The relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency of Iranian EFL learners: The case of Darrehshahr city

Tayebeh Zeinivand*, Akbar Azizifar*, Habib Gowharya†

*Department of English language Teaching, Islamic Azad University, Ilam Branch, Ilam, Iran

Abstract

Among different factors contributing to foreign language learning, affective variables such as attitudes, orientations, motivation, and anxiety are of paramount importance. Among these various factors, learners' attitude towards language learning is considered as one of the key factors in motivating the learners to learn that language. The present study investigates the correlation between attitude and speaking proficiency in the Iranian EFL context. The sample of the study consists of 70 EFL learners from three Institutions in the city of Darrehshahr. The Data were collected through using Gardner’s Attitude/Motivation Test Battery Questionnaire and speaking Proficiency Test to assess the English speaking proficiency level. Means, S.D., percentage, Pearson product moment correlations, and Kolmogorov –Smirnov Test were used to analyze the data. The analyses revealed that EFL learners have very high attitude towards learning English and relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency learners is positive. The paper also reported some implications of the study.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Peer-review under responsibility of Hacettepe Üniversitesi.

Keywords: Attitude; motivation; EFL learner; speaking proficiency;
1. Introduction

Attitudes are crucial in language growth or decay, restoration or destruction. Attitudes are internal states that influence what the learners likely to do. The internal state is some degree of positive/negative or favorable/unfavorable reaction towards an object.

Some researchers (e.g. Stern, 1983, pp.376-7) distinguish three types of attitudes in second language learning situation: (a) Attitudes towards the community and people who speak the L2 (group specific attitudes), (b) Attitudes towards learning the language concerned; and (c) Attitude towards languages and language learning in general. These attitudes are influenced by the kind of personality the learner possesses - for example whether they are ‘ethnocentric’ or ‘authoritarian’. They may also be influenced by the particular social environment/milieu/within which the language learning process takes place. Different attitudes, for instance, may be found in monolingual versus bilingual contexts (Ellis 1985). Brown (2000) uses the term ‘attitudes’ to refer to the set of beliefs that the learner holds towards members of the target language group and also towards his own culture. Attitudes differ in intensity or strength. Language attitude is an important concept because it plays a key role in language learning and teaching. According to Oller (1979, p.138) "Attitudes are merely one of types of factors that give rise to motivation which eventually results in attainment of proficiency in a second language". Gardner and Lambert (1972) in Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning postulate the theory in brief: This theory, maintains that the successful learner of a second language must be psychologically prepared to adopt various aspects of behavior which characterize members of another linguistic-cultural group. The learner’s ethnocentric tendencies and his attitudes toward the members of the other group are believed to determine how successful he will be, relatively learning the language. His motivation to learn is thought to be determined by his attitudes toward the other group in particular and toward the learning task itself.

De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor (2005, p. 72) claimed that “teachers, learners and researchers will all agree that a high motivation and a positive attitude towards a second language and its community help second language learning”. Baker (1988) believed that attitudes are not subject to inheritance because they are internalized predispositions. Attitudes towards a particular language might be either positive or negative. Some learners may have negative attitude towards the second language and want to learn it in order to prevail over people in the community but generally positive attitude strengthens the motivation. Some individuals might generate neutral feelings. Attitudes towards language are likely to have been developed by learners’ experiences. They may change during the passage of time. It could refer to both attitudes towards language learning and attitudes towards the members of a particular speech community. Fasold (1984) claimed that attitudes toward a language are often mirrored in the attitudes toward the members of that speech community.

Language attitude is an important concept because it plays a key role in language learning and teaching. According to Prodromou (1992), a successful learner is the one who possess positive attitudes towards the target language.

Attitude is one of the factors that influence foreign language learning because how much effort students put into language learning depends partly on attitude (Gardner, Lanlonde and Moorcroft, 1985). Thus, it can be inferred that learners with positive attitude towards speaking English will be more involved in speaking activities and may try to make use of more strategies that help them deal with their difficulties in the course of conversation; and learners with negative attitude will be less willing to participate in speaking activities.

Unfortunately, there is a real paucity of research on speaking not only in Iran but also in other countries. Out of more than 30 volumes of a journal, you can hardly find five or six articles on speaking. Research on the relationship between speaking and attitude is no exception.

The present study is an attempt to investigate the relationship between the attitudes and speaking proficiency of Iranian learners. To achieve the objectives, the following question was formulated for the present study:

1. Is there any significant relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Method

2.1. Participants

The subjects of this study are Iranian EFL learners. The sample of the study included 70 learners from three Institutions in the city of Darrehshahr, Ilam, Iran. From this sample, 35 learners are female and 35 are male.

2.2. Instruments

The data-collection instruments used in this study were a questionnaire adapted from Gardner’s Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (2004). Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (2004) which was adapted to a 5 point scale, ranging from ‘strongly agree to strongly disagree (Appendix A). The questionnaire is made up of 48 questions. The AMTB is reported to have good reliability and validity. (Gardner 1985).

It should be mentioned that some changes were made in the questionnaire to make it more comprehensible for the Iranian EFL learners.

And also for the participants’ speaking proficiency, Evaluation Criteria for Speaking Assignment was used.

2.3. Procedures for Data collection and Analyses

The participants were fully informed about the objective of the study before the administration of the questionnaire. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire in the class during a session. Instructor generously gave 20 minutes of her class time to the researcher. After the questionnaires were completed and collected by the researcher, learners were told about the speaking test, explaining them the whole procedure.

The learners were asked to speak about a selected topic for two or three minutes. Then according to some oral participation evaluation criteria considered marks from 0 to 20 for scoring the students performance in speaking classes.

The students' responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of descriptive and inferential statistics. To answer the research questions, inferential statistics were computed through the SPSS (Statistical Packages of Social Sciences).

Then the questionnaire data and the students’ grades in speaking proficiency were run through a correlation to see if there is any relationship between the students' attitude and speaking proficiency.

3. Results

Data presented in Table 1 shows that of total participants, 31.1 percent participant selected completely agree that shows that attitude in EFL learners is positive.

| Q1 | Completely disagree | Frequency | 0 | Percent | 0.0% | disagree | Frequency | 1 | Percent | 1.4% | Neither agree nor disagree | Frequency | 9 | Percent | 12.9% | agree | Frequency | 20 | Percent | 28.6% | Completely agree | Frequency | 40 | Percent | 57.1% |
|----|---------------------|-----------|---|---------|------|---------|-----------|---|---------|------|--------------------------|-----------|---|---------|------|------|-----------|----|---------|------|-----------------------|-----------|---|---------|------|
| Q2 | 0                   | Frequency  | 0 | Percent | 0.0% | 4   | Frequency  | 5.7% | 7 | Percent | 10.0% | 20       | Frequency  | 28.6% | 39 | Percent | 55.7% |
| Q3 | 0                   | Frequency  | 0 | Percent | 0.0% | 0   | Frequency  | 0.0% | 1 | Percent | 1.4% | 23       | Frequency  | 32.9% | 46 | Percent | 65.7% |
| Q4 | 0                   | Frequency  | 0 | Percent | 0.0% | 2   | Frequency  | 2.9% | 11 | Percent | 15.7% | 57       | Frequency  | 81.4% |
| Q5 | 5                   | Frequency  | 7.1% | 6 | Percent | 8.6% | 26       | Frequency  | 37.1% | 9 | Percent | 12.9% | 24       | Frequency  | 34.3% |
| Q6 | 0                   | Frequency  | 0.0% | 1 | Percent | 1.4% | 6       | Frequency  | 8.6% | 27 | Percent | 38.6% | 36       | Frequency  | 51.4% |
| Q7 | 51                  | Frequency  | 72.9% | 16 | Percent | 22.9% | 0       | Frequency  | 0.0% | 0 | Percent | 0.0% | 3       | Frequency  | 4.3% |
| Q  | 48 | 68.6% | 18 | 25.7% | 4 | 5.7% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 30 | 42.9% | 23 | 32.9% | 10 | 14.3% | 6 | 8.6% | 1 | 1.4% |
| Q  | 40 | 57.1% | 22 | 31.4% | 7 | 10.0% | 1 | 1.4% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 57 | 81.4% | 13 | 18.6% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 7  | 10.0% | 9  | 12.9% | 18 | 25.7% | 20 | 28.6% | 16 | 22.9% |
| Q  | 2  | 2.9%  | 9  | 12.9% | 28 | 40.0% | 16 | 22.9% | 15 | 21.4% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 3  | 4.3%  | 1  | 1.4%  | 20 | 28.6% | 46 | 65.7% |
| Q  | 4  | 5.7%  | 16 | 25.7% | 20 | 28.6% | 20 | 28.6% | 23 | 32.9% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 28 | 25.7% | 24 | 34.3% | 28 | 40.0% |
| Q  | 2  | 2.9%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 4  | 5.7%  | 15 | 21.4% | 49 | 70.0% |
| Q  | 3  | 4.3%  | 21 | 30.0% | 24 | 34.3% | 9  | 12.9% | 13 | 18.6% |
| Q  | 38 | 54.3% | 25 | 35.7% | 6  | 8.6%  | 1  | 1.4%  | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 22 | 31.4% | 28 | 40.0% | 15 | 21.4% | 5  | 7.1%  | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 52 | 74.3% | 15 | 21.4% | 1  | 1.4%  | 2  | 2.9%  | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 26 | 37.1% | 23 | 32.9% | 27 | 38.6% | 20 | 28.6% | 0  | 0.0% |
| Q  | 5  | 7.1%  | 5  | 7.1%  | 8  | 11.4% | 16 | 22.9% | 36 | 51.4% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 10 | 14.3% | 26 | 37.1% | 34 | 48.6% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 22 | 31.4% | 29 | 41.4% | 19 | 27.1% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 10 | 14.3% | 20 | 28.6% | 40 | 57.1% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 8  | 11.4% | 23 | 32.9% | 39 | 55.7% |
| Q  | 2  | 2.9%  | 7  | 10.0% | 4  | 5.7%  | 30 | 42.9% | 27 | 38.6% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 3  | 4.3%  | 14 | 20.0% | 53 | 75.7% |
| Q  | 41 | 58.6% | 26 | 37.1% | 1  | 1.4%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 2 | 2.9% |
| Q  | 49 | 70.0% | 16 | 22.9% | 3  | 4.3%  | 1  | 1.4%  | 1 | 1.4% |
| Q  | 28 | 40.0% | 14 | 20.0% | 25 | 35.7% | 1  | 1.4%  | 2 | 2.9% |
| Q  | 57 | 81.4% | 13 | 18.6% | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 4  | 5.7%  | 22 | 31.4% | 44 | 62.9% |
| Q  | 4  | 5.7%  | 33 | 14.3% | 33 | 47.1% | 7  | 10.0% | 16 | 22.9% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 1  | 1.4%  | 15 | 21.4% | 54 | 77.1% |
| Q  | 34 | 48.6% | 25 | 35.7% | 6  | 8.6%  | 2  | 2.9%  | 3 | 4.3% |
| Q  | 35 | 50.0% | 20 | 28.6% | 11 | 15.7% | 4  | 5.7%  | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 57 | 81.4% | 10 | 14.3% | 1  | 1.4%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 2 | 2.9% |
| Q  | 49 | 70.0% | 16 | 22.9% | 5  | 7.1%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0 | 0.0% |
| Q  | 11 | 15.7% | 7  | 10.0% | 34 | 48.6% | 9  | 12.9% | 9  | 12.9% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 3  | 4.3%  | 9  | 12.9% | 58 | 82.9% |
| Q  | 1  | 1.4%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 1  | 1.4%  | 11 | 15.7% | 57 | 81.4% |
| Q  | 16 | 22.9% | 14 | 20.0% | 24 | 34.3% | 15 | 21.4% | 1  | 1.4% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 0  | 0.0%  | 8  | 11.4% | 23 | 32.9% | 39 | 55.7% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 3  | 4.3%  | 20 | 28.6% | 24 | 34.3% | 23 | 32.9% |
| Q  | 0  | 0.0%  | 7  | 10.0% | 14 | 20.0% | 49 | 70.0% | 49 | 70.0% |

Total: 23.66% 13.37% 14.88% 17.00% 31.10%
To investigate the normality distribution of variables the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test was utilized. If the obtained significance level is more than 0.05, distribution of variables is normality. According to Table 3, mean, standard deviation, and significance level of each variable were computed.

Table 3: The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

|                  | Speaking Proficiency of Iranian EFL learners | Attitude |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------|
| N                | 70                                          | 70       |
| Normal Parameters$^a$<sup>b</sup> | Mean 12.7000 | 152.8857 |
|                  | Std. Deviation 3.76232 | 7.78058  |
|                  | Absolute .126 | .117     |
|                  | Positive .070 | .087     |
|                  | Negative -.126 | -.117   |
| Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z | 1.056 | .976 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .215 | .297 |

As Table 3 shows, significance value of Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test for speaking proficiency (asymp.sig=0.215), and attitude (asymp.sig=0.297) score were found to be more than 0.05, indicating the normality distribution of variables. This result also proved that it was appropriate to use Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

The result of Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test indicated normality distribution of variables, so to investigate this question Pearson correlation test was employed.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Test to investigate relationship between attitude and speaking

| Attitude                         | Pearson Correlation | Sig. (2-tailed) | N |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|---|
| Speaking Proficiency of Iranian EFL learners | -.430** | .000 | 70 |
| Attitude                         | 1                  | .000 | 70 |

According to the Table of 4 the obtained level of significance is lower than value p<0.05, so there is statistically significant relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency of Iranian EFL learners.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency EFL learners in the city of Darrehshahr, Ilam, Iran. Finding showed that attitude of EFL learners in the city of Darrehshahr to learning English is positive and there is a significant relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency.

Over the past few decades, there has been an increasing concern for examining the human personality to find answers to language learning problems. As a result, good numbers of studies have focused on the crucial role that affective variables can play in the process of learning a second language. Among these variables, attitudes factors are frequently recognized as potentially influential in successful L2 learning, especially in contexts or countries where there is no or little chance for learners to be in contact with the target language native speakers. Therefore, a consequent question is whether or not and to what extent attitudes play any role in developing learners’ speaking proficiency in such particular contexts.
Numerous studies have been conducted on the influence of attitude factors; nonetheless, as yet there has not been a comprehensive study on the study of relationship between attitude of students and their relationship with speaking proficiency among Iranian EFL.

Confirming the obtained results, data presented in descriptive statistics section indicated completely agree option was the highest percentage among other options that selected by participants. These data indicate that attitude in EFL learners is positive.

To determine if there was a relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency, the students’ grades on speaking test and their responses to attitude questionnaire items were run through Pearson-product correlation.

There was a significant positive correlation between attitude and speaking proficiency because obtained level of significance was lower than value $p<0.05$, so there was statistically significant relationship between attitudes and speaking proficiency of Iranian EFL learners.

This result is consistent with the findings of the previous studies on investigating the relationship between attitude and speaking that reported attitude is one of the factors that influence foreign language learning because how much effort students put into language learning depends partly on attitude thus, it can be inferred that learners with positive attitude towards speaking English will be more involved in speaking activities and may try to make use of more strategies that help them deal with their difficulties in the course of conversation; and learners with negative attitude will be less willing to participate in speaking activities (Gardner, Lanlonde and Moorcroft, 1985). In another study, Johnson (2012) investigated the attitude of Japanese non-English major EFL learners. These engineering students exhibited a range of attitudes towards learning English. Their positive attitudes correlated positively with their proficiency levels, with higher level students voicing the weakest dislike for English.

In contrary to the results of our study, the results of a study by Jahin and Idrees (2012) showed no significant correlation between EFL major students’ attitudes towards English language learning and their overall English language proficiency. In Iran, Dehbozorgi (2012) investigated the effects of attitude towards language learning on EFL college students majoring in English translation. The results showed that the relationship between language proficiency level and attitude towards language learning was not significant.

5. Implication and Limitations of the study

The findings of the study can be employed as a starting point for providing some pedagogical implications. Further, the findings of this paper can help language developers, syllabus designers and decision makers to develop programs and design syllabi and create interesting textbooks and programme which encourage students to speak, employ foreign exchange programme to help the students meet and converse with more and varied people, understand and appreciate their way of life and interact and communicate more easily with the speakers of other languages in general and English, in particular. Employing new and more communicative methods (rather than Grammar Translation Method, which emphasizes vocabulary items, grammatical rules and translation) at high school level which arouse the interest of the students. Teachers can also encourage the students to continue learning English and improving their oral skills.

The finding of the study are limited to the participants in the city of Darrehshahr. The present study may have limited validity for foreign language context in different city or country. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the findings of the study to all EFL learners. Not all of the variables influencing foreign language learning are controlled. For instance, personality, self-perception, beliefs, intelligence, classroom climate, etc., are also the important variables in acquiring foreign languages.

Appendix A. Attitude/ Motivation Test Battery: International AMTB Research Project by R. C. Gardner.

| No | Item |
|----|------|
| 1  | I wish I could speak many foreign languages perfectly. |
| 2  | I don’t get anxious when I have to answer a question in my English class. |
| 2  | I look forward to going to class because my English teacher is so good. |
Learning English is really great.

If Iran had no contact with English-speaking countries, it would be a great loss.

I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English.

My English class is really a waste of time.

Studying foreign languages is not enjoyable.

I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in our English class.

Knowing English isn’t really an important goal in my life.

I hate English.

I feel very much at ease when I have to speak English.

I would rather spend more time in my English class and less in other classes.

I wish I could read newspapers and magazines in many foreign languages.

I feel confident when asked to speak in my English class.

My English teacher is better than any of my other teachers.

I really enjoy learning English.

If it were up to me, I would spend all of my time learning English.

I wish I could have many native English speaking friends.

Speaking English anywhere makes me feel worried.

I really have no interest in foreign languages.

It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in our English class.

I would rather spend my time on subjects other than English.

It doesn’t bother me at all to speak English.

I wish I could have many native English speaking friends.

I enjoy the activities of our English class much more than those of my other classes.

I would really like to learn many foreign languages.

My English teacher has a dynamic and interesting teaching style.

English is a very important part of the school programme.

I want to learn English so well that it will become natural to me.

To be honest, I really have little interest in my English class.

It is not important for us to learn foreign languages.

It worries me that other students in my class seem to speak English better than I do.

Learning English is a waste of time.

I like my English class so much, I look forward to studying more English in the future.

I don’t understand why other students feel nervous about speaking English in class.

I plan to learn as much English as possible.

My English teacher doesn’t present materials in an interesting way.

I would prefer to have a different English teacher.

To be honest, I really have no desire to learn English.

I think that learning English is dull.

Students who claim they get nervous in English classes are just making excuses.

I love learning English.

I wish I were fluent in English.

I am sometimes anxious that the other students in class will laugh at me when I speak English.

English is one of my favourite courses.
I look forward to the time I spend in English class.

To be honest, I don’t like my English class.

References

Baker, C. (1988). Attitudes and language. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
Brown, H. D. (2000). Principles of language learning and teaching (4th Ed.). NJ: Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs.
De Bot, K, & Lowie, W., & Verspoor, M. Second Language Acquisition: An Advanced Resource Book, (2005), London: Routledge.
Dehbozorgi E. 2012. Effects of Attitude towards Language Learning and Risk- taking on EFL Students’ Proficiency. International Journal of English Linguistics. 2(2): 41-48. doi:10.5539/ijel.v2n2p41
Ellis, R. Understanding Second Language Acquisition, (1985), Oxford: OUP.
Fasold, R. 1984. The sociolinguistics of society. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). Attitudes and motivation in second language learning. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
Gardner, R.C., & Lalonde, R.N., & Moorcroft, R. (1985). The role of attitudes and motivation in second language learning: Correlational and experimental considerations. Language Learning, 35 (2), 207-227.
Jahin JH, Idrees MW. 2012. EFL major student teachers’ writing proficiency and attitudes towards learning English. Umm Al-Qura University Journal of Educational & Psychologic Sciences. 4(1):10-72.
Johnson Y. 2012. Attitudes towards EFL learning and extensive reading in Japanese engineering students. 10: 65-81.
Oller, J. Language Tests at School, (1979), London: Longman.
Prodromou, L. (1992). What culture? Which culture? Cross-cultural factors in language learning. ELT Journal, 46(1), 39-50.
Stern., H. H. (1983). Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.