

The Relationship between Attitudes towards Foreign Culture and Language Proficiency Level: A Case of Iranian EFL learners

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Abstract

The current study made a comparison between Iranian EFL students at two different levels (freshman vs. junior) with respect to their attitudes towards foreign culture. One hundred EFL learners were selected based on availability sampling and were divided into two groups according to their level (freshman vs. junior). All the participants were asked to complete the attitude questionnaire. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test was run to test for possible differences between the two independent groups on their attitudes towards foreign culture. The results revealed insignificant difference between the freshmen group and the junior group. Thus, the null hypothesis was confirmed implying that there was not any significant difference between Iranian freshman and junior English major students' attitudes toward foreign culture.

Keywords: culture, attitude, personal perspectives, family perspectives, school perspective, social perspectives, proficiency, social rank

INTRODUCTION

According to Starks and Paltridge (1996), learning a language is closely related to attitudes toward the language. In a similar vein, Dornyei (2005) concluded that attitude constitutes an important factor of language learning society.

Gardner (1985) also believed that attitude and other affective variables are as important as aptitude for language achievement. According to Brown (2000), second language learners could have both positive and negative attitudes. Negative attitude leads to decreasing motivation. Nevertheless, he believed that negative attitude can be changed often by exposure to reality. Positive attitude on the part of language learners can cause the development of an integrative motivation and this can consequently

enhance second language learning. Thus, when it comes to any foreign language learning, attitude as one of the vital factors is at work and it demands much more attention.

Regarding the notion of motivation, Gardner (1985) believed that attitudes are components of motivation in language learning. Based on his studies, motivation refers to the combination of efforts and desires to achieve the objective of learning. He argued that motivation to learn a foreign language is determined by basic pre-disposition and personality characteristics. Kroeber and Kuckhohn (1952) claimed that culture is a notoriously difficult term to define. In Tylor's (1871, p. 24) words "culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society". According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952, p. 11):

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consist of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand be considered , as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action.

Peterson (2004) defined English culture as a complex and interrelated pattern of human behavior including all thoughts, communication strategies and languages. In his view it also encompasses the beliefs, values, customs, rituals, manners and roles, relationship and expected behaviors of a racial, religious, or social group. This inclusive definition embraces all the elements related to social life of English community.

The widespread studies show that attitude affects learning directly. Many factors can enhance positive attitude including motivation, social rank, family, culture and school. On the other hand, only a few studies have specifically examined the relationship between attitudes toward foreign and in particular English culture and English proficiency. The scarcity of information on the benefits of the relationship between attitudes toward foreign culture and English proficiency is deeply ignored in Iranian EFL context.

Therefore, investigating the relationship between attitudes towards culture and English proficiency in five different contexts such as attitude within personal factor, social rank factor, family factor, cultural factor, and specifically school factor are of high importance and this study is designed to fill the gap of literature in this regard.

In order to achieve the objective in this study the following question was addressed by the researcher:

- Is there any significant difference between Iranian freshman and junior English major students' attitudes towards foreign culture?

METHOD

Participants

The research population consisted of English major students at University of Guilan (Guilan province, Rasht, Iran), and the research sample included just freshman and junior English major students ($n = 100$, mean age = 19.08 years old, $SD = 2.08$) who were selected through availability sampling method and based on their year of study. 50 students out of 100 participants were male (25 freshmen and 25 junior) and the other 50 students were female (25 freshmen and 25 junior).

Instruments

The research instrument was the attitude questionnaire developed by Min-chen Tseng (2013). The questionnaire was composed of two parts. In the first part the students were asked to provide their general information (e.g., gender, age). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 54 multiple choice items. The questions were divided into seven categories including, individual factors, and factors relating to the location of education (university), social factors, personal view, the location of education view, the social view, and the family view towards the foreign language.

Data analysis

All the questions were designed according to a Likert-type scale of 5 points, and they were tested by a Reliability Test, which was based on calculation of the correlation coefficient between each item score and the score of the whole scale. The data obtained through the Min Chung questionnaire were analyzed by the non-parametric Chi-Square Test. Next, the Eta statistics was run to examine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL students' levels of education (freshman vs. junior).

RESULTS

The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test was used to test for the possible differences between the two independent groups (freshmen vs. junior) on their attitudes towards foreign culture. In other words, it was run to determine if freshmen and junior groups differed in terms of their attitudes towards foreign culture. The scales selected by the respondents for the items of the attitude questionnaire were considered ranks across the two groups. Then, the ranks for the two groups were evaluated to see if they differed significantly. As the data were ranks, the actual distribution of the scores did not matter.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney U Test for the Two Groups

	Total
Mann-Whitney U	1068.00
Wilcoxon W	2343.00
Z	-1.255
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.209

The Z value and the significance level, which were given as Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed), were presented in the output. In Table 4.10, the Z value was (-1.255) with a significance level of ($p=.209$). The probability value (p) was higher than (.05), so the result was not significant. There was not statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of their attitudes towards foreign culture. Although no statistically significant difference was found between the two groups, the direction of the small difference which group had higher attitudes towards foreign culture) was also described in the following table.

Table 2. Ranks for the two groups with respect to their attitudes towards foreign culture

	Groups	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	Freshman	50	46.86	2343.00
Total	Junior	50	54.14	2707.00
	Total	100		

The median values for each group was also presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Median for the two groups with respect to their attitudes towards foreign culture

Groups	Total
Freshman	3.2593
Junior	3.3148
Total	3.2778

The value of z that was reported in Table 4.10 was used to calculate the approximate value of effect size or (r). The effect size was computed through the following procedure: (Effect size) $r = Z / \text{square root of } N$ where $N = \text{total number of cases}$

Based on the findings displayed in Table 1, $Z = (-1.255)$ and $N = 100$; therefore the (r) value was (.125). This was considered a very small effect size using Cohen's (1988) criteria of .1=small effect, .3=medium effect, .5=large effect.

Consequently, the Mann-Whitney U Test revealed insignificant difference between the freshmen group ($Md = 3.25$, $n = 50$) and the junior group ($Md = 3.31$, $n = 50$), $U = 1068.00$, $z = -1.255$, $p = .209$, $r = .125$. Thus, the first null hypothesis was supported implying that there was not any significant difference between Iranian freshman and junior English major students' attitudes toward foreign culture.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results indicated that there was not statistically significant difference between the freshman and junior English major students in terms of their attitudes towards foreign culture. Although no statistically significant difference was found between the two groups, the students in junior group had higher attitudes towards foreign culture.

Regarding the effect size, it was revealed that there was a very small effect size showing an insignificant difference between the freshmen group and the junior group in terms of their attitudes towards foreign culture. Thus, the null hypothesis was supported

implying that there was not any significant difference between Iranian freshman and junior English major students' attitudes toward foreign culture. Actually, the findings are inconsistent with those of Ekstrand (1980) as he asserted, gender is assumed as an effective factor for attitude and motivation in learning process. In this new age the researchers tend to show the direct relationship between genders difference and the learning process (Ekstrand, 1980 cited in Sunderland, 2000). Also, findings in Ansari (1983)'s study supporting the findings in the study of Ekstrand (1980) are inconsistent with the findings in this study in which he argued that while both boys and girls have good performance, girl's marks are higher than boys in foreign language.

The findings of this study recommend the material developers to present the cultural items in textbooks more than before. That is, students' textbooks need to be prepared in a way that could make more opportunity for the students to get more familiar with the foreign culture. In fact, learners are in need of textbooks that make them more interested and motivated to enhance their positive attitude towards foreign culture.

Further implication of the present study is concerned with curriculum designer in that they can set a few sessions to play movies on the cultural items of the target language so that the students could have more chances to know the culture and improve the attitude. The idea of students exchange can be beneficial for improving and enhancing the students positive attitude by having more interaction with the members of the target language.

Further studies can be both quantitative and qualitative; the former including a number of different questionnaires and the latter can include the structured interviews having deeper insights into the students' attitude towards foreign culture. Since this study is concerned with the students in Guilan University, further studies can be conducted investigating the relationship between the students' attitude toward foreign culture and their language proficiency among the different college students and also different levels.

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