

In this country, as elsewhere in the world, English Language teaching and learning may together be viewed as twin pillars of a growing industry. A great and increasing amount of human attention, energy and resources are being spent on making the industry a productive one. Millions of dollars are paid out as wages to those who have chosen to make a living by teaching the language. Many more millions are spent on curriculum development, teacher training, testing, resource development, teacher importation and the like. More than three million children spend scores of man hours each trying to learn the language. Publishers derive a great part of their income from the sale of language courses and related materials. Teaching aids are produced by firms who specialise in the business. A fair proportion of broadcasting time is allotted to language instruction on radio and television. There are strong indicators that these activities will go on increasing in volume and intensity.

In view of the time, energy and resources expended it is reasonable to ask whether the returns from the industry are commensurate with the input. In this particular context the returns may broadly be viewed as the proficiency level attained by students at the end of the school course. There are strong indications that the returns fall far short of expectations. This is attested by the percentage of passes in the Communicational English Language Paper set for the S.P.M. Examination. The low pass rate attained by candidates from the National Secondary schools (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan) is evidence that the commodity (the English Language) has very little attraction for this group of consumers. All the advertising campaigns about the versatility of the product, the redesigning of the product specifications (curriculum change and innovation), the reorientation of the practitioners for effective selling do not seem to have produced the desired effects. There is still a reluctance on the part of this group of consumers to buy the product. What are the underlying causes for this reluctance? Wouldn't an identification of the contributory causes provide some indicators for improved selling? It can reasonably be assumed that an

understanding of the consumers' perceptions of the good and bad features of the product would invariably enhance any attempt to improve its saleability. It was postulated that a market survey of consumer perceptions would provide valuable feedback.

The National Secondary school students' perceptions of the value of the English language and their reasons for liking or disliking the subject at school are discussed below. A selected sample of Fifth-Form Malay-Medium pupils were asked to give their reasons for liking or disliking the study of English in school. This was a preliminary step to the construction of an attitude scale.¹ An analysis of the students' statements showed certain general characteristics. It must be cautioned that only the commonest and, in a few cases, the most extreme viewpoints are presented. These may best be discussed under the following headings: Linguistic Interest, Utility, Achievement, Teachers and Teaching Techniques and Home Influence.

Linguistic Interest

Students who liked learning the language showed a deep awareness of its international status and believed that acquisition of the language was desirable. In English, they saw an additional tool for interaction with local as well as foreign people. A few felt that proficiency in the language would enhance their standing in the community while some others were emphatic that proficiency would put them on par with their English Medium counterparts.

Those who professed a strong dislike for the subject expressed the fear that English may usurp the position of Bahasa Malaysia. They feared that a person who is proficient in English would discount the need for Bahasa Malaysia. The extreme view was that English, being the language of the colonial masters, should be far removed from the school curriculum. The time spent in learning the language could well be spent on other important subjects. Donald M. Taylor postulates that this kind of extreme stand may have its origins in the threat second-language learning poses for ethnic identity,

"For some, the positive instrumental and integrative rewards which accrue from becoming bilingual may be overshadowed by the threat second-language learning poses for ethnic identity. For others it may be that a major barrier to bilingualism is negative attitudes toward members of the other group."²

Utility

The statements about the utilitarian value of the language provided enough evidence that the students were well aware of the "instrumental" incentives for learning English, to use Gardner and Lambert's (1972) terms. They were convinced of the material benefits to be accrued from a serious study of the language. Some stated that proficiency in the language was desirable for getting a well paid job or getting into the professions. The students believed that the language had an important role to play in the acquisition of knowledge and in tertiary education. Proficiency in English would enable them to read magazines and journals in the language. English would provide them access to reference books and materials. They stressed that the study of the language is mandatory for the pursuit of degree courses at the local institutions of higher learning. Students who aspired to go overseas were convinced of the need for English. For those who hoped to gain employment and for others who wanted to continue their studies.

"..... English can be viewed with some justification as a bread-and-butter skill, much as is shorthand, typing and bookkeeping"³

Individual needs apart, students postulated that English had an important role to play in national development specially in the fields of Science and Technology. A few even suggested that it might be expedient to learn subjects like Science and Mathematics through the medium of English.

On the other hand, students who were unfavourably disposed towards the subject had misgivings about the value of English. The extreme point of view was that the progress of the nation was not dependent on English and that it was possible for a person to further his education without a knowledge of the language.

Achievement

It is generally accepted that pupils tend to like a subject more if they are making progress and doing well in it. Students who professed a liking for the subject felt that it was not a difficult task to learn the language. Such students stated that they obtained high scores in the monthly tests and were doing well in the subject. The truth of this was borne out by a research study undertaken by the writer. In this study it was found that:

"The mean achievement score of the group of 67 pupils with negative attitudes was 39.46 and the Standard Deviation was 10.97. The group of 100 pupils who had a positive attitude towards the study of the English Language had a mean achievement score higher than this.
(Mean = 57.17, SD = 15.91)⁴"

Students who felt they were not doing well in the subject, were vocal about the problems they faced. English was the most boring subject in the school curriculum. It was difficult for these students to understand, let alone follow what was going on in class. They were truly confounded by the vagaries of English phonology, syntax, and semantics. Such students rationalise and attribute their seemingly insurmountable difficulties to a distant past (primary school days) when they were indolent towards the subject. A lone voice pleading for help underwrites the agony and plight of countless others: (verbatim)

The problems that I feel in learning English are:—

1. I can't speak very well in English, but I like this subject very much.
2. I can't understand much about the difficult words and conjunctions.
3. I don't know how to write in a good sentence in my composition.
4. I don't know how to improve my English.

Teachers and Teaching Techniques

Students who liked the subject attributed their positive attitude to the teachers. They viewed the teachers as being skilled in their jobs. Such

teachers used language that was easily understood, and were painstaking in their effort to encourage the students to use the language in the classroom and outside. They were constantly exhorting their pupils to read books and magazines in English. It is indeed gratifying to note that the teachers efforts are appreciated and are bearing fruit — though few in number!

Students who felt otherwise aired a number of grouses. Some traced the origins of the dislike to their days in the primary school when the subject was “badly” taught. Their present complaint was that the methodology of imparting the language was hardly sufficient to arouse their interest in the subject. It was hypothesized that some practitioners lacked an understanding of even the basic needs of their students. Therefore the methods employed by such teachers were seen as irrelevant to the task at hand. A common complaint was that the teachers failed to use Bahasa Malaysia to explain and clarify features of the English language which posed problems for the students. Teachers were also criticised for the unrealistic choice and use of textbooks which were far above the level of proficiency of the students.

Home Influence

Students who were positively motivated towards the subject alluded to strong parental encouragement to learn the language and use it in and outside the home. These students enjoyed reading story books and magazines in English. They liked listening to English programmes on radio and watching television shows in the language. They frequently used English in their interaction with family members and peers.

However, students who disliked the subject stated that there were no opportunities for them to use the language at home or outside and neither was there any parental encouragement to do so.

There is enough research evidence to support the theory that active parental encouragement contributes to success in second-language learning. Gardner postulates that parents who are “passive” play a more subtle and more important role in the language learning situation. Such parents may hold negative attitudes towards the other community whose language the child is trying to learn. These may be transferred to the child thus reducing his motivation to learn the language.

“By his own attitudes the parent may develop in the child doubts concerning the real need for the language (particularly in the case where the parent does not speak the language).⁵” Gardner argues further that a child who does not do well in the language in school rationalizes,

“that it is not really necessary to learn the language, as it is evidenced by the fact that his parents get along well enough without it.”⁶

The above discussion has centered around the reasons given by National Secondary School students for their like or dislike of English as a school subject and some factors which may have contributed to this. It is evident that all is not well with the art. The consumers (students) have had their say about their perceived notions of the product and the quality of the salesmanship (teaching). Shouldn't the sales force take stock of its capacity to bring about improved selling? Or should it take comfort in Fishman's statement that:

“On the whole, English as an additional language is more learned than used and more used than liked. The three (learning, using and liking) are little related to each other.”⁷

Acceptance of this line of reasoning would only point to an abdication of responsibility. As concerned practitioners it would be more logical to see new hope in Macnamara's stand (1973). Macnamara points to the typically low correlations obtained between second-language achievement scores and learners' attitudes towards native speakers of the target language and argues that languages often spread among people who actively dislike its native speakers. Among several examples, he cites the spread of English in Ireland. Macnamara believes that if people need to learn a language they will do so regardless of their attitudes towards its native speakers.⁸

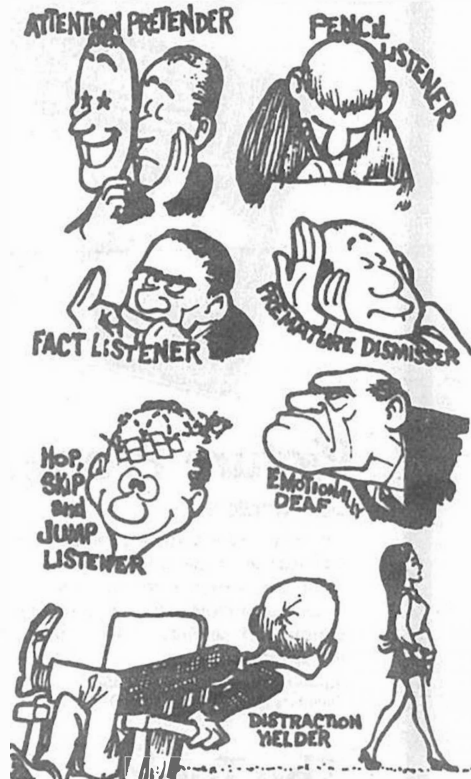
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