



## Relevance of attitude for the achievement in English

Intakhab A. Khan

King Abdulaziz University, Community College, Jeddah-Saudi Arabia.

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the learners' and the teachers' attitude towards learning English. It aims to explore the existing co-relationship between the attitude and the achievement in English. The paper is limited to the JCC which may be applicable to any other college that is of similar type. The focus group has been used as a technique of data collection, however, personal experience and observation play a major role in the process of interpretation, conclusion and recommendations. The findings show that the positive attitude towards learning/teaching English plays an important role in the overall achievement in the target language. It has also been noticed that though the Saudi people realize the importance of using (especially speaking) English, they tend to show indifference towards those who try to interact in the foreign language. It is found that there is a positive correlation between attitude towards learning/teaching English and their proficiency in it. In addition, the study reveals that students have open access to use media technology such as websites, online learning, college developed e-learning resources etc which could be proved to be effective techniques and strategies for the target language achievement. On the other hand, it has also been realised that in spite of the fact all the necessary equipment and resources are in practice, the achievement is not upto the mark. Thus, teachers' role is quite crucial in this connection. Many other studies can be undertaken to prove the positive effect of the attitude of the teachers/learners on learning in general and language achievement in particular.

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### Introduction

Jeddah Community College (JCC) is one of the Saudi Community Colleges that are working in almost all important cities and towns. The curriculum design is though localised, yet it is in harmony with the national interest and objectives of education. The level of education in Saudi is mainly divided into: primary, secondary and tertiary. English is taught in the primary school when the target learners are around 13/14 years of the age. Those students who have completed the secondary level are supposed to have six academic years of studying English. And, this is the entry point of tertiary education. English is pursued as a major subject as a part of foundation year program in almost all the community/technical/industrial/engineering/medical/health/management colleges. Saudi Arabia, being the centre of Islam practises and focuses Arabic as the medium of general communication, business and religion. But, in recent year, a due focus has been given on the achievement of English as the government realises the power of English as lingua franca, international understanding and global business. Thus, the government is not leaving any stone unturned in making an attempt to popularise and achieve the maximum level possible. The time has come to study as to the factor like attitude is influential. And, if it is so whether the teachers also have positive attitude towards changing the attitude of the learners, and teach them as per the need.

#### Relevance of 'Attitude' in the EFL context

'Attitude' is one of the most important components of one's personality. It includes psychological, emotional and behavioural aspects. It leads to the level of involvement in some expected human activities. In the view of Chapman and McKnight (2004), 'attitude is the way a person looks at things

mentally; it represents the overall mood in which people interpret what a person says and does.

Attitude has been identified as one of the most crucial factors in learning a second or a foreign language. It plays a major role in arousing students' interest and motivation to learn. Though many researchers and the pedagogues attempted to investigate the issues related to ESL/EFL context, Gardner's (1985) is the landmark work that provided the actual platform for many researchers to undertake studies that fall under the category of motivation and attitude.

Gardner opines attitudes as a component of motivation in language learning. According to him, 'motivation includes favourable attitudes towards learning the language. He further says that learning a foreign language is determined by the learner's attitude towards foreign people in general, and the target group and language in particular.

From many other studies, a few as mentioned here confirm the effect of attitude on language achievement such as Basturkman (1998), Pendergrass et al. (2001), Pritchard & Nasr (2004), Joseba (2005), Sidek et al. (2006), Hui (2007) and Venkatraman & Prema (2007). In this connection, for example, Pendergrass et al. (2001) point out that English is an essential tool in the engineering education and, therefore, integrating English into engineering, science and math courses is an effective way to improve the performance of engineering students in oral and written communication" (p. 1).

Low proficiency in English may be attributed to several social, economic and psycholinguistic factors. For example, the petroleum engineering students' motivation towards the English language was found as a key factor which influences the rate and success of second/foreign language learning (McDonough, 1983; Ellis, 1994). McDonough (1983, p.142) states that

"motivation of the students is one of the most important factors influencing their success or failure in learning the language". Another factor is learners' attitude. This is because an ESL/EFL learner's motivation in language learning is affected by his/her attitude towards learning the language.

Motivation and attitude have been considered closely related to each other, thus, can't be ignored in the area of language research. The two pioneer researchers Gardner and Lambert (1972, p.3) state that "his (the learner) motivation to learn is thought to be determined by his attitudes towards the other group in particular and by his orientation towards the learning task itself". In addition, Lifrieri (2005, p.14) affirms that "attitudes are necessary but insufficient indirect conditions for linguistic attainment. Thus, a proper understanding of students' motivation and attitudes may assist ESL/EFL curriculum and instruction designers to devise language teaching programs that generate the attitudes and motivation most conducive to the production of more successful ESL/EFL learners (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Midraj, 1998, 2003). Additionally, it can help material writers create and teachers select activities and tasks that tap students' motivation and attitudes (Midraj et al., 2008)

The following is an abstract of those studies which are similar to the Arabic speaking context. Al-Quyadi (2002) and Al-Tamimi & Shuib (2009) have examined both students' attitudes and motivation in Yemen. Malallah (2000) and Suleiman (1993) focused on the following issues:

- (1) Students' attitudes towards learning English,
- (2) Students' attitudes towards the English language,
- (3) Students' attitudes towards native speakers of English,
- (4) Students' purposes of studying English, and
- (5) The place of English in Kuwait society.

However, Suleiman (1993) boldly pointed out that Arab students have not been given the opportunity to assess their own needs, motivation and attitudes in their EFL preparation. The study conducted by Buschenhofen (1998) has examined high school and first-year students' attitudes. It is of the view that university students' attitudes could be shaped by their experiences of learning English in the high school stage. The Turkish study (Karahana 2007) explored the dissatisfaction expressed by parents, teachers, administrators and the learners themselves about their low proficiency levels in English. Yet another study (Lafaye & Tsuda 2002) concluded several contradictions in the questionnaire results, the most pertinent one being that the students stated that their interest in English was strong and yet they did not like studying it and were unhappy with their proficiency in it. Thus, the findings of the quoted researches provide a significant theoretical base for the present research to proceed further.

#### **Statement of the present research**

Based on the above review, it may be concluded that 'attitude' is extremely important for the learners to achieve the target. A desired level of attitude may be found in a person, the same can be further developed by him, his parents, friends, family, social pressure and most importantly by the teachers. Sometimes, at the tertiary level, the creation of an attitude is very challenging, however, even a moderate change will be quite helpful.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate students' attitudes towards English, and learning English in relation to the achievement. In addition, it also aims to explore the teacher's

attitude towards teaching English, and changing the attitude the target learners.

The present study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. What kind of attitudes do the target learners have towards English language and its learning?
2. Is there a correlation between students' attitudes towards learning English and their achievement in English?
3. What is the teachers' attitude towards teaching English, and changing the attitude of the target learners?

The study is based on the Jeddah Community College where the researcher/author teaches. The focus group (questionnaires) is the main research tool for the present study. The data analysis is qualitative, and the results are interpreted accordingly.

#### **Research tools: the focus group**

In the present study, focus group has been used to study the attitude of using English, and the focus is on speaking skill.

Focus groups are group discussions organised to explore a specific set of issues such as people's views and experiences of nutrition (Crockett et al. 1990) or mental illness (Grunig, 1990). The group is 'focused' in the sense that it involves some kind of collective activity - simply debating a particular set of questions. Focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by 'the explicit use of the group interaction' as research data (Merton 1956 and Morgan 1988: 12). Focus groups are of no latest origin. They are first mentioned as a market research technique in the 1920s (Basch 1987; Bogardus 1926) and were used by Merton who is often credited with developing the 'focused interview' with groups. (Merton 1987).

Group methods are often used within 'communication research' (Frazer 1987, Pilo 1990, Schlesinger et al. 1992, Comer 1990). Such methods are also popular in studies designed to explore people's experiences of services in action research projects involving grass-roots participation (Gregory and McKie 1991). However, group work has not been systematically developed as a research technique within social science in general and although group interviews have often implicitly informed research they are rarely acknowledged as part of the process (Frey and Fontana 1991: 177). Though focus group involves a group, usually consists many people, yet, sometimes it is hard to believe that there was ever more than one person in at the site of the focus group. The written questionnaires have some advantages on the focus group due to this very reason. On the contrary, many studies which explicitly identify their methodology as 'focus group discussion' in spite of the fact that the distinguishing feature of focus groups is supposed to be the use of interaction as part of the research data. One main reason for the selection is the transparency and face to face argumentative discussions.

#### **Teachers' attitude observed:**

No formal research tool was administered on the teachers thinking they are smart enough. As a result, they may be a disparity between theory and practice. However, the researcher used some projective techniques to analysis as whether X teacher is really motivated to teach, and motivated to develop proper attitude among the target learners. The proper attitude of teaching among teachers can be noticed from the teaching behaviour, and the way they interact with the students. How much time do they spare in their offices as office hours to deal with the individual student's problems?

Informal Interaction or even deliberate brainstorming may lead to the analysis if the teachers are really willing to do their job. Teaching in a college in Saudi generally requires great deal of motivation and creation of proper attitude among the students so that the targets can be accordingly achieved. Or else the teaching remains a formality and the learning is limited to class attendance only.

#### **Data analysis and interpretation of results**

The focus group items(for students) are divided into three sections. Each section has been analysed item-wise as under:

#### **Questionnaire used for focus group (Appendix: A&B)**

#### **Section I: Attitudes towards learning English**

##### **Analysis:**

##### **Item-1**

On the basis of the majority of the responses, it was analysed that learning English is not easy for most of the learners. There are many reasons of the difficulties faced by them: background, lack of interaction, moral support and lack of proper attitude itself.

##### **Item-2**

Almost 50% students like English. They have desire to learn. Some have developed positive attitude towards English as a language, but, rest of them remain passive as if the language has been forced on them.

##### **Item-3**

Analysis: This item has a mixed response. Around 40% are of the opinion that English is a very important language. It is one means for getting high profile job and income. The other group says it is not our language so why should one learn.

##### **Item-4**

Most of them say they don't want to learn this language, but there is no option. But, a few of them say that it is enjoyable, and one can learn it easily. Almost all know that English is a necessity now as without it, it is quite difficult to develop in the present time. All activities related to day to day business, communication, political relation, science-technology is linked to the international means of communication, and it is none other than English.

##### **Item-5**

Most of them say that in near future, English will become more important and compulsory so no need to motivate youngster to learn it. There won't be any choice if one wants to develop as a whole. But, Arabic should not lose its importance as it is the language of Arabic culture.

##### **Item-6**

The responses were very short. Perhaps they didn't know whether to blame their schooling and their attitudes towards English. But, some of them clearly said that English was not a focused subject at secondary school level.

##### **Item-7**

Most teachers blamed the teaching at school level. Some of them talked about irregular presence of some of the teachers. The teaching was based on cramming of a few chosen words, and the same words used to appear in the tests and exams. And, the teaching of English was over.

##### **Item-8**

Most good students said that the way teaching is done in the college is far better than the school teaching. The teachers there were quite lenient for attendance. Homework was not given. Teachers did not involve students in discussions. The previous teachers used to translate important words and that's all. The

teaching in the school was not done with computers, and internet was not used to explain things.

##### **Item-9**

Some of the responses show that quite a few of them have opportunities to practice, therefore, even if they have attitude to use English, they could not. Most of the respondents are first generation learners of English.

Therefore, proper home environment for practising English is missing. As regards markets, in certain situations, the customers and the dealers/sellers share in English, because in most cases if the Saudi consumer is not able to speak English, the seller is considerably good in the Arabic-

##### **Item-10**

Most of them say that they are not ashamed of speaking English.

However, it is noticed that they are quite hesitant in taking initiative to engage in any conversation.

#### **Section II: Attitudes and feelings towards using English**

##### **Item-1**

The responses show that the target sample is basically nervous and confused when they try speaking English even with the friends.

##### **Item-2**

Most of them feel that they generally find trying to communicate in English frustrating, but when they succeed even a little they enjoy it.

##### **Item-3**

It was found that when they speak in English, the fear of making grammatical errors has a great influence on the target learners possibly because they didn't have enough exposure in the target language.

Item-4. do you think yourself confident in the target language?

The respondents always feel that others speak English better than them. This is the factor that leads to negative impact on the speaking achievement.

Item-5. do you think of other's presence and criticism?

Most of them feel that the other students will laugh at me when they speak English.

#### **Section III: Self-learning**

Item-1- The respondents say that can read the text, but they usually take help from dictionary to understand meanings.

Item-2- They can understand their notes in English to some extent, therefore, translation is needed.

Item-3- They face difficulties in understanding the lectures of the native English speakers especially when they don't grasp the accent.

Item-4- Most of them feel that teaching should be facilitated through Arabic because sometimes explanations are necessarily required.

Item-5- Most learners compare their overall proficiency in English to other students in your class and find quite of the same level

Item-6- Many of them say that after finishing the foundation year, they will be able to read, write and speak functional English?

Item-7- Around 70-80% of the respondents will try to get in the job while remaining will try to go for higher education especially abroad sooner or later.

Item-8- Some of them watch English movies, listen to cassettes etc to improve their proficiency in English outside of the college. They can understand especially the American accent.

### Implications

The study supports the theory that the students' attitudes towards English and towards learning English are quite positive. Therefore, it can be said that if the target students achieve less grades than expected in exams or seem less effective in using English, the students' attitudes seems to be quite influential among many other factors. The study reveals that the poor background of English, the fear of making grammatical mistakes; lack of confidence and peer support lead to less performance. Consequently, the role of teachers becomes significant in the process of developing positive attitude for learning and using the target language.

### Suggestions for further research

A piece of research answers a few questions only, and leave associated questions for further research. Having done the present research, it is felt that many other empirical researchers can be conducted to prove the theory that attitude leads to effective learning especially in the context of Saudi English learning situations.

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#### Appendix-Questionnaire used for Focus Group

##### Section I: Attitudes towards learning English

1. Is Learning English easy for you?
2. Do you like English?
3. Is Learning English important at this time?
4. Why do you want to learn if it is very difficult?
5. Would you like your younger brothers and children learn this language.
6. Do you find English difficult because you did not have interest in schools?
7. Do you think your teachers in schools were not good enough?
8. Do you find any differences in teaching between schools and this college?
9. Do you ever speak English at home or markets?
10. Are you ashamed of using English?

##### Section II: Attitudes and feelings towards using English

1. How do you feel when you initiate in English?
2. Do you enjoy communicating in English?
3. Does the feeling of making mistakes affect you?
4. Do you think yourself confident in the target language?
5. Do you think of other's presence and criticism?

##### Section III: self learning

1. Can you read newspaper in English?
- 2- Can you understand your notes in English?
- 3- Do you face any difficulties in following the native English speakers?

- 4- Would you like a teacher to teach you in Arabic?
5. So far how do you compare your overall proficiency in English to other students in your class?
6. After finishing the foundation year, will you be able to read, write and speak functional English?
7. What is your future academic goal?
8. What kind of activities do you do to improve your English outside of the college?

#### Appendix-B. Responses:

##### Section I: Attitudes towards learning English

- 1- No, it is not easy./little difficult/easy
- 2-Yes, I do. I want to learn it.
- 3-Yes, it is./ not at all./No, it is not our language.
- 5.It is needed, now a day, for business and technology.
6. I plan to make sure that my children learn both Arabic and English well.
- 7.Yes, may be.
8. Yes, some of them.
9. Yes, a lot. Learning at this college is interesting.
10. Sometimes with brothers/sisters/friends.
11. Not always.

##### Section II: Attitudes and feelings towards using English

- 1.I get nervous and confused when I speak English.
- 2.I generally find trying to communicate in English frustrating.
- 3.When I speak in English, the fear of making grammatical errors has a great influence on me.
- 4.I always feel that the other students speak English better than me.
- 5.I am afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak English

##### Section III: self learning

1. Yes, but I take help from dictionary to understand meanings.
- 2- To some extent. A translation is needed.
- 3- Yes, when we don't understand the accent.
- 4- Yes, sometimes when we need explanations.
5. Almost the same.
- 6.Let's hope so.
7. I would join a job/ i will go abroad.
8. I watch English movies, listen to cassettes.