

The Entwined Effects of Attitude, Motivation and Gender on EFL Learning: A Correlation Study

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Abstract

Foreign language learners vary on a number of dimensions to do with personality, motivation, gender, aptitude, and age. The aim of this paper is to illustrate and summarize the relationship between personality and foreign language learning. Using a correlation study, findings indicated that females are better language learners being more motivated than men are, and having more positive attitudes towards language learning than male students.

Key words: Personality factors; Affect; Gender; Motivation; Attitude; EFL

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INTRODUCTION

The human personality is made up of three components: the psychomotor domain, the cognitive domain and the affective domain. Learning is mediated through these three domains interactively; people learn using their bodies, their thinking skills and their emotions. In the literature, Ajzen & Fishben (1980), Ajzen (1988), Corbin, et al. (1991), Locke (1996), Chiachiere (1997), Ehrman & Dörnyei (1998) and Sung & Padilla (1998) claimed that the affective domain plays a crucial role in learning. Affective factors prominently include attitude and motivation.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Byram (2000) made clear that the nexus connecting attitudes and language learning has been observed in empirical research; leading educational thinkers produced two viewpoints: The resultative hypothesis assumes that a successful experience of language learning can potentially induce attitudes of the language learners not only towards the target language but also towards the country and its people where the language is natively spoken. The motivational hypothesis switches the directionality of influence to subtle, yet stable motive-like constructs, such as integrative versus instrumental motivation or intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation.

Dörnyei (1998), Rahimpour (1990) and Dörnyei & Csizér (2002) argued that a positive attitude can possibly ease or support learning process whereas a negative attitude deactivates our learning potentials; negative attitudes function as psychological barriers to learning, especially, in language learning; i.e., an attitude-related factor is motivation. Attitude influences our motivation for learning, simply, given that an attitude has to do with what one likes or dislikes.

Dörnyei (1998) mentioned that attitude to foreign language learning has been investigated within the framework of the broader notion of motivation. Among an array of entwined factors, motivation is probably one of the fundamental determinants of individual's action.

Williams & Burden (1997) saw motivation as a process through which the learner is involved in some action or other. The word action suggests that the individual is a doer that performs out of determination a conscious decision, which can explain why terms like goal-oriented, reasoned action are dominantly employed in characterizing this process. Thus, Motivation may be construed as a state of cognitive and emotional arousal which leads to conscious decision to act and gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to get a previously set goal.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Attitude and motivation research both in EFL and ESL situations fall in either of the two categories of psychological and social approaches. The former is typically a paradigm representing a trend of research which seeks to look for theoretical frameworks to explain motivation; while, the other category is more descriptive in nature such as examining the learners' motivational patterns in a given socio-cultural or educational environment. Relevant to the former, Gardner (1985) students' attitudes towards a specific language group are bond to influence on how successful they will be in incorporating new aspects of that language. Thus, motivation is the extent to which an individual works to learn a language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity. Relevant to the latter, Ludwig (1983), Tannen (1994), Freed (1995) and Vanderick (2000) have supported a contextual variability of motivation; that is, motivation varies by time, place and type/gender of learners. In this trend, Laine (1995) did longitudinal and cross-national study in which he explored Belgium and Finland (two bilingual West-European countries) teenagers' motivation to learn a third language. The study indicated that a variety of ethnic, social and cultural variables interfere with learning foreign languages by affecting the students' attitudes and motivation towards learning. Coleman (1996) examined the L2 motivation of British university students as compared to that of students in Ireland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Austria and France. The study came up with a rich source of data concerning attitude and proficiency of the students. In a similar mode, Dörnyei, et al. (1996) conducted a nation-wide survey on 4,700 Hungarian 8th grade students to investigate their motivation to learn English, German, French, Italian and Russian. English among other languages proved to be of more demand and appeal. This study was further supported by Dörnyei (2002) in which he ascribed preference to learn English to a post-Soviet propensity towards open-market policies and the desire to integrate with the West.

The case of Middle-Eastern Arabic-Jewish linguistic interaction and English as a reminder of US presence is a case in point. Abu-Rabia (1996a and 1996b) and Abu-Rabia & Feuerverger (1996) focused upon three different social contexts, i.e, Israeli Arab students learning Hebrew, Israeli Jewish students learning English, and Canadian Arab students learning English. Suleiman (1993) concentrated on the attitude of US university students from Arabic backgrounds towards US and US citizens before and after arrival in America. He examined the subjects' attitudes employing a 9-Likert scale ranging from ultimate amusement to ultimate resentment. By the same token, Sung & Padilla (1998) investigated learners' motivations plus parental attitudes towards learning Asian languages like Chinese, Japanese or Korean languages

in schools, and could show age and instructional level interference in attitudinal patterns. Correlational links between motivation, attitudes and gender have been confirmed in this research.

In Saudi Arabia, there are several studies investigating the same topic. For example Makrami (2010) examined the effects of motivation and attitude on Saudi university learners in English for specific purposes (ESP) compared to a sample of students learning English for general purposes (EGP). Results showed that the learners' achievement on English, measured by their scores on the final English test, correlated more with the attitude, motivation, and anxiety of the EGP group than the ESP group. In addition, attitude motivation, and anxiety within the same gender did not change significantly from the pre-test to the post-test, except that the males ended up with their attitude lower, with ($M= 3.15, SD=.46$), compared to the females' attitude, with ($M= 3.72, SD=.52$).

In this line, too, Al-Rabai (2010) examined the language learning strategies of Saudi EFL students in intensive English language programs. Both researchers, in two different contexts, examined the relationship between strategy use and certain factors such as language proficiency level, gender and motivation. Their studies revealed that proficient and highly motivated participants used a greater number of effective strategies more frequently. In addition, the findings indicated that female participants utilized a more active approach to language learning, and were more inclined to communicate with English speakers when their teachers wanted that, too. The findings also revealed that teachers and teaching practices affect students' motivation and strategy use. According to Al-Rabai (2010), teachers' motivational behaviors are conducive to parallel motivation improvements on the part of their L2 students.

In summary, language students' affective factors constitute a major element in their successful learning attempts. In language learning, a few factors have been found to affect language learning; these are attitudes, motivation, self-esteem and gender. Most of these factors are related to emotions and feelings which the humanistic theory has placed more emphasis on as important formative emotions on the course of language learning.

However, the problem of the study is that attitudes and gender may cause diversity on the learners' performances in EFL.

2. OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

It is evident that attitude and motivation have strong influences on the learning process of EFL. The objective of the present study is to examine the genders sand attitudes of male and female university students as motivating factors in studying English as a foreign

language in the English department at King Khalid University. To achieve the objectives the following questions are posited.

- Is there a difference in the attitudinal and motivational patterns across students among Saudi English major university students at King Khalid University?
- How does gender affect the learners' performances in EFL?

3. HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

The hypothesis is that female students are better in learning EFL than males. University formal examination results on campus show that females received significantly better grades in FL courses than boys.

4. METHODOLOGY

The method of research appropriate for the present study is the descriptive method; thus, a questionnaire study is followed.

4.1 Sampling

Participants of the study are major students of English; they are randomly selected from the campus for both men and women. The number is 25 each. They have participated in a questionnaire study.

4.2 Data collection

Data collection took place during the present semester of the academic year 2011/2012. The central technique elicit data has been a questionnaire taken originally from

Lo Castro (2000). The adapted version of the survey contained a set of 10 questions addressed on a five—point scale, i.e., Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire items have been slightly modified in terms of content of questions to fit them into Saudi context of EFL. Procedures for data collection simply include handing out the questionnaire, instructing the participants to complete the questionnaire and hand it in personally to me. Participants will be requested to check the box that most closely represented their reaction to each of the items on the questionnaire. Participants were asked to fill in the information about their age group, sex, background of language education background. Table 1 summarizes the participants' statistics.

5. RESULTS

The data gathered via the questionnaire has been converted to empirically verifiable numerical values. For this purpose, the numerical values of +5, +4, +3, +2, and +1 were assigned to Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, and Strongly disagree, respectively. The statistical procedure employed to test the research hypothesis had to be a non-parametric test, namely, Mann-Whitney U-test. For the statistical analysis of the data, I asked a statistician to process the raw data from the survey study, who, in turn, employed the SPSS Version 14.0. Results are presented in Tables 2 and 3. With the other items on the questionnaire no significant difference was found.

Table 1
Participants' Descriptive Statistics Distributed by Gender

Gender	Age group		Off-campus language experience	
	18-20	21-23	Yes	No
Male	21	4	8	17
Female	23	2	18	7
Total	44	6		50

Table 2
Mann-Whitney U-Test Results of Survey Items 1-10

		#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
Male Subjects	N	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	Mean Rank	80.43	92.09	97.97	96.36	93.93	89.70	91.36	84.29	91.36	84.89
	Sum of Ranks	6756.50	7735.50	8229.50	8094.50	7890	7535	7674	7080.50	7674	7090.50
Female Subjects	N	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	Mean Rank	93.22	94.66	89.82	91.14	93.15	96.63	95.26	101.08	104.26	101.08
	Sum of Ranks	7830.50	9655.50	9161.50	9296.50	9501	9856	9717	10310.50	10634.50	10310.50
Mann-Whitney U		3186.50	4076.50	3988.50	3775	4043.5	3938	3899.50	3965	3970	4154
Wilcoxon W		6756.50	7646.50	7558.50	9028	9296.50	7508	9152.50	7535	9223	7724
Z		-3.11	-0.59	-0.88	-1.47	-0.68	-0.97	-1.09	-0.95	-0.91	-0.39
P		.00.*	0.55	0.37	0.14	.49	0.33	0.27	.34	0.35	0.69

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

The males' patterns of response to the items in the above table significantly differ from that of females. For

instance, as far as item # 1 is concerned, the table clearly illustrates that the females' ranks exceeds that of males

with this item. It means that females tended to agree more with the idea in the item. Thus; females like hearing English spoken more than males do. In other words, males

and females reacted quite differently to the items in Table 2. Table 1 above clearly illustrates that the females' ranks exceeded those of males with the items as in Table 2.

Table 3
Mann-Whitney U-Test Results of Survey Items 11-20

		#11	#12	#13	#14	#15	#16	#17	#18	#19	#20
Male Subjects	N	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	Mean Rank	100.97	92.09	92.10	99.56	100.54	89.38	98.08	99.71	97.24	91.95
	Sum of Ranks	8481.50	7735.50	7736	8363	8445	7508	8238.50	8375.50	8168	7724
Female Subjects	N	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
	Mean Rank	87.35	94.66	94.66	88.51	87.71	96.89	89.73	88.39	90.42	94.77
	Sum of Ranks	8909.50	9655.50	9655	9028	8946	9883	9152.50	9015.50	9223.	9667
Mann-Whitney U		3656.50	4165.50	4166	3775	3693	3938	3899.50	3965	3970	4154
Wilcoxon W		8909.50	7735.50	7736	9028	8946	7508	9152.50	9015.50	9223	7724
Z		-1.813	-0.33	-0.390	-1.47	-1.69	-0.97	-1.09	-1.48	-0.91	-0.39
P		0.07	0.73	0.69	0.14	0.09	0.33	0.27	0.13	0.35	0.69

Furthermore, the table above clearly shows that females' average rank is higher, which means that females agreed more with most of the items on the questionnaire more favorably than the males did. These findings go commensurately with prior research on gender differences favoring women over men in terms of aptitude, attitude and motivational impact on language learning/acquisition (e.g., Freed, 1995; Ludwig, 1983; Tannen, 1994; Vanderick, 2000).

In addition, according to the findings, females are shown to be more supportive of the conviction that English promotes sophistication and cosmopolitan views. Such differences between males and females in their perceptions of personality factors affecting their learning of English are supported, on one hand, by Oxford et. al. (1993) and Sung and Padilla (1998); on the other hand, contradicted by findings of the studies by (Baker & McIntyre (2000), Suleiman (1993), Thot (1996)... etc. However, it is the converse for the rest of the 26 items. Generally speaking, while admitting a slight motivational pattern difference across genders, the study gives evidence as to the congruity on the part of both genders regarding their attitude.

Students, both males and females, have exhibited an instrumental type of motivation towards learning English; some of them like to learn English for grades, travelling abroad, making friends, passing exams, succeeding academically, watching movies in English, etc. Very few would like to learn English for integrative motivation purposes, like loving English in itself, or for talking to friends and teachers communicatively.

However, gender differences do exist between males and females in these motivational/attitudinal aspects as seen in z scores in tables 2 and 3. Therefore, implied is the fact that a biased attitude to gender in language classrooms is an issue that continues to intrigue researchers. By probing into the male and female specific motivational patterns, language instruction can be geared up to learners' interests. In this way, language learning content can serve

to prepare the learners for more autonomous kind of learning a foreign language.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident that women have more tendencies in motivation towards learning EFL more than men do. This was evident from the final results of examinations held in the campus. Thus, females prefer to hear English more than males do. As the females' attitudes to listen to English are than the males, it is because English promotes progress in thoughts of modern purposes. As far as for motivation is of both genders concerned, both of them have exhibited the instrumental type of motivation towards the learning process. In other words, they learn English for different purposes.

As far as gender of both sexes is concerned, there are differences shown in the learning process. Women are favored over men in terms of attitudes and motivations. They have more positive attitudes towards English than boys because their motivations are high. Thus, the hypothesis that female students are better in learning EFL than males is proved to be correct. This issue is supported by formal examination results held on campus in which females received significantly better grades in FL courses than boys. The researcher recommends that similar studies can be done on other samples in other universities in Saudi Arabia to confirm or refute the hypothesis.

The results from this study imply that EFL teachers should not exercise any bias or prejudice on gender bases and they should view attitudes towards foreign language learning as convergent rather than divergent; since positive attitudes are important for developing language aptitude, teachers should work to improve learners' attitudes towards the target language and its culture alike.

By the same token, language instruction can be geared up to match students' attitudinal patterns as well as motivational patterns, given that motivation and attitudes are responsible for the improvement of foreign

language learning much more than any other factors of the personality. In this way, EFL curriculum should be designed to serve the purpose of leveraging motivation and improving attitudes in order to encourage autonomous language learning in EFL instruction settings. The results of the study, though apt to be generalizable, cannot be exaggerated beyond the context the study was conducted in; future researchers need to use larger EFL population to test the reliability of the findings and to further focus on the contextual variety of attitudinal patterns more precisely in order to explicate the effects of motivation and attitudes on EFL learners' foreign language aptitude in different types of learning settings, including the e-learning environments.

In conclusion, teachers' teaching methodology should be adapted to the individual differences in personality, in order to enhance EFL learning. A plethora of theories and case studies tell that personality factors significantly influence the degree of success that individuals achieve in learning a foreign language.

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