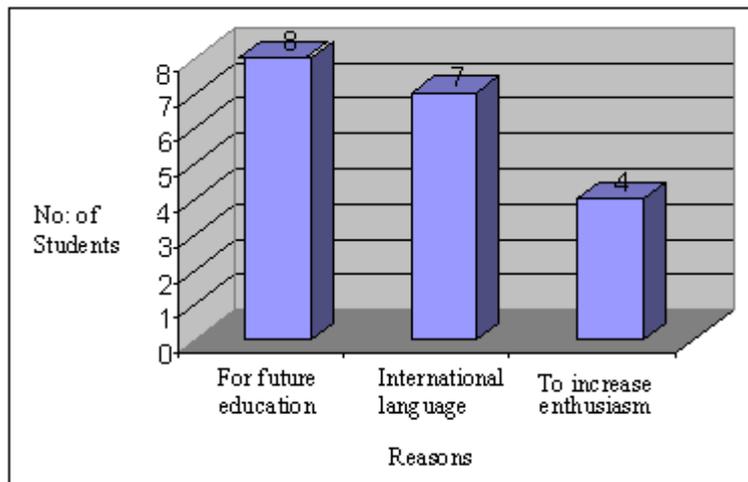

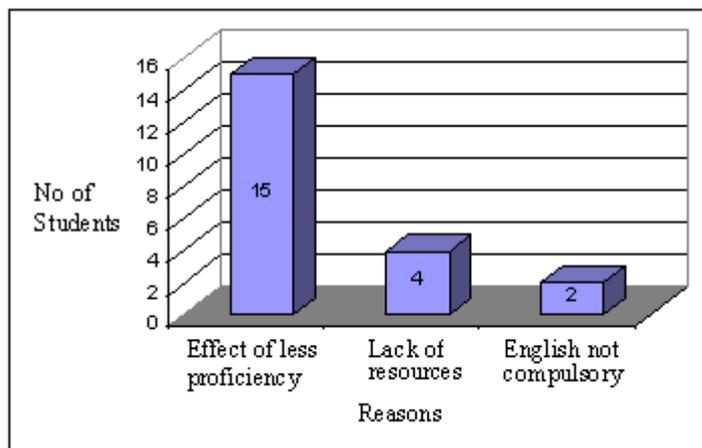**Figure 4:** General English Marks Added to the Aggregate of University Entrance

Figure 5: General English Marks Not Added to the Aggregate of University Entrance

It is important to note that the question is evaluative in the sense that it measures the real attitudes of students. Especially the suggestion presented by 4 respondents that is adding marks increases the enthusiasm of the learners is indeed significant.

According to the results presented in the figure 6 it is obvious that almost 70% of students felt that certain modification is required in the text, since it was inadequately designed, and does not properly cater to the learner needs.
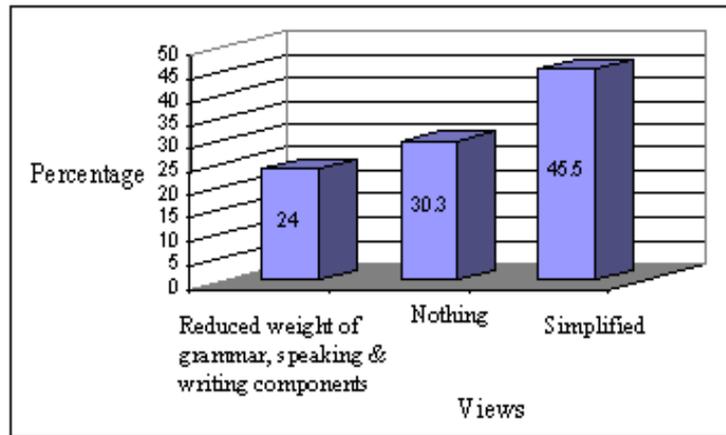

Figure 6: Responses of the Students Regarding the Changes to be Introduced to the General English Test

The results given in figure 7 demonstrates that 82% of students in the sample identified the preferable time to learn General English is from 7.30 a.m.to 10.30 a.m. However, reasons which indicate the learning General English 'After Interval' and which justified 'Before Interval' seem contradic -tory since 'easy to concentrate' has become a response of both categories.
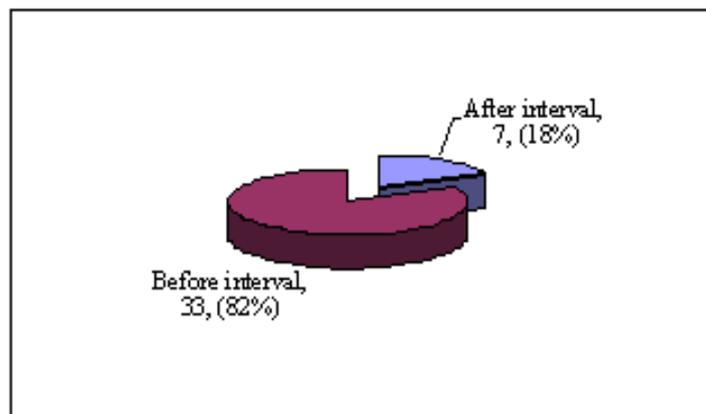

Figure 7: Preferable Time for General English

For the question tabulated in the figure 8, all participants were asked to give reasons for attending tuition classes for General English. Respondents mentioned individual reasons and then they were organized into categories which emerged in the pooled data and displayed in the table 4.

Table 4: Reasons for Learning General English

Before interval	No: of students	After interval	No: of students
Easy to concentrate	32	Easy to concentrate	5
Better attention in the morning	1	Less work load	2
Total No: of respondents	**33**	**Total No: of respondents**	**7**

The largest percentage of responses (72%) indicates no desire for attending tuition classes whereas nobody mentioned reasons for that. In contrast out of the 28% of students who are attending tuition classes , nearly 27% of respondents stated inadequate work in school and poor quality of teaching made them to attend tuition classes.
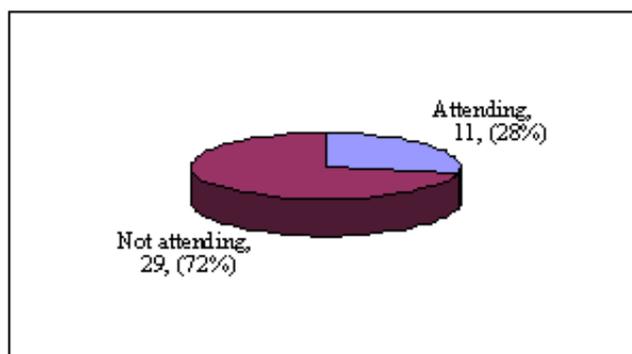

Figure 8: Attending Tution Classes for General English

The following table 5 illustrate reasons for attending tution classes.

Table 5: Reasons for Attending Tution Classes

Reasons for attending	No: of students	Percentage
Percentage	2	18.18%
To improve language competence	3	27.27%
Future importance	5	45.45%
Poor quality of teaching	1	9.09%
Total no: of respondents	**11**	

Discussion and Conclusion

The major objective of this survey is to identify the attitudes of students to the GCE AL General English Course in schools of Balangoda Educational Zone, Sri Lanka. As noted in the results section, it is obviously essential to reduce the weight given for the components of grammar, speech and writing in the GE Text at least to some extent while initiating to change its appearance and size and further to simplify the text using simple vocabulary to address the learner needs . It is notable that the textbook for General English at the GCE Advanced Level does not easily lend itself to individualization of instruction that is not catering to the varying levels of language competence.

Apparently the proficiency levels of the second language learners directly impinge on designing and developing syllabuses and text books. Cumaranatunga (1989) maintains, "What achieves impact with ten learners in a class might not achieve impact with other five." Therefore it is really essential to examine one's teaching and learning context prior to designing materials and syllabuses.

The simpler tasks and activities in the GE textbook should be assigned to weaker students. If needed they could be simplified further. Able students should be assigned to help weaker students in Cooperative Learning Groups. The complexity and difficulty level of the texts should match the knowledge base and reading level of the students. It has become a must to reduce some of the unfamiliar cultural references and non-high frequency idiomatic uses of language to make students accessible to the language of the textbook (Wijeratne et al., 2005).

Wijesinha (2004) states that in particular, the production of texts that teach and test thinking skills should have been expedited and some aspects could have perhaps been included in the Advanced Level General English component, to emphasize the connection between the two subjects and ensure greater attention to the latter.

The question of whether and how to use textbooks in teaching English as a second language (ESL) has long been debated among professionals in the field. However, even with the development of new technologies that allow for higher quality teacher-generated material, demand for textbooks continues to grow. A textbook can serve different purposes for teachers: as a core resource, as a source of supplemental material, as an inspiration for classroom activities, even as the curriculum itself, but in practice, the process is often

based on personal preference and may be affected by factors unrelated to pedagogy. Yet with a little additional consideration and attention, the designing process of textbooks can be enhanced and the outcomes for learners will be improved. (Cunningsworth, 1984; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991; Ur, 1996).

Ur (1996) identifies the need for thorough coverage of the course objectives in the textbook. The textbook needs to address a reasonable number of course objectives to make it worthwhile for both teacher and students. A book that addresses at least half of the course objectives is a good option. While every instructor should supplement the textbook with self-created materials or materials from other sources that reflect the unique needs of the class, a textbook that can be used consistently within that classroom seems more likely to be useful to both the instructor and students.

The major objective of the GCE AL General English course is to enable students to gain proficiency in grammatical English and use the language with confidence in a variety of situations and to provide students with knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. These findings suggest that more than two third of the students have positive attitudes to learning General English and the reasons stated have made a strong conviction about the usefulness and interest.

ESP is a good source of information about curriculum and material development for learners, though considerable care must be taken to ensure that the topics, tasks, and tokens are entirely appropriate for their interests. Tailoring the approach and content of a textbook, or of an entire language course, helps to establish satisfactory motivation in students by creating, maintaining, or increasing their interest (Clark, 1987).

Developing supplementary materials for ESL Programmes, while challenging and time-consuming, can be very rewarding. It is a good learning experience, which may give insight into one's teaching, it also allows him/her to target the types of activities that will be most valuable to his/her students, and to tailor them exactly to fit their needs. Tomlinson (1998) asserts that the most meaningful learning takes place when students are "involved intellectually, aesthetically, and emotionally" in their own education. To ensure some success for ESL Programmes, teachers need to identify learner and what each learner needs and wants to learn and at the same time learnin environment.

In general the experimental sample resisted to accept the idea that the only reason for learning General English is to pass the subject at the GCE, A/L

examination .The other facts mentioned in addition, show the predominant role of English in Sri Lankan society at present.

Gradually over the years it became obvious that Sinhala and Tamil would not give Sri Lankans sufficient prospects of securing a high-powered job locally or an international career. Like India or Pakistan or Bangladesh, Sri Lankans have in recent decades realized that English may bring them medium-and long-term benefits. It was then that the status and perception of English started changing; from the language that once stood for oppression English would finally become a language of popular choice, mutual convenience and social acceptance. All this has been taking place despite the 'swabhasa' (mother tongue) movement which naturally insists on the use of the two local languages.

Whether the marks obtained for the General English paper should be added to the aggregate, has become a controversial issue among the students of the educational zone. The reasons mentioned by them consist of logical weight. The marks of the General English paper should not be added into the aggregate mark for purposes of University Entrance.The present policy should continue (Wijeratne et al., 2005).

Sivasatkunanathan (2006) maintains that the very fact that the Sri Lankan learners under-perform in English, yet they still go through the educational system on the strength of passing specialist subject exams creates a system whereby linguistic deficiencies in English do not preclude students from completing their courses or graduating.

In general, it was confirmed that the preferable time for learning General English is the morning session. However, many a school uses time periods in the General English subject for teaching other subjects of Advanced Level subject scheme Circular I (Ministry of Education, 1993-2003).

The poor quality of teaching which leads students towards the tuition classes should be addressed immediately.

Sri Lankan teachers of English face the daunting task of doing their jobs in an under-resourced system where the ELT infrastructure is very basic. While for example students of science and technology are actively encouraged to use ICT for studying their specialist subjects, this does not happen when it comes to teaching and learning English: there are no language laboratories; English teachers are not normally supported in their continuous professional development, (Sivasatkunanathan, 2006).

In recent years the use of English language has had impact on the social, cultural, political and economic factors in Sri Lankan life. However, the conditions in which the teaching and learning of English take place are still far from perfect.

It becomes evident that a large scale cross sectional study has still not been undertaken to investigate the tendencies and attitudes of either teachers or students to GCE AL General English Course. It should be noted that this is a very limited study restricted to one area. Therefore, research in this area might produce materials of greater assistance to writers especially educationists who are involved in designing materials and syllabuses for GCE AL General English.

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