

Positive Attitude and English Language Learning: Psycho-pedagogic Connections

Intakhab Alam Khan

King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah
Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This study's main purpose is to explore the learners' attitude towards education in general, and learning English in particular. It aims to elicit an implicit connection between the learners' and teachers' attitude and the achievement in English. The research is based on the personal experience of the researcher at Jeddah Community College, however the case doesn't much differ from most of the community colleges in Saudi Arabia and other such vocational institutions. The study was descriptive in nature which data were collected through focus group and questionnaires from the college where the researcher teaches as mentioned. The responses of the teachers and students were qualitatively analysed and compared to match with the objectives of the study. The results indicate that the students generally don't possess positive attitude towards learning. Many reasons can be attributed to this behavior. It can be concluded that the positive attitude towards learning target language matters a lot. It is found that there is a positive correlation between attitude towards learning/teaching English and their proficiency in it. It has also been found that in spite of the fact all the necessary equipment and resources are integrated in the pedagogic setting, ultimate language achievement is not up to the expectations of the policy makers and the administrators. Thus, teachers' role is quite crucial in this connection. The findings are likely to be implemented in all those similar institutions that technically as well as academically resemble the sample college.

Keywords: positive attitude, education, vocational education, effective learning, learner motivation, desired achievement

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Introduction

Attitude is perhaps the outcome of environmental situation, however certain personality traits can also be related to the specific features of one's attitude. In most of the academic situation, as felt by many practicing teachers, the learners as well teachers' attitude constitute the factors that are directly or indirectly related to the educational outcome.

Psychology of Education

There are certain foundations of education: psychological, sociological and philosophical foundations. Psychological connections with education can't be ignored. It has been noted that most of the applied elements of education have been derived from the discipline of psychology. The most significant components of psychology applied to education are: learning theories, individual differences, intelligence, personality, behavior, developmental aspects, adolescence psychology and so on.

Philosophy of Education

Philosophy and education are two sides of the same coin: philosophy being the theoretical and education-the practical side. However, education also plays an important part in changing the perception of life, consequently leading towards a change in one's philosophy. Though to most people, philosophy is still considered as a metaphysical conceit, it is extremely important to integrate certain philosophical postulates in an educational setting. Education has been viewed extremely important as the following philosophical thought:

- Education for education,
- Education for employment, and
- Education for life.

To some educational thinkers, education is life and life is education. It means education is as important as life, or in other way, there is no life without education. In Islam, the concept has been considered as very important in Islam, and made compulsory to all Muslims: males and females.

If the role and importance of education is not understood by the members of the society the achievement will remain be a dream. The overall importance of education in Islam has been duly emphasized in holy *Qur'an* and *ahadiths* (the noble traditions of the last prophet (PBUH), and positive support and promotion by the government of Saudi Arabia, the achievement is not up to the desired level.

The idea of 'attitude' is conceived by having perspectives of psychology and philosophy. In the process of education or even in a setting of business, attitude plays a significant role. To put more precisely the significance of attitude and related factors, in the terms of business and marketing, the product is in demand, the industry is rising, the finance is appropriate, the marketing strategies are employed, the salesmen are hired from all around the globe, but the product is not being sold, and the buyers are not motivated or interested in buying. But, the question is: why?

Are the buyers not aware of the product, or they think it is useless. Such questions lead to many interpretation and conclusion which the researchers as well as the government officials are

trying to find out. The present study is a modest attempt towards the most crucial issue of education as to why the learners don't possess the positive attitude towards education in general.

The Present Study

The study was carried out in one of the colleges of King Abdulaziz university-Jeddah, KSA where students are enrolled in the preparatory year of English. The English curriculum in general is designed to provide and strengthen the level of English with which the learner can pursue further education in the discipline of their interest. 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. Students having completed secondary schools are supposed to have in their background around 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 practices 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.

Significance of 'Attitude' in Education

Like many other behavioural elements, 'Attitude' is one of the most important features of one's personality. It includes psychological, emotional and behavioural aspects. It leads to the level of involvement in some expected human activities. Attitude can be operationally defined as the way an individual looks at things/activities. It expresses the type of mood one has, and interprets a person's saying and action.

Attitude has been identified as one of the most crucial factors in learning a foreign language. It plays a major role in arousing students' interest and motivation to learn. Though many investigators exerted their efforts to research issues related to an EFL context, Gardner (1985) is a landmark work that provided the actual platform for many researchers to undertake studies that fall under the category of motivation and attitude. The researcher 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 Buschenhofen (1998) Pritchard & Nasr (2004), Joseba (2005), Sidek, Ramachandran & Ramakrishan (2006), Hui (2007), Venkatraman & Prema (2007). In this connection, for example, Pendergrass et al (2001) point out that English is a part of engineering education and, therefore, integrating English enables the level to rise the proficiency of technology or engineering students especially in communication" (p. 1).

Poor achievement in English may be attributed to several social and psycholinguistic factors as noted by McDonough (1983) and Ellis (2008) as a key factor which affect the process of learning a foreign language (English). More specifically, McDonough (1983, p.142) states that "motivation of the students is one of the most crucial variables that tend to exert a crucial impact on the successful learning". As there exists a close connection between motivation and attitude it has been advised not to ignore these in the pedagogic domain of language research in particular. Researchers state that "the learner motivation is considered to be determined by his attitudes. (Gardner & Lambert (1972, p.3).

In addition, (Lifrieri, 2005, p.14) affirms that "a proper and positive attitude is imperative for achievement in language learning. Therefore, it is inevitable to possess an appropriate understanding of motivation and attitude of the students. (Gardner & Lambert (1972) and Midraj (1998, 2003).

It is advised that that the textbook writers design and evolve that material that ensures to serve the purpose and method of learning. In addition, the teachers also succeeds in imparting the knowledge and skills to grab right amount of learning motivation to pursue courses of English. (Midraj et al, 2008).

The following is an abstract of those studies which contextually fit in the given Arabic context. Authors (Al-Quyadi, 2000 and Al-Tamimi & Munir, 2008) have carried out a study in the area of students' attitudes and motivation in Yemen. On the other hand, the following issues were focused by (Malallah, 2000).

However, Suleiman (1993) boldly points out that Arab students have not been given the opportunity to assess their own needs, motivation and attitudes while the study conducted by Karahan (2007) explore high school and first-year students' attitudes. A study conducted in Turkey (Lafaye & Tsuda, 2002) explore the dissatisfaction expressed by parents, teachers, administrators and the learners themselves about their low proficiency levels in English. Yet another study (Crockett, 1990) concludes 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.

Factors associated with 'attitude'

There are many factors that constitute the 'attitude' of an individual learner. The following are some of them: -social background, - lack of vision, -no proper guidance/counseling, -indifferent parental attitude, -economic security, - less competitive nature- carefree life style, -lack of job opportunities, -less employment due to foreigner's dominance etc.

Many attempts have so far been made to investigate as to what are the factors responsible for making a positive or negative attitude in general and learning in particular. The most important of all could be a careless attitude towards the life itself that doesn't positively affect the learner to do anything. Youngsters are generally found as careless even in putting their life in danger in the form of reckless driving. Thus, education as a target of life is also taken casually by most of the Saudi young learners.

The Research Design

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

Research tools

The Focus Group

In the present study, focus group (the students) has been used to study the attitude towards learning English in general. 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 'interaction' among some people in order to collect data (Morgan, 1988) and Basch (1987). Focus groups are of no latest origin. They are first mentioned as a market research technique in the 1920s (Bogardus (1926) and Frazer (1987), who are considered genuinely as innovating the concept of the 'focused interview'(Morgan, 1988).

Teachers Questionnaires

In order to study the teachers' attitude, the researcher developed a questionnaire which was administered to study/ elicit data on teachers' attitude/perception towards learners' attitude towards education/learning. The teachers are smart enough. As a result, in their responses, they may be a disparity between theory and practice. Therefore, 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.

Establishing Validity

Validity is an important point of consideration in especially experimental researches that technically establishes the amount of systematic or built-in error in measurement (Norland, 1990) with the help of a group of subject experts. In the present context, content validity was applied to assess the validity of the instrument in accordance with the objectives of the study. The following questions were addressed:

1. Does the questionnaire measure the actual aim of the study?
2. Are the items representative of the relevance and scope of the study?
3. Does the instrument include the features of a questionnaire?

Five experts of language teaching and assessment were consulted to ensure the mentioned points above, and the questionnaire was edited according to the comments.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Results

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

Questionnaire used for focus group (Appendix: A)

Section-1: Attitude towards education

Based on the responses of the learners, it was found that:

- 1- Only 30 from 89 learners were sure of the importance of education.
- 2- 31 students told that they come because they were told to come to college.
- 3- Only 29 were aware of the relevance of education in life/job,
- 4- Only 17 were actually aware of the positive side of education,
- 5- Only 8 students were known to the difference between an educated and uneducated.

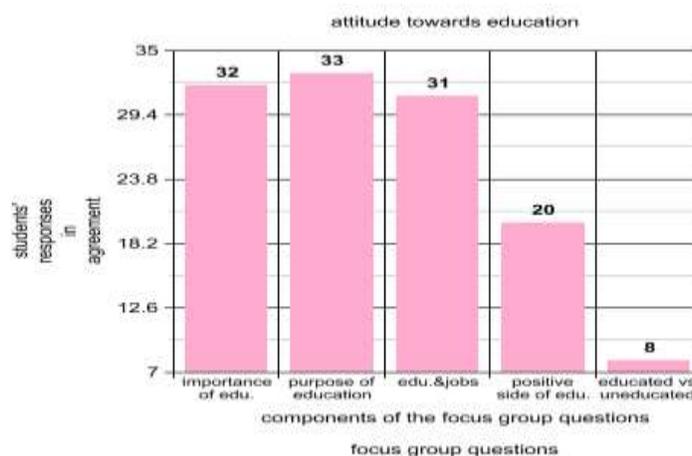


Figure 1. Students' attitude towards Education

Section II: Attitudes towards learning English

Item wise Analysis:

Item-1

On the basis 78 % (70/89) of the response, 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 51% (46/89) 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 39% (35/89) 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

75% (67/89) 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

65/89 (70%) 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

(72/89) 80% of 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

76/89 (84 %) 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

30/89 (33%) students (mostly good ones) 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

25/89 (28%) 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 Arabic, because in most cases if the Saudi consumer is not able to speak English, and the seller is considerably good in Arabic.

Item-10

Eighty eight (88%) of the students are of the opinion 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.

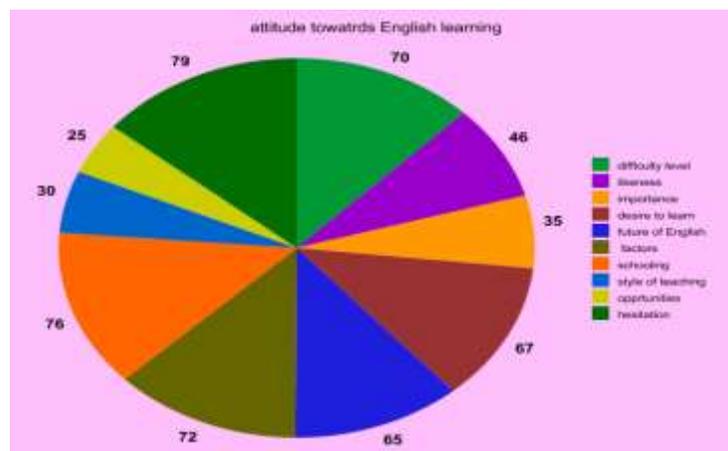


Figure 2. Students' attitude towards English Language learning

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 to further facilitate.

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.

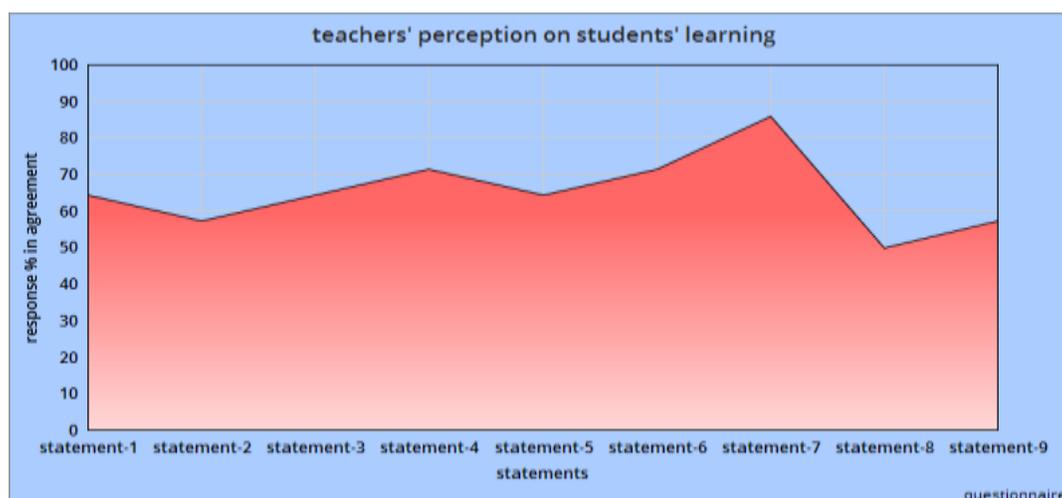
Item-8- Some of them watch English movies, listen to cassettes etc to improve their proficiency in English outside of the college. They can understand especially the American accent.

Analysis of the questionnaires (for teachers)

On the basis of the data elicited from the questionnaires of the teachers, it was found: Most students are disinterested in education in general. No significant factor was noticed which could enforce the learners to think positively about the educational attainments. It was confirmed that the background of the learners was a contributing factor to the negative attitude towards education in general and English in particular.

In addition, it was found that they have no vision for their future career except getting money and live a luxurious life. They are not used to hard work or hardships. Self-learning is completely missing.

The students hardly attend classes, do the formalities, and don't focus on learning in any situation other than classroom activities, and that too seems a compulsion. Some of the students are found interested in using English, but they can't as they lack the proficiency level. Some teachers are of the opinion that the attitude of the learners can't be changed in any way.



Graph3. Teachers' perception on the attitude of the learners

Discussion

Teaching of English in Saudi Arabia or any where in the world can't be a success unless both the teachers and learners are properly motivated toward attaining the pre-determined goals. The motivation of the learners can be dealt with by either employing positive or negative reinforcement. In other words, incentives and human relation approach can be proved to be an appropriate motivation strategy for accomplishment of the aims. But, when it comes to the issue of the students, it becomes quite challenging because they may not be motivated by any means unless they are self-motivated for some reasons. The results show that the level of attitude towards learning English is missing among many students. Many reasons can be attributed to such an attitude: their vision, parental indifferent attitude, the life style, lack of job opportunities etc. However, it can't be denied that teachers are the motivating force, and they should keep on trying their level best to motivate the students. The teachers should also express their motivation level in the classroom to inspire the learners, it is quite difficult, though.

Conclusion

It was concluded that the students don't possess positive attitude towards education in general. The issue of attitude becomes more crucial in the case of learning of English due to many reasons. There are multiple reasons due to which students are generally disinterested in learning as a whole. The philosophy of life, job aspiration, dignified life style are all missing

from the personality of most of the students, and this affects negatively the attitude of the teachers as well.

Implication

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 seem 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.

About the Author:

Dr. Intakhab Alam Khan, an educationist, teacher, researcher and author from New Delhi-India, is presently a teaching faculty at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah-Saudi Arabia. An author of 12 books and around 65 papers in different international online and print journals Dr Khan is an honorary chief editor/associate editor/asst. editor of many online international educational journals

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Appendixes

Appendix-A: Questions used for Focus Group (the learners)

Section:1-Attitude towards Education

- 1- Do you think education is important?
- 2- Why do you think you should come to college?
- 3- In what ways does education help you in your life?
- 4- Does education bring any changes in you?
- 5- Is there any difference between an educated and uneducated?

Section 2: 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 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: the items in the teachers' questionnaires

- 1- The students are interested in education.
- 2- They don't like learning English.
- 3- Students have no reasons to learn.
- 4- Students' social background affects the level of attitude.
- 5- Parental attitude constitutes the major factor of attitude.
- 6- Students have lack of future vision.
- 7- The students have almost no attitude to use English.
- 8- Self learning mode is completely missing.
- 9- They want to use English, but they fail.

10- There is no way one can develop the learner's level of English.

Appendix-C: Responses of students on the questionnaires

Section-I: Attitude towards Education

1- Yes, it.2- ...to learn...3- ...money...4- not really, but money.5- I am not sure.

Section II: Attitudes towards learning English

1- No, it is not easy./little difficult/easy2- Yes, I do. I want to learn it.3- Yes, it is./ not at all./No, it is not our language.4. It is needed, now a day, for business and technology.5. I plan to make sure that my children learn both Arabic and English well.6. Yes, may be.7. Yes, some of them.8. Yes, a lot. Learning at this college is interesting.9. Sometimes, with brothers/ sisters/ friends. 10. Not always.

Section III: self learning1. 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.

Appendix- D: Responses on the teachers' questionnaire

SN	Statements	Agree (in%)	undecided	disagree
1		1 (7.14%)	2	11
2.		9(64.2%)	1	4
3.		8(57.14)	1	5
4.		9(64.2%)	2	3
5.		10(71.4%)	1	3
6.		9(64.2%)	2	3
7.		10(71.4%)	1	3
8.		12(85.7%)	1	1
9.		7(50%)	4	3
10.		8(57.14%)	2	4