Students' Attitude Towards English Language Learning: The Case of Iranian Junior High-School Students and Prospects Course-books

Seyed Yousef Savaedi[1*], *Sedigheh Vahdat*[2]

[1]*Ph.D Candidate in Applied Linguistics, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Iran*

[2]*Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Iran*

Abstract

Although a surfeit of studies have examined the students' attitude towards foreign and / or second language both inside and outside Iran, it seems scanty studies have been devoted to evaluate Prospect-trained students' attitude towards English. This quantitative study investigated the students' attitudes towards English language learning among 80 junior high school students in Ahvaz, Iran. These students have been exposed to English through Prospect course-books (the newly designed course-books in Iranian Educational system) for three years. To this end the researchers adapted a Likert scale questionnaire some items of which have been taken from Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) designed by Gardner. The questions comprised three parts each of which represented one aspect of students' attitude towards English language (Cognitive, Behavioral, and Emotional aspects). The choices opted by the participants have been calculated using descriptive statistics (minimum score, maximum score, mean, and standard deviation).The results indicated that the participants enjoyed a positive attitude towards all three aspects with differing degrees. Additionally, participants' demographic information was used to justify some parts of the findings. The findings can be inspiring for teachers and material designers to consider attitude aspects more than ever.

Keywords: Attitude, Cognitive, Behavioral, Emotional, Demographic Information.

1. Introduction

It is argued that language learning is regarded as the cornerstone of human existence. Knowing the language can help us to express our opinions, hopes, and even our dreams (Tavil, 2009). Nowadays learning a second or foreign language has its fever among parents and children, and it seems logical if people wish to learn the most spoken language. According to Abdel-Rahman (2009), English and Mandarin Chinese are the two most widely used languages today. The English language has been considered a global language for decades. Since English is a "global language" (Crystal, 2003), and widely used in science and commerce, the number of English language learners has increased tremendously worldwide. With English language becoming more significant each day due to globalization and increasing competition among nations in the world, there has been a renewed effort by the relevant authorities to improve the standard of the language in the country (Faradila, 2010).

And Iran is no exception. Since the usage of English as a second language and a language of learning and teaching has always been a burning issue in many institutions of learning in Iran, in 2013 the educational policymakers in Iran put a tremendous change into operation in the national EFL course-books, in which the content and methodology has been renewed to reach the worldwide improvement in language learning. However, the question which might need to be asked and answered after this change is about the students' attitude towards the newly introduced EFL system.

Language attitudes can be defined as strong positive or negative emotions experienced by people when they are faced with a choice between languages in a variety of situations or are learning a language (Smit, 1996). Attitude, according to Spolsky (1989), fuels motivation which can enhance learning. The matter of learner's attitude is acknowledged as one of the most important factors that impact on learning language (Fakeye, 2010). Therefore, this study looks into the concept of attitude as one of the major affective factors for success in learning a foreign language. More specifically, it investigates junior high-school students' attitudes towards learning English language, taking into consideration the three aspects of attitude i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. So, the research seeks to answer the following question:

1. What are the attitudes of Iranian junior high-school students towards learning English language in terms of their behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Behavioral, Cognitive and Emotional Aspects of Attitude

Behavioral aspect of attitude deals with the way students behaves and reacts in particular situations, in this study classroom context. In fact, success in language learning can improve the learners' identification of themselves with the native speakers of that language and can also enhance the process of acquisition or adoption of various aspects of behaviors which characterize the members of the target language community (Gajalakshmi, 2013, p. 1)

Cognitive aspect of attitude, on the other hand, deals with what the learners believe about the knowledge that they receive and their understanding in the process of language learning. It has been classified into four steps starting with connecting the previous knowledge and the new one and ends with applying the new knowledge in many situations (Gajalakshmi, 2013, p. 2).

And finally, emotional aspect can help the learners state their emotions towards things and phenomena around them. It is agreed that the inner feelings and emotions of learners influence their perspectives and their attitudes towards the target language (Choy & Troudi, 2006).

2.2 Studies on Students' Attitudes Towards English Language Learning

Due to the importance of attitude in learning in general and language learning in particular, a plethora of studies have investigated this psychological aspect of language learning. Such studies become more prominent when the educational system decides to change the usual course-books. In the following, some examples presented.

Hoping to examine the attitude and motivation of second language learners in Kuwait, Alshaar (1997) adapted a self-report questionnaire from Gardner's (1985) Attitude and Motivation Test Battery and ran it as an instrument for his thesis. The findings showed that there were significant correlations between affective variables (attitudes and motivation) and learning a second language. Also, a significant level of English class anxiety was revealed upon which future investigations were recommended.

In a similar study, Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzwari (2012) investigated Libyan secondary school students' attitudes towards learning English in terms of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects. They also explored whether there is any significant difference in the students' attitudes towards English language based on their demographic profiles i.e., gender, field and year of study. A total of 180 participants in the three study years from three specializations of Basic Sciences, Life Sciences, and Social Sciences took a questionnaire as a measuring instrument. Regarding the three aspects of attitude i.e., cognitive, behavioral, and emotional, the participants showed negative attitudes towards learning English. On the demographic profile, there were statistically significant attitudinal differences regarding gender and field of study but not year of study. Finally, regarding the observed negative attitude towards English, the researchers recommended the EFL teachers to create an encouraging atmosphere in the English classes to promote the students' positive attitudes towards English. Accordingly, EFL teachers should also motivate the students to learn English, highlighting its importance. The researchers claimed that this can be achieved by implementing the appropriate methods and activities of teaching English effectively.

Soleimani and Hanafi (2013) examined a sample of Iranian medical students' attitudes towards English language learning. In this study three aspects of attitude (emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) were taken into consideration. In addition, the effect of learners' demographics on their attitudes was investigated. The researchers employed an adapted questionnaire as a measuring instrument. The participants (N=40, medical students) answered a 30 items Likert scale questionnaire. The results of this study implied that Iranian medical students hold highly positive overall attitude regarding English language learning and male students enjoyed higher attitude comparing with their female counterparts.

In a study aiming to investigate Malysian rural students' perception of the importance of English language Sekharan Nair, Setia, Mohamad, Abdul Kadir,

Luqman, Vadeveloo, and Ngah (2014) studied a sample of 150 Upper Six students from a population of 755 students from six schools in the district of Marang, Terengganu. They also investigated if the students' attitude towards learning English language is positive and if they receive sufficient parental encouragement and support in their English language learning. It was found that the students were well aware of the importance of English language and also had a very positive attitude towards English Language learning and receive more than adequate parental encouragement and support in their English language learning.

In a mixed methods study aiming at gaining insights into the Iranian graduate students' attitudes towards English language and the current education policies in addition to the purposes for which they learn the foreign language Khoshsaligheh, Jamali, and Saeedian (2014) studied 45 MA students from Razi University. 30 students completed a questionnaire and 15 volunteers participated in the interview. The findings of this study indicated that Iranian higher education students hold positive attitudes toward English and the purposes for which they learn the foreign language. The participants, however, seemed to hold negative attitudes toward the current education policies.

And finally, to investigate Iranian high school EFL students' attitudes toward English learning Zareian, Zangoei, and Taghvaee (2014) conducted a study in Gonabad. The researchers used "The Beliefs about Language Learning Questionnaire" adopted from Sage (2011). Their sample included 123 male and female high school EFL students. Data analysis indicated the participants had positive attitudes toward English learning. Additionally, the results obtained from t-test indicated lack of any statistically significant difference between two genders.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 80 Iranian EFL male students comprising 4 junior high-school classes in Ahvaz, Iran. The students had an experience of 3 years studying Prospect series, the state EFL books since 2013. They aged between 14-15 years old. The participants were the researchers' students for more than two years. Based on their scores and performance during the previous two years the researchers knew that most of participants were above average in English language proficiency. In addition, the demographic information gained through the first part of the questionnaire showed that 70 percent of the participants were attending private language institutes at the time they answered the questionnaire. The demographic information also revealed that most of the participants' parents are educated with around 90 percent ranging between high-school diploma to PhD (Table 1).

Table 1. *Parents' literacy level*

Illiterate	Middle	High	Associate	Bachelor	Master	PhD

	school	school diploma	(A.A./S.)	(B.A./S.)	(M.A./S.)	
0.0	10.56	33.39	14.08	21.26	19.01	2.816

3.2 Design

This study is quantitative in nature in which descriptive statistics helped analyzing the data. Thus, an adapted questionnaire was employed as a measuring instrument. The participants were required to answer all the items of the questionnaire honestly, giving their own perceptions about their attitudes towards learning English language in terms of the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of attitude as well as some other information including their language experience and parents' level of literacy which has been used in the justifying discussions.

3.3 Instrument

The measuring instrument was an attitude Likert scale questionnaire which focused on the attitudes towards learning English. The items were adapted from the attitude questionnaire employed in a study by Boonrangsri, Chuaymankhong, Rermyindee, and Vongchittpinyo (2004) and Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzwari (2012). Some items have been taken from Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) designed by Gardner (1985). The questionnaire has been comprised of two parts. The first part was asking the participants' demographic information. The second part had three different but related sets of item. While 15 items have been designed to investigate the cognitive aspect of students' attitude, 15 other items examined the emotional aspect and the last 15 items inspected the behavioral aspect of the participants' attitude. In order to be legible enough for junior high-school students whose first language is Persian, the researchers translated the questionnaire into Persian.

3.4 Reliability

The reliability of the whole instrument has been determined through the reliability coefficient test.

Table 2. *Reliability regarding the Language Attitude Aspects*

Aspects of Attitude	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Behavioral aspect	15	0.731
Cognitive aspect	15	0.714
Emotional aspect	15	0.787
General Attitude towards English Language	45	0.833

As Table 2 shows the acceptable value of Cronbach Alpha was 0.833 which showed acceptable consistency of reliability. On the other hand, since each 15 questions studied a different aspect and made an independent questionnaire, the researchers calculated them separately in which the value of Cronbach's Alpha regarding Behavioral aspect is 0.731, the cognitive aspect is 0.714, and the emotional aspect is 0.787. The questionnaire also proved to be reliable for two subsequent studies in different contexts previously.

3.5 Validity

To check the validity of the questionnaire it was reviewed by two PhD TEFEL candidates working as junior high-school EFL teachers. Besides, the questionnaire items were reviewed by an expert of applied linguistics. After taking all comments into consideration they advocated that the questionnaire is valid.

3.6 Administration

Since one of the researchers was the participants' teacher as well, he explained the instructions of the questionnaire form to the participants. The participants were required to choose between strongly disagree to strongly agree for each item on a Likert scale. The participants were asked to answer the whole questions honestly in 25 minutes time limitation.

3.7 Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed by the SPSS version 20 Program aiming to answer the research question quantitatively. For this purpose, descriptive statistics was conducted to determine the frequency, the mean, the variance and the standard deviation of the gathered data.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Students' Attitudes Towards Learning English Language

To answer the research question, the students' attitude towards Learning English, a descriptive analysis was conducted.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics of Students' Attitude towards English Language*

	N	Min(out of 100)	Max(out of 100)	Mean(out of 100)
ELA	80	1.90(38)	4.44(88.8)	3.4222(68.444)
BAA	80	1.90(38)	4.33(86.6)	3.510(70.2)
CAA	80	2.64(52.8)	4.44(88.8)	3.568(71.36)
EAA	80	2.18(43.6)	3.99(79.8)	3.1886(63.772)
Valid N	80			

The result of the descriptive statistics analysis, as can be seen in Table 3, shows that the overall mean of the English Learning Attitude (the whole questionnaire) is 3.422(68.44). Accordingly, the students had positive attitude

towards learning English. Additionally, the mean scores for the three aspects among the students for Behavioral aspect, Cognitive aspect, and Emotional aspect are 3.51(70.20), 3.568(71.36), and 3.188(63.77) respectively.

While the result is in contrast with Al-Zahrani (2008) and Zainol Abidin et. al. (2012) who reported that the students participated in their studies in Saudi Arabia and Libya showed negative attitude towards English, it proved to be in-line with the results obtained by studies done by Soleimani and Hanafi (2013), Sekharan Nair et al (2014), Khoshsaligheh, Jamali, and Saeedian (2014) and Zareian, Zangoei, and Taghvaee (2014). The reason for the positive attitude observed in our context can be due to the newly designed course-books. The recent communicative methodology employed since 2013 seems to be in harmony with the students' current language needs.

On the other hand, the demographic information obtained from the first part of the questionnaire showed that all participants' parents are educated and this seems to have a positive impact on the students' general attitude towards English language. Additionally, around 70 percent of the participants were attending language institutes voluntarily. This is another factor which might back up our findings.

4.2 The Behavioral Aspect of Attitude Towards English Language

As Table 3 shows the behavioral aspect stands in the second place compared with the other two aspects with the overall mean of 3.51. Question 25 (I am not relaxed whenever I have to speak in my English class هر وقت نیاز باشد در کلاس انگلیسی صحبت کنم احساس آرامش نمی کنم) obtained the maximum mean in Behavioral aspect (M=4.33, SD=0.883) that might show a unanimous agreement among participants that they still (after two years working with this methodology) do not feel comfortable whenever asked to speak in English in the classroom and teachers need to work more on this problem. The minimum score, on the other hand, was obtained by question number 45 (I do not pay any attention when my English teacher is explaining the lesson من به توضیحات معلم در کلاس درس توجه نمی کنم). As the question was negative, the low mean (M=1.90, SD=1.109) might depict a positive aspect of the students' behavior in the classroom. The lessons seem to be attractive enough to make most students pay attention enthusiastically.

However, a meticulous investigation of the questionnaire can be illuminating, too. A good number of the participants mentioned that they are not relaxed when they have to speak in their English class and that is because they feel embarrassed to speak in English in front of other students. These are, in fact, the same psychological barriers mentioned by Lozanov in his de-suggestopedia method that might hurdle the students' integration with the class activities. Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to invent a proper context which might facilitate the students' integration with the new language.

4.3 The Cognitive Aspect of Attitude Towards English Language

According to Table 3 the cognitive aspect achieved the highest overall mean among the other aspects of attitude (M= 3.568) and this shows that the students beliefs about the knowledge that they receive and their understanding in the process of English language learning is mostly positive. The highest score (question 2, M=4.44) reveals that students consider being good at English will help them study other subjects well. In addition, the minimum score (M=2.64) which was gained by question 22 (Frankly, I study English just to pass the exams در حقیقت، من انگلیسی را فقط برای قبول شدن در امتحان مطالعه می کنم) has a positive interpretation. It reveals that students learn English for out-of-school communicative purpose.

Although this aspect was highly positive, those minimum negatively selected questions need deeper observation. Why some students opted to mention they study English just to pass the exams? In fact, according to Ghorbani (2009) in Iran, expectations of parents and school principals merely revolve around the students' performance in exams which is not grounded in communicative principles in language teaching (p. 137). So, such an option even from highly motivated students should not seem surprising since the usual norm especially external pressures in teaching expects such a perspective.

It seems necessary to go 'up' and make radical revisions in the level of policy-making and national expectations. Because of the huge impact of testing on teaching and students' attitude towards this course, there must be a serious re-viewing of the Iranian curriculum in English language from mere passing the final exam with high scores to gaining communicative skills in out-of-class situations.

4.4 The Emotional Aspect of Attitude Towards English Language

This aspect unlike the other two disclosed less positive inner feelings and emotions towards English. Some students confessed to have low interest in English. This can be due to its being a foreign language in our context with very limited application in daily activities. However, they mentioned although the interest is not so high, they still like to learn English by minimally scoring question 24 (I do not like studying English من دوست ندارم انگلیسی بخوانم) representing the lowest mean score (M=2.18, SD=1.240)

An outstanding point in this aspect is that some students preferred studying in their mother tongue rather than any other foreign language. According to Harris, Gleason, and Aycicegi (2006), "one arena in which emotional concomitants of language are keenly felt is in bilingual speakers' sense that there is greater emotional arousal associated with their first language compared to their second language" (p.262). This might be the result of the amount of interaction children have with a specific language. If so, we naturally expect stronger emotions towards the language students had more interaction with. Bloom and Beckwith (cited in Haris, Gleason, &

Aycicegi 2006) noted that mother tongue is acquired during the same years of life (early childhood) as the development of emotional systems. This suggests that emotional aspects of language are coordinated with first language or first languages. Accordingly, to build stronger emotions with the second language, students need to be exposed to the second language in their early childhood not after being 12-13 years old (the age in which students start English in Iranian educational system).

5. Conclusion

It is generally believed that the students' personal attitudes may affect their success in their future academic lives. So, for the students to be successful in learning new knowledge they need to be open to new things in life and *want* to learn new things too (Hussein, Demirok & Uzunboylu, 2009, p. 432). Both negative and positive attitudes have a strong impact on the success of language learning. The findings of this study although not so strong, showed better attitude towards English than what we expected. However, we may anticipate teachers, syllabus designers, and Ministry of Education (MOE) pay profound attention to students' attitude to English language learning. Additionally, teachers may be needed to undergo in-service trainings specifically designed to outfit the teachers with the techniques and strategies that might elevate students' behavioral, emotional and cognitive aspects of attitude.

This study could be more revealing if the researchers could find the correlation between students' attitude and other variables like gender or parents level of literacy. Besides if the study was run on a bigger sample, it could have better generalization value.

References

Abdel-Rahman, A. (2009). Attitudes of Jordanian college students towards learning English as a foreign language. College Student Journal, 43(2). Retrieved January 3, 2012, from Alshaar, B. (1997). *Attitudes and motivation of second language learners in Kuwait* (M.A.). Iowa State University.

Al-Zahrani, M. (2008). Saudi secondary school male students' attitudes towards English: An exploratory study. *J. King Saudi University, Language and translation*, 20, 25-39.

Boonrangsri, K., Chuaymankhong, D., Rermyindee, N. & Vongchittpinyo, N. (2004). *The attitude towards English language learning of the students in vocational certificate level under curriculum in 2002.* A case study of Ayutthaya Technical College studied by Naresuan University, Thailand.

Choy, S. C. & Troudi, S. (2006). An investigation into the changes in perceptions of and attitudes towards learning English in a Malaysian college. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 18*(2), 120-130.

Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fakeye, D. (2010). Students' personal variables as correlates of academic achievement in English as a second language in Nigeria. *Journal of Social Sciences, 22*(3), 205-211.

Gajalakshmi,. (2013). High school students' attitude towards English language learning. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, 3*(9), 1-7.

Ghorbani, M.R. (2009). ELT in Iranian high schools in Iran, Malaysia and Japan: Reflections on how tests influence use of prescribed textbooks. *Reflections on English Language Teaching,* 8 (2), 131–139.

Harris, C.L., Gleason, J.B., & Aycicegi, A. (2006). When is a first language more emotional? Psychophysiological evidence from bilingual speakers. In A. Pavlenko (Ed.), *Bilingual minds: Emotional experience, expression, and representation* (pp. 257-283). Clevedon, United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters.

Hussein, G., Demirok, M., & Uzunboylu, H. (2009). Undergraduate student's attitudes towards English language. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *1*(1), 431-433.

Khoshsaligheh, M., Jamali, F., & Saeedian, A. (2014). Attitude of Iranian graduate students toward English: A case study. *English Language Teaching (ELT)*, *1*(2), 105-126.

Sekharan Nair, G., Setia, R., Mohamad, R., Abdul Kadir, Z., Luqman, A., Vadeveloo, T., & Ngah, H. (2014). Attitude, parental encouragement and perception of the importance of English in English language learning. *Asian Social Science*, *10*(3).

Smit, V. (1996). *A new English for a New South African language attitudes planning and education*. Vienna: Braumuller.

Soleimani, H., & Hanafi, S. (2013). Iranian medical students' attitudes towards English language learning. *International Research Journal of Applied and Basic Sciences*, *4*(12), 3816-3823.

Spolsky, B. (1989). *Conditions for second language learning*. Oxford: OUP.

Tavil, Z. (2009). Parental attitudes towards English education for kindergarten students in Turkey. *Kastamonu Education Journal*. 17(1), 331-340.

Zainol Abidin, M., Pour-Mohammadi, M., & Alzwari, H. (2012). EFL students' attitudes towards learning English language: The case of Libyan secondary school students. *Asian Social Science*, *8*(2).

Zareian, G., Zangoei, A., & Taghvaee, M. (2014). EFL learners' attitude towards English language learning: a focus on male and females' priorities and preferences. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLALW)*, *7*(2), 50-□57.