

Pedagogical Implications of the Attitudes and Motivation of Malaysians of Chinese Origin for Learning English as a Second Language (ESL)

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This study aims at examining the attitudes and motivation of Malaysian students of Chinese origin for learning English as a Second Language (ESL). It further aims at investigating how the socio-cultural environment of these students i.e. their home, social and college environment influences their motivation for learning ESL.

Data was collected from students (n=71) in their first year of a certificate course attending a public college in Kuala Lumpur by means of journal writings and semi-structured interviews, and then analysed by means of a mainly interpretative approach.

The findings indicated that students from Chinese educational and/or mainly Chinese speaking backgrounds displayed more negative or mixed attitudes towards learning ESL than those from Malay educational and/or English speaking backgrounds. Negative attitudes were found to be related to a mixture of internal (lack of interest and effort, low self-efficacy) and external (use of and preference for using mother-tongue, influence of home environment) factors. Positive attitudes were related to the opposite ends of these spectrums (high interest, effort, conducive home environment, etc).

The study also revealed that generally the students were found to be more instrumentally motivated to learn English for the purpose of communication, study and future career. However, students from the English speaking and Malay educated backgrounds were found to be generally more integratively motivated whereas students from Chinese speaking and Chinese educated backgrounds were generally more instrumentally motivated. The findings also indicated that Chinese educated students attributed their failure to learn English mainly to lack of practice and exposure, lack of interest, initiative and motivation, lack of effort, poor teaching environments, task difficulty, lack of self-efficacy, self-confidence and a will to learn (internal attributions), and competing interests such as the Chinese media and culture (external attributions).

Further enquiry into the influence of socio-cultural factors such as the home, social and college environment towards learning ESL suggested that there was more negative motivation against using English with friends than positive motivation. The negative motivation comprised responses of shock and surprise, criticism, lack of understanding, rejection and lack of confidence. The positive motivation constituted receiving assistance, support and encouragement, and respect and recognition. In addition, the College environment was found not to be very conducive towards learning English as the majority of students were of Chinese origin with Chinese educated and Chinese speaking backgrounds.

Implications arising from the study suggest that far greater attention needs to be paid to combating the strong negative influences operating within the social and cultural backgrounds of many Chinese educated students in order to change their attitude towards learning English and increase their level of motivation to do so.

Key words: attitudes, motivation, socio-cultural environment, ESL.