Secondary Chilean EFL Learners’ Attitudes Toward English Language Learning, the English Language Itself, and the L2 Community

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During the last three decades, attitudes have played a major role in second/foreign language learning research. Scholars have found that a more positive attitude towards the target language improves second/foreign language learning. In order to contribute to this area of research, this study focuses on Chilean EFL learners with different proficiency levels (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced) and their attitudes toward learning English, the English language itself, and the L2 community. By gathering data through a questionnaire and analysing it using SPSS, significant differences were found among the learners’ groups, and their attitudes toward English. These findings will be discussed further in this study together with previous research.

Keywords: language learning, attitudes, language teaching, English as a foreign language

Introduction

Second or foreign language learning has been through important changes in the last decades. The researchers’ focus has moved from the effects of foreign language learning to the learners’ effects on foreign language acquisition. As Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1994) stated, foreign language learning is conditioned by non-linguistic factors, such as attitudes and motivation. These non-linguistic features can either improve or impede foreign language acquisition. Moreover, Ellis (1994) highlighted the role of attitudes in foreign language acquisition, stating that attitudes condition successful foreign language acquisition. In order to contribute to this area of research, our study aims at identifying whether there is a significant difference between the Chilean EFL learners’ attitude towards English language learning, the English language itself, the L2 community, and the learners’ proficiency level. In addition, we intend to identify where (i.e., between what levels) the possibly significant difference(s) is located. Our hypothesis is that there is a significant difference between the Chilean EFL learners’ attitudes in the measured constructs and their proficiency level (i.e., degree of success in foreign language acquisition) (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1994; Gardner, 1985; Henry & Apelgren, 2008). The background information, method, results, and discussion will be presented in the following sections.

Attitudes and Language Learning

The learner’s attitude toward learning a foreign language is an important factor in successful second/foreign language acquisition (Ellis, 1994). Allport (1954) defined attitude regarding a mental state that...
is organised through experiences and expressed as a dynamic influence on someone’s response to objects and situations to which it is related. From a social perspective, Gardner (1985) defined attitude as “an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individuals’ beliefs or opinions about the referent” (p. 9). Gardner’s definition highlights the operational role that attitudes play in evaluative responses expressed towards referents.

Attitude has also been defined as either a favourable or unfavourable reaction towards a stimulus (Ito & Cacioppo, 2007). This definition introduced the “implicit” dimension embedded in attitudes. This internal dimension can be better addressed in relation to specific situations, in which individuals are unaware of the outcomes of particular attitudes (e.g., non-verbalised attitudes). On attitude’s development, Brown (2000) stated that attitudes are born: (a) early in childhood as a result of others’ attitudes (e.g., parents); (b) from contact with others; and (c) and affective factors embedded in human experiences. Moreover, attitudes also form someone’s perception of self and others.

Concerning the relationship between attitude and second/foreign language learning, Gardner (1985) classified attitudes towards language learning in three categories: (a) “specific attitudes” (e.g., learning one specific language, such as English or Spanish) and “general attitudes” (e.g., develop several activities around a language rather than learning one particular language); (b) attitudes relevant to second/foreign language acquisition; and (c) “educational attitudes” and “social attitudes”. Gardner’s classification distinguishes between attitudes that either improve or impede second/foreign language acquisition.

Henry and Apelgren (2008) described attitudes towards second/foreign language as a result of the learner’s identification with the target language’s community, its social groups, and the language itself. The authors also asserted that the strength of this sense of identification conditions the learner’s attitudes and motivations. This assumption is supported by research where a positive attitude towards language learning and the language itself facilitate second/foreign language learning (Al Rifai, 2010; Shams, 2008; Yang & Lau, 2003).

Brown (2000) was more explicit in his reasoning by stating that a positive attitude towards second/foreign language learning, the language’s community, and its members enhance the target language proficiency level. He also maintained that a negative attitude decreases motivation and, therefore, target language learning may not occur. The author concluded that teachers can change negative attitudes into positive ones by exposing learners to the real context of the target language. This authentic input would eventually replace the misconceptions that the learners might have regarding a precise understanding and awareness of the target language, its community, and its members. However, it is also important to comprehend that other factors affect second/foreign language acquisition, such as aptitude and intelligence and that these factors act as independent elements embedded in the complexity of second/foreign language acquisition (Gardner, 1985).

Whereas some attitudes and motivations are rooted in situations unique to certain contexts (i.e., home, school, and university), others seem to be more general and stable, emerging from the learners’ past experiences (Clément & Gardner, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002). According to the findings of previous studies on attitudes and second/foreign language acquisition, positive attitudes towards second/foreign language learning result into better second/foreign language acquisition (Al Rifai, 2010; Brown, 2000; Gardner, 1985; Henry & Apelgren, 2008; Shams, 2008; Yang & Lau, 2003). In order to contribute to this area of research, this study focused on Chilean EFL learners’ attitudes toward: (a) learning English; (b) the English language itself; and (c) the L2 community and the learners’ proficiency level (Brown, 2000; Gardner, 1985; Henry & Apelgren, 2008). Thus, our research attempts to answer the following research questions:
RQ 1: Is there a significant difference between the Chilean EFL learners’ attitudes toward: (a) learning English; (b) the English language itself; and (c) the L2 community and the learners’ proficiency level? If there is a significant difference,

RQ 2: In what levels (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced) are the differences significant?

Our hypothesis is that there is a significant difference between the Chilean EFL learners’ attitudes: (a) learning English; (b) the English language itself; and (c) the L2 community and the learners’ proficiency level. However, we also aim at identifying in what levels the differences are significant. Since the learners are taught in different streams (i.e., basic, intermediate, and advanced) and also exposed to different teachers and teaching methodologies, the learners’ attitudes toward English are likely to vary in multiple dimensions. Therefore, we investigated the learners’ attitudes regarding three constructs: (a) learning English; (b) the English language itself; and (c) the L2 community (Brown, 2000; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Gardner, 1985; Henry & Apelgren, 2008). Finally, we have provided an open-ended question so that we can gather qualitative data on the learners’ opinions about their EFL learning experience.

Method

Participants

With the support of a Chilean school, 105 learners in their second year of high school (whose age vary between 15 and 16 years old) participated in this research. They were classified in three groups: beginners, intermediate, and advanced. The criteria used to classify the learners were the previous term’s (2015) average score in the EFL subject. The learners with an average score below 4.9 were classified as beginners. An average score between 5.0 and 5.9 allocated the learner in the intermediate group. An average score of 6.0 or higher (7.0 was the maximum) classified the learner in the advanced group. After the classification of the learners, the groups were comprised of 44 beginner learners, 34 intermediate learners, and 27 advanced learners. It is important to highlight that the learners are classified in these streams since they are 12 years old (sixth grade of secondary school). Therefore, our participants have spent a considerable amount of time in their streams.

Instrument

The questionnaire was comprised of 14 positively keyed items and one open-ended question (see Appendix 2). Six items regarding attitude towards learning English, four items on attitude towards English language itself, four items regarding attitude towards the L2 community, and one open-ended question regarding the learners’ EFL learning experience are shown. The items were extracted from Dörnyei and Taguchi’s (2010) book on questionnaire construction and administration. These questions “have already been used in a large-scale comparative study in Japan, China, and Iran” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 111), which establishes the questionnaire’s reliability. However, the Cronbach’s alpha reliability index was calculated in each construct to reassure the questionnaire’s reliability. The result indicated a high reliability for the attitude English language learning construct ($\alpha = 0.9$), attitude toward the English language itself ($\alpha = 0.8$), and attitude toward the L2 community ($\alpha = 0.9$). Overall, our questionnaire had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.9.

Since the participants’ mother tongue is Spanish, the questionnaire was administered in their L1 to ensure their complete understanding (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). The questionnaire was translated by the researcher who is a native speaker of the learners’ L1. Thus, the quality of the data gathered was not weakened (Harkness, 2008).
**Procedure**

At the beginning of the online “Attitudes toward English” questionnaire, a consent form (see Appendix 1) including all the relevant information for the learners was attached so that each of them could either accept or decline his/her participation in the research. Afterwards, the participants were asked to rate on a 6-point Likert scale their level of agreement with each (14) statement. The open-ended question was optional, meaning that learners may or may not have answered it. In addition, information on the stream (basic, intermediate, or advanced level) was requested to group the learners (see Appendix 2).

Through the option given in the consent form, the 105 participants agreed to participate anonymously in our study. The complete data collection process took 90 minutes (about 30 minutes per group).

**Analysis**

All the data analysis was carried out using the software SPSS 24. The mean score of each construct was computed using the participants’ responses to each statement and the “compute variable” feature in SPSS. Next, three one-way ANOVAs were performed to calculate the differences between the learners’ proficiency level and their attitudes towards English in the three dimensions previously addressed. Finally, three post hoc Scheffe tests were computed in order to identify where (i.e., between what groups) the significant differences were located.

**Results**

**Attitudes Toward English**

The mean scores were computed to represent the Chilean EFL learners’ attitude toward: (a) English language learning (ELL); (b) the English language itself (ENG); and (c) the L2 community (L2C) (see Table 1). The advanced group presented the highest mean for positive attitude toward the English language itself ($M = 5.03$) and the L2 community ($M = 5.20$). The intermediate group presented the highest mean for positive attitude toward English language learning ($M = 4.72$). Finally, the beginner’s group presented the lowest mean for positive attitude toward the three constructs measured. Moreover, the standard deviations (SD) indicate that the distribution of the responses in each construct varies to a similar extent.

**Table 1**

| Group     | N  | ELL | SD | ENG | SD | L2C | SD |
|-----------|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|
| Beginner  | 44 | 3.17| 1.1| 3.68| 1.2| 4.34| 1.3|
| Intermediate | 34 | 4.72| 1.0| 4.92| 0.83| 5.15| 1.0|
| Advanced  | 27 | 4.61| 1.0| 5.03| 0.94| 5.20| 1.0|

**ANOVA**

Three ANOVAs were computed in order to address our Research Question 1. Table 2 (see Appendix 3) contains the ANOVA results for the three constructs addressed. Our ANOVAs indicated that there is a significant difference between mean scores of the Chilean EFL learners’ attitudes toward English language learning ($F = 24.000, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.31$), the English language itself ($F = 20.031, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.28$), the L2 community ($F = 6.370, p = 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.11$), and the learners’ proficiency level in the target language. Moreover, the effect sizes ($\eta^2$ values) suggest that the learners’ proficiency level accounts for 31% of the variance in their attitude toward English language learning, 28% of the variance in their attitude toward the
English language itself, and 11% of the variance in their attitude toward the L2 community.

Whereas these results indicate that there is a significant difference between the group’s mean scores in the three constructs measured, the location of this difference is still unknown. Therefore, we computed a post hoc.

**Post hoc: Scheffe**

In order to decide what post hoc was suitable for our research, the Levene statistic was computed. The Levene statistic results for the attitudes toward English language learning ($p = 0.07$), the English language itself ($p = 0.10$), and the L2 community ($p = 0.07$) were non-significant; therefore, equal variances were assumed. The corresponding post hoc for equal variances is Scheffe. This post hoc allowed us to identify where (i.e., between what groups) the significant differences are (RQ 2).

Table 3 (see Appendix 4) contains the results of our post hoc Scheffe tests on the three constructs measured. Our Scheffe results indicate that in the attitude toward English language learning construct, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the beginner and intermediate group ($p < 0.001$), and the beginner and advanced group ($p < 0.001$), but there is a non-significant difference between the mean scores of the intermediate and advanced group ($p = 0.928$). In the attitude toward the English language itself construct, the results indicate that there is a significant difference between the beginner and the intermediate group ($p < 0.001$), and the beginner and advanced group ($p < 0.001$); however, there is a non-significant difference between the intermediate and advanced group ($p = 0.917$) in the aforementioned construct. Finally, for the attitude toward the L2 community construct, the Scheffe results indicate that there is a significant difference between the beginner and intermediate groups ($p = 0.013$), and the beginner and advanced groups ($p = 0.014$), however, the results also show that there is a non-significant difference between the intermediate and advanced groups ($p = 0.987$).

The results detailed in this section will be discussed in relation to our literature review and research questions in the following section.

**Discussion**

The research’s results support the hypothesis that there is a significant difference between the Chilean EFL learners’ attitudes toward: (a) English language learning; (b) the English language itself; and (c) the L2 community and the learners’ proficiency level (RQ 1). In addition, the Scheffe results indicate that these differences are not significant across the three levels of proficiency (RQ 2). The differences were significant only between the beginner and intermediate groups, and the beginner and advanced groups. The intermediate and advanced groups had a non-significant difference between their mean scores.

One of the reasons why the mean scores are lower in the beginner’s group could rely on the teaching methodology. Whereas the intermediate and advanced groups are taught using communicative language teaching approach, the beginner’s group is taught through a grammar-based method. This is enhanced by the classrooms’ configuration. The beginners sit in rows looking directly at the whiteboard and the teacher, whilst the intermediate and advanced groups sit in groups comprised of four learners. All the aforementioned factors come together as present and past experiences. These experiences, sustained over time, might impact the learners’ uptake of English and, therefore, their attitudes toward English language learning, the language itself, and the L2 community (Clément & Gardner, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002).
In our study, the more successful EFL learners (i.e., intermediate and advanced groups) presented a “more positive” attitude toward English language learning, the English language itself, and the L2 community. However, not all the constructs measured were affected to the same extent by the learners’ proficiency level. Whereas the learners’ attitude toward English language learning, and the English language itself is affected by the learners’ proficiency to a similar extent (31% and 28% respectively), the learners’ proficiency level has a small effect on their attitude towards the L2 community (11%). This finding might be related to one of the few elements that the learners share across the three groups: teaching materials. All the learners use the same textbook and teaching materials to learn English, therefore, the learners are exposed to same “authentic context” (Brown, 2000).

Brown (2000) stated that the negative attitudes can be changed into positive ones. As we have seen in our research, the beginner group presents the lowest mean score representing their attitudes towards the constructs measured. As the teaching methodology appears to be one of the main differences between the three groups that systematically aligns with our results, we recommend to abandon the grammar-based method in the beginner group in order to adopt a communicative language teaching approach with all the modifications the it entails (i.e., classroom configuration, materials’ use, and language used in discussions). This would enable the learners’ active participation in the lessons, promote the use of the target language in their discussions, and enhance the use of teaching materials as part of an authentic context (Brown, 2000). Thus, the learners’ attitudes toward English language learning, the English language itself, and the L2 community might change into more positive attitudes.

When consulted about their EFL learning experience, the learners in the beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels had different opinions on it. Learners in the intermediate, and the advanced group highlighted their extrinsic motivation, their classroom configuration, and the number of students in the classroom as positive features in their EFL learning experience. On the other hand, learners in the beginners’ group criticised their class and the teaching methods used in their classroom, which they described as too grammar-based.

Conclusion

Our research’s findings are in accordance with other authors’ research in the same area as more positive attitudes toward English language learning, the English language itself, and the L2 community improve second/foreign language acquisition (Al Rifai, 2010; Brown, 2000; Gardner, 1985; Henry & Apelgren, 2008; Shams, 2008; Yang & Lau, 2003). There is a significant difference between the Chilean EFL learners’ attitude toward the measured constructs and their proficiency level (RQ 1); however, the differences are not significant in the multiple comparisons between the three proficiency levels (RQ 2). We could argue that classroom configuration, exposure to the target language, and the number of students in the classroom can help improving second/foreign language acquisition. In relation to the limitations of our study, the instrument could be improved. Collecting data regarding time of exposure to the English language, or a deeper focus on the learners’ motivation in conjunction with their attitudes may help enriching further studies’ results.

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SECONDARY CHILEAN EFL LEARNERS’ ATTITUDES

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Appendix 1: Consent Form

Welcome to our questionnaire. Before we start, we would like you to know what this is all about.

This questionnaire is the main instrument used in research that will be carried out at the University of Melbourne, Australia. The information you will share here is extremely confidential. Only the researcher will have access to it. Moreover, any information regarding your identity will not be required. Once all the analyses are done, the data will be destroyed to protect your privacy.

As a student, you need to be aware that your participation in this research is voluntary, which is why you have the possibility to either accept or decline your participation on it. Your name or any information concerning your identity will not be required at any point. The more students accept to participate; the better quality our results will be.

We appreciate your collaboration, and we hope that you can finish your semester without any inconvenient.

I □ accept to participate in this research anonymously.
I □ decline to participate in this research.

Appendix 2: Dörnyei and Taguchi’s (2010) Questionnaire

1. In what stream are you enrolled?
   □ Beginner
   □ Intermediate
   □ Advanced

2. Our questionnaire is very simple; you just need to grade from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) the different statements that are presented in the left column for you. It is very important that you are as honest as possible, and remember that all the information here is private. Thank you for your collaboration.

| Statements                                                                 | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly disagree | Slightly agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| 1. I like the atmosphere of my English lessons.                          | 1                 | 2        | 3                 | 4              | 5     | 6              |
| 2. I am always looking forward to my English lessons.                     |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 3. Learning English is fascinating.                                      |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 4. I really enjoy learning English.                                       |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 5. Time goes by faster in my English lessons.                            |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 6. I would like to have more English lessons at school.                   |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 7. I get excited when I hear someone speaking English.                    |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 8. I am curious about the ways in which English is used in conversations. |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 9. The differences between the English vocabulary and Spanish vocabulary are interesting. |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 10. I like the sounds of the English language.                           |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 11. I would like to travel to countries where English is the mother tongue. |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 12. I think the people that come from English speaking countries are fascinating. |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 13. I would to meet people from English speaking countries.               |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
| 14. I would like to know more about the people that live in English speaking countries. |                   |          |                   |                |       |                |
Appendix 3: ANOVA Results

Table 2
One-Way ANOVA Results for the Three Constructs Measured

| Construct | Source of Variance | Sum of squares | df | Mean square | F     | Sig.    |
|-----------|--------------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|---------|
| ELL       | Between groups     | 57.533         | 2  | 28.766      | 24.000| < 0.001 |
|           | Within groups      | 122.260        | 102| 1.199       |       |         |
|           | Total              | 179.793        | 104|             |       |         |
| ENG       | Between groups     | 42.584         | 2  | 21.292      | 20.031| < 0.001 |
|           | Within groups      | 108.420        | 102| 1.063       |       |         |
|           | Total              | 151.004        | 104|             |       |         |
| L2C       | Between groups     | 17.631         | 2  | 8.815       | 6.370 | 0.002   |
|           | Within groups      | 141.158        | 102| 1.384       |       |         |
|           | Total              | 158.789        | 104|             |       |         |

Appendix 4: Scheffe Results

Table 3
Post hoc Scheffe Results for the Three Constructs Measured

| Construct | Level (I)   | Level (J)   | Mean difference (I-J) | Sig.   |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|--------|
| ELL       | Beginner    | Intermediate| -1.54                 | < 0.001|
|           | Advanced    | Beginner    | -1.43                 | < 0.001|
|           | Advanced    | Advanced    | 1.54                  | < 0.001|
|           | Intermediate| Advanced    | 0.10                  | 0.928  |
|           | Intermediate| Beginner    | 1.43                  | < 0.001|
|           | Intermediate| Intermediate| -0.10                | 0.928  |
| ENG       | Beginner    | Intermediate| -1.23                 | < 0.001|
|           | Advanced    | Beginner    | -1.34                 | < 0.001|
|           | Advanced    | Advanced    | 1.23                  | < 0.001|
|           | Intermediate| Advanced    | -0.11                 | 0.917  |
|           | Intermediate| Beginner    | 1.34                  | < 0.001|
|           | Intermediate| Intermediate| 0.11                 | 0.917  |
| L2C       | Beginner    | Intermediate| -0.80                 | 0.013  |
|           | Advanced    | Beginner    | -0.85                 | 0.014  |
|           | Advanced    | Advanced    | 0.80                  | 0.013  |
|           | Beginner    | Advanced    | 0.85                  | 0.014  |
|           | Intermediate| Intermediate| 0.04                 | 0.987  |

Note. The mean difference is significant at the < 0.05 level.