

# Attitudes Towards Learning English Language Online (A Study on First-year Students of a Private University in Sri Lanka)

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the attitudes of first-year students at a private university in Sri Lanka who are following, Higher Diploma in Information Technology towards learning the English language online and to determine whether there is an interconnectedness between their attitudes and the grade they obtain in the semester end examination. Attitude offers the initial incentive to begin learning a second language and subsequently serves as the driving force to persevere through the long and often laborious learning process. One of the influencing elements that might impact students' productivity in language lessons is their attitude toward learning the language. Online teaching in Sri Lanka flourished recently due to the Covid 19 pandemic as a sort of Emergency Remote Teaching Method. Thus, it was essential to discover the attitudinal change towards learning the English language from the traditional classroom to the online virtual classroom. Intending to find the attitudes towards learning English language online, data was basically gathered through questionnaires and interviews and the results were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Some favorable and negative views of learners about English as a second language were discovered as results of the survey. According to the data gathered it was discovered that students have both positive and negative attitudes towards learning English online and most of the time their attitudes remain neutral. Although students have a neutral attitude towards learning English online in a general context, when their attitudes are categorized based on the grade they obtained, it was evident that students who have performed well in the exam have a slightly negative attitude towards online learning and students who have average performance have a positive attitude towards online learning. The findings of this study will lead to the creation of an effective online English course.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, English Language, Interconnectedness, Online, Grades

## INTRODUCTION

English language teaching plays a significant role in Sri Lankan university education due to its importance as the main conducting medium of several degree programmes along with its recognition in the job market. World has become very competitive due to the advancements in modern technology, and it has increased globalization. In such a context, learning a second language and knowing the usage of technological devices are more likely imperative for the survival of most of the people. The need to learn a second language has risen several centuries ago due to the need to communicate across cultures. The study of a second language (L2) or acquisition of a foreign language (FL) is very significant in field of Applied Linguistics. In this multifaceted second language learning process attitudes also play an important role. Although, online learning has not been much popular in the past few decades, due to Covid 19 pandemic entire world had to adopt Emergency Remote Teaching Methods, and in such a context the need to learn and teach online grew exponentially. Thus, online education has made a paradigm shift in the higher education sector of Sri Lanka. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, worldwide schools and higher education institutes paid paramount importance towards online education as an Emergency Remote Teaching Method. Although E-Learning was

not a new concept for Sri Lankans, Online education proliferated during the Covid 19 Lockdown creating new dimensions of E-learning. Since schools were closed until further notice due to the pandemic, the entire education system was halted. Meanwhile, higher education institutes including universities and even schools divert their attention towards online education. Universities have been using different Moodle-based platforms to facilitate E-Learning including Learning Management Systems (LMS), Computer Assisted Learning (CAL), and Course Web in order to meet up their academic requirements. In such a context attitude plays a vital role in learning English language. Thus, this study aims at investigating whether the students following Higher Diploma in Information Technology at the selected Higher education institute have positive or negative attitudes towards learning English online as a second language and to examine the interconnectedness between their attitudes and the final grade they obtained for their overall performance during the semester.

### **Research problem**

- What is the overall attitude of students towards learning English language in an online context?
- Is there an interconnectedness between students' attitudes towards learning English online and their performance in online exams and the grade they obtained?

The outcome of this research will result in the development of the English module prescribed for first-year undergraduates of the selected private university. In addition, this study will also be beneficial for language teachers, education planners, syllabus designers, and researchers to gain adequate insight towards online teaching and learning process. Furthermore, knowing the attitudes of students towards learning English online might help language teachers to adapt more effectively into online teaching including effective online classroom activities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Attitude towards language**

There is a notable association between a learner's classroom performance and social psychological characteristics, as reported in several sources. Furthermore, individual factors have a substantial association. In research conducted on students in Barcelona, Gardner [1] contends that in some cases the variables have a positive correlation with classroom performance or overall English grades while in some cases the variables reveal a rather negative correlation. According to his study students with an integrative orientation towards SLA, and open to cultural identification have favourable attitudes towards language learning and obtain higher grades compared to those who are liable to ethnocentric or authoritarian attitudes. In relation to language learning, attitude is considered an important concept to understand human behavior and is defined as a mental state that includes beliefs and feelings. Attitudes and beliefs are really important in achieving the expected outcome in language learning. If the students have negative attitudes towards the learning process, their performance might be quite low in the classroom and the teacher will not be able to achieve the expected learning outcomes. Thus, paramount importance should be given to inculcating positive attitudes among the learners as well. [2]

### **Attitude towards online Education**

According to educationists, positive attitudes of learners towards online learning have been shown to increase student outcomes in language acquisition; negative attitudes, on the other hand, have been shown to lower learners' motivation and so impair effective language learning. Although students are comfortable and accustomed to communicating online, numerous research implies that they are particularly comfortable with passive social networking habits. [3] As a result, language teachers must be aware of their students' attitudes

toward language learning, and if the students have an unfavorable negative attitude, they must find ways to stimulate them and assist them in developing good attitudes. To keep pupils involved and motivated when working with others, a variety of tools are required. When it comes to measuring engagement with collaborative technologies, one tool may be too limited. [4] Maintaining motivation while taking an online course is another issue that online students confront. Overall, students who lacked independence and self-motivation performed worse than their peers [5]. Some students are put off by the amount of reading and writing required in online courses. The hefty text and writing curriculum may be difficult for students with inadequate reading ability [6]. Another difficulty that some students have is the lack of interaction at a certain location and at a specific time during the semester. When becoming used to asking questions in various forums rather than in a typical face-to-face classroom setting, some online learners confront a learning curve. [7] When referring to the previous research, Indriani K.S and Widiastuti N.M.A [8] has conducted a study on “Students’ Attitudes English Online Learning through Moodle during the covid 19 pandemic”. The data for this study came from 112 students from Udayana University’s Faculty of Economics and Business. Students’ perceptions about online English learning via the LMS Moodle were gathered through the distribution of questionnaires. Meanwhile, data was collected through observation on Moodle to examine the impact of students’ attitudes on learning accomplishment. Students in this research had good opinions regarding online English learning using the LMS Moodle, despite the fact that it was their first-time using Moodle. This positive attitude grew in tandem with their growing understanding of Moodle and their capacity to self-manage their learning. It’s also been discovered that their good attitudes about learning have an effect on gradually increasing learning outcomes. [8]

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this research aims at identifying the attitudes of first-year students at the selected private university, towards learning English language online and to determine the correlation between their attitudes and proficiency. Two main research tools including questionnaires and interviews are used in this research to rectify the objectives of the research. Furthermore, the marks scored by students for the oral tests and written test were also analyzed in order to check whether there is a connection between their attitude towards learning online and their examination performance.

### Data Elicitation Procedure and participants

A blended method which consisted of both quantitative and qualitative research methods has been used for this research. This mixed approach amalgamates both methods while creating a much more detailed and comprehensive picture of the sample that is being investigated. Thus, the quantitative data collected via questionnaires elucidated statistical data while the interview manifested the in-depth qualitative data. The data collection for this research was done mainly in three ways: the first questionnaire, a second questionnaire with the comparison of grades in the final exam, and two interviews. SPSS software was used to analyze the data in detail. The spotlight of this research was focused on first-year students at the selected private university who are following a Higher Diploma in Information Technology, and the sample consisted of students who have received their secondary education in English medium, who have considerable knowledge of English, and who were struggling in handling language. A random sample of 95 students from first-year first semester students of the 2021 June intake was selected for the research and relevant questionnaires were distributed among them. Later the students were categorized into groups based on the grade they obtained in the final examination. The reason for this categorization is to determine whether there is a relationship between their attitude towards learning English online and their overall performance in the module. Gardner’s [9] AMTB’s six-point Likert scale was rebuilt into a five-point scale, ranging from “strongly agree (5), slightly agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), slightly disagree (2), strongly disagree (1).” (Gardner, 1985). The questions of the questionnaire were categorized into certain domains each representing attitude of the target population towards learning English, their attitude towards

English culture, and their motivational orientations attitude towards online learning and lectures. This questionnaire was circulated among the participants through Moodle which they have been using as their Learning Management system (LMS) for academic purposes including online exams. The purpose of using Moodle for this purpose is to comparatively analyze whether there is a connection between students' attitude and their overall performance in the course by analyzing their grades. Google forms were used to collect data from questionnaires and Microsoft excel has been used to further analyze the gathered data and to draw graphs and tables. Mark distribution of first year first-semester English Module titled "Business English and Communication Skills" consists of the following percentages: Mid examination 30%, Assignments 10%, and Final exam 60%. Students were categorized into three groups in Moodle based on their overall performance in the examinations and assignments which are conducted online. Then the students who scored between 40-50 were categorized as C-grade students, 50-70 have been categorized as B-grade students, and students who scored above 70 have been categorized as A-grade students. However, this procedure of grouping the students was kept undisclosed to the students in order to preserve their confidence. The participants who failed the English module (0-40) were not taken into consideration at this point. SPSS software was used to analyze the second questionnaire in detail and to draw conclusions. Interviews were utilized to complement and cross-validate the students' replies to the questionnaire in addition to the exam papers and questionnaires delivered by the current author. Despite the fact that the questionnaire was provided to 95 students, only 10 students were interviewed at random. For the interviews, the interviewees were asked ten questions that backed up the writer's goals. A phone recorder and a notebook were used to record some of these interviews and other students preferred having individual zoom sessions. Thus, a triangular mixed method approach was used as the methodology of this research.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Data that was gathered through various methods including questionnaires and interviews were analyzed in chapter 4 and this chapter will discuss the finding of the study. Thus, this sector aims at finding the participants' attitudes towards learning English as a second language in an online context and whether there is an interconnectedness between students' attitudes towards learning English online and their performance in online exams and the grade they obtained. When analyzing the data from the questionnaire initially the overall responses were analyzed and later the responses of the participants were sorted based on the grade obtained in the final exam. Then the comparative analysis was presented based on the variations in the data.

### Attitudes towards learning English in an online context

Attitudes of students towards learning language in an online context will be analyzed in detail in this section.

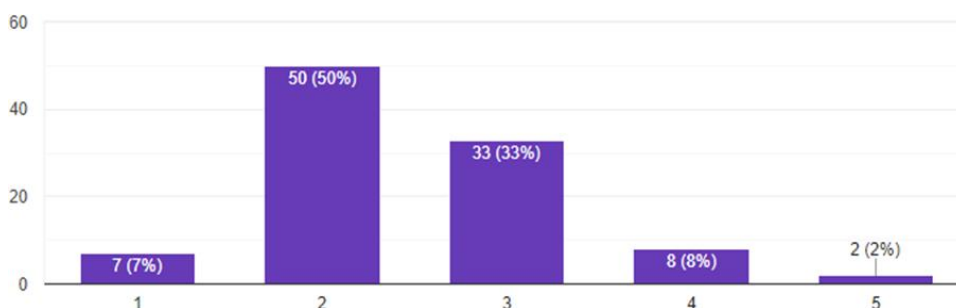


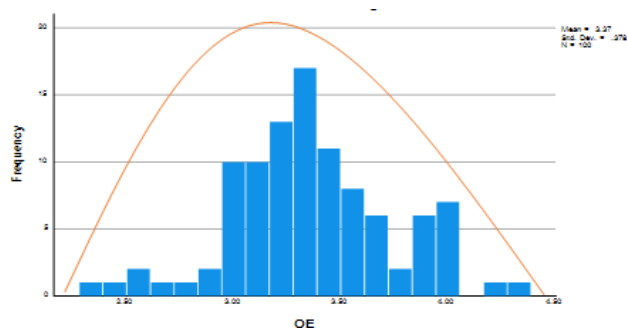
Figure 1: satisfactory level of learning English online

In order to determine the attitudes of students towards learning English online, it is essential to know their

level of satisfaction. The bar chart illustrates that the majority of (50%) first-year first-semester students are satisfied with learning English online. 33% of students have a neutral attitude towards learning English online and 7% of students are strongly satisfied with learning English online. On the other hand, 8% of students are dissatisfied with the process and 2% of students are strongly dissatisfied with learning English online. (1. Strongly satisfied 2. Satisfied 3. Neutral 4. Dissatisfied 5. Strongly Dissatisfied). Furthermore, according to the data gathered students' participation in online lectures was also at a satisfactory level. This can be noticed as a good trend and the researcher has also witnessed that the attendance of students for lectures is high and only a very few are absent from the regular count of the students. Despite the good attendance of the students for lectures, it was also noticed that their involvement in interactive activities was poor. In order to find reasons for this more in-depth interview questions were asked. According to the responses it was evident that some students have language anxiety and inferiority complex since they have not met any of their classmates physically maybe they are unable to take an overall picture of the nature of their colleagues. Some have the tension of background noises and although they have the true desire to tell the answer they are afraid thinking that something might go wrong. It has also been noted that some students have been pressurized by parents sitting with them and attending the online lectures. The responses given for the following statements in a five-point Likert scale question can be displayed in the below figure.

- I have a calm environment at home to concentrate on my lessons.
- I feel tired when looking at the screen.
- I like to leave zoom meetings when group work is given.
- I think group works are important.
- I never submit the homework and tutorials given in lectures.
- I am often distracted by social media w attending to lectures.
- My speaking skills are not improved in online sessions.
- My attitude towards English has an impact on the grades I obtain.
- I consider online English lectures as an unnecessary burden.
- The lecturer is well-prepared with the online lecture materials.

The responses given for the above statements can be illustrated in the below graph. In the given graph mean value is 3.16 and the standard deviation is 0.352. Although statistically it can be mentioned that this bell curve has a normal distribution is also evident that neutral responses and disagreeing responses are higher in this bar graph. However, there are several negative statements also given in section 2 and students disagreed with those.



**Figure 2: Attitudes towards online education**

In the online context lecturer cannot see the students and cannot determine the activities based on the mood of students on that day. In online contexts students are on their own a lecturer even got no idea whether the student is actually sitting on the seat or sleeping doing some other work. Thus, these factors might lead them to be more lethargic. Thus, it can be stated that students have identified which areas they need to develop in

English in order to fulfill their career goals and educational goals. Students also hope to develop those skills by attending English lectures at the university. Overall, students do not have a strong dislike towards learning English online despite the general technical difficulties they encounter which is common for all other subjects as well. The main issue that is found here is the students lack engagement, in activities during the online sessions. Taking these factors into consideration it can be concluded that students have a neutral attitude towards online education.

### The interconnectedness between attitude towards online learning and final exam grades

This section aims at finding out whether there is an interconnectedness between the attitude of students towards online learning and the final exam grade they scored. Thus, the responses of the students were sorted into three main sections named A, B, and C based on the marks and grades they obtained in the final examination. Out of the 95 participants 28 of them have obtained “A” grades (marks above 70) and the mean of this data set is 2.86 and the standard deviation is 0.872. As a percentage, it is 29.47%. The Skewness value is 0.61 and has a normal distribution. Similar to the students who score “A” grades, students who score “B” grades (marks 50-70) also show a normal distribution. There are 37 students who have got a B and the mean of this data set is 3.12. As a percentage, it is 38.94%. From the responses given it is obvious that some have disagreed with online learning whereas some have agreed. The majority of the responses fall between 2.50 and 3.50. According to the data, 30 students have scored “C” grades (marks 40-50) and the mean value is 3.20. As a percentage, It is 31.57% Just like in the previous A and B grade students the distribution of the bar chart is normal. The standard deviation is 0.573. However, looking at the mean of these students’ certain assumptions can be driven. The mean of A-grade students is 2.86, B-grade students are 3.12, and C-grade students 3.20. According to this sample students who scored A have less preference towards online learning whereas students who got C rather prefer online learning when compared to other groups. This can be further elucidated in the below graphs.

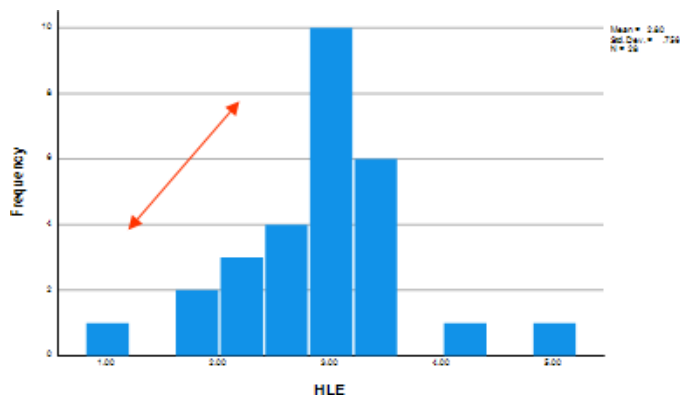


Figure 3: Attitudes of A grade towards learning English online

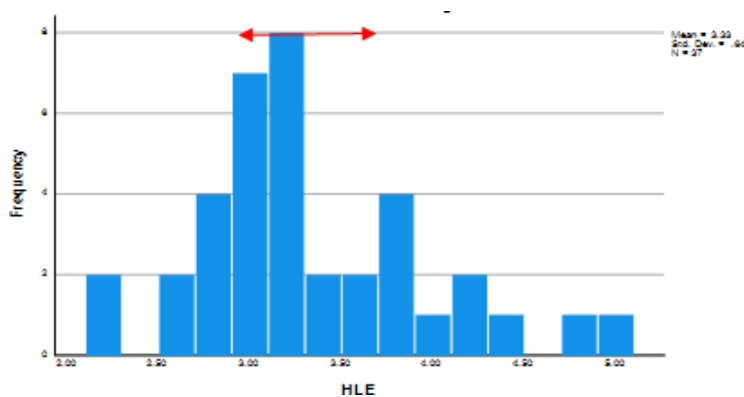
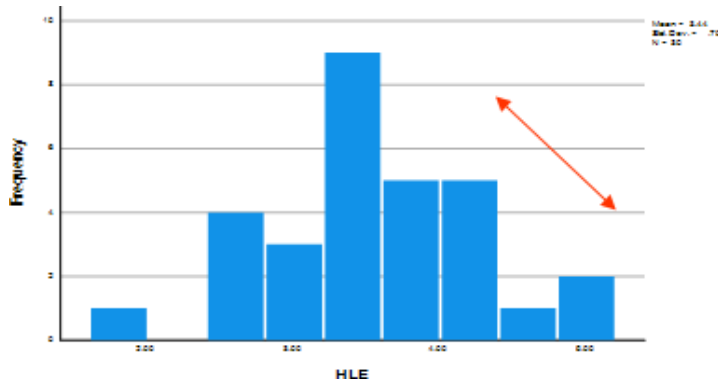


Figure 4: Attitudes of B grade towards learning English online



**Figure 5: Attitudes of C grade towards learning English online**

According to the analysis of the above graphs, it is evident that although there is no significant difference between A and B grade students' attitudes or B and C grade students' attitudes, there is a disparity between the attitudes of A and C grade students. The mean value of A-grade students for the given questionnaire is 2.80 and C grade students it is 3.44. In general context although it can be summarized that their responses are in a neutral position, the students who have got A seem to have a little bit more weight towards negative side whereas C grade students' responses are closer to the positive side. The researcher was under the slight impression that students who have scored A might like online learning since they are responsive and scored well in presentations as well and grade C students might dislike it based on factors like language difficulty or due to comprehension issues, they might prefer face-to-face lectures. However, this assumption entirely changed based on the data collected. The reason for this might also be the certain loopholes in the online testing systems and online lectures as stated by some students in the interviews they participated. On the hand according to their responses, some students have found it convenient with online presentations rather than physical ones. Some backward students who are having language anxiety might also prefer online lectures because they hide without coming into the spotlight. Meanwhile, the students who have scored well might be under the impression that they are missing the opportunity to showcase their skills in English and those who really have the desire to speak and communicate but cannot do it due to other external barriers in online education might also prefer physical lectures over online lectures.

## CONCLUSION

After The aim of this research was to investigate whether first-year first-semester students at the selected private university students have a positive or negative attitude towards learning English online as a second language and to examine the interconnectedness between grades they obtain for the final exams and their attitude towards the online learning process. Thus, based on the data analysis and the findings derived from the discussion chapter following conclusions can be presented. First year first semester students who participated in this survey have a quite positive attitude towards learning English language. Students have identified the importance of learning English language as a necessary 21st-century skill to find better career opportunities, continue their studies or even migrate as stated in their responses. In the online teaching scenario, which was introduced as an Emergency Remote Teaching Method, there is no physical interaction and peer motivation. Due to this factor students feel isolated and lethargic. Human being always like to socialize and due to social distancing students are less motivated. The most common word in their responses towards online learning was "boring" which suggest students need more engagement with others in classrooms. It is also shown that when activities like games are given using online tools their motivation level suddenly boost up. Nevertheless, according to quantitative results generated from the questionnaire it can be concluded that students' attitude may vary according to the grade they obtained. Students who have scored well in online exams and obtained A grades have a rather negative attitude towards online learning

process and, students with intermediate scores have neutral attitude whereas students who have scored C grades have rather positive attitude towards online learning process. However, since this study is based on both quantitative and qualitative data there can be instances where clear cut attitude of the students are not visible as well. Thus, it is evident that students with high proficiency levels believe that they can do better in physical lectures rather than online lectures. The students with low proficiency may be satisfied with grades they obtained and might feel hesitant to come for physical lectures and to do the practical activities in the classroom. Although students had the option of just keeping mute and not responding or telling false excuses to avoid in class activities, that option is not there in on campus physical classroom. However, in another perspective it can also be stated that students who are weak in English always have the option to go through the lecture recording several times since recording is there and thus such students might also have been benefitted and they are satisfied with the grade they obtain, and they have a positive attitude towards online learning. Thus, due to several factors like these it can be concluded that high proficiency level students from the selected sample tend to have more negative attitude towards online learning when compared to low proficiency students who have rather positive attitude towards online learning.

## Recommendations

If online teaching has to be continued due to certain chaotic situations related to the pandemic certain recommendations can be suggested.

- Students can be initially graded into certain groups like beginner, intermediate, advance based on a proficiency level test and conduct separate lectures for them based on the proficiency level of the students. In this manner students will not feel inferior or superior and it might be easier for the teacher to change the style of teaching based on the proficiency level. It might be sometimes difficult to handle large classrooms even in online contexts.
- Reducing the theoretical explanation time in online lectures and add more game-based language learning activities where students can practically use them and increase the positive competition in the classroom.
- Motivate the students to speak constantly and create effective group activities and monitor how students improve their communications skills through them.
- Spoken activities should be prioritized when designing future curriculums for these students.

Thus, it can be stated that one of the most significant aspects of language acquisition is one's attitude. Teachers should pay attention to their students' attitudes since it influences their language learning performance. Teachers and curriculum designers should include activities that are both fun and educational that might help them develop positive attitudes toward learning English by concentrating on strategies to improve their communication skills.

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