



Attitudes of Turkish EFL Students towards Learning English

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Abstract

The study investigated the attitudes of Turkish undergraduate EFL students' attitudes toward learning English. The study was carried out with 60 students studying at Bartın University the School of Foreign Languages in the 2018-2019 academic year by conducting a questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale. The scales examined in the questionnaire were “integrativeness, attitudes to L2 community, cultural interest, attitudes to learning Turkish, criterion measures, ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, family influence, instrumentality (promotion and prevention), and fear of assimilation”. The data were analyzed by using SPSS program. The results revealed that Turkish EFL students had positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language since they need it in their lives and for their career.

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Keywords: attitude, EFL learners, motivation, professional needs

1. Introduction

The English Language, “which plays a crucial role in worldwide affairs for business, research, and popular culture”, is undoubtedly the most commonly used international language of the world (Şentürk, 2017). Therefore, in many countries like Turkey, it has extensively been taught in every stage of the education system. Teaching English as a foreign language begins even in pre-primary school in Turkey. However, while some learners learn it as ease and master it in a component way, some learners have difficulty in improving their language (Akkuş-Çakır & Ünlü, 2019). To be able to understand the reason for it, a great deal of research has been carried out and second-language acquisition (SLA) researchers have concluded that although the learners follow a general development process, they have different degrees of success. The question of “What makes some language learners more successful than others in the same opportunities?” has been tried to be found out by the SLA researchers since the 1970s. Finally, they agreed that there are some aspects that enhance language learning success.

Attitudes are important and are influenced by many things like parents, peers, and interactions with people. Thus, attitudes “form a part of one’s perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living” (Brown, 2000; 180).

In line with this background, this study looks into Turkish first-year undergraduates’ attitudes towards learning English in an EFL setting. Therefore, the research question to be answered in this study is as follow:

1. What are the first-year Turkish university students’ attitudes towards learning English?

2. Review of literature

Attitude is described as “a tendency to respond positively or negatively towards a certain thing, idea, person, situation, etc.” For education, Brown (2000) points out that teachers must be conscious that all learners have varying degrees of positive and negative attitudes and clarifies that by using different methods or/and activities, the students with a negative attitude may change their opinions.

2.1. Attitudes and Foreign Language Learning

Attitude has received significant attention in the field of education. It has been proven that the attitude is a part of learning and as a result it is an important part of second language pedagogy. It is believed that “attitudes towards learning influence behaviors like selecting books or speaking a foreign language” (Kaballa & Crowley, 1985 as cited in Weinburgh, 1998). It is concluded that attitudes affect people’s inner mood, thus learning.

Chamber (1999) states that “learning happens more easily, when the learner has a positive attitude towards the language and language learning”. Chamber (1999) affirms that successful learning depends on positive attitude towards language and learning; thus, it is an important part of success. Studies of Gardner and Lambert (1972) support the idea that an individual needs positive attitude to enhance his/her achievement in language. Brown asserts that (2000; 181), “that second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and, in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency.”

2.2. Studies Related to Attitude toward Learning Foreign Languages in Literature

As attitude is accepted as a predictor of foreign language achievement, the numbers of studies have increased to examine it. There are many studies on the effects of attitudes on foreign language achievement. Researchers have also studied on different variables and their relationships with language attitude and other variables such as attitude and language learning strategies (Gan, 2004), attitudes and level of language achievement (Graham, 2004), attitude and anxiety (Levine, 2003) attitude and gender (Karahana, 2007) and so on.

One of the studies conducted in Turkey on attitude is Tarhan's (2003). She studied on 982 students in 42 Anatolian high schools. She conducted it to see whether the students had positive attitude or not. As a result of her study, it is proved that students have a positive attitude towards English.

Karahana (2007) studied the relationship between language attitudes toward English and gender. He surveyed over 190 eight grade students of a private school. The studies showed that female students have higher rates of attitude towards the target culture when compared to male students.

Dimitroff, Dimitroff & Alhashimi (2018) examined whether there was a relationship between the reported level of attitude towards English and engagement while learning English. The data indicated that there was a positive correlation between the two. The fact that there is a correlation implies the following – when students' attitudes towards learning English increases, their feeling of engagement while learning increases as well. This, in turn, increases motivation as a whole.

Akkuş-Çakır & Ünlü (2019) investigated learners' attitudes towards languages other than English. Their study explored participant instructors' views on students' attitudes towards language learning. Overall, it was found that students have positive attitudes towards learning languages and that the positive attitudes that the students display could be because of the fact that the languages included in the study were elective courses in both countries, which means most of the students take these courses just because they want to. This was confirmed by the focus group interviews as the teachers of both groups stated positive influence of being able to choose a course on students' attitudes and motivation.

3. Method

3.1. Participants & Setting

The study was carried out at the Department of Basic English at Bartın University, Turkey. The students who volunteer to study English for general purposes study English during a complete academic year before they start their university education at their departments. 60 A2 level students of English participated in the study. The students were all four-year undergraduate students. At the beginning of the academic year,

students took a Placement Examination and the students were divided into three levels (A1, A2, B1). The participants were generally from engineering, management and philosophy departments.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

An attitude questionnaire adopted from Dörnyei and Csizér (2006) was used as an instrument in this study. It was also used by Göztepe (2014). In the questionnaire, there were 43 items including questioning the degree of the participants' opinions and feelings about learning English. Table 1 below presents the information about the scales in the questionnaire:

Table 1: Domains in the scale

<i>Domains</i>	<i>Scale item no.</i>
<i>Integrativeness</i>	7, 12, 17
<i>Attitudes to L2 Community</i>	8, 10, 11
<i>Cultural Interest</i>	13, 14, 15, 16
<i>Attitudes to learning English</i>	18, 19, 20, 21, 22
<i>Criterion Measures</i>	24, 25, 26, 43
<i>Ideal L2 self</i>	27, 28, 29
<i>Ought to L2 self</i>	23, 30, 31
<i>Family influence</i>	32
<i>Instrumentality promotion</i>	9, 33, 34, 35, 36, 40
<i>Instrumentality prevention</i>	37, 38, 39, 41

There are eleven subscales in the attitude scale. The first is integrativeness and cultural interest, which refer to the willingness to learn the language to communicate with the community members “(e.g. 17. How important do you think learning English is in order to learn more about the culture and art of its speakers?)”; attitudes to L2 community and learning English are related to the beliefs of the students towards the L2 community “(e.g.11. How much do you like to meet people from English-speaking countries?)”; criterion measures is related with the learners efforts to learn English and Ideal L2 Self proposes what the learner want to learn “(e.g. I would like to study English even if I were not required)”; Ought-to L2 Self is related with the expectations of the society “(e.g. My parents believe that I must study English to be an educated person.)”; and finally, instrumentality (Promotion-Prevention) refers to the idea that learning English is necessary for some personal goals like earning money or career building. Participants made their responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1= 'not at all, 5= 'very much').

3.3. Data Analysis

The questionnaires were analyzed using a statistical software program, SPSS version 22.00. While analyzing the quantitative data by means of SPSS, such tests as Cronbach's

Alpha coefficient to see the reliability of the questionnaires; an independent sample T tests, descriptive statistics were run.

4. Results

4.1. 1. What are the first-year Turkish university students' attitudes towards learning English?

There were eleven subscales in the attitude scale and the mean scores for each domain is given in Table 2:

Table 2: shows the means for all scales of the attitude scale

<i>Domains</i>	<i>Scale item no.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Integrativeness</i>	7, 12, 17	3.53	2.64
<i>Attitudes to L2 Community</i>	8, 10, 11	4.12	2.43
<i>Cultural Interest</i>	13, 14, 15, 16	3.60	3.50
<i>Attitudes to learning English</i>	18, 19, 20, 21, 22	3.73	4.35
<i>Criterion Measures</i>	24, 25, 26, 43	3.94	2.43
<i>Ideal L2 self</i>	27, 28, 29	4.13	2.09
<i>Ought to L2 self</i>	23, 30, 31	3.96	2.14
<i>Family influence</i>	32		
<i>Instrumentality promotion</i>	9, 33, 34, 35, 36, 40	3.96	3.60
<i>Instrumentality prevention</i>	37, 38, 39, 41	2.79	4.38

4.2. Integrativeness and Cultural Interest

Integrativeness is the desire to communicate with the members of the foreign community. It includes being part of the target community; therefore, it requires the people to respect to the culture and way of life. The mean score for this scale is M: 3.53 which shows that most of the students would like to be the part and have a positive sympathy to the language. Since most of their plans for the future is to work abroad and have a good career, they are interested in learning about the culture and the life there.

4.3. Attitudes to L2 Community and to learning English

According to the results of the scale (M: 4.12), it is clear that most students are willing to meet people from the target community. Moreover, the scores for the scale that questions students' attitudes towards learning English is M: 3.73 which also shows that the students have a moderate feeling about learning English. These students chose to study English voluntarily for one year before they start their education in their departments.

There may be some other factors influencing them to choose studying English, but the main motive was related to their future careers. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of the students have positive attitudes to learning English.

4.4. Criterion Measures and Ideal L2 Self

The mean score for the scale criterion measures is M:3.94 and M:4.13 for the ideal L2 self. The mean score for the ideal L2 self is the highest in the scale which shows that the students are eager to learn English for their own sake, they really wanted to speak the language accurately and fluently in the future. As stated earlier, these students study English voluntarily and they are aware of the fact that they need it for their future career. As a result, it is really worth mentioning that ideal L2 self, having the highest mean score in the scale proves that these students learn English for their own sake, they chose to study English for their success in their job, so most of them chose to study English on their own will.

4.5. Ought-to L2 Self

The mean score of the scale is M:3.96 which has a moderate result in the questionnaire. The finding reveals that the students are aware that they need English for their jobs, they need to learn it to have a better future; therefore, rather than internal reasons they also have external reasons to learn the language. Even though most of the students may have chosen to study English on their own, some also may have had a family influence to choose. However, after starting their education at the School of Foreign Languages, no matter what the starting motive was, they need to finish their education successfully having good grades from the exams. Therefore, they are eager to finish their language education successfully and get a good a job in the future.

4.6. Instrumentality (Promotion-Prevention)

Almost all participants (96%) agreed that English may enable them to have a good career and earn more money in Turkey. On the contrary, the lowest mean score in the scales was instrumentality prevention (M:2.79) which expresses that the students main purpose to learn English is not to pass the English course, but for their future career. This result shows the importance of voluntary language education. Since it is not compulsory to study at prep school for one year at Bartın University, only the students who are willing to learn English chose to study at School of Foreign Languages, as a result, this result proves that they are really enthusiastic about learning English. So, their main purpose is not just to pass their class and start their department, but learn English well. Since they study voluntarily, even if they fail their classes, they have the chance to start their

departments; thus, their aim is to learn the necessary skills and knowledge in English that they can use in their jobs in the future.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

This study intended to seek EFL students' attitudes towards learning English. The findings affirmed that the students are generally motivated to learn the language for their professional needs. Even though they are aware of the fact that learning a language is crucial in today's world, they are forced to learn it. The most important finding of the study is "the ideal L2 self" which proves that these students chose to study English voluntarily for one year before they start their education in their departments. There may be some other factors influencing them to choose studying English, but the main motive was related to their future careers. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of the students have positive attitudes to learning English. This is because of the fact that they want to learn English for their future career, so they need to speak it fluently and learn it accurately. Since they all chose to learn English voluntarily at the beginning of the year, they are aware of the need to learn it. They had this internal force when they just started their university career. This proposes that they also have an internal motivation.

This finding is in line with the Akkuş-Çakır & Ünlü's (2019) study in which they examined the attitudes of the learners towards languages. In their study, they concluded the positive attitudes students showed may be because of the fact that those courses were elective courses and the students chose to take them according to their wish. They also presented that teachers of these students' stated that being able to choose a language course may lead to positive attitudes and motivation towards learning it.

As another point, the lowest score in the scales was "Instrumentality prevention" with a mean score of M:2.79. This scale supports the idea that students learn English to pass their language classes. However, since they study English voluntarily for one year, even if they fail their courses at prep school, they had the chance to start their education at their departments. Thus, they are not afraid that they will fail while the students studying at prep classes compulsorily have the fear of failing as they have to repeat their class. This finding also supports Akkuş-Çakır & Ünlü's (2019) study in that they state that according to the teacher interview results, the negative attitude of the students to learn English even if they know the global status of it is because of the "required status of the compulsory English courses".

From a language learning perspective, there are some different factors influencing students to have a positive attitude towards learning English. This study proves that when students are provided with opportunities to decide on to study foreign language, they leverage efforts and resources effectively. Students enrolled in prep class in this

example have been characterized as holding positive attitudes towards the target language and as intrinsically motivated. Therefore, if students have positive attitude towards learning English, their engagement increases which supports the study of Dimitroff, Dimitroff & Alhashimi (2018) in that they also concluded that “more positive attitudes were associated with higher levels of engagement in English classes and vice versa”.

This study underlined the importance of taking into account differences rooted in the factors related to the target language and its culture when designing or adopting approaches to help students to develop positive attitudes towards learning foreign languages and increase students’ motivation. Nevertheless, there are several limitations to this study that suggest the need for future research.

The current study was carried out with a small sample size at Bartın University School of Foreign Languages; therefore, further research may be conducted with a large sample representing more widespread participants from different backgrounds and with a different purpose to study English. There may also be some comparisons about the attitudes of the students towards learning English with the students studying English at prep classes compulsorily and voluntarily.

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