An evaluation of students' attitudes toward English language learning in terms of several variables

Mehmet Nuri Gömleksiz[a] *

[a]Firat University, Faculty of Education, Department of Education Sciences, 23119, Elazig, Turkey

Abstract

Age, socio-economic status, strategies, methods and techniques, teaching-learning environment and cultural dimension are some of the factors that affect English language learning. Attitudes towards language learning should also be taken into consideration. The purpose of this study is to explore students' attitudes towards learning English in terms of gender, grade level and department variables. Data were collected through a Likert-type scale from a total of 1275 students enrolled at Fırat University, Turkey. ANOVA and t test were used to analyze the data. Statistically significant differences were observed in terms of gender, grade level and department variables. Some useful implications are discussed based on the research findings to help students develop positive attitude towards English language learning.

Keywords: English language learning, attitude, university, student

1. Introduction

English has become a dominant language in business, finance and banking, science and technology, popular culture and international relations around the world. It is widely accepted that fluency in the English language is a key to success in life. A student's attitude toward learning the language is one of the leading predictors of success in learning English. So, teachers and educators should take motivation and attitude factors into consideration when designing English language training and instruction (Hall, 2009). Attitude is accepted as an important concept to understand human behavior and is defined as a mental state that includes beliefs and feelings (Latchanna & Dagnew, 2009). Beliefs are among the essential points that have a relation with learning (Ajzen, 1988). Students' beliefs can be an obstacle if they believe that they cannot learn the new language successfully (Lennartsson, 2008). Negative attitude can impede learning a language (Ellis, 1994). But a student's negative attitudes can be changed and turned into positive ones and facilitate getting a positive result (Lennartsson, 2008). Having positive attitude towards learning a language is a good start to learn a language. As Kramsch (2006) points out "language learners are not only communicators and problem-solvers, but whole persons with hearts, bodies, and minds, with memories, fantasies, loyalties, identities".

Motivation has a direct effect on learning a language as well. According to Lennartsson (2008) motivation and the will to learn a second language are the factors that were considered much more important than the social ones. Csize´r et al. (2010) remark that positive attitude enhances learners' motivated behavior. Pointing out the importance of motivation, Saville-Troike (2006) claims that the more motivated students are, the better they will learn a new language. "How fast they learn a new language depends on the individual learner's motivation. If the

* Mehmet Nuri Gömleksiz, Tel.: +90 424 237 00 00 Ext: 49 36 ; fax: +90 424 236 50 64.
E-mail address: nurigomleksiz@yahoo.com

learners are motivated to learn the new language and feel that it is usable, they will learn it better than those who do not think that they need it" (Ellis, 1994). Reece and Walker (1997) stress that "a less able student who is highly motivated can achieve greater success than the more intelligent student who is not well motivated". Teacher is another factor in learning process. If the student has respect feelings towards the language teacher, this will help him/her learn a language effectively. If the student does not like or respect the teacher, he wont be able to go through the periods when the teacher is teaching (Abu-Melhim, 2009). Family expectations can be listed among the factors affecting students to develop positive attitudes toward language learning, but they may cause anxiety as well if the student cannot fulfill his/her parents' expectations (Csize´r et al., 2010). The purpose of this research is to explore university students' attitudes toward learning English. In line with this purpose, it was aimed to see whether there were any statistically significant differences among students' attitudes toward learning English in terms of class level, gender and department variables.

2. Method

This is a descriptive study in nature and survey was conducted to collect the data. In accordance with this approach, the attitudes of students enrolled at Faculty of Education in Fırat University towards learning English have been studied. The population of the study comprised of freshmen and sophomores enrolled at the Faculty of Education at Fırat University in Turkey. The sample consisted of 1275 (594 male and 681 female) students selected randomly. The gender proportions of the respondents were 46,6 % male and 53,4 % female. 614 of the students are freshmen and 661 students are sophomores. As to the department, students are distributed in nine departments as follows: Elementary Mathematics Education (n:136), Early-Childhood Education (n:87), Turkish Language Education (n:176), Social Studies Education (n:175), Elementary Science Education (n:172), Elementary Education (n:197), Computer Education & Instructional Technology (n:176), Fine Arts Education (n:72), Religious Culture and Moral Education (n:84).

Data for the study were collected through a 56-item five-point Likert-type attitude scale, developed by Gömleksiz (2003). Reliability of the scale was calculated with a sample of 310 students and Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was measured to be .95. Out of the 56 statements 38 were of favorable (positive) attitude and the rest 18 statements were unfavorable (negative) attitude. The items covered the areas; interest towards learning English, self-confidence for learning English, usefulness of learning English and the teacher. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic characteristics of the participants. Independent groups t test was carried out at the analysis of differences of students' attitudes towards learning English in terms of gender and grade level variables. One Way ANOVA and Scheffe tests were used to see the differences between students' attitudes in terms of department variable. The researcher himself administered the scales among the students and collected the data.

3. Findings

In this section, the t test and one way ANOVA findings showing whether there are significant differences between attitudes of students with respect gender, grade level and department variables. Independent groups t test results for gender on students' attitudes towards learning English are given in Table 2.

Table 2: t test results for gender on students' attitudes towards learning English

Subscale	Class Level	n	$\overline{X}$	sd	df	t	Significance
Interest	Male	594	3,38	0,829	1273	-2,152*	0,032
	Female	681	3,47	0,745			
Self-confidence	Male	594	3,35	0,717	1273	-1,612*	0,107
	Female	681	3,41	0,685			
Usefulness	Male	594	3,23	0,361	1273	-8,073*	0,000
	Female	681	3,43	0,485			
Teacher	Male	594	3,22	0,761	1273	-3,827*	0,000
	Female	681	3,38	0,694			
Total		1275					

*p<0,05

As it is seen in Table 2, students' attitudes towards learning English differed significantly in terms of gender of the students. A higher mean rating in interest $[t_{(1273)}=-2,152; p<0,05]$, usefulness $[t_{(1273)}=--8,073; p<0,05]$ and teacher $[t_{(1273)}=--3,827; p<0,05]$ subscales indicate that female students had more positive attitudes than the male students did. ANOVA revealed no significant differences in self-confidence scale $[t_{(1273)}=-1,612; p<0,05]$ between the gender groups.

Table 3: t test results for grade level on students' attitudes towards learning English

Subscale	Class Level	n	$\overline{X}$	sd	df	t	Significance
Interest	Freshmen	614	3,38	0,825	1273	-2,042*	0,041
	Sophomore	661	3,47	0,746			
Self-confidence	Freshmen	614	3,34	0,714	1273	-2,204*	0,028
	Sophomore	661	3,43	0,685			
Usefulness	Freshmen	614	3,24	0,386	1273	-7,523*	0,000
	Sophomore	661	3,43	0,473			
Teacher	Freshmen	614	3,22	0,756	1273	-4,003*	0,000
	Sophomore	661	3,38	0,696			
Total		1275					

*p<0,05

As illustrated in Table 3, t-test results revealed significant differences between freshmen and sophomores' attitudes in terms of interest $[t_{(1273)}=-2,042; p<0,05]$, self-confidence $[t_{(1273)}=-2,204; p<0,05]$, usefulness $[t_{(1273)}=--7,523; p<0,05]$ and teacher $[t_{(1273)}=--4,003; p<0,05]$ subscales. Sophomores tended to adopt learning English more than freshmen did.

Table 4: ANOVA results for department on interest subscale

Scale	Department	n	x	sd	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Scheffe
Interest	Elementary Math.	136	3,66	0,72	Between Groups	44,953	8	5,619	9,574*	0,000	1-2,6 3-2,6,8 4-2 7-2
	Early-Childhood	87	3,04	0,85							
	Turkish Language	176	3,69	0,68							
	Social Studies	175	3,44	0,72							
	Elementary Science	172	3,40	0,79	Within Groups	743,034	1266	0,587			
	Elementary Education	197	3,22	0,88							
	Comp. Ed.&Instr.Tech	176	3.51	0,72							
	Fine Arts	72	3,26	0,75	Total	787,987	1274				
	Religious Cult.&Mor	84	3,37	0,80							
Total		1275	3,43	0,786							

*p<0,05

As shown in Table 4, ANOVA results indicate significant differences between the attitudes of the students in terms of interest subscale $[F_{(8-1266)}=9,574; p<0,05]$. Scheffe results show that students of Elementary Mathematics Education, Turkish Language Education, Social Studies Education and Computer Education & Instructional Technology departments have greater interest towards learning English than the students of Early-Childhood Education, Elementary Education and Fine Arts Education departments.

Table 5: ANOVA results for department on self-confidence subscale

Scale	Department	n	x	sd	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Scheffe

Scale	Department	n	x	sd	S. of Var.	Sum of Sq	df	M.Squ.	F	p	Scheffe
Self-confidence	Elementary Math.	136	3,69	0,61							
	Early-Childhood	87	2,94	0,68	Between Groups	49,814	8	6,227			
	Turkish Language	176	3,63	0,58							1-2,5,6, 1-7,8
	Social Studies	175	3,40	0,70							
	Elementary Science	172	3,37	0,71	Within Groups	575,298	1266	0,454	13,703*	0,000	3-2,6,8 4-2
	Elementary Education	197	3,24	0,72							7-2
	Comp. Ed.&Instr.Tech	176	3,37	0,62							9-2
	Fine Arts	72	3,11	0,68	Total	625,112	1274				
	Religious Cult.&Mor.	84	3,39	0,78							
Total		1275	3,38	0,70							

*p<0,05

As can be seen in Table 5, the result of ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences between the students' attitudes in terms of self-confidence subscale. The significant F value (13,703, p<0.05) obtained for department variable demonstrated that the students of Elementary Mathematics Education, Turkish Language Education, Social Studies Education, Computer Education & Instructional Technology and Religious Culture and Moral Education departments felt more confident than those of Early-Childhood Education, Elementary Science Education, Elementary Education and Fine Arts Education departments.

Table 6: ANOVA results for department on usefulness subscale

Scale	Department	n	x	sd	S. of Var.	Sum of Sq	df	M.Squ.	F	p	Scheffe
Usefulness	Elementary Math.	136	3,72	0,67							
	Early-Childhood	87	3,18	0,41	Between Groups	34,150	8	4,269			
	Turkish Language	176	3,45	0,38							
	Social Studies	175	3,34	0,30							1-2,3,4, 5,6,7,8,9
	Elementary Science	172	3,35	0,43	Within Groups	215,615	1266	0,170	25,065*	0,000	3-2,6,7,8,9
	Elementary Education	197	3,27	0,35							
	Comp. Ed.&Instr.Tech	176	3,25	0,35							
	Fine Arts	72	3,07	0,38	Total	249,765	1274				
	Religious Cult.&Mor	84	3,19	0,38							
Total		1275	3,34	0,44							

*p<0,05

Table 6 contains the summary of analysis of ANOVA for usefulness subscale comparing the mean scores of the students' attitudes. The results indicate significant differences between the attitudes of the students in terms of usefulness subscale [$F_{(8-1266)}=25,065$; p<0,05]. Scheffe results show that students of Elementary Mathematics Education and Turkish Language Education believe usefulness of learning English more than the other student groups.

Table 7: ANOVA results for department on teacher subscale

Scale	Department	n	x	sd	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Scheffe
Teacher	Elementary Math.	136	3,52	0,73					6,855*	0,000	1-6,8,9
	Early-Childhood	87	3,22	0,71	Between Groups	28,178	8	3,522			4-6,8,9
	Turkish Language	176	3,40	0,67							
	Social Studies	175	3,47	0,74							
	Elementary Science	172	3,34	0,72	Within	650,510	1266	0,514			

Elementary Education	197	3,15	0,80			
Comp. Ed.&Instr.Tech.	176	3,25	0,66			
Fine Arts	72	3,04	0,64	Total	678,688	1274
Religious Cult.&Mor	84	3,10	0,69			
Total	1275	3,30	0,73			

*p<0,05

The results of ANOVA for teacher subscale in Table 7 show that there is a significant difference in students' attitudes in terms of department variable [$F_{(8-1266)}$=6,855; p<0,05]. Scheffe results reveal that students of Elementary Mathematics Education and Social Studies Education had more positive attitudes towards their English teacher than the students of Elementary Education, Fine Arts Education and Religious Culture & Moral Education departments.

4.   Conclusion and Recommendations

Effective English language teaching has always been one of the interest areas in Turkey. Increasing numbers of teachers, teacher educators, linguists and researchers have devoted themselves to finding ways of effective language teaching. Attitudes are among the factors that affect students' learning. This paper has examined university students' attitudes towards learning English in Turkey. As "learner's motivation in language learning is affected by his/her attitudes towards learning the language" (Al-Tamimi and Shuib, 2009), the main topic of this study is to explore university students' attitudes towards learning English in terms of gender, grade level and department variables. As Gardner & Lambert (1972) and Midraj (2003) pointed out a better understanding of students' attitudes will assist instruction designers to prepare language teaching programs that generate the attitudes and motivation most conducive to the production of more successful EFL learners.

The results of the statistics revealed significant differences in students' attitudes. Statistically significant differences were found between the attitudes of students in terms of gender, grade level and department variables. Students' attitudes towards learning English differed significantly in terms of gender of the students. Female students had more positive attitudes in interest, usefulness and teacher subscales. This result is in agreement with the findings from a survey research conducted by Karahan (2007). But no significant differences were found in self-confidence scale between the gender groups. Students' attitudes differed in terms of grade level. Sophomores' attitudes were more positive than freshmen in terms of interest, self-confidence, usefulness and teacher subscales. Sophomores' tendency towards learning English was higher than freshmen's.

As to department variable, students' attitudes vary from one department to another, ANOVA results revealed statistically significant differences between the attitudes of the students towards learning English. Students of Elementary Mathematics Education, Turkish Language Education, Social Studies Education and Computer Education & Instructional Technology departments showed more interest than the students of Early-Childhood Education, Elementary Education and Fine Arts Education departments. Similar results were seen in self-confidence subscale. Students of Elementary Mathematics Education, Turkish Language Education, Social Studies Education, Computer Education & Instructional Technology and Religious Culture and Moral Education departments felt more confident than those of Early-Childhood Education, Elementary Science Education, Elementary Education and Fine Arts Education departments. Students enrolled at the departments of Elementary Mathematics Education and Turkish Language Education tended to have more positive attitudes than the other student groups. Students' attitudes differed towards their teacher too. Students of Elementary Mathematics Education and Social Studies Education had more positive attitudes towards their English teacher than the students of Elementary Education, Fine Arts Education and Religious Culture & Moral Education departments.

The role of the teacher is an important factor to develop positive attitude towards learning English. So the teachers should provide a more active, free learning environment for their students. Poor attitudes towards learning English prevent students from participating classroom activities actively. So it is important to understand how negative attitudes to learning English can be avoided to develop students' interests, self confidence and positive attitude towards learning English. To do that, teachers should be aware of the factors affecting students negatively and should take the needs of students into consideration. Studies should be conducted to investigate other variables such as socio-economic and cultural level, income level, education level of the parents, locations that may influence

the attitudes. Due to the sample size of the study, it is recommended that further studies with larger samples be undertaken to develop more understanding of students' attitudes towards learning English. Furthermore, qualitative studies could be done to find out the factors affecting students' attitudes towards learning English. A possible further research topic could be to interview other universities and faculties' students to find out more about their attitudes towards learning English. It would be interesting to know whether or not they have similar attitudes. Other studies could be conducted using observational research methods. Observing actual classroom environment and interviewing the instructors would provide more insight into the variables that may influence attitudes.

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