

Attitude of Iranian Students towards Learning the English Language

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Attitude is one of the fundamental issues in determining the success of students. It is related to a person's values and beliefs and promotes or discourages the choices made in both academic career and social life. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of gender and field of study on students' attitude towards learning the English language. **Materials and methods:** A questionnaire was adopted from a previous study to evaluate attitude of 33 human sciences and medical sciences students selected from the Mazandaran University and Golestan University of Medical Sciences, respectively. **Results:** Gender had no significant impact on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects of attitude. Field of study had a significant impact on the behavioral and cognitive aspects of attitude but not on the emotional aspect. **Conclusions:** Since English is an obligatory subject for the majority of EFL learners, teachers are ought to motivate the learners by highlighting the importance of English for their academic achievement. Engaging students in activities that are matched with their needs and interests can also improve the attitude towards English.

KEYWORDS: EFL learner, Attitude, Language learning, Gender, Field of study

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INTRODUCTION

Learners' attitude is acknowledged as one of the most important factors affecting language learning [1,2]. Reid declared "attitudes are important to us because they cannot be neatly separated from study" [3]. Attitude is also an essential factor influencing language performance [4]. Achievement in a target language relies not only on intellectual capacity, but also on the learner's attitudes towards language learning. This means that language learning should be approached primarily as a social and psychological phenomenon rather than a purely academic one.

The attitude concept has three components: behavioral, cognitive and affective [5], which are based on the three theoretical approaches of behaviorism, cognitivism and humanism, respectively. Feng and Chen stated "learning process is an emotional process affected by different emotional factors and attitude can help the learners express whether they like or dislike the objects or surrounding situations" [6].

In the last 50 years, numerous studies have been conducted on the attitudes towards language learning. Gardner and Lambert conducted an early research on the relationship between learners' attitudes and language learning in the 1950s. De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor showed that positive attitude of learners facilitates second language learning [7]. Hashwani also examined attitudes, motivation and anxiety of students towards learning English in the multilingual context of Karachi, Pakistan. They reported that the students had a positive attitude and high interest towards learning English. In addition, girls had a slightly more positive attitude and motivation compared to boys [8].

Al-Zahrani conducted a study in order to determine the attitude of Saudi students towards learning English and reported that their attitudes had not changed significantly over three years of English learning [9]. In order to investigate the correlation between attitude and achievement in English learning,

Fakeye conducted a study on 400 randomly selected senior secondary students, and found a significant relationship between attitude and achievement. They also stated that gender had no effect on the students' attitude [2].

In a study on Libyan secondary school students, the participants exhibited negative attitudes towards learning English and there were statistically significant attitudinal differences considering gender and field of study but not year of study [5]. In a comparative study on university English students, Azarnoosh found no significant difference between peer assessment and teacher assessment. They also found no friendship bias in the peer assessment [10]. Soleimani and Hanafi revealed that Iranian medical students have a highly positive attitude towards learning the English language [11]. Amiri surveyed initial and final attitudes of young female Iranian EFL learners in two different age groups (8 and 11 years old), and explored the effect of age at time of language learning on their attitudes. In this study, the participants in both age groups had positive attitudes towards foreign language learning at baseline, which was slightly reduced during the experimental course of examination. Moreover, the age of language acquisition was found to be effective on the attitude of participants [12]. A study stated that gender, preparatory training and language level do not influence the attitude of students at Istanbul Technical University towards learning English [13]. Considering the lack of enough data on the Iranian students' attitudes towards learning English, the present study aimed to determine the impact of gender and field of study on the attitude of medical sciences and human sciences students towards learning English.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

In this study, 33 students (14 males and 19 females) of medical sciences (n=16) and human sciences (n=17) were selected using availability non-random sampling. The students of human sciences were selected from the Mazandaran University and the medical students were selected from the Golestan University of Medical Sciences.

In this quantitative research, the participants were required to answer items of a questionnaire within 20 minutes, giving their own perception about learning English in terms of the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of attitude. Demographic data of the participants were also collected using the questionnaire. The researcher was present during this period to clarify any questions regarding the questionnaire when necessary.

Instrument

The items of the questionnaire were adopted from the attitude questionnaire test developed by Zainol Abidin et al. [5]. Overall, there were 45 items on the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects of attitude towards language learning. In addition, 30 items were positive and 15 items were negative. The items of the questionnaire were scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Reliability

The validity of the questionnaire has been verified previously [5]. As shown in table 1, the reliability of the three aspects of the questionnaire was also verified using SPSS v16 by calculation of Cronbach's alpha equal to 0.67, 0.72 and 0.75 for the behavioral aspect, the cognitive aspect and the emotional aspect, respectively

Table 1. Reliability the three aspects of the questionnaire

Aspects of Attitude	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Behavioral	15	0.68
Cognitive	15	0.72
Emotional	15	0.74
General attitude towards learning the English language	45	0.81

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of the participants based on gender and field of study.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the participants based on gender and field of study

Variable		Frequency	Percent %
Gender	Male	14	42
	Female	19	58
Faculty	Medical Sciences	16	48.5
	Human Sciences	17	51.5

Mean scores of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects of attitude among female students were 58.31 ± 5.62 , 48.21 ± 4.66 and 52.21 ± 4.673 , respectively. Moreover, mean scores of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects of attitude among male students were 56.64 ± 10.17 , 43.86 ± 11.49 and

50.93 ± 8.34 , respectively (Table 3). Results of the independent sample t-test showed no significant difference between the female and male students in terms of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects.

Table 3. The students' attitude towards learning English based on gender

General attitude towards learning English	Gender				T-test	P-value
	Male		Female			
	Mean	Standard deviation (SD)	Mean	SD		
Behavioral aspect	56.64	10.17	58.3158	5.62783	-0.604	0.55
Cognitive aspect	43.86	11.49	48.2105	4.66165	-1.49	0.14
Emotional aspect	50.93	8.34	52.2105	4.67355	-0.52	0.58

As shown in table 4, there was a significant difference between medical sciences and human sciences students in terms of the

behavioral and cognitive aspects of attitude. However, there was no significant difference between the two student groups in terms of the emotional aspect.

Table 4. The students' attitude towards learning English based on field of study

General attitude towards learning English	Field of Study				T-test	P-value
	Medical Sciences		Human Sciences			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Behavioral aspect	61.25	6.58	54.18	7.40	2.89	0.007
Cognitive aspect	49.31	4.42	43.59	10.30	2.05	0.049
Emotional aspect	52.69	5.12	50.71	7.44	0.89	0.38

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to examine the effect of gender and field of study on the learners' attitudes towards learning the English language. The findings of the present study indicated no significant difference between females and males in terms of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects. This finding is in line with the results of some other studies. For example, Karatas et al. claimed that the students' attitude towards learning English was not influenced by gender, receiving training and language level [13]. Similarly, Al-Zahrani revealed that gender had no effect on the students' attitude towards learning English [9]. However, in a study by Hashwani, the students had a positive attitude and high interest towards the English language. In addition, girls had a slightly more positive attitude and motivation compared to boys [8]. Similarly, Zainol Abidin et al. found that female secondary school students had a slightly more positive attitude towards learning English compared to male counterparts [5]. Furthermore, Soleimani and Hanafi found that the attitude of male medical students towards the English language learning was more positive compared to the female counterparts [11]. Shoaib and Dornyei also found that females show more interest and positive attitude towards learning a second language compared to males [14].

Based on the findings of the present study, there was a significant difference in terms of behavioral and cognitive aspects of attitude between the medical sciences and human

sciences students. However, we found no significant difference in terms of the emotional aspect between the two student groups. On the contrary, Zainol Abidin et al. found that the field of study has a notable impact on the attitude of Libyan secondary school students towards learning the English language [5].

CONCLUSION

There is no significant difference between females and males in terms of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects of attitude. In addition, field of study significantly affects the behavioral and cognitive aspects of attitude but not the emotional aspect. Since English is an obligatory subject for the majority of EFL learners, teachers are ought to motivate the learners by highlighting the importance of English for their academic achievement. Engaging students in activities that are matched with their needs and interests can also improve the attitude towards learning English.

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