

Attitudes towards trilingualism: a comparison between the Basque and Irish contexts

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine attitudes towards trilingualism by focusing on the minority language (Basque in the Basque Country and Irish in Ireland) and the L3 (English in the Basque Country and French, Spanish, or German in Ireland). The participants are 1,087 Basque university students and 250 Irish third-level students. By using the same questionnaire — based on Baker (1992) — both in the Basque Country and Ireland, the research aims to explore attitudes in two contexts which share some similarities while at the same time retaining their own sociolinguistic features. Thus, it is expected that the level of proficiency in the minority language will exert a clearly positive impact on attitudes to Irish and Basque. Similarly, it is hypothesized that different attitudes to the L3 will be shown in both contexts for different sociolinguistic reasons.

Introduction

The study of language attitudes has drawn the interest of scholars from many different fields, such as sociolinguistics, social psychology, anthropology, bilingual education, second language education, sociology, and even politics, as many researchers have taken to the study of language attitudes in an attempt to better understand the societies we live in. Moreover, multilingualism is becoming the norm rather than the exception, due to both the need to learn foreign languages and the desire to protect and boost the learning and use of minority languages. As a result of this situation, in which different languages share the same linguistic space, linguistic friction arises and research on language attitudes becomes inevitable.

Nevertheless, there is a fact that came to our notice while reviewing studies in this field which has to do with the dearth of studies whose main aim is to compare language attitudes in different European contexts. There are studies wherein the language attitudes of inhabitants from different bilingual settings within the same country are examined (for example those carried out in Spain by Ros et al. 1987, 1994 and Iglesias 2003), but very few transnational studies such as the one we put forward here between the Basque and Irish contexts.

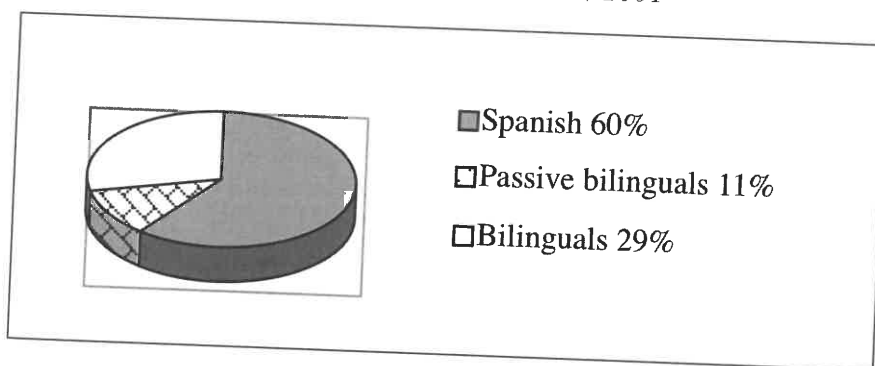
The Basque and Irish sociolinguistic contexts

The present research study was conducted in Ireland and in the southern Basque Country, two contexts which share some similarities while at the same time retaining their own sociolinguistic features. In the following lines the sociolinguistic picture of both contexts will be drawn.

The Basque context

The community of Basque speakers is divided into three political units: The Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and Navarre in Spain, and the Atlantic Pyrenees Department in France. This paper will focus on the BAC, a bilingual community wherein both Basque and Spanish are official languages and which lies in the north of Spain, close to the French border.

Figure 1. Language proficiency in the BAC, 2001



According to the last sociolinguistic survey carried out by the Basque Government in late 2001 and early 2002 (Basque Government 2003), 59.2% of the population in the BAC are monolinguals

in Spanish, 11.4% are passive bilinguals (they can understand Basque but find it difficult to express themselves in it), and 29.4% are bilingual speakers. The role of Spanish as the majority language is therefore evident, as there are no monolingual speakers in Basque and six out of 10 speakers cannot speak Basque.

There are three different linguistic models available in the Basque educational system (Lasagabaster 2001a). Depending on the parents' choice, the presence of Basque and Spanish in the curriculum varies, but both languages are always taught throughout the compulsory education. Moreover, the early teaching of English as a foreign language is becoming so fashionable that around 90% of the schools start teaching it at the age of four. The hegemony of English as the first foreign language is overwhelming. This means that students are used to the presence of three languages in the curriculum from a very early age.

The Irish context

Preliminary figures for the 2002 census reveal that 1.43 million people have some knowledge of the Irish language, with 9.5% of the population professing to use Irish on daily basis. When school-going children are omitted from this statistic, however, the proportion of people who habitually use the language drops to 2.6% of the population (Ó hEallaithe 2003). These figures generally point to an increase from the 1996 census, in which 1.43 million self-reported 'some' competence in the language. This competence, however, may often reflect activation of receptive rather productive skills (Ó Murchú 2001). These skills are garnered, in the main, through the education system, where students experience at least 11 years' exposure to the language.

Students generally begin their study of FLs in post-primary school (age 11-17), although the Department of Education and Science's initiative in 1997 to teach a European language other than Irish and English in primary school was the first official attempt to integrate L3 into the learning experience of children at that level. Regarding the study of L3 at post-primary level, the proportions of students studying different FLs have remained stable over the years, indicating an overall preference for French, which may have as much or, indeed, more to do with the wide availability of the subject and tradition in schools than with student choice. The main FLs which are studied, therefore, are

French, German, and Spanish, even though the Department of Education and Science through a recent initiative is committed to the desirability of greater diversification in the FLs on offer in the curriculum (for example Arabic, Japanese, and/or Russian).

Methodology

The sample

The participants were 1,337 university students, 1,087 of them being Basque and 250 Irish. The mean age for the Basque group was 20.64, the vast majority of them (92.5%) being in the age range between 17 and 23; they were studying 17 different specializations. The Basque sample was very balanced as for gender: 50.2% of them were male and 49.8% female. As far as their mother tongue was concerned, 21.2% of them had Basque as L1, 57.4% Spanish, and 21.5% both Basque and Spanish. Consequently, in this group Basque and/or Spanish represent their L1 and/or L2 and English the L3. When the students were asked to define their level of competence in the different languages in contact, three groups were obtained: low or no proficiency, good proficiency and very good proficiency. It is worth pointing out that only 65 students (just 6% of the Basque students) considered that their command of the foreign language was very good.

The Irish group was made up of 250 students at tertiary level (universities and institutes of technology). The mean age was 22.8 years. Over half the students interviewed were studying Arts, with 40% pursuing courses in IT, Business, and Computers. Nearly half the sample was from an English-speaking background (40%), with a further 10% professing to come from an English-Irish background, and 50% having Irish as an L1. Fifty-five percent of students had studied French as an L3, with 25% studying German and a further 20% studying Spanish. Only 25% of all the students were studying or had studied a fourth language; in this context 15% specified German as their L2 with 5% specifying Spanish and a further 5% specifying Other. When asked to self-report on their proficiency levels in L1, L2, and L3, 90% of students with both Irish and English as an L1 reported possessing very good proficiency in L1, with the 10% stating it to be good. With regard to L2, however, the picture is more complex, with 55% reporting to possess very good proficiency, 20% describing themselves as being good, 10% as being fair, and a further 10% as being poor. A

small proportion (5%) did not respond. It must be noted that the L2 in the case of the 20% returning a fair to poor proficiency were studying Irish as an L2. The figures change significantly, however, when it comes to the L3. Here, only 18% of students professed themselves to be very good, with a further 33% regarding themselves as being good. The proportion that self-reported being fair to poor is also 45% (37% fair and 8% poor respectively).

The instrument

The questionnaire used in this research study was based on that of Baker (1992), which allowed us to base our work on an instrument that had already been validated and which was made up of reliable scales (Lasagabaster 2001b). The questionnaire was anonymous and students had the chance to complete it in the two official languages: Basque or Spanish in the BAC and English or Irish in Ireland. The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first section deals with personal data (age, gender, mother tongue, proficiency in the three languages, etc.), the second with the use of the minority languages (Basque or Irish); in the third section the students' attitudes towards each of the languages were independently analysed, and the last section was focused on their attitudes towards trilingualism. In this paper we will centre on the third section (see the Appendix).

Ten statements were given in a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'. It has to be underlined that items 4 and 5 were recoded, because the expected positive attitudes were just the opposite to the answers to the rest of the statements. Therefore, the answers were recorded in the following way: 1=5, 2=4, 3=3, 4=2, and 5=1. Taking as a starting point the procedure utilized by Lai (2001), means and standard deviations were calculated with any mean value for the general attitude index for each of the languages involved greater than 35.00 indicating an inclination towards agreeing with the proposed statements, while a value smaller than 35.00 indicated an inclination towards disagreement. The value 35.00 is the result of multiplying 3.5 by ten (the number of statements). In Lai's study the turning point was established in the value 2.5, but this was because the scale used was a 4-point Likert scale where 'the middle point was omitted in order to avoid the central tendency' (Lai 2001: 118). As our scale contains the 'Neither Agree nor Disagree = 3'

middle point, the value is raised to 3.5. One-way ANOVA tests were carried out to find out the significant differences between the different groups under analysis, following the convention that any significance value smaller than 0.05 indicates a significant difference between the groups.

Method

The questionnaires were completed individually in class. Students' answers were recorded on answer sheets, which were statistically evaluated after having been codified. The statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

Hypotheses

HP1: The level of proficiency in the minority language will be clearly tied to the students' attitudes towards Basque and Irish.

The studies carried out in the Basque Country (Madariaga 1994, Larrañaga 1995) have demonstrated that there is a clear relationship between language attitudes and language proficiency. No similar study has been carried out in Ireland.

HP2: Negative attitudes towards the L3 (English in the BAC and French, Spanish, or German in Ireland) are expected among the students who have the minority language (Basque or Irish) as L1.

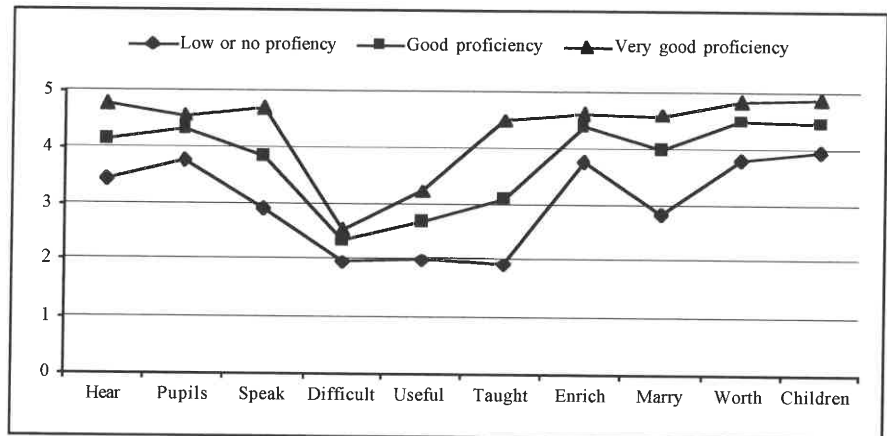
The reasons for these results will vary depending on the context. Thus, in the BAC the students who have Basque as their L1 are expected to hold negative attitudes towards the foreign language, as shown in previous research (Lasagabaster 2001b, c), because they see this international language as an added threat (together with Spanish) to the minority language. On the contrary, the reason behind the Irish students' negative attitude towards the L3 will stem from the fact that, being speakers of English, the language which has become the main *lingua franca* all over the world (House 2002), they will have the view that the foreign language is not considered to be so crucial to their future.

Results

In order to check our first hypothesis, the Basque students were divided into three categories depending on their linguistic command of the minority language: (i) students with a low or no proficiency

(32.5%), (ii) those with a good proficiency (28.5%), and (iii) those with a very good proficiency (39%). A similar categorization was made in the case of Irish. The language attitudes of each of these three groups can be observed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Attitudes towards the minority language depending on proficiency in Basque.



There is a clear trend in these results, which is depicted as regards each of the 10 items included in this part of the questionnaire. The students with a very high command of Basque harbour significantly more favourable attitudes towards the minority language than those with a high command ($p < 0.001$) or low or no command ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, those with a high command happen to be more positive than the students who know no or just a little Basque ($p < 0.001$). This pattern is obviously maintained when the scores for each item are added so as to obtain an overall attitude index towards the Basque language, as seen in Table 1 below.

Taking into account our decision to establish the value 35.00 as the border between positive and negative attitudes, we can state that those with a low or no proficiency in Basque are rather negative towards the minority language, whereas the high and very high groups are very positive (especially the latter, whose mean score is 43.35).

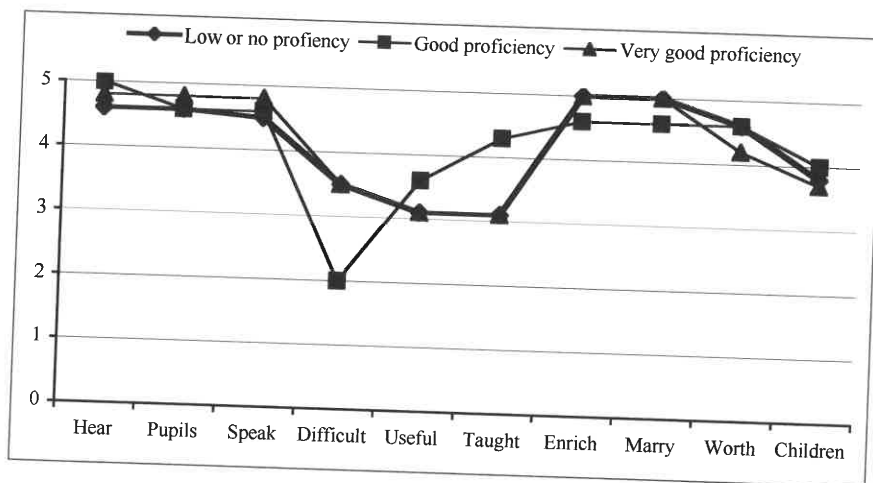
Table 1. Overall attitude towards Basque depending on language proficiency.

	Low or no proficiency	High proficiency	Very high proficiency	F
Overall attitude	30.92	38.11	43.35	393.531*

*p<0.001

In the case of the Irish language, the division of the sample in three groups (low or no proficiency 15%, high proficiency 30%, and very high proficiency 55%) reflected the differences shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Attitudes towards the minority language depending on proficiency in Irish.



As in the case of Basque, there is evidence of a similar pattern emerging with regard to the 10 items. Again, the students with a very high proficiency in Irish exhibit more favourable attitudes towards Irish, although the high proficiency group scores very close to this group. Here too, the pattern is obviously maintained when the scores for each item are added so as to obtain an overall attitude index towards Irish, as shown in Table 2 below.

In the case of the Irish sample there are no differences between the high proficiency and the very high proficiency groups, as their scores are very close to each other (41.90 versus 42).

However, the former two groups are significantly more positive towards the minority language than those who have low or no proficiency in Irish.

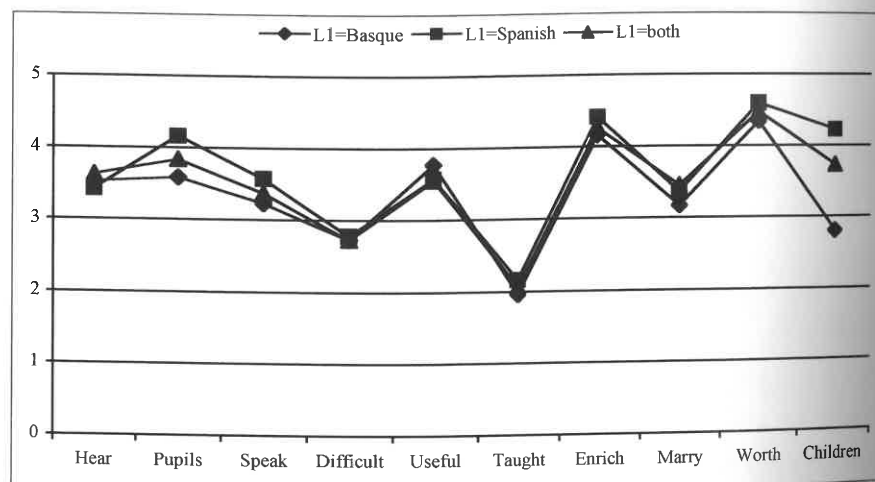
Table 2. Overall attitude towards Irish depending on language proficiency.

	<u>Low or no proficiency</u>	<u>High proficiency</u>	<u>Very high proficiency</u>	<u>F</u>
Overall attitude	32.84	41.90	42.00	303.514*

* $p < 0.001$

When analysing the attitudes towards English (L3) of the three Basque linguistic groups depending on their different mother tongues (Basque, Spanish, or both Basque and Spanish), the results exhibited the pattern seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Attitudes towards English (L3) among Basque students depending on their L1.



It can be stated in general terms that the language attitudes of the three groups towards English follow a pattern in which the L1=Spanish group harbours the more positive attitudes in seven items (out of 10), whereas the L1=Basque group is the more reluctant. The L1=both group lies in between. The L1=Spanish group significantly favours the foreign language in the seven items

($p < 0.05$) when compared to the L1=Basque group, and in five items ($p < 0.05$) when compared to the L1=both group. The lowest scores are obtained by the three groups as regards item 6 (*I prefer to be taught in English*), where the L1=Spanish group is significantly more favourable than the L1=Basque group. The mean score of the three groups is very close (and without significant differences) in the case of item 4, the statement about how difficult it is to learn English, which shows the second lowest score out of all the statements. These data reflect these students' reluctance toward the use of English as a means of instruction and their agreement about how difficult learning the foreign language turns out to be for the vast majority of them. It is worth remembering that only 6% (65 subjects out of 1,087) of the Basque students regarded their command of English as very good. The other item where no differences are found is the third (*I like hearing English spoken*). Curiously enough, the only item where the L1=Basque group shows significantly more positive attitudes than the other two groups is item 5 (*There are more useful languages to learn than English*).

As could have been expected once the individual items were analyzed, the L1=Spanish students held significantly more positive attitudes towards English in the general attitude index than the L1=Basque ($p < 0.01$) and the L1=both ($p < 0.01$) groups, whereas the latter did so with respect to the L1=Basque group ($p < 0.01$). However, it has to be borne in mind that, as hypothesized, the L1=Basque group is the only one whose mean score (33.26) is below the 35.00 established as indication of agreement and positive attitudes towards the L3. These results are shown in Table 3 below.

As can be seen in Figure 5 below, the language attitudes of the Irish students whose L1 is English differs to a significant degree from the students whose L1 is Irish. It needs to be pointed out here that there are no monolingual speakers of Irish and in fact the L1 Irish speakers and those who describe themselves as L1 Irish and English (10%) could be collapsed into the same category. Bearing this in mind, it was decided therefore to control the sample by the choice of language self-reported as the L1 (Section 1, Item 3). The proportion stating Irish as an L1 only, i.e. 40%, constituted the sample illustrated in Figure 5. It was interesting that a large proportion would have deemed themselves as Irish-only speakers, when, in fact, it is most likely, following the pattern of Gaeltacht residents, that they are bilingual.

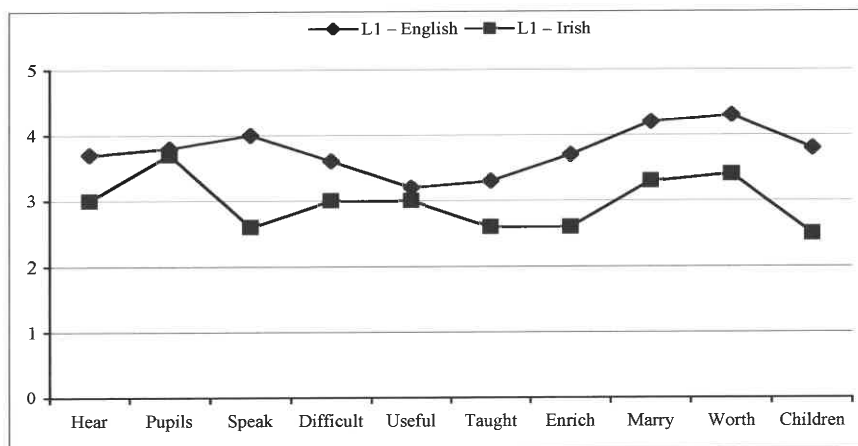
Table 3. Overall attitude towards English (L3) among Basque students depending on L1.

	L1=Basque	L1=Spanish	L1=both	F
Overall attitude	33.26	36.24	35.05	28.282*

* $p < 0.01$

As seen in Figure 5, then, the English L1 group exhibited more positive attitudes in all 10 items than their counterparts with Irish as L1. This bears out the second hypothesis, that negative attitudes towards the L3 are expected among the students who have the minority language as L1.

Figure 5. Attitudes towards L3 among Irish students depending on their L1.



The mean score of the two groups is significantly different in items 3, 7, 8, 9, and 10, indicating that those students who identify themselves as being predominantly Irish-speaking, as distinct from being bilingual, do not consider the L3 to be enriching culturally ($M=2.6$) compared to English L1 students ($M=3.7$). There is a significant variation regarding item 3 *I like speaking the L3* with MS 2.6 (Irish as L1) compared to a high mean score of 4.0 for the English L1 students. The data also reflect Irish L1 students' reluctance to see themselves as transmitting the L3 to their children ($M=2.5$ Irish as L1 compared to $M=3.8$ English as L1). The L3 stated (French, German, or Spanish) had practically no bearing on

the result here ($p < 0.001$). The mean score in the case of the other items is close and no significant difference emerges.

As could have been expected after analysing the ten items in the battery, the differences between the L1=English and the L1=Irish groups are statistically significant when it comes to the overall attitude towards the L3 (French, German, or Spanish) index. This results is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Overall attitude towards L3 among Irish students depending on L1.

	<u>L1=English</u>	<u>L1=Irish</u>	<u>F</u>
Overall attitude towards L3	33.26	36.24	28.282*

* $p < 0.01$

Conclusions

This study was aimed at comparing language attitudes towards trilingualism in a formal setting such as a university in two different contexts, the Basque Country and Ireland. With respect to our first hypothesis (according to which different attitudes towards the minority languages — Basque or Irish — are expected depending on level of proficiency), a comment has to be made first of all about the unusually high group (40%) of learners who self-reported as Irish speakers, although they are in fact bilinguals in Irish and English. It must be remembered that these groups were already studying Irish or taking courses through Irish and therein had opted deliberately to study the language, which clearly shows their positive attitude towards the Irish language. In both contexts the attitudes of those who had a high or very high proficiency in the minority language happened to be significantly more positive than those of the groups who had a low or no proficiency. Therefore the effect of the variable proficiency in the minority language on attitudes towards Basque and Irish is unquestionable.

As far as the second hypothesis is concerned, the study shows that the high proportion of Irish students who chose their minority language as L1 (despite the both Irish and English option being more realistic) had a significant bearing on the attitudes towards the L3, with this group displaying significantly negative attitudes to the L3 in five of the 10 items. The scoring on these items (3, 7,

8, 9,10) reflects a non-integrative type attitude. This may be due to strong attachment and commitment that these students have to the language. It is as if 'they have no room for any other language' in an attitude underscored by passionate motivation. The same pattern is observed in the case of the Basque sample. There is no doubt that these results should make people in the Basque Country and Ireland think about why these students show such a protective attitude. The sociolinguistic situation in both contexts, where the minority language is improving its situation but still lags clearly behind the majority language (Spanish and English respectively), may be the reason behind these results.

Therefore, and despite the sociolinguistic and political differences between the Basque and Irish contexts, both share a very similar pattern, in which the attitudes towards the minority language are clearly affected by the level of proficiency, whereas attitudes towards the foreign language (L3) are sharply determined by the students' L1.

Appendix

Note: In the questionnaire which follows, the abbreviations in bold are used above in the figures. The same ten items were used in the case of the minority language (whether it be Irish or Basque).

Questionnaire

Here are some statements about the English language. Please say whether you agree or disagree with these statements. There are no right or wrong answers. Please be as honest as possible. Answer with ONE of the following:

SA = Strongly Agree	(circle SA)
A = Agree	(circle A)
NAND = Neither Agree Nor Disagree	(circle NAND)
D = Disagree	(circle D)
SD = Strongly Disagree	(circle SD)

- | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|
| | (5) | (4) | (3) | (2) | (1) |
| 1. I like hearing English spoken (hear) | SA | A | NAND | D | SD |
| 2. English should be taught to all pupils in the Basque Country (pupils) | SA | A | NAND | D | SD |

3. I like speaking English (**speak**)
SA A NAND D SD
4. English is a difficult language to learn (**difficult**)
SA A NAND D SD
5. There are more useful languages to learn than English (**useful**)
SA A NAND D SD
6. I prefer to be taught in English (**taught**)
SA A NAND D SD
7. Learning English enriches my cultural knowlegde (**enrich**)
SA A NAND D SD
8. I would not mind marrying an English speaker (**marry**)
SA A NAND D SD
9. English is a language worth learning (**worth**)
SA A NAND D SD
10. If I have children, I would like them to be English speakers
regardless of other languages they may know (**children**)
SA A NAND D SD

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