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A Study on the Lack of Motivation in Learning Foreign Languages among Undergraduates

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The University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka provides the opportunity for the undergraduates to learn a number of foreign languages at the main subject level and at the certificate course level. Despite of such opportunities, a lack of motivation in learning foreign languages including English is apparent among the undergraduates. The purpose of this study is to identify the reasons for this lack of language learning motivation at the university level. Two surveys have been carried out for this purpose, the first being a survey with 50 randomly selected undergraduates from special first year, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Kelaniya. Data was collected through questionnaires. The highest percentage, which is 52% of the sample do not learn any foreign language. As identified by this research, the major reason is a language anxiety situation resulted by the unsatisfactory skills in English, due to which the students hesitate to learn a foreign language which is entirely new to them. The second survey has been conducted with 100 graduates who had learned languages at the University of Kelaniya. Their current job positions and the way their language skills have helped them in pursue of employment opportunities were identified here. The highest percentage, which is 29% are involved in jobs related to tourism industry in which the foreign language skills are highly required. 22% of the sample are involved in jobs related to academic fields including language teaching. According to the first survey, getting a job is the prime expectation of undergraduates. A total of 94% percentage of the graduates of the second survey have satisfactory language skills. Thus, it is recommended that university language courses are prepared with more focus on employment opportunities, so that the motivation towards learning foreign languages will increase.

Key words: employment opportunities, foreign language teaching, language anxiety, language for professional purposes, motivation