



Zanjan University
English Language Department

**The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Attitudes
towards English Language Learning and their Inferencing
Ability in Reading Comprehension**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By

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To my parents for their love

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Abstract

The major focus of language learning and teaching theories has recently been on learner characteristics, especially the influence of non-linguistic factors on language attainment and a great deal of research has been conducted in this area. Due to the significance of such factors, the aim of this study was to explore the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards English language learning and their inferencing ability in reading comprehension. Investigating performance of these learners on inference test according to their gender and different linguistic contexts were secondary goals of the study. After the homogenizing process, a group of learners of both sexes were put in the final group. The attitude questionnaire and the inference test were administered in order to examine the learners' attitudes and inferencing ability respectively. In order to investigate the role of linguistic context, the inference test was then divided into two sub-tests of short and long passages. The results of the analyses for the collected data indicated a moderate positive correlation between the attitudes of the learners and their inferencing performance. The effect of linguistic context on inferencing turned out to be significant too. However, no significant difference was found between the mean scores of the males and females on the inference test.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Second/foreign language learning has witnessed considerable changes in the last few decades and the number of studies concerned with effects of learner traits such as learner attitudes toward learning a second/foreign language has increased considerably. This is in part, due to the fact that non-linguistic factors can strongly influence language learning. According to Clement, Dörnyei and Noels (1994), successful language learning is a multifaceted conception where these factors have a complex relationship and are probably influence students' attitudes and motivation towards language learning. Thus, these factors can increase language learners' interests and behaviors in classrooms which support or inhibit their language learning performance.

According to Ellis (1994), attitude is a significant factor in the success of the students in learning second/foreign language and learners themselves, can be affected by their own success. Thus, understanding learners' certain characteristics and the ways in which learners differ from one another has been a fundamental concern. In contrast, Cagnon (1974) in (Gardner, 1985) has put limited role to affective factors such as learners' attitudes in their language achievement.

On the other hand, studies on reading comprehension as one of the important skills involved in language learning and in the improvement of reading instruction and text materials have become more important in recent years. Graham and Oakhill (1996)

believe that a great portion of our comprehension of the text is derived from making inferences—a central component of skilled reading. Hence, making inference assists readers in driving implicit knowledge from what is explicitly stated which results in the formation of coherent mental representation.

The present study has tried to investigate the possible relationship between EFL learners' attitudes towards English language learning and their inferencing ability in reading comprehension in the context of foreign language learning. Moreover, the study has attempted to examine the role of gender and the linguistic context in learners' inferencing ability during reading.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Researchers have recently shifted their attention to the effects of learner characteristics such as their positive or negative attitudes as well as the relationship between these traits and learners' achievement in learning different aspects and components of a language. Researches carried out based on traditional social-psychological theory and methodology perspective (see Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret, 1997) or based on social constructionist approaches (see Siegal, 1996) have attempted to explain the relationship between socio-affective factors and second/foreign language acquisition.

In addition, a variety of variables such as language learners' educational system and classroom setting, social context, cultural background, and their gender have been regarded as essential parameters to be addressed in the investigation of attitude as well as learning differences (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Ehram & Oxford, 1995).

On the other hand, the importance of inferencing as a cognitive process and as one of the most important components involved in reading comprehension and the

learning process is undeniable. Paribakht (2005) also stresses the role of contextual factors and especially, the effect of linguistic context on learners' inferencing ability.

Taking the importance of all the mentioned variables into account, the existence of an appropriate mechanism for language teachers to improve inferencing and subsequently, the understanding of any discourse seems necessary. Hence, the present study has mainly aimed at further investigation of the possible relationship between language learners' attitudes towards English language learning and their inferencing ability in reading comprehension.

The study has also attempted to investigate the learners' performance on inference test according to their gender as well as different linguistic contexts from which the meaning is driven as its secondary purpose in order to provide more evidence for previous findings in this regard.

1.3 Significance of the Study

As in recent years, researchers and teachers have mainly focused on learner-oriented roles in language learning and have ceased to focus on abstract and rigid methods of language teaching, the interest in learners' cognitive and socio-affective factors as potentials to influence successful language learning has been increasing. Ustunluoglu (2004) believes that teachers who want to promote language learning among their students should consider the way learners produce knowledge rather than how they merely reproduce it.

The fact that language learners may face difficulty in learning different aspects of language is inevitable. Graesser, Singer and Trabasso (1994) remarks that this difficulty is more prominent in the case of reading comprehension and that for many learners, these comprehension problems are due to their attention deficiencies or attitudinal and motivational states. Campbell (1970) states that understanding the

foreign language is to acquire native speaker' competence in that language. He also believes that students' ability to learn a foreign language, for the most part, depends upon teachers to focus on learner capacities and differences and to provide them with opportunities to acquire native speaker competence. Hence, one cannot make any decisive statement about language learning skills—in this case the students' inferencing ability—without considering these factors. One of these factors is certainly the learner's attitudes and its association with linguistic abilities. Besides, investigating the role of linguistic context and gender in inferencing ability of the learners seems crucial to provide teachers with approaches to promote the understanding of English language texts in a productive way.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' attitudes towards English language learning and their inferencing ability in reading comprehension?
2. Is there any significant difference between male and female EFL learners in terms of their inferencing ability in reading comprehension?
3. Is there any significant difference in the performance of EFL learners in short and extended linguistic contexts in terms of their inferencing ability?

The following null hypotheses were formulated in line with the above research questions:

H₀ (1): There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' attitudes towards English language learning and their inferencing ability in reading comprehension.

H₀ (2): There is no significant difference between male and female EFL learners in terms of their inferencing ability in reading comprehension.

H₀ (3): There is no significant difference in the performance of EFL learners in short and extended linguistic contexts in terms of their inferencing ability.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms and Concepts

Attitude

Eiser (1986) remarks that attitudes are subjective evaluations of an issue which are communicated through language and people with different attitudes towards an object will differ in what they believe are true or false about it.

Inference

According to Chikalanga (1993), inferencing is a cognitive process one goes through to obtain the implicit meaning of a written text or any discourse.

Linguistic context

Linguistic context refers to the discourse that surrounds a language unit and helps to determine its interpretation.

EFL

EFL (English as a foreign language) refers to the use or study of English by people with a different native language in non-English contexts.

1.6 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Since this is a small-scale study, it suffers from some limitations. The most prominent limitations of this study are clarified here. This study has been merely confined to the learners' attitudes towards English language learning. Thus, other non-linguistic factors have been neglected. The selection of inferencing ability as one of the cognitive processes involved in reading comprehension is still another limitation. Only reading comprehension has been considered in this study, so the performance of learners on other language skills such as listening has not been dealt with. Any fluctuation in the learners' attitudes and inferencing performance due to linguistic

backgrounds (monolingualism, bilingualism, etc.), and background knowledge has not been considered too. The participants have been chosen from undergraduate students, majoring at English Translation in Zanjan University; therefore, other universities as well as other cities have been disregarded.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical bases and the importance of reading comprehension and inferencing as one of the skills involved, and EFL learners' attitudes towards English language learning. The researcher's purpose here is to review, to the extent possible, the findings of other researchers about the related issues and to provide information in line with the problem under discussion.

2.2 Attitude

2.2.1 The concept of attitude

There have been many definitions and interpretations presented to describe the concept of *attitude*. When measuring the attitude, social scientists essentially infer it on the basis of individuals' reactions to the evaluatively-worded belief statements. So, one operational definition views attitude as “an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individuals' beliefs or opinions about the referent” (Gardner, 1985, p. 9). Furthermore, Gardner (1985) refers to Allport's definition of attitude as “a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (1954, p. 45). Ito and Cacioppo (2007) define attitude as global and enduring tendency—either favorable or unfavorable—to react toward a stimulus or class of stimuli. With this definition, they introduce the term “implicit” and note that it has been applied to attitudes in at least

three different ways: “(1) when considering the lack of awareness of the information-processing operations that underlie attitudes, (2) when the attitude itself is implicit (i.e., non-verbalizable), and (3) when the attitude is implicitly measured” (p.126).

Differences between implicit and explicit attitudes have prompted the development of theories concerning the generation of evaluative information in memory more generally (Bassili & Brown, 2005). Largely on the basis of this research, the idea of *automatic attitudes* has come at work. There are three components of the definition of an automatic attitude. The first one concerns the attitude itself. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) present one of the most currently widely accepted definitions of attitude. In this definition, attitude is a psychological tendency expressed by a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of a particular entity. Similarly, Fazio (2001) argues that an attitude is developed as a result of the association in memory between an object and its positive or negative judgment. The second component considers the nature of the attitude object. According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), the only necessity for an object that is being evaluated is that it is discriminable and that attitude objects can consist of physical or concrete objects, individuals or groups of people, abstract ideals and values or issues and policies. The third component of the definition of an automatic attitude involves the implicit way in which the attitude is generated. As mentioned earlier, the implicit attitude is characterized as an unintentional and natural activation of an attitude. Explicit attitudes, in contrast, inevitably require the respondent’s awareness and control.

Simsek (2000) in (Hussein, Demirok and Uzunboylu, 2009) classifies attitude as an individual’s personal preferences and choices under certain circumstances. It seems difficult to explain the essence of attitude as this concept is too complex, but individual’s attitude toward a particular topic can be easily observed. Although attitudes

cannot be changed in to behavior, however, there is ample evidence to support the fact that they are indirectly related. For example, an individual's inclination to listen to a particular type of music or his/her tendency to keep away from a particular object as a result of negative attitude toward it.

In a research conducted by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), the relationship between the attitude of performing a particular behavior and the actual behavior is reflected by considering the factors which influence the magnitude of this relationship. They claim that the high extent of association between attitudes and behaviors exists when their elements correspond, namely, target, action, context, and time. Gardner (1985) believes that there is a range of relevance between attitudes and the behavior and these differing degrees of relevance is expected to influence the extent of the interactions of such attitudes with the corresponding behavior. This differing extent of correlations yet displays the relevance of the attitude to that behavior, not that of the concept of attitude to behavior.

According to Brown (2000), attitudes shape one's perception of self and others and develop early in childhood as the result of parents' and peers' attitudes, of contact with people who are different in any number of ways, and of interacting affective factors in the human experience.

2.2.2 Attitude measurements

By drawing on the significance of the brain as one of the organs of the mind, one can rely on psychological measures in order to have access to the implicit information-processing operations which underlie attitude judgments as they do not depend on individual's subjective awareness of the attitude. Cacioppo, Berntson, Lorig, Norris, Rickett and Nusbaum (2003) remark that neural processes involved in psychological measures which reflect the implicit attitude process, like other indirect measures of

attitude should be detectable without assuming that the individual has identified the indicator of implicit attitudes.

Among the most important developments in attitude research over the last two decades, the advent of measures in implicit manners has been more noticeable (see Bassili & Brown, 2005). These measures gauge the extent to which people evaluate a given stimulus as good or bad without having the awareness that their attitude toward the stimulus is being measured.

Implicit measurements of attitude are contrasted to the direct self-report methods. According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), implicit measures gauge attitudes indirectly, but self-report measures openly asking people to report their evaluations of certain stimuli. Even many of the subtle attitude measures developed in the 1970s and 1980s required people to explicitly and deliberately report their attitudes, such measures allow the respondents to provide strategic reactions to the object that is often without time constraints. Accordingly, as Rosenberg (1969) asserts, attitudes measured explicitly may reflect respondents' attempts at hiding their true feelings or giving way to what they think the experimenter wants them to feel. For example, the "bogus pipeline" measure of attitude developed by Jones and Sigall (1971) was on the assumption that people will intentionally report a more truthful attitude if they believe that any fabrication will be detected. Contemporary implicit measures that gauge people's attitude without their awareness, on the other hand, represent a dramatic departure from the ways in which attitudes have been measured over the last 100 years. Thus, in these two major types of attitude measures, the way in which evaluative information about the object is activated in memory differs. However, in both types of measures, the evaluation is assumed to refer to a single object.

The development of implicit measures was prompted by the extended evidence that explicitly measured attitudes are greatly influenced by the context in which they are assessed. For instance, Schwarz and Clore (1983) have demonstrated that people's explicit attitudes about the state of their marriages depend in part on whether it is sunny outside at the moment or as Salancik and Conway (1975) indicate, people self-report on an attitude questionnaire depends in part, on the nature of the preceding question. Thus, one can see that explicit attitudes are influenced by many contextual constraints such as observations of one's own behavior, current thoughts, mood, and demand effects. In other words, people may spontaneously construct their attitudes at the time of measurement rather than recalling and reporting preexisting attitudes in memory.

Considering the difficulties in interpreting data from explicit attitude measures, researchers began to search for more effective tools for the assessment of attitude. Implicit measures were first employed by Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell and Kardes (1986) to measure attitudes. The independence of implicit attitudes was to the point that such attitude measures were regarded as a potential "bona fide pipeline" to people's inner attitudes (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton & Williams, 1995). One of the genuine reasons for such an assumption is that implicit measures obtain people's attitudes outside their awareness and without any strategic control and modification. Implicit measures, on the other hand, as Wilson, Lindsey and Schooler (2000) claim are impervious to strategic intentions and are able to capture a constant and unchanging evaluation of an object. Hence, such attitudes are likely to provide more pure indications of how people feel toward the stimuli in their environment. Researchers in attitude theory therefore, initially grasped the view that implicit attitudes are context independent and stable indices of people's true evaluations of objects, people, places, and concepts (see Fazio, et al., 1995; Swanson, Rudman & Greenwald, 2001).