

Learning English in Urban Sri Lanka

**Social, Psychological and Pedagogical Factors Related to
Second Language Acquisition**

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the social, psychological and pedagogical factors that affect second language acquisition. The case of learning English as a second language in Sri Lanka was chosen for study. The thesis is based on quantitative and qualitative empirical research carried out from May 2001 to December 2001 in the city of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. The sample was selected from among Grade 9 students (14 years old) of four 'prestigious/privileged' government schools (that is, schools in the top group of schools described as the 1AB category). The sample consisted of 366 students, their parents, eight English teachers and the principals of the four schools. Additional information was gathered from government institutions such as the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Department of Examinations and the National Institute of Education (NIE).

The principal social factor considered was social class. It has been assumed that the students' social class background would be indicated by characteristics such as income, parental education, father's occupation, language spoken at home, tuition class attendance and age at which English learning commenced. M.W. Apple's theory (1976, 1996) about the relationship between education and social class was adopted for studying the relationship between these class characteristics and English acquisition. The socio-educational model introduced by R.C. Gardner (1985b) was adapted to facilitate the study of students' motivational and attitudinal characteristics. Finally, pedagogical factors were examined to see the extent to which communicative language teaching, a particular language teaching approach devised for teaching English as a second language, was implemented in Sri Lanka. Students' level of English acquisition was determined by averaging their English marks for two school term-tests.

The findings related to students' social class identity confirmed that students from an upper social class background showed higher levels of English acquisition.

However, it was revealed that even in these so-called 'prestigious' schools, only a minority of students came from families with characteristics such as English-speaking parents and large family incomes. It was clear that even in these 1AB schools the majority of students depend on the school for learning English.

Contrary to initial expectations, the findings of this study showed that the students were highly motivated to learn English. However, higher motivation in itself did not result in higher levels of English acquisition for all students. The impact of social and pedagogical factors seemed significant as well. Further, students who were motivated to learn English for instrumental reasons, such as better education and employment, achieved higher levels of English acquisition than those motivated by integrative reasons, such as becoming friends with English-speaking Sri Lankans.

Finally, the study revealed several issues related to classroom pedagogy that seemed to inhibit students' English fluency. Classroom conditions, such as course and examination requirements, teachers' lack of English proficiency, students' reluctance to speak English in the classroom and the kind of authority exercised by the teacher were seen to hinder the communicative objectives of the language course.