

A Study on the Attitude of English Learning Among Secondary School Students in China

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Abstract: Applying the method of quantitative questionnaire survey and the SPSS 23.0 software program, this study explored the English learning attitude of 372 elementary, junior and senior high school students in China. The results show that (1) the participants held relatively positive attitude towards English learning; (2) English learning attitude was significantly and positively but weakly correlated with English learning achievement; (3) Attitude to English study and attitude to foreign language and culture are the important predictors of the participants' English proficiency. (4) There were significant differences in the participants' English learning attitude in regard to gender and English proficiency level.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The study of foreign language learning attitudes first began in the 1930s and reached a relatively mature stage in the 1990s (Tao, 2001). According to Ellis (1994), learners' attitudes toward learning have a significant impact on their second language acquisition level. Ellis (1994) argued that learners' learning attitudes have a great influence on their second language acquisition level. The positive attitudes can promote second language acquisition, while the negative attitudes can hinder second language acquisition. In the last decade, there have been many studies on the relationship between English as a second or foreign language students' attitudes and English acquisition or performance (Rahimi & Hassani, 2012; Ahmed, 2015; Tanda & Eposi, 2017; Taiwo, 2018; Morales-Ventura, 2019).

Research in China began mainly in the 1990s. Early researchers (Hao, 1999; Qin, 2002) mainly studied English learning attitudes in combination with other factors, such as motivation and affective factors. Most of them used empirical quantitative questionnaire survey method. Some researchers focus on factors affecting English learning attitudes (Tan & Jiang, 2008), such as various factors in schools, individuals, and society. Some focus on the relationship between learning attitudes and academic

performance (Li, 2012); and these studies have been conducted on a wide range of group subjects, including primary school, secondary school, university students, and ethnic minority students (Peng, 2007; Han & Xu, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to examine the overall attitudes toward English language learning, the relationship between attitudes and academic performance, and the significant differences in English learning attitude in terms of various demographic variables and to provide useful suggestions for improving their motivation and academic performance.

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions of this study are:

(1) What is the current situation of English learning attitudes among the participants in Southwest China?

(2) Are there any correlations between English learning attitudes and English achievement of the participants?

(3) Which English learning attitude factors are important predictors of English achievement of the participants?

(4) Are there any significant differences in English learning attitudes in terms of demographic variables such as gender, age, grade, ethnicity, home

location and school types?

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an empirical quantitative questionnaire survey method (Wen, 2001).

3.1 Sampling

A convenience sample was used and the questionnaire was administered to 372 students from 35 elementary and secondary schools in China. There are 161 (43.3%) senior high school students, 193 (51.9%) junior high school students and 18 (4.8%) elementary students, among whom 116 (44.6%) are boys and 206 (55.4%) are girls; 286 (76.9%) are Han the mainstream ethnic group and 86 (23.1%) are ethnic minority students; 286 (76.9%) are from villages, 86(23.1%) from townships, and 145(39.0%) from county seats or above. As for the participants' self-evaluated English proficiency, 82 (42%) participants rated poor, 141 (37.9%) of them rated average, 108 (29%) good and 41 (11%) excellent.

3.2 Instrument

This study used English Learning Attitude Scale designed by Schmidt & Watanabe (2001) and

Yichuan Yuan (2007). This questionnaire is composed of 18 items which belong to four factors, i.e, attitude toward ethnic identity, attitude toward foreign language and culture, attitude toward British and American people and attitude toward English study. Cronbach's Alpha of the 18 question items is .814, which means the reliability statistics of the questionnaire is very high.

3.3 Data Treatment

SPSS 22.0 was adopted to measure the data, in which Descriptive Statistics was used to find out the general situation of the participants' attitude toward English learning; Spearman Correlation Coefficient was utilized to spot the relationship between their English learning attitude and their English proficiency.

4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 General Situation of English Learning Attitude of the Participants

Table 1 shows the result of the mean value and std. deviation of the Descriptive Statistics of English leaning attitude.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics result of English learning attitude

Factor	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ethnic identity	372	2.33	5.00	3.9014	.46063
attitude to foreign culture and language	372	1.00	5.00	3.5484	.68213
attitude to British and American people	372	1.00	4.50	2.8817	.64620
attitude to English study	372	1.00	5.00	3.6317	.77276
Valid N (listwise)	372				

As is shown in Table 1, the mean of the responses to ethnic identity (mean=3.90, SD=.46 on 5-point scale) among the subjects is the highest, and the mean of attitude to English study (mean=3.63, SD=.77 on 5-point scale) is the second highest; the attitude to foreign culture and language (mean=3.55, SD=.68 on 5-point scale) comes the third; the mean of attitude to British and American people (mean=2.88, SD=.64) is the lowest. It means that the subjects' ethnic identity is strong; their attitude to English study and attitude

to foreign culture and language is relatively good, but attitude to British and American people is moderate.

4.2 The Relationship between English Learning Attitude and Self-Evaluated English Proficiency

The result of the Spearman Correlation Coefficient between English learning attitude and English achievement by the participants is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 Spearman Correlation Coefficient between English learning attitude and English achievement

			self-evaluated English proficiency	ethnic identity	attitude to foreign culture and language	attitude to British and American people	attitude to English study
Spearman's rho	self-evaluated English proficiency	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.139**	.303**	.132*	.320**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.007	.000	.011	.000
		N	372	372	372	372	372
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).							

As illustrated in Table 2, English achievement is significantly, positively but weakly correlated with attitude to English study ($r=.320, p=.000$) and attitude to foreign culture and language ($r=.303, p=.000$), and very weakly with ethnic identity ($r=.139, p=.007$) and attitude to British and American people ($r=.132, p=.011$). This result indicates that English

achievement and all the four factors of English learning attitude affect mutually but weakly.

The result of Model Summary of Linear Stepwise Regression of important attitudinal predictors of English proficiency between English learning attitude and English achievement by the participants is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3 Model Summary of Linear Stepwise Regression of important attitudinal predictors of English proficiency

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.325 ^a	.106	.104	.88296
2	.342 ^b	.117	.112	.87879
a. Predictors: (Constant), attitude to English study				
b. Predictors: (Constant), attitude to English study, attitude to foreign culture and language				

Table 3 displays the result of Linear Stepwise Regression in terms of English learning attitude. Self-evaluated English proficiency was used as dependent factor and the four attitude factors were employed as independent factors. As shown in the table, two factors entered the Model Summary, i.e., attitude to English study and attitude to foreign culture and language. The first factor explained 10.4% of English proficiency and the second factor affected 0.8% of English proficiency, and altogether these two factors contributed 11.2% of English proficiency.

4.3 The Significant Differences in English Learning Attitude in Terms of the Participants' Demographic Variables

The result of Independent Sampling T-test result of English learning attitude by sex among English learning attitude by the participants is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 Independent Sampling T-test result of English learning attitude by sex

Factor	Males		Female		F-value	p-value	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
1. Self ethnic identity	3.89	.50	3.91	.43	2.97	.76>.05	NS
2. Attitude to foreign language and culture	3.51	.76	3.58	.61	9.03	.300>.05	NS
3. Attitude to British and American people	2.83	.66	2.92	.63	2.18	.153>.05	NS
4. Attitude to English study	3.54	.83	3.70	.72	6.63	.048<.05	S

Table 4 shows the result of Independent Sampling T-test in English learning attitude related to gender. Table 4 indicates that there were no significant differences in ethnic identity ($p=.76>.05$), attitude to foreign culture and language ($p=.300>.05$), attitude to

British and American people ($p=.153>.05$) for both male and female subjects, which signifies that no matter whether they were boys or girls, they had the same/similar attitudes toward ethnic identity, attitude to foreign culture and language and attitude to British

and American people. But significant differences were found in terms of attitude to English study ($p=.048<.05$) for both sexes. This means that boys and girls held significantly different attitude toward English study. As illustrated in Table 4, both the female (mean=3.70) and male (mean=3.54) students held a relatively good attitude to English study, which

means the female subjects had a better attitude to English study than the male subjects.

The result of Mean value, F-value and P-value of different English proficiency level of the participants' English learning attitude in English learning attitude by the participants is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5 Mean value, F-value and P-value of different English proficiency level of the participants' English learning attitude

English proficiency level	Poor		Average		Good		Excellent		F-value	P-value	P-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Ethnic identity	3.73	.47	3.95	.44	3.97	.44	3.92	.50	5.151	.002	<.05
Attitude to foreign language and culture	3.20	.81	3.52	.61	3.78	.60	3.74	.55	14.003	.000	<.05
Attitude to British and American people	2.67	.72	2.95	.57	2.98	.63	2.82	.68	4.629	.003	<.05
Attitude to English study	3.17	.88	3.63	.70	3.89	.63	3.89	.71	217.343	.000	<.05

Table 5 indicates that there were significant differences in ethnic identity ($p=.002<.05$), attitude to foreign culture and language ($p=.000<.05$), attitude to British and American people ($p=.003<.05$) and attitude to English study ($p=.000<.05$) for the four groups of participants of self-evaluated English proficiency, which means they all had significantly different attitudes toward English learning attitude. As is indicated in Table 5, as for ethnic identity, significant differences existed among the four groups of poor, average, good and excellent. According to Table 5 in terms of ethnic identity, the good group got the highest scores (mean=3.96, SD=0.44), the average group had the second highest (mean=3.95, SD=.44), the excellent group scored the third (mean=3.92, StD=.50), and the poor group scored the lowest (mean=3.73, SD=.47). This result means that as for ethnic identity, the good group had the best attitude, the poor group had the poorest attitude among the four groups, and the excellent group and average group came out in between.

As is indicated in Table 5, as for attitude to foreign language and culture, significant differences existed among the four groups of poor, average, good and excellent ($p<.05$). According to Table 4 in terms of attitude to foreign language and culture, the good group got the highest scores (mean=3.78, SD=.60), the excellent group had the second highest (mean=3.74, SD=.55), the average group scored the third (mean=3.52, StD=.50), and the poor group

scored the lowest (mean=3.20, SD=.81). This result means that as for attitude to foreign language and culture, the good group had the best attitude, the poor group had the poorest attitude among the four groups, and the excellent group and average group came out in between.

As is indicated in Table 5, in terms of attitude to English study, significant differences existed among the four groups of poor, average, good and excellent ($p<.05$). According to Table 4 as for attitude to English study, the excellent group and good group got the same highest scores (mean=3.89, SD=.71; mean=3.89, SD=.63), the average group scored the second (mean=3.63, SD=.70), and the poor group scored the lowest (mean=3.17, SD=.88). This result means that as for attitude to English study, the excellent group and the good group had the best attitude, the poor group had the poorest attitude among the four groups, and average group came out in between.

No significant differences in English learning attitude in terms of school type, ethnic group, grades and home location were found.

5 CONCLUSION

In general, the participants' English learning attitude is generally positive except for attitude to British and

American people. Besides, there is a significant and positive but weak correlation between the participants' English proficiency and English learning attitude. Attitude to English study and attitude to foreign language and culture are the important predictors of the participants' English proficiency. Significant differences are found in English learning attitude in terms of gender and English proficiency level. Hopefully, this study will provide some helpful suggestions to improve school students' English learning attitude and motivation as well as their English proficiency.

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