



Exploring students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language: A semi-structured research interviewing with third year LMD students at Saida University

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على ميول طلاب اللغة الانجليزية بقسم اللغة والأدب الانجليزي بجامعة سعيدة في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية. وبغية تحقيق هذا القصد، استخدم المؤلفان البحث النوعي على أساس المقابلات الشبه منظمة، بحيث تتألف العينة المستعملة في هذا البحث من ستة (06) طلاب من فئة الذكور والإناث. وقد كشفت نتائج أسئلة المقابلة أن الطلاب يعتقدون بأن العوامل الرئيسية التالية هي الأكثر أهمية في تحديد مدى تعلم اللغة: 1/ التوجهات الاندماجية والوسائلية التي تعتبر الدوافع الأكثر تأثيراً في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية. 2/ العوامل التربوية (الأساتذة/ المناهج/ نمط الدروس وفحواها/) تسم ميول هؤلاء الطلاب اتجاه اللغة الانجليزية إما بالسلب أو الإيجاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المواقف- التوجهات الاندماجية- التوجهات الوسائلية- الدافعية

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the EFL university students' attitudes towards learning English. To this effect a qualitative method based on a semi-structured interview questions is applied where the sample used consists of six pundits; 3 males and 3 females EFL students. The result shows that participants believe on the integrative and instrumental orientations as the most influential reasons for which they learn English, and that educational factors (teachers/ lessons/ curriculum) influence the students' attitudes to learn English in Saida University either negatively or positively.

Keywords: Attitudes, integrative orientation, instrumental orientation, motivation.

Introduction

Attitudes play a primordial role in language learning because they are very important, in that students with positive attitudes are able to limit the effect of any failure. The reason is that they do not generalise the negative evaluation to all their abilities and life situations as well. Accordingly, the concept of attitude is a highly determinant factor in shaping the rate of language learning¹.

Firdevs Karahan states that "positive language attitudes let learner have positive orientation towards learning English"². As such, attitudes may play a very crucial role in language learning as they would appear to influence students' success or failure in their learning. Besides, the importance of attitudes lies in the way they influence behaviour. Thus, negative attitudes may well hinder the students' learning process, thereby, influencing their future views, decisions, and activities.

Of further importance of attitudes' role in the learning process is its relationship with achievement. Renato A. Schibeci, in this respect, argues that student's positive achievement level that is coined with positive feelings means positive stimulus for further study³. Besides, the study of the learners' attitude and motivation towards learning English is an effective way to get a clear insight into the learning process⁴. So, the intimate relationship between motivation and attitudes can be clearly evidenced through the attempt to search for what leads mainly to a motivated individual.

As for learning a language, the concept of attitude is a highly determinant factor in shaping the rate of language learning. Starks, Paltridge and Karahan state that "positive language attitudes let learner have positive orientation towards learning English"⁵. Therefore, attitudes may play a significant role in language learning as they would either render learning a difficult task, or contrarily help entering into the new environment of learning more positively.

Generally speaking, the integrative and the instrumental orientation have played a major role in studies on the second language acquisition (in the case of the present study the foreign language as a target language) and the degree of competence attained. At the same time, several studies have supported the idea that both the instrumental and the integrative orientation facilitate the second language learning process which confirms

that the dichotomy "integrative versus instrumental orientation" plays a fundamental role in the study of attitudes⁶.

The purpose of this study is an attempt to explore the students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language based on semi-structured interview questions.

Accordingly, the researchers address the following question: What inferences can be derived on the basis of students' beliefs and attitudes toward learning English in EFL context?

Literature Review

Attitudes and related terms

Robert McKenzie-Mohr states that attitudes have been the focus of a great deal of research throughout the social sciences particularly the field of social psychology more than in any other academic discipline⁷. According to him, attitudes have been defined from different angles and by different theories. A workable interpretation of attitude is highly linked to the following definition: attitude is "a summary evaluation of an object or thought"⁸.

In accordance with the previous definition, attitude can be perceived as a hypothetical construct, that is to say, it is not directly observable but can be inferred from observable responses⁹.

Another important definition stated by Rensis Likert, shapes the term attitude as "an inference which is made on the basis of a complex of beliefs about the attitude object"¹⁰. Robert C. Gardner elaborates on Likert's definition by defining attitude as "the sum total of a man's instincts and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, fears, threats, and convictions about any specified topic"¹¹.

The concept of beliefs is highly important in determining the meaning of attitudes. Jack C. Richards & Richard W. Schmidt consider learner beliefs as "ideas learners have concerning different aspects of language, language learning and language teaching, that may influence their attitudes and motivations in learning and have an effect on their learning strategies and learning outcomes"¹².

Attitudes and motivation.

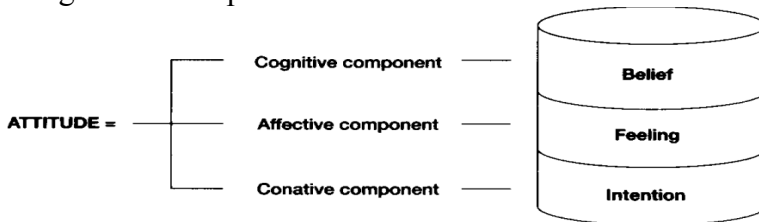
Gardner views attitudes as components of motivation in language learning. He states that "motivation ... refers to the combination of effort

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plus desire to achieve the goal of language learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language”¹³. From a broader vision, Anita Wenden proposed another view to “attitudes” which includes three components namely; cognitive, affective and behavioural¹⁴. A cognitive component is made up of the beliefs and ideas or opinions about the object of the attitude. The affective one refers to the feeling and emotions that one holds towards an object, 'likes' or 'dislikes', for' or 'against'. Finally, the behavioural component refers to one's consisting actions or behavioural intentions towards the object.

A similar definition, as shown in figure 1, explains attitudes as “a stable, long-lasting, learned predisposition to respond to certain things in a certain way. The concept has a cognitive (belief) aspect, an affective (feeling) aspect, and a conative (intention) aspect”¹⁵.

Figure.1: Components of Attitudes¹⁶



In an attempt to highlight the difference between attitudes and a number of related terms, Oppenheim classified different levels of attitudes. The most superficial level is labeled ‘opinions’, the next ‘attitudes’, at a deeper level ‘values’ and at the deepest level ‘personality’. These vague distinctions between levels can also be considered, from top to bottom, in terms of superficial versus deep, changeable versus stable and specific versus general¹⁷.

A further differentiation that may clarify what attitude is from what is not, is that of ideology. Ideology refers to “a patterned, naturalised set of assumptions and values associated with a particular social or cultural group”¹⁸. On the other hand, attitude is considered as a key term in the field of social psychology, and in parallel it is very much less important in that of sociology, where ideology is central and crucial. Ideology is often viewed as a global attitude in that it most often refers to broad perspectives in society such as the ideological principle of conservatism-liberalism. In the field of social psychology; however, attitudes tend to be specific to objects¹⁹.

Classification of attitudes

A best way of classifying attitudes towards learning language can be well illustrated through the relationship between attitude measures and indices of achievement. Gardner states that attitudes can be classified along the dimension of specificity/generality. He takes the example of attitudes towards learning French as relatively specific in the sense that the action of learning French which represents the attitude object is fairly clearly circumscribed and definite²⁰. In contrast, interest in 'foreign languages' is considerably more general in the sense that the interest in foreign languages could involve many activities such as learning them, speaking them, and hearing them, which is more general construct than only one language (i.e., French).

A further classification has been established by G. Randhawa and Mary Lou Korpon who develop a 26 item scale to measure attitudes towards learning French, but once analysing them, three different common themes were obtained. One involves a utilitarian predisposition, emphasizing the usefulness of learning French, another is described as an aestheticism dimension because the items defining this dimension tends to focus on an appreciation of the language, and the third one is identified as tolerance towards learning French since the items appears to reflect an accepting attitude rather than any direct positive orientation towards learning French²¹.

Lasagabaster states in an approximate way the existence of two major types of attitudes that have traditionally been distinguished²². "Integrative attitudes"; one major type of attitudes that have social and interpersonal orientation under cultural inclination in which non native language learners show some empathy towards the target language. In this context, high probabilities to have successful results in the learning process of the non native language are more likely to be attained. "An integrative orientation; it is found to reflect a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture of the other ethnic group, thus it sustains the long term-motivation in learning and using a second language"²³. This gives an implication to have a low competence in the target language subject of learning and leads to a low desire to communicate in the target language²⁴.

Brendan Bartram gives a complementary view which may affirm that learners of a foreign language are more likely to be influenced by the

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nations of those foreign languages they are learning²⁵. In this respect, Caroline Filmer-Sankey says: "in general, pupils were found to be well disposed towards the country and people of the language they were learning"²⁶.

The second type of attitudes is classified as instrumental, which is represented by utilitarian motives (for example a better job prospects). As opposed to the first type, instrumental attitudes are not oriented to seek for integration in the target group, but rather they are reinforced by the desire to achieve social acknowledgement and economic advantages²⁷, or just the desire to pass an exam²⁸.

Methods and Procedures

Instruments of the Study

A semi-structured interview questions are used in this study to explore the students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language. The sample used in the semi-structured interviews consists of six participants; 3male and 3female EFL students.

The analysis covered three areas: the reasons for which EFL students study English as a foreign language which comprise: both integrative and instrumental orientations, the motivation's level of EFL students, and attitudes towards the learning situation which comprise: students' attitudes towards the English teacher, the English lessons, and the English curriculum.

Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview is an efficient tool that is considered to be one of the most important techniques in gathering information. The semi-structured interviews are applied in this survey because they provide a very flexible technique for small-scale research. The researchers introduce themselves and explain the purpose of the interview in order to alleviate the tension of the participants and gain their trust.

These interviews consist of questions with the aim to find out the students' attitudes towards learning "EFL" which provide a key point to interpret their motivational level as well. The questions aim at inspecting factors other than those mentioned in the review of literature. Thus, six students were selected upon their cooperation to perform a well reliable work. Validity of the interview questions.

The semi-structured interviews questions are prepared in advance and are validated by the participation of English teachers specialized in the field. The teachers' comments are considerably effective in the validation of the interview questions before their final implementation.

Analysis of the Semi-Structured Interviews

Six third year LMD English language students who study in Saida University are interviewed to discuss the extent of their motivation, the reasons behind their motivation, and their attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language. All the students accept to engage in the interview orally while the researchers are writing down their answers without using any recording material so that they can speak comfortably. The first three interviewees are females and the rest were males.

1-The first student believes through the informal interview that the external factors such as marks, grades, communication with native speakers, and the desire to have a fair sight on their culture are the most important factors that motivate students to learn English. This student was impressed by famous American actors and she explains what makes her to want to learn English in addition to her desire to get a job.

She also states that she is always interested to improve her English, not necessarily inside the University, as an answer to whether she is more or less motivated to learn English than she was in the previous years. She also adds that she doesn't hold the same attitudes towards learning English that she had before being a third year LMD English student because things are constantly changing from best to worst. In the same way, she argues that she doesn't dislike English but her attitude has changed because the general educational factors are not suitable. For example, the majority of teachers are not really qualified.

The last point leads her to agree that competent teachers play a positive role in shaping the student's view towards learning English. In contrast, incompetent teachers decrease the students' interest to learn English. In accordance, she believes that the lessons presented by teachers have an influential part in making English enjoyable provided that they should be well presented and adapted by technology. In addition, she claims that the content of the current English curriculum is not really enjoyable and needs to be reviewed. This is because there is a gap between the decision makers and students. Consequently, she believes

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that educational factors (teachers/lessons/curriculum) influence the students' attitudes to learn English in our university either negatively or positively.

The formal interview consists of five questions with multiple choice answers. She thinks that the most important factor that motivates students to learn English is self motivation. She considers the time she devotes per day in studying English outside university to be slightly sufficient. She finds English lessons boring. She points out that none of the educational factors (teachers/lessons/curriculum) are motivating for her, yet she is strongly motivated to learn English.

2- The second female through the informal interview thinks that the most important factor that motivates students to learn English is to get a job. She points out that what spurs her to learn English is to improve her intellectual capacities and knowledge because she really likes it more than any other foreign language. She states that her motivation compared to the previous years has decreased owing to personal occupation and her various responsibilities.

As regard her attitudes towards learning English before being a third year LMD English student, she believes they are always the same unlike motivation which is getting less and less through time. She stresses on the fact that the most important affective factors that can be placed as reasons for liking or disliking learning English is that teachers are not really at the level; in addition, the atmosphere inside university is frustrating. Another point is that learners are not really cooperative with each other.

She also believes that teachers, because of their competencies and the way they teach, are the most important factor that can shape the student's view towards learning English and render it more enjoyable. In this view, she finds the lessons presented by most of the teachers boring because teachers themselves are passive and do not create strong interaction with students. She considers also that the current curriculum is not really enjoyable because it doesn't concentrate on speaking and listening skills. This latter are the focal point of a real communication. As a result, the three educational factors are the most important elements they shape the students' attitudes. They can affect, significantly, the students' attitudes either positively or negatively.

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The formal interview reveals the second female student's educational tendencies. She admits that self motivation is the most important factor that motivates students to learn English more than other factors such as the teacher, the lesson, and others. She considers the time she devotes per day in studying English outside of University as poorly sufficient. She also finds the English lessons boring and alsodeclares also that she is self motivated more than by the teacher, the lesson, and the curriculum,so self motivationkeeps her exuberant to learn English.

3- The third female student finds it a must to learn English because it is a universal language that is necessary to learn so as to know about technology and science. These are the most important factors that motivate students to learn English. Another factor for her to learn English is to have more universal friends via the social networks where a sense of pleasureis felt. More simply put, the attribute of English in terms pronunciation and rhythm are the lure to like this language. Under these circumstances she finds her motivation stable in comparison to the previous years.

She also claims that she is still holding the same attitudes towards learning English as same as she had before being a third being LMD English student. She also considers that the fact of not being satisfied with her speaking skill incites her to improve her level. This latter is the most important affective factor for her to either like or dislike learning English.

The other attitudes are related to the learning situation which, according to her, influences, considerably, the student's attitudes. She believes, in this account, that teachers play a major role to guide the students' attitudes either positively or negatively. The way teachers interact with students and have a positive rapport with them guide, positively, the students' attitudes; especially, if teachers are not biased towards a group of specific students. Lessons in the other side, are very important to make English enjoyable; depending on the way they are presented by teachers. She also points out that the English curriculum is not really interesting; there are some modules that are not part of the students' needs. In this view, the three educational factors, influence, tremendously, the student's attitudes. For her, she has a general disappointment towards the educational factors: teachers, lessons, and curriculum.

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As same as the two previews students in the formal interview, she opts for self motivation as being the most important factor that motivates students to learn English. Yet, she considers the time she devotes per day in studying English outside university to be moderately sufficient and finds English lessons boring and that she is moderately motivated to learn English. Consequently, she lacks motivation by the teacher, the lesson, and the curriculum as well.

4- The second half of the interviewees is males. The first male student considers the acquisition of a new language as the most important factor that motivates students to learn English so as to understand the different English materials; especially, movies, music. He also mentions that he loves English so much because he is impressed with the British accent as the most important factor that leads him to learn it. Nevertheless, he finds himself less motivated because of the inadequacy of the syllabus. As a result, it requires a careful attention and needs to be updated.

He also declares that his attitudes towards learning English are not as same as those before being a third year LMD English student. He holds these negative attitudes because he feels bored because of the lack of a good relationship between teachers and students. Besides, teachers lack the ability to teach well; although, they possess a considerable amount of knowledge. Additionally, obstacles are felt to hamper learning. For example, the catastrophic marks he gets in exams although he attends regularly the lessons.

He affirms that teachers have a central part in shaping the student's views either negatively or positively depending on their way of teaching. He also mentions that lessons have a strong part in making English enjoyable, but they depend, primarily, on the manner they are presented by teachers. In addition, the English curriculum is not enjoyable because speaking and listening skills are neglected. According to him, speaking and listening should be integrated until the final year. He points out that those educational factors (teachers/lessons/curriculum) have a big role in influencing the students' attitudes to learning English in the University. He also stresses on the students' views to be integrated in the curriculum preparation.

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Like all the previous interviewees in the formal interview, he declares that self motivation is the most important factor that motivates students to learn English. He considers the time he devotes per day in studying English outside of University to be moderately sufficient. He finds English lessons critical and none of the educational factors (the teacher, the lesson, the curriculum) is motivating for him. Finally, he states that he is moderately motivated to learn English.

5- The second male student thinks that the most important factor that motivates students to learn English is to have a considerable culture, job, and communication with foreign people. He adds that he wants to learn English to ameliorate his English; besides, he has the strong desire to travel to USA to get special training in Neuro-linguistic programming. He likes English since he was in the primary school because he was fascinated by video games that were made in English. He also declares that he is not motivated as same as before being a third year LMD English student because of the negative educational environment.

His attitudes towards learning English show that they are negative because before being a third year LMD English student, he was quite energetic but later on he realised that his expectations are no longer the same. Nevertheless, he still likes English, although he is disappointed when it comes to teachers due to their incompetence. Another factor that makes him disappointed is that the rapport between teachers and students is not really good. According, communication between students and teachers is not really strong.

He confirms that teachers play a central role in shaping the students' views towards learning English. For example, male teachers control the discipline inside classrooms much better than female teachers. He also adds that the lessons presented by teachers have an influential part in making English pleasant, especially, if they are accompanied with the use of technology. For example, the use of technology in the oral session influences tremendously the student's desire to embrace the lesson and makes it more enjoyable.

In the formal interview the student puts self motivation as the most important factor that motivates students to learn English. However, he considers the time he devotes per day in studying English outside of University to be slightly sufficient. He finds English lessons neutral. He

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states that he is motivated by the teacher more than the lesson or the curriculum. Finally, he says that he is slightly motivated to learn English.

6- The third male student believes that the prestige of being literate and cultivated is the most important factor that motivates students to learn English. He adds that he wants to learn English because of the domination of English as the most powerful and universal language. In his case, he states that he is always motivated to learn English since the middle school. He is still holding the strong desire to learn it.

He declares that he is still holding the same attitudes as same as before being a third year LMD English student, and that he is quite interested to learn English. He believes that one of the most important affective factors to like learning English is the good rapport between teachers and students and how good results can be produced from this positive relationship.

In response to the questions related to the learning situation, he states that he is quite certain that teachers play both positive and negative role in shaping the student's views towards learning English. This is due to their degrees of competence and their ways of teaching. Additionally, he believes that topics have an influential part in making English enjoyable and teachers as well. For example, the same course can be presented differently from different teachers with significant impact on students, either positively or negatively.

As for the current curriculum, he, unfortunately, believes that it is far behind satisfaction because it doesn't meet the students learning needs. For instance, the oral expression module is so important that it needs to be integrated until the final year of master degree. Finally, he keeps stressing on the reality that teachers play a vital role to make the lessons well accepted by students, and that the current curriculum doesn't fit the students' real learning needs.

In the formal interview, he assures that self motivation is the most important factor that motivates students to learn English more than any other factor. He considers the time he devotes per day in studying English outside University as moderately sufficient. He finds English lessons to be delightful and that the teacher is the source of motivation not the lesson, the curriculum, or any other factor. Finally, he states that he is strongly motivated to learn English.

Conclusion

To wrap it up, attitude is an important concept because it plays a key role in language learning and teaching. More simply put, it is widely accepted that motivation plays a primordial role in human activity in general and in the educational field in particular. The study of attitude in combination to motivation has been conducted to give a peculiar reinforcement to the educational realm.

The results of the questions in the semi-structured interview revealed that the interviewees believe on the following major attitudes:

- 1-They believe on the integrative and instrumental orientation as the most influential reasons for which they learn English.
- 2- They claim that the content of the current English curriculum is not really enjoyable and needs to be reviewed; this is because there is a gap between the decision makers and students. Consequently, they believe that educational factors (teachers/lessons/curriculum) influence the students' attitudes to learn English in our university either negatively or positively.
- 3-They believe that the lessons presented by teachers have an influential part in making English enjoyable; especially, if they are accompanied with the use of technology.
- 4-Teachers, because of their competencies and the way they teach, are the most important factor that can shape the students' views towards learning English and render it more enjoyable; especially, if they have a good rapport with their students.
- 5- They admit that self motivation is the most important factor that motivates students to learn English more than other factors such as the teacher, the lesson, and other factors.
- 6-They consider the time they devote per day in studying English outside of university as not really sufficient.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The following are the questions and sub-questions that were asked to the students during the semi-structured interview. The interview provides an in-depth information to interpret the data collected. The interviewees were informed that the interview would take about twenty to thirty minutes. The form of the interview is relatively free, resembling a conversation.

Informal interviews:

Open-ended questions:

Q1: What do you think is the most important factor that motivates students to learn English?

Q2: What makes you to want to learn English?

Q3: Are you more or less motivated to learn English than you were in the previous years? Why?

Q4: Do you still hold the same attitudes towards learning English that you had before being a third year LMD English student? If no, what makes you having a different view?

Q5: Can you mention some of the most important affective factors as reasons for liking or disliking learning English?

Q6: To what extent do educational factors (teachers/lessons/curriculum) influence the students' attitudes to learning English in our university?

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Formal Interviews:

1. Which of the following do you think is the most important factor that motivates students to learn English ?

- a) teacher b) lesson
c) Self motivation d) Others

2. How do you consider the time you devote per day in studying English outside of university?

- a) Strongly sufficient. b) moderately sufficient.
c) Slightly sufficient. d) poorly sufficient.

3. How do you find English lessons?

- a) Enjoyable b) Neutral
c) Boring d) critical

4. The English lessons are always really nice because of

- a) the variety of things we do in the lessons .
b) the way the teacher presents them .
c) the well adaptation with the students' learning needs.
d) Others.

5. I am motivated by

- a) the teacher b) the lesson
c) the overall curriculum d) All the above e) None

6. How motivated are you to learn English?

- a) Strongly Motivated b) moderately motivated
c) Slightly Motivated d) poorly motivated