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Students' Attitude towards English Language Common Courses

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Abstract- This study is intended to investigate the students' attitude towards English Language common courses: Communicative English Skills and Basic Writing Skills (CES and BWS) which are delivered to all freshman students at Wolaita Sodo University, Ethiopia. The students' attitude towards the courses was not encouraging. They did not give enough time to study English common courses; rather they focused on their major courses only. As a result, their grades in these courses became very low. To explore the students' attitude towards these English common courses, descriptive research method was used. To collect data from both students and instructors, questionnaire and interview were employed. The major populations of this study were all freshman students at Wolaita Sodo University in 2016 G.C. The researcher selected 500 students out of 3,000 students using stratified sampling technique to address students in each department. Results showed that students believe their major courses are more important than English common courses. Consequently, they give much time to study their major courses. Most students also think that English common courses are not essential, but they think as additional courses.

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Endale Endrias Arega

Abstract- This study is intended to investigate the students' attitude towards English Language common courses: Communicative English Skills and Basic Writing Skills (CES and BWS) which are delivered to all freshman students at Wolaita Sodo University, Ethiopia. The students' attitude towards the courses was not encouraging. They did not give enough time to study English common courses; rather they focused on their major courses only. As a result, their grades in these courses became very low. To explore the students' attitude towards these English common courses, descriptive research method was used. To collect data from both students and instructors, questionnaire and interview were employed. The major populations of this study were all freshman students at Wolaita Sodo University in 2016 G.C. The researcher selected 500 students out of 3,000 students using stratified sampling technique to address students in each department. Results showed that students believe their major courses are more important than English common courses. Consequently, they give much time to study their major courses. Most students also think that English common courses are not essential, but they think as additional courses. Students think that language courses do not need studying, so they do not pay attention to study the English common courses. The students do not like to participate in practical activities while learning the English common courses due to fear, influence of their mother tongue and etc. They also choose to learn in their mother tongue than in English. Finally, recommendations are forwarded based on the results and conclusions.

Keywords: students' attitude, english common courses, medium of instruction, major courses, freshman students, communicative english, basic writing skills

I. Introduction

Attitude is "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" according to scholars called Eagly and Chaiken (1993, 1). Again, as cited in Chambers, 1999, another scholar called Azjen states attitude as the individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing the particular behavior of interest." In line with the definition of these scholars, this study focuses on investigating students' attitude towards English Language common courses: Communicative English Skills and Basic Writing Skills (CES and BWS). The courses are given to all freshman students of Wolaita Sodo University. These courses were designed with the intention to make first year students competent in communicative English Skills and English Writing Skills. The instructional medium in Ethiopian Universities is English. In support of this, Kachru (1985, 16) states that English Language is used as a medium of instruction in many universities worldwide, particularly in non-native speaking countries with a vision for future access to the scientific and technological progress in the developed countries. Chen & Kraklow (2014) also confirm saying English has also become a necessary tool for global higher education institutions to compete with one another and promote more internationalization by accommodating both international and domestic students who use English as a medium of instruction. The English language has immense importance internationally. Thus, students who study at university level should be competent in using the language. These English common courses were designed out of this need. Learning any language depends mainly on the attitude of a learner. Thus, the learners' positive attitude to learn a language is quintessential for success in learning a language. Taking CES and BWS courses in the first year has much importance for the students' future time in helping them to communicate with their teachers and classmates and to express their ideas in writing without difficulties. In these courses, students are expected to get key elements to remove their communication and writing barriers they may face in their coming years of study.

However, the freshman students who take the aforementioned common courses do have wrong attitude towards them compared to the objectives why the courses were intended. It is common for students to feel uncomfortable towards these courses. The students do not see the courses as essential; rather they see them as less important and as if they do not add any value to their study. As a result, they give very less time to study these courses. They want to spend their time studying other major courses. They read or prepare themselves on the common courses only when they have tests and examinations. When they were given home works and assignments, most of the students come unprepared. If something like paragraph writing assignment is given to these students, instead of practicing and writing by their own, most of them have it done by other senior students thinking that they will score better marks. Writing is an ability that one masters not by getting it done by others but through self devotion. One can best learn to communicate and write in English if one is interested and continuously involved

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in daily practical activities. Generally speaking, the students do have very low attention to follow these English common courses.

Due to the above reasons, the students' performance in CES and BWS courses is very low. The students cannot communicate with their teachers and class students in English as expected having completed the courses. The gaps they do have in their CES and BWS courses is clearly observed especially when students deliver presentations and written assignments respectively. Lack of attention to these English common courses affects their learning of other courses and their future stay in the university since English is the medium.

The achievement in learning a foreign language depends not only on cognitive factors. but also on affective factors such as attitude and motivation Berna (2016, 1). Therefore, the researcher found it is very important to explore the students' attitude towards the English common courses.

a) Objectives of the Study

This study is designed to realize the students' attitude towards English Language common courses: CES and BWS courses given to all freshman students in Wolaita Sodo University. It also tries to set directions to help learners express themselves in better communicative and written English by suggesting on their wrong perceptions.

II. Research Design

In this study, the descriptive survey method was employed in order to know the learners' attitudes towards the English Language common courses given to first year students in Wolaita Sodo University. This is because this method is designed to portray the participants in an accurate way.

a) Population and Sample

In the data collection process, it is important to ensure that the data is representative of the population. The populations of this research were first year students of Wolaita Sodo University who were taking CES and BWS English common courses in 2016 G.C. They were 3,000 in number; out of this number, 500 sample respondents were selected. This makes 16.6% of the total population. Thus, the researcher believed this sample could represent the population. Out of forty three English teachers who were teaching English common courses, 20 teachers were used as questionnaire respondents, and the researcher selected five of them and five students for the interview.

b) Sampling Technique

The researcher excluded English Language students, because all English courses are equally important for them, and they do not have English common courses. The author used stratified random sampling technique to select respondents from different colleges, schools and departments in Wolaita Sodo University. From the students who were already grouped into departments, the researcher selected randomly from within each group.

c) Tools of Data Collection

Having decided the sample size, the researcher designed data collection tools for students and instructors. The data collection tools used for this study were questionnaire and interview. The students' questionnaire and interview were prepared in two languages - English and Amharic; this is because some students may be more convenient to respond in Amharic. The students' questionnaire comprised 8 items, and the teachers' consisted of 12 items. The respondents were given questions to answer using a 5 point Likert scale as: Strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree and strongly disagree. Also the researcher used interview because as Ballou (2008) states, Likert type items sometimes may not reveal the other sides of the medals in the questionnaires. Again the researcher wanted to triangulate the data obtained using questionnaire.

III. Results and Discussions

a) Results and Discussions of teachers and students questionnaire on students' attitudes towards learning English common courses

The tables below show the students' and teachers' beliefs on students' attitudes towards English Language common courses.

Table 1: Teachers' responses on students' attitudes towards English common courses

No.	Statements	SA f %	Ag f %	Uc f %	D f %	SD f %
1.	Students think major courses are more important to learn than English common courses.	7 35%	10 50%	2 10%	1 5%	
2.	Students think that studying major courses is equally important to studying English common courses.		1 5%	3 15%	11 55%	5 25%
3.	Students give much time to study their major courses than English common courses.	7 35%	9 45%	4 20%		
4.	Students give equal time to study their major courses and English common courses.		1 5%	3 15%	4 20%	12 60%

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5.	Students are interested in taking English Common courses		3 15%	7 35%	10 50%	
6.	Students think English common courses are not essential but they are additional courses.	1 5%	14 70%	2 10%	3 15%	
7.	Students think English is a difficult language for them to learn.	8 40%	9 45%	2 10%	1 5%	
8.	Students prefer learning in (their mother tongue) than learning in English.	3 15%	8 40%	7 35%	2 10%	
9.	When students are given English common courses' assignments, they do by their own.		2 10%	4 20%	5 25%	9 45%
10.	I think students like practical activities as they are learning English common courses.	2 10%	3 15%	2 10%	12 60%	1 5%
11.	I believe English is more important for only English majoring students; it is less important for other department students.				9 45%	11 55%
12.	While teaching English common courses, I do not treat English Department students and others equally.		3 15%		7 35%	10 50%

f=frequency %=percentage SA=Strongly Agree Ag=Agree Un=Uncertain Ds=Disagree SD=Strongly Disagree

Table 2: Students' responses on their attitudes towards English common courses

No.	Statements	SA f %	Ag f %	Uc f %	D f %	SD f %
1.	Major courses are more important than English common courses.	165 33%	111 22.2%	21 4.2%	145 29%	58 11.6%
2.	Studying major courses is equally important to studying English common courses.	202 40.4%	182 36.4%	58 11.6%	54 10.8%	4 0.8%
3.	I give much time to study my major courses than English common courses.	145 29%	95 19%	45 9%	128 25.6%	87 17.4%
4.	English common courses are not essential, but they are additional courses.	153 30.6%	207 41.4%	45 9%	50 10%	45 9%
5.	English is a difficult language to learn.	66 13.2%	99 19.8%	33 6.6%	136 27.2%	166 33.2%
6.	I like to learn English common courses	260 52%	161 32.2	16 3.2%	42 8.4%	21 4.2%
7.	I like to learn in my mother tongue than to learn in English.	99 19.8%	145 29%	33 6.6%	124 24.8%	99 19.8%
8.	I like practical activities while taking English Common Courses.	16 3.2%	41 8.2%	21 4.2%	178 35.6	244 48.8%

f=frequency %=percentage SA=Strongly Agree Ag=Agree Un=Uncertain Ds=Disagree SD=Strongly Disagree

b) Discussion of teachers' responses on students' attitudes towards English common courses

As it is indicated in table 1, item no. 1 above, majority of the teachers (85%) believe that students think their major courses are more important than English common courses. As per the teachers' interview, most students think that their major subject area courses are very important than English common courses and give more value to their major courses. They think that their major area courses are courses that provide them skills and knowledge that they will be using even after graduation in their field of study. They do not know that English is the medium that will help them a lot in gaining the skills and knowledge they deserve in studying a specific discipline. Again in item no. 2, table 1, majority of the teachers (80%) accept that students do not think that learning major courses and English common courses are equally important for them. This means that students give much attention to their major courses. This is revealed in item no. 3, table 1. In this item, (80%) of the teachers believe that students give much time to study their major courses than English common courses. Regarding this, one of the interviewed teachers explained that most of the students see the English common courses as additional courses that do not have much importance for their study. Evidently, most students do not come doing their assignments when they are given one. It is common to see some students trying to do their assignments in the classroom after 3 or 4 days stay without doing. In item 4, table 1, majority of the instructors (80%) disagree that students give equal time to study their major courses and English common courses. In item 5, table 1, (50%) of the teachers agree that students are not interested in taking English Common courses. According to one of the interviewed teacher, students do not think that English common courses belong to them. Most students do not show any interest in learning them. They do not show active participation in the topics that they have been learning since grade seven. In item 6, table 1, majority of the

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teachers (75%) also believe that students think English common courses are not essential, but they are additional courses. As the teachers' interview shows students do not know that English common courses are essential not only for this time but also for their future time of study. Many studies show that students who tend to have a better competency in English language tend to have a better achievement in their study, the interviewee added. Language is a key for learning. When a student has poor competence in English language, he/she has a tendency to have poor understanding of the subject matter that he/she studies, the teacher elaborated. Another interviewee also explained: Students do not value English courses as their major courses. This is the reason why they fail in the courses. If they value as their major courses, first, students will master the target language; second, they will gain better result in the courses. Again most of the respondents (85%) in item no. 7, table 1, believe that students think English is a difficult language for them to learn. Though the students have been studying English for more than twelve years, they find it difficult to understand. This shows that students do not pay due attention to the language. As a result, in item no. 8, table 1, the greater number (55%) of the teachers accept that students prefer to learn in (their mother tongue) than to learn in English. As one of the interviewed teacher's explanation, most of the students choose to learn in their mother tongue. The reason the interviewee gives is that students think that they understand better if they are taught in their own language. Of course this is true, the teacher continued. However, it doesn't work in learning the target language. In item no. 9, table 1, most of the respondents (70%) disagree that students do by their own when they are given English common courses' assignments. This is an implication that students did not internalize that the courses are important for them to improve their skills and knowledge in the area of these courses. Again in item no. 10, table 1, the larger part of the teacher respondents (65%) disagree that students like practical activities when learning English common courses. As said by one of the interviewed teacher, students act as if they were taking English courses for the first time. As they try to speak out English in the classroom, they show strong anxiety, and influence of their mother tongue is also observed. Therefore, they have very low interest to practically involve in activities. In item no. 11, table 1, all respondents (100%) strongly disagree that English is more important for only English majoring students; it is less important for other department students. As indicated by teachers' interview, English common courses are equally important for all students in different disciplines. The fact is that the medium is obviously English Language. Many researches show that the problem of Ethiopian students is not the difficulty of the subject matter/discipline they study, but it is the language problem, the interviewee added. In the last item of table 1, majority of the teacher respondents (85%) disagree that they treat English Department students and others differently while teaching English courses. This means that English common courses' teachers teach in the same way and treat equally both English majoring and other students.

c) *Discussion of students' responses on their attitudes towards English common courses*

As item no. 1 in table 2 depicts, majority of the students (55.2%) responded that they believe major courses are more important than English common courses. As it is explained in their interview, the students think that their major courses are very important for them not only for now but also for their future study in the university. On the other hand, in item no. 2, table 2, greater part of the respondents (76.8%) reacted that studying major courses is equally important to studying English common courses. As one of the interviewed students said, students believe in the importance of the English Language common courses. However, they fail to study them; they prefer to waste their time studying their major courses. They do not take English common courses as part of their courses. The current plan of Wolaita Sodo University to achieve 0.5% student attrition rate worsened the students' studying habit of English common courses. The students feel that there is "No Fail" policy. Most of the students simply want to get just a pass mark which is "C" in English common courses. Most of them do not expect more than this. Even though they believe that learning English common courses is equally important to their major courses, in item no. 3, table 2, the greater part of the respondents (48%) claimed the reality that they give much time to study their major courses than English common courses. According to their interview, this is because their major courses have continuity; and they will be more difficult gradually. If they do not give much time to study their major courses, they feel that they will go without understanding their major courses whose difficulty level gradually increases and they feel they may miss the foundation for their advanced courses that will be taken in the coming years. The students also think that their most important courses are their major courses. Even after graduation, the students sense they will be using the knowledge and skills of their major courses when they are employed. As it can be observed in table 2 item no. 4, greater part of the students (72%) responded that English common courses are not essential; they are additional courses. According to their interview, except very active students, others do not understand that English common courses are very important for their study. It is the language through which we study other courses. If a student lacks this language, he/she will not be successful in his/her study. At this level, English common courses are very essential because they were designed to fill in the gaps we do have regarding the

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language. Many students see them as additional and less significant; this is wrong perception, the student added. Another interviewee backed this idea saying - English common courses are intended to capacitate us for the coming study period. The language in which one learns through is a key part of the teaching-learning process. If one is not proficient in the language through which one learns, how can he/she understand the subject matter he/she studies? Therefore, English common courses do have a paramount importance for the success in our studies, the student explained. On the other hand, another interviewee responded that English common courses are not more essential than our major courses. She elaborated that having completed our study; we will not be using English since we are in the multilingual community that is not using English Language. Again most of the time, our teachers use Amharic to explain the main points. Students give much attention to understanding the content not to the English Language, the student briefed. In item no. 5, table 2, the larger number of the students (60.4%) responded that English is not a difficult language to learn. One of the interviewed respondents explained that students do not perform well in English. Most of the students think that language courses do not need to be studied; for example, when we were in lower grades, we did not study language courses - English, Wolaita Language and Amharic. This is the trend we have come across. Students score poor marks in English common courses not because the language is too difficult to learn, but because students do not pay much attention to study/learn the language. Another interviewee also said we have been learning the English Language for many years. This is enough time if one properly plans to learn the language. At lower grades teachers do not teach practically; especially speaking, listening and writing skills. If we had had situations in which we could learn by doing, we could have mastered it. Again many students think that they know English Language, but they do not know that they lack so many things. Knowing a language doesn't mean reading only. Rather a student should read and understand, speak, write and listen it, the student elaborated. For questionnaire item no. 6, in table 2, majority of the respondents (84.2%) agree that they like to learn English common courses. This means that students do not hate to learn in English. They would be very happy if they can use the language as they use their mother tongue. In the next item, in table 2, most of the respondents (48.8) express their belief that they like to learn in their mother tongue than to learn in English. According to their interview, this is because first, they think that they would understand better if they learn in their own language than in English. Second, they focus on understanding the content than the language. If the students were given an opportunity to choose to learn between English and their mother tongue, they would prefer to learn in their mother tongue. Regarding the last item, in table 2, majority of the respondents (84.4%) indicated that they do not like practical activities while taking English Common Courses. This means that the students do not have preference to participate in practical conversation in front of the class to improve their communicative skill, and they do not prefer to practice writing through repeated experience, according to their response. Of course, they are not seen participating in practical activities in a classroom. Their interview also clearly shows that students are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates. They do not want to be seen foolish before the class.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

a) *Conclusions*

In this paper, the author has presented the attitudes of students towards learning English common courses - CES and BWS at Wolaita Sodo University. Based on the results and discussions, the following conclusions have been reached. The students believe that their major courses are more important than English common courses; consequently, they give more value and time to study their major courses. Most of the students think that English common courses are not essential; but they think as additional courses. The students think English is not a difficult language to understand, and they think that language courses do not need studying. Thus, they do not pay due attention to study/learn English common courses as they do their major courses. Most of the students choose to learn in their mother tongue because they understand better if they are taught in their own language. The students do not do by their own when they are given English common courses' assignments. Students do not like to be involved in practical activities when learning English common courses; they do have strong anxiety, and influence of their mother tongue. Teachers strongly believe that English is equally important for English majoring and other department students; as a result, they treat both equally while teaching English Language common courses. Wolaita Sodo University's over ambitious plan to achieve 0.5% student attrition rate has a negative effect on students' studying of English common courses.

b) *Recommendations*

From the findings above mentioned, the following recommendations are forwarded: It is necessary to raise students' awareness towards English that it is not only used by native speakers but also it is widely used among second and foreign language speakers as communicative tool. Students should know that having positive attitude towards the language will help them learn the language easily; in support of this Shameem (2015:7) states that Language attitudes may have an effect on second language or foreign language

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learning. Students should understand that English common courses are equally important to their major courses, and they should give equal weight and time to study their major courses and English common courses as English is a tool through which they learn new information and skills. The learners have to know that English common courses are essential, and they are aimed to fill the gaps in their Communicative English and Writing Skills. To learn the English Language easily, the students are supposed to give due attention as they work on their major courses. As the medium of instruction in Ethiopian higher educational institutions is English, students should strive to learn only in English, and they have to work English common courses' assignments by their own. Students should understand that though English is not a difficult language according to their response, the language courses need studying. The students should not be afraid to speak or write in English in and outside the classroom though they make mistakes. Both lower grade teachers and instructors in universities should try to help the students by using various teaching strategies that directly engage them in different practical communicative and written activities. The teachers also should use only English Language to make explanations to the learners. Teachers' strong belief about the importance of the courses for English majoring and other department students, and treating both in equal approach while teaching English common courses has to be strengthened. Wolaita Sodo University's over ambitious plan to achieve 0.5% student attrition rate should be reviewed as it has a negative effect on students' studying of English common courses.

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