

## **Chinese University EFL Students' Attitudes towards English, Interest in Foreign Languages and perceptions of Social Norms in Foreign Language Learning**

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### **Abstract:**

The present study explored the general patterns of Chinese university EFL students' attitudes towards English, interest in foreign languages, and their perceptions of social norms in foreign language learning, and the relationships among these measured variables and their performance in English. Analyses of 1697 questionnaires revealed the following findings: (1) more than half of the participants held moderately or strongly positive attitudes towards English, were moderately or even strongly interested in foreign languages, and moderately believed that the Chinese social norms supported foreign language learning, (2) male and female students significantly differed from each other in the three measured variables, and (3) the measured variables were significantly positively related to one another and the students' performance in English.

**Key Words:** Attitude, Interest, Perception, Social norm, Performance

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have long realized the role of attitudes towards and interest in a second/foreign language (SL/FL) in the learning of that language. For example, in the socio-psychological model on motivation proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1972), motivation was defined as influenced by attitudes towards and orientations to learn a SL. As the core concept of his motivation theory, Gardner (1985) defined the integrative motive as a “motivation to learn a second language because of positive feelings toward the community that speaks that language” (pp. 82-83), which comprised three main components—integrative orientation, interest in foreign languages, and attitudes towards the L2 community, reflecting the “individual’s willingness and interest in social interaction with members of other groups” (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 159). Attitudes towards and interest in the target language and the L2 speakers are also an important component of Dörnyei’s (2001) process-oriented motivation theory. It has often been indicated, for instance, that learners who have favorable attitudes towards a language, its speakers and their culture tend to be more successful in their learning than those who have negative attitudes (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985). In studying “attitude intervention” in the foreign language classroom, Mantle-Bromley (1995) observed that “without a positive learning atmosphere, students may well gain nothing from new curricular infusions” (p. 383).

Empirical studies have also revealed that attitudes towards and interest in a SL/FL play a paramount role in language learning and that positive attitudes towards a language often lead to higher motivation to learn and higher proficiency in the language (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Dörnyei, 2001; Gan, 2004; Gardner, 1985; Liu, 2009; Loulidi, 1990; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Gardner, Lalonde and MacPherson’s (1985) study revealed that participants with less favorable attitudes and motivation evidenced significant loss in rated speaking and understanding skills, while those who reported little use of French after training ended demonstrated a significant loss in their self-rated understanding skills. Masgoret and Gardner (2003) found that attitudes toward the target language and interest in foreign languages were significantly positively related to language proficiency. Snow, Padilla and Campbell (1984) discovered that interest in foreign languages related significantly to retention of writing and speaking skills and use of Spanish. Gupta and Woldemarian (2011) examined the influence of motivation and attitude on the writing strategy use of more than 1000 undergraduate EFL students in Ethiopia. Results showed that participants with strong motivation demonstrated high level of enjoyment, confidence, perceived ability, and positive attitude towards effective teaching methods of writing, and they employed writing strategies most frequently.

Research on attitudes of Mainland Chinese EFL learners has often adopted Gardner’s attitudes questionnaire (1985), which has revealed that Chinese students often hold positive attitudes toward English and are more instrumentally motivated to learn the language (Liu, 2007; Yang,

Liu & Wu, 2010; Zhang & Hu, 2008). For example, 30 Chinese postgraduate students studying in America participated in Zhang and Hu's (2008) study of SL learners' attitudes towards English varieties. The results showed that the learners were positive towards the varieties of English they had been exposed to and their attitudes were not related to the understandability of the passage delivered by the speakers of the three varieties.

Sex differences in attitudes towards and interest in the study of foreign languages have also become a widespread area of investigation. It is indicated from research studies that boys and girls have different attitudes towards language learning and that girls tend to show significantly more positive attitudes than boys (Liu, 2009; Pritchard, 1987; Pritchard & Loulidi, 1994). Pritchard (1987) carried out a small scale survey study in Northern Ireland to find out boys' and girls' attitudes towards French and German. He found that boys perceived German boring and were much less likely to be pleased to have a chance to learn it. Similarly, Salters, McEwen and Canavan's (1987) study revealed that the males were more ethnocentric than females and had a less positive attitude to language learning.

Meanwhile, some researchers have suggested that motivation, beliefs, and attitudes that govern the success or failure of foreign language acquisition depend on contextual factors, such as a nation's sociocultural contexts (Kouritzin, 2004; Kouritzin, Piquemal & Renaud, 2009; Nieto, 1999). For example, Kouritzin et al. (2009) distributed a survey to more than 6,000 university students in Canada, Japan, and France to examine differences in language learning beliefs, attitudes, and motivations in the three countries. The finding was that learners in Canada and France exhibited primarily instrumental and integrative motivation, respectively, whereas learners from Japan displayed a different social capital motivation, in which knowledge of a foreign language carried value in and of itself.

As reviewed, people from different cultures may hold different attitudes towards foreign languages and their attitudes may be affected by the social context they live in. Moreover, male and female students may differ from each other in their attitudes and perceptions towards foreign languages and the learning of those languages. For this reason, the present study aimed to explore the general patterns of Chinese university students' attitudes towards English, interest in foreign languages, and their perceptions of social norms in foreign language learning, and the relationships among these measured variables and the students' performance in English. Another purpose of the study was to examine the differences in these measured variables between male and female students. English was chosen as the focus of the present study because it had been the No. 1 foreign language in the country. With the rapid economic development in China, Chinese people's interactions with English-speaking people from various countries have dramatically increased. Adolescents and young adults in contemporary China have a strong desire to learn English because they believe that being able to use English will help them find lucrative employment in the future or because English is necessary for

tertiary education (Liu, 2007, 2009; Yang et al., 2010). The following research questions were of particular interest in the present study:

- (1) What are the general patterns of Chinese university EFL learners' attitudes towards English, interest in foreign languages, and their perceptions of social norms in foreign language learning?
- (2) Is there any difference in the measured variables between male and female students?
- (3) How are these variables related to one another and the students' performance in English?

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

**Participants.** 1697 (920 female and 777 male) students from five universities of varied ranks in Mainland China participated in the present study. With an average age of 19 and an age range of 16 to 24, the participants came from various disciplines such as business management, civil engineering and environmental engineering, with a majority being first-year students (1169/68.9%), 481 (28.3%) being second-year, 43 (2.5%) being third-year and 4 (.2%) fourth-year students.

**Instrument.** The participants in the present study answered a 9-item Attitudes towards English, a 9-item Interest in Foreign Languages, and a 14-item Social Norms in Foreign Language Learning, as detailed below.

*Attitudes towards English (ATE).* This 9-item scale (see Appendix items 1-9) was adapted from Gardner's Attitudes toward French (1985) ( $a = .853$ ). The word "French" in the original scale items was replaced by "English" to better reflect the present situation. It is believed that whether a learner likes the target language may determine what s/he will put into learning the language (Clément & Kruidenier, 1985; Gardner, 1985).

*Interest in Foreign Languages (IFL).* This scale (see Appendix items 10-18), adapted from that developed by Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret (1997), consisted of 9 items assessing a general interest in studying foreign languages ( $a = .837$ ). To better fit the present situation, the word "English" in the original scale items was replaced by "Chinese", and the item "Seeing that Canada is relatively far from countries speaking other languages, it is not important for Canadians to learn foreign languages" was excluded from the present study.

*Social norms in Foreign Language Learning.* This 14-item Social Norms in Foreign Language Learning (SNFLL) (see Appendix items 19-32) was adapted from that developed by Kouritzin et al. (2009) ( $a = .661$ ), intending to assess general social attitudes toward learning foreign languages. To better fit the present situation, the words "Canada" and "Canadian" in the original scale items were replaced by "China" and "Chinese" respectively, and the item

“English-speaking Canadians believe that all residents in English-speaking Canada should learn English” was deleted from the present study.

**Performance in English.** At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> week of the term, all the students took the course final exam which consisted of reading, writing, translation, and grammar and vocabulary. Speaking was excluded from the test because it was time consuming. All the participants’ scores in the test were collected as their performance in English, as done in other studies (Liu, 2009).

**Procedure.** About 2000 students who registered for “English Reading and Writing” course in five universities of varying ranks in Mainland China were invited to complete the questionnaire in 10 minutes in a normal class session in the fifteenth week, a week prior to their final course exam. Finally, 1697 collected questionnaires were valid for further statistical analyses; and their scores in the course final exam administered in the 16<sup>th</sup> week were collected as their performance in English.

**Data analysis.** The data were analyzed in terms of mean, standard deviation and range to reveal the general pattern of the students’ attitudes towards English, interest in foreign languages, and their perceptions of social norms in foreign language learning. Then, independent samples t-tests were run to explore the differences in the measured variables between male and female participants. Finally, correlational analyses were conducted to reveal the relationships among the measured variables and the students’ performance in English.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### **3.1 General patterns of the students’ attitudes towards, interest in foreign languages and their perceptions of social norms in foreign language learning**

In order to know the general patterns of the students’ attitudes towards English, interest in foreign languages, and their perceptions of social norms in foreign language learning, the mean, standard deviation, and score range of the ATE, the IFL and the SNFLL were computed. When computing these scores, the researcher adjusted the values assigned to different alternatives of some items. For example, items 6, 7, 8, and 9 which expressed negative attitudes towards English had values assigned to their alternatives reversed. Thus, the mean scores of the ATE, the IFL and the SNFLL reflected the degree to which a respondent thought of English positively, was interested in foreign languages, and how supportive s/he perceived social norms to be of foreign language learning, respectively. The higher the score, the more positive the respondent’s attitude was towards English, more interested in foreign languages, and more supportive s/he perceived social norms to be of foreign language learning. The results are reported in Table 1.

Given that all the questionnaires were answered on a 5-point Likert scale, a mean score higher than the scale mid-point 27 on the ATE implies that the respondents thought moderately or even highly of English; a mean score higher than the scale mid-point 27 on the IFL suggests that the participants were moderately or even highly interested in foreign languages; and a mean score higher than the scale mid-point 42 implies that the respondents moderately or even highly believed that the social norms were supportive of foreign language learning.

**Table 1: Statistical Analyses of the ATE, the IFL, and the SNFLL**

	IFL			SNFLL			ATE		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
Male (777)	32.58	6.11	10-45	45.01	5.98	18-70	32.06	6.09	9-45
Female (920)	35.60	6.01	14-45	47.22	5.79	22-68	34.99	5.65	16-45
Total (1697)	34.21	6.24	10-45	46.21	5.97	18-70	33.65	6.03	9-45

As noted from Table 1, though some students (with a score of 10) held extremely negative attitudes, the mean score of 33.65 on the ATE, exceeding the scale midpoint 27, indicates that more than half of them held moderately or strongly positive attitudes towards English, as found in many other studies (Gan, 2004; Liu, 2007, 2009; Zhang & Hu, 2008). This finding is also consistent with the results of the ATE item analyses summarized in the Appendix, which shows that the participants generally believed learning English was important to Chinese (item 1,  $m = 3.53$ ) and enjoyable (item 3,  $m = 3.40$ ), and expressed (strong) wish to speak fluent English (item 2,  $m = 4.22$ ) and love for learning the language (item 4,  $m = 3.31$ ). At the same time, they (strongly) rejected the statements (items 6-9) indicative of negative attitudes towards English, with a mean range of .380 to 4.05, while planning to learn as much English as possible (item 5,  $m = 3.55$ ).

Table 1 also shows that the students scored 34.21 on the IFL, well above the scale midpoint 27, suggesting that they were moderately or even highly interested in foreign languages, as found in Liu (2009) and Gardner (1985). This is further supported by the analyses of the IFL items reported in the Appendix. With a mean range of 3.39 to 4.15, the majority participants moderately or strongly endorsed the statements reflective of interest in foreign languages and vetoed those implicative of no or little interest in foreign languages. For example, they expressed the wish to learn many foreign languages (item 10,  $m = 3.59$ ), to speak another language perfectly (item 11,  $m = 4.15$ ), and to read newspapers and magazines in another language (item 12,  $m = 3.97$ ). Meanwhile, they reported enjoying meeting and listening to people of other languages (item 14,  $m = 3.64$ ) and disagreed with the statement that “most foreign languages sound crude and harsh” (item 17,  $m = 3.74$ ).

Meanwhile, as shown in Table 1, the participants scored 46.21 on the SNFLL, slightly above the scale midpoint 42, indicates that the participants moderately believed that the Chinese social norms were supportive of foreign language learning. This is consistent with the results of the analyses of the SNFLL items summarized in the Appendix. With a mean score range of 2.42 to 3.76, the respondents generally moderately agreed with the statements such as “The media makes me aware of people who speak more than one language” (item 23,  $m = 3.76$ ), “The Chinese education supports learning more than one language” (item 20,  $m = 3.74$ ), “The Chinese respect people who speak more than one language” (item 19,  $m = 3.69$ ), “There are government policies which encourage the Chinese to learn foreign languages” (item 24,  $m = 3.58$ ), and “The Chinese believe that the study of foreign languages is equally important to core subjects such as mathematics, sciences, social studies, and language arts” (item 32,  $m = 3.51$ ). Less than half endorsed the statements “Most Chinese are fluent in a foreign language by the end of high school” (item 27,  $m = 2.42$ ) and “The Chinese are bilingual” (item 21,  $m = 2.88$ ), while rejecting the statement “The Chinese believe that learning a foreign language is difficult” (item 29,  $m = 2.56$ ).

As discussed above, the participants of the present study generally held (strongly) positive attitudes towards English, were (strongly) interested in foreign languages, and moderately believed that the Chinese social norms were supportive of foreign language learning.

### 3.2 Differences in the measured variables between male and female students

Table 1 also shows that, female students scored 34.99 on the ATE, 35.60 on the IFL, and 47.22 on the SNFLL, while male students scored 32.06, 32.58 and 45.01 on the three scales respectively. This clearly shows that the female students tended to hold more positive attitudes towards English, be more interested in foreign languages, as happened in other studies (Liu, 2009; Pritchard, 1987; Pritchard & Loulidi, 1994; Yang et al., 2010), and more strongly believed that the Chinese social norms were supportive of foreign language learning than their male counterparts. The independent samples t-test results (see Table 2) reveal that the differences in the three measured variables were all statistically significant ( $t = -10.275, -10.23$ , and  $-7.799$  for the ATE, the IFL, and the SNFLL respectively,  $p = .000$ ).

**Table 2: Independent samples t-test results**

	t	df	p	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference
ATE	-10.275	1695	.000	-2.931	-3.491~-2.372
IFL	-10.23	1695	.000	-3.02	-3.599~-2.44
SNFLL	-7.799	1695	.000	-2.248	-2.813~-1.683

### 3.3 Correlations among the measured variables and performance in English

To reveal the relationships among the measured variables and the students' performance in English, correlational analyses were run and the results are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3: Correlations among the Measured Variables and Performance in English**

	ATE	ILF	SNFLL	Performance
ATE	1			.166*
IFL	.675**	1		.112*
SNFLL	.434**	.450**	1	-.045

**Note:** \*\* = < .01; \* = < .05

As seen from Table 3, the ATE, the IFL, and the SNFLL were significantly highly correlated with one another, with coefficients ranging from .434 to .675 ( $p < .01$ ). Alternatively, the more positive attitudes towards English, the more interested the respondent was in foreign languages, and the more strongly they believed that the Chinese social norms supported foreign language learning.

Moreover, the ATE and the IFL were significantly positively related to the students' performance in English ( $r = 1.66$  and  $.112$  respectively,  $p < .05$ ), as found in Liu (2007, 2009) and other studies (Gardner et al., 1985; Snow et al., 1984), while the SNFLL was negatively related with the latter and the coefficient was statistically not significant. Namely, the more positive attitudes a respondent held towards English, and/or the more interested s/he was in foreign languages, the significantly better s/he performed in the course final exam, or vice versa. On the other hand, the more strongly a respondent believed that the Chinese social norms supported foreign language learning, the worse s/he performed in the latter, which is surprising and needs further investigation.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study explored the general patterns of Chinese university students' attitudes towards English, interest in foreign languages, and their perceptions of social norms in foreign language learning, and the relationships among these measured variables and their performance in English. The study also examined the differences in these measured variables between male and female students.

Analyses of the data revealed that more than half of the participants held moderately or strongly positive attitudes towards English, were moderately or even strongly interested in foreign languages, and moderately believed that the Chinese social norms supported foreign language learning. The second finding is that female students tended to hold significantly more positive attitudes towards English, be significantly more interested in foreign languages, and significantly more strongly believed that the Chinese social norms were supportive of foreign language learning than their male counterparts. Another finding is that the measured variables



were significantly positively related to one another and the students' performance in English. For example, the more positive attitudes a respondent held towards English, the more interested s/he was in foreign languages, and the better s/he performed in the course final exam.

As such, the present study further supports the finding that positive attitudes towards the target language and interest in foreign languages are conducive to the learning of a SL/FL (Dörnyei, 2001; Gan, 2004; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Liu, 2009; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Therefore, in order to better students' performance in a SL/FL, it is beneficial to foster or enhance their positive attitudes towards and interest in the language. It may also be useful to foster social norms which can be more supportive of foreign language learning, so that people living with those norms could be more motivated to learn a foreign language, as suggested in Kouritzin et al. (2009).

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APPENDIX: The survey

	Mean	SD
<b>Attitudes towards English</b>		
1. Learning English is important to us Chinese.	3.53	.99
2. I really wish I could speak fluent English.	4.22	.87
3. Learning English is really enjoyable.	3.40	1.01
4. I love learning English.	3.31	1.05
5. I plan to learn as much English as possible.	3.55	1.02
6. I hate English.	3.91	1.02
7. I would rather spend my time on courses other than English.	3.80	1.01
8. Learning English is a waste of time.	4.05	.89
9. I find the study of English very boring.	3.87	1.03
<b>Interest in foreign languages</b>		
10. I would really like to learn many foreign languages.	3.59	1.198
11. I wish I could speak another language perfectly.	4.15	.94
12. I often wish I could read newspapers and magazines in another language.	3.97	1.03
13. If I planned to stay in another country, I would make a great effort to learn the language even though I could get along in Chinese.	3.94	1.06
14. I enjoy meeting and listening to people who speak other languages.	3.64	1.05
15. Studying a foreign language is not a pleasant experience.	3.39	1.11
16. I really have no interest in foreign languages.	3.76	.98
17. Most foreign languages sound crude and harsh.	3.74	1.01
18. I would rather see a foreign film dubbed in Chinese than see the film in its original language with Chinese sub-titles.	4.03	1.07
<b>Social norms in foreign language learning</b>		
19. The Chinese respect people who speak more than one language.	3.69	.98
20. The Chinese education supports learning more than one language.	3.74	.98
21. The Chinese are bilingual.	2.88	1.30
22. The Chinese-speaking Chinese think that knowing Chinese only is good enough.	3.66	1.00
23. The media makes me aware of people who speak more than one language.	3.76	.99
24. There are government policies which encourage the Chinese to learn foreign languages.	3.58	.92
25. The Chinese believe that learning foreign languages is just a normal part of life.	3.31	.99
26. Chinese celebrities who speak more than one language frequently use	3.44	.99

foreign language words and phrases in public.		
27. Most Chinese are fluent in a foreign language by the end of high school.	2.42	1.05
28. The Chinese are becoming more interested in learning a foreign language.	3.09	1.02
29. The Chinese believe that learning a foreign language is difficult.	2.56	.89
30. China promotes the maintenance of languages spoken by the children of immigrants and foreign visitors.	3.32	.85
31. Students need to learn a foreign language in order to get into university.	3.25	1.08
32. The Chinese believe that the study of foreign languages is equally important to core subjects such as mathematics, sciences, social studies, and language arts.	3.51	1.04