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**The Relationship between High School Students’
Achievements in English Course and their Attitudes
towards their EFL Teachers**

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CHAPTER ONE

Preliminaries

“Across all schools, the greatest obstacle to expanding language learning is seen as pupil attitudes.”

Ward, 2002 (as cited in Bartram, 2010, p. 2)

1.1. Introduction

Human beings react to their environments in an evaluative fashion. They maintain formative evaluations with regard to themselves as well as those around them. They evaluate others' attractiveness. They also evaluate and select leaders, decide how to spend their resources, and plan for the future they envision. Such covert and overt actions often involve judgments about whether objects, events, and individuals are favorable or unfavorable, likeable or unlikeable, good or bad. Scholars, who study attitude, investigate factors behind such evaluations, i.e., the way they are formed, changed, represented in memory, and transformed into cognitions, motivations, and actions (Albarracin, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005).

Many studies have demonstrated the significance of attitudes as key motivational components in foreign language learning. While attitudes towards learning in any field may rightfully be seen as important, considering the unique nature of language acquisition and the process of “acquiring symbolic elements of a different ethno-linguistic community” (Dornyei, 2001, p. 47) that language learning necessarily involves, their centrality in second/foreign language learning elevates their significance. Importing elements of another culture into one's own culture (ibid.) and the learners' willingness to allow this to happen will clearly be determined by their attitudes to a great extent (Bartram, 2010).

Chastain (1988) claimed that among the learner variables, the most influential ones were those related to emotions, attitudes, and personalities. She also believed that the affective domain played a remarkable role in developing second language skills than the cognitive one did, because the emotions control the will to activate or shut down the cognitive functions. According to her, if the students did not want to learn, they would either learn very little or perform less than their maximum capacity.

Stevick (1976) took the development of positive attitudes among the learners as the number one priority in ESL/EFL classes and maintained that “. . . fluency depends at least as much on emotional factors as on amount of practice” (Stevick ,1982, p. 27). Self-concept, attitude, perseverance, internal versus external locus of control, introversion versus extroversion, interests, and needs are among the affective variables that are involved in the development of second and foreign language (Chastain, 1988). The present study complies with the centrality of attitude and accordingly, revolves round the same topic.

As a learning construct, attitude has received considerable attention from both first and second language researchers; most researches have recognized learner attitude as an integral part of learning which has to be viewed from different perspectives in second/foreign language learning pedagogy. There are several reasons why research on students' attitudes towards language learning is important. Firstly, attitudes towards learning are believed to influence and shape behaviors such as selecting and reading books and speaking in a foreign language (Koballa & Crowley, 1985). Secondly, attitudes have proven to be closely linked with achievement. Schibeci and Riley (1986) reported evidence in support of the contention that attitudes influence achievement rather than the reverse.

Brown (2007) believed that:

Attitudes, like other aspects of cognitive and affective development originate early in childhood and are heavily influenced by parental as well as peer-group feedback, of contact with people who are different in any number of ways, and of interacting affective factors in the human experience. These attitudes form a part of one's perception of self, and of others (p. 192-193).

Gardner and Lambert's extensive studies (1972) were among the first systematic attempts to examine the effect of attitudes on language learning. After studying the interrelationships of a number of different types of attitudes, they defined motivation as a construct made up of certain attitudes. The most important of these is group specific; the attitude learners have towards the members of the cultural group whose language they are learning.

According to Brown (2007), language learners benefit from positive attitudes towards language, negative attitudes towards which lead to decreased motivation and, in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency. Yet the teacher needs to be aware that every learner has both positive and negative attitudes towards the target language and its speakers.

Negative attitudes towards the target language and its community are occasionally the result of one's indirect exposure to a culture or group through television, movies, news, media, books, and other secondary sources that might be less genuine. Such attitudes can be changed by exposure to real situations—for example, by encounters with natives of the language under question (Brown, 2007).

Students do not attend foreign language classes as *tabula rasa*. They bring with them certain conceptions with respect to the target language and the community of native speakers (Chamber, 1999). They are even likely to come to class with certain attitudes

about the language teacher and the class itself. They have probably developed predisposition either to cooperate or not to cooperate based on what they have heard about what the teacher is like, and they will expect the class to correspond to the image they have in their minds of a second-language class (Chastain, 1988).

The most important factor in the development of second-language skills is the learner (Chastain, 1988). However, the reality of language learning at schools is that learning tasks are generally introduced by another person, most often the teacher (Williams & Burden, 1997). Language teachers do play a crucial role as they establish goals, adopt textbooks, develop curricula, prepare lesson plans, conduct classes, set standards, and evaluate students' achievement. They set the tone for the class, coordinate the learning activities, and bear the responsibility for teaching the material. They guide the uncertain, support the faltering, and encourage all to persevere and succeed (chastain, 1988).

Two main factors can be seen as contributing to the learners' motivation to participate in the activities designed for language learning. The first is the personality of the person introducing the activity; all learners are likely to be influenced by their personal feelings about their teachers as well as the classroom interactions. In this way, teachers undoubtedly affect students' motivation to learn. The second factor pertains to the way in which materials and related activities are presented to the learner. Thus, the role of the teacher is remarkable at all stages of the motivational process (Williams & Burden, 1997).

It is widely accepted that an important predictor of success in foreign language learning is students' attitude towards the language teacher. In ESL/EFL contexts, students who have positive attitudes towards their teacher are less likely to suffer from

the anxiety associated with foreign language learning. Such students usually have higher levels of motivation, willingness to participate, and better L2 performance.

The argument is that whether EFL teachers' attitudes influence those of students' (Aiken, 1970; Larson, 1983), and that whether students' attitudes have a powerful influence on their learning (Evans, 1965; Khan & Weiss, 1973). In a considerable number of researches, a significant correlation was reported between students' attitudes towards their language teachers and their achievements in the target language (Begle, 1979; Bishop & Nickson, 1983; Schofield, 1981).

The serious concern in this regard is that language teachers often neglect the importance of students' emotions and attitudes when they set high standards for learning and try to increase test scores (Dodd, 2000). Pedagogical experts, accordingly, try to utilize the emotional power of attitudes to improve students' performance and overall academic achievement. (Karpicke & Murphy, 1996)

1.2. Purpose of the Study

There could be many variables contributing to learners' low achievement from in-school to out-of-school and from cognitive to affective parameters. A large number of studies have addressed such variables. Research on the affective domain, attitudinal factors, and learner variables has gained prominence in second and foreign language acquisition for a number of decades. According to Dodd (2000); Buckley, Storino, and Sebastini (2003), it is very important to assess language learners' perception of their teachers, of their classmates and of the atmosphere of the school in order to determine the particular needs of the specific learners and address some of the social/affective concerns in this regard. The present study takes the attitudinal factor as its focus and tries to uncover its relationship with students' English achievement. Gardner and Lambert were among the first to do systematic research in this regard (Brown, 2007),

but the present study approached the issue from a different perspective. Gardner and Lambert's study (1972) examined learners' attitude towards language learning and the community of target language. The present study, however, investigates high school students' attitude towards their EFL teacher and its relationship with English language achievement.

In particular, the present study is carried out to fulfill the following purposes:

- To reveal if there is any significant relationship between high school students' achievement in English course and their attitudes towards their EFL teachers.
- To explore whether there is any significant difference between high and low achievers in terms of their attitudes towards their EFL teachers.
- To investigate the difference between male and female learners regarding their attitudes towards their EFL teachers.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

The humanistic and psychological shift of focus from the teacher and teaching materials to the learner has led the researchers to detect and identify the learner variables which appear to be responsible for success or failure in second and foreign language learning among which the most noticed ones are age, intelligence, aptitude, cognitive style, personality, attitude, and motivation (Khanna, A. L., Verma, M. K., Agnihotri, R. K., & Sinha, S. K., 1998).

Providing foreign language learners with a quality education is a value near and dear to the hearts and minds of parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and the community at large. Many educational experts tend to allocate time and practice not only to improve learners' academic achievement, but also to design programs that address the emotional needs of students (Miller, 2008). Almost all language teaching contexts are after administering educational curricula which lead to higher achievement

on the part of the learners. But, not everything in the garden is rosy; there are obstacles which impede the learners' progress. In Iran, the setting of the present study, English language is presented at secondary schools as an obligatory course. It is being taught two sessions a week and each session takes one and a half hour. Textbooks contain exclusively prescribed materials from which the students must learn English. The classes are almost dominated by the teacher (Kariminia & Salehizadeh, 2007).

According to Noora (2008), the culture of teaching in Iran is primarily teacher-centered; and accordingly, there are limited opportunities for learners to have their say about their expectations of a good and effective teacher. What is apparent from the general trend of foreign language teaching in Iran is that, Iranian students do not learn English satisfactorily and they suffer from low achievement. This claim can be verified by having a look at students' final exam scores administered nationwide at the end of grade three of high school and their English test scores in university entrance examination. The researcher himself who had years of experiences in teaching English to high school students, observed the same problem. In spite of his adopting up-to-date methods and strategies the majority of the students did not do well in final exams.

1.4. Significance of the Study

Research on the affective domain in second and foreign language acquisition has been mounting steadily for a number of decades. The present research has been inspired by a number of factors, among which is the fact that linguistic theory is now pointing to the deepest possible questions about human language, with some applied linguists examining the inner being of the person to discover the possible answers. Since, it is assumed that in the affective side of human behavior, there lies a possible explanation to the mysteries of language acquisition (Brown, 2007).

In the absence of strict guidelines regarding teaching English language in the era of post method pedagogy, language teachers are left to decide on their own to organize and conduct language classes. What EFL teachers do in class remains unknown because no observation of any form takes place in high school classes in our own setting. So the learners, their needs, their feedback to the instructions and their attitude towards the teacher are neglected. Because of such neglect of an integral part of the learning process, the educational goal is not met appropriately.

The purpose of education is student growth (Chastain (1988)). Basically, teacher responsibility entails intellectual and academic growth which may not be fully achieved if students' affective needs are not met. Fortunately, in recent years, the importance of affective variables in learning and the role teachers play in fostering academic growth have received increased attention and the present research has the privilege of studying teacher-related attitudinal factors that contribute to learners' academic achievement.

To the best knowledge of the researcher, the number of the studies addressing EFL learners' attitudinal factors is limited in Iranian educational setting. This study tends to uncover the relationship between high school students' achievement in English course and their attitudes towards their EFL teachers so that the educational experts can better identify and tackle the problems related to low achievement in English pedagogy. Similarly, EFL teachers and those who are in charge of educational reforms can draw on the results of this study.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to study the learners' attitudes towards their English language teachers in a teacher-centered setting like Iran. Since it serve as learners' needs analysis and provides the learners with an opportunity to have their say and express their expectations of their EFL teachers. It, on the other hand, helps EFL teachers to improve the quality of their teaching to meet their students' needs. In other

words, in the process of language teaching and learning, getting informed about the opinions of learners will help teachers to better live up to their learners expectations (Babai Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009).

1.5. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following questions are addressed in this research:

1. Is there any significant relationship between high school students' English language achievement and their attitudes towards their EFL teachers?
2. Is there any significant difference between high achievers and low achievers in terms of their attitudes towards their EFL teachers?
3. Is there any significant difference between male and female students regarding their attitudes towards their EFL teachers?

On the basis of the above questions, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

H01: There is no significant relationship between high school students' English language achievement and their attitudes towards their EFL teachers.

H02: There is no significant difference between high and low achievers in terms of their attitudes towards their EFL teacher.

H03: There is no significance difference between male and female students with respect to their attitudes towards their EFL teachers.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms are used in this study:

1.6.1. Attitude. In this study, attitude is conceived of as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.1).

1.6.2. Language achievement. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), Language achievement is a learner's mastery, in an ESL/EFL field, of what has been taught or learned after a period of instruction.

1.7. Delimitations of the Study

One of the most severe limitations was the restrictions imposed by the educational offices and school authorities on the conduction of the research in high schools especially among girls because permission had to be obtained from Educational Administration which took a long time. Also the content of the questionnaire designed for the present research had to be inspected by the officials in charge for any probable incongruity concerning the Iranian setting. Another practical limitation placed by the school administration was due to the regulations stipulating the confidentiality of the students' records. As a result, most of high school authorities did not easily provide the researcher with much information about their students and their final term scores. In addition, the researcher did not have control over the participants who took the tests. The researcher did not also have control either over students' drop-outs before the end of the term or their absence when the tests were administered. These limitations reduced the sample of the study. However, a random sample of 160 students was selected from 6 high schools of Kaleibar, Khodaafarin, and Pars Abad districts of Eastern Azerbaijan and Ardebil. So, the generalizability of the research results would be proportional to the size of the population. .

More reliable results would be gained if the study was conducted in a greater number of high schools from different parts of Eastern Azerbaijan and Ardebil. Furthermore, the correlation between attitude and achievement can be investigated best through a longitudinal study rather than through conducting a questionnaire in a very

limited period of time since participants' responses can be changeable from time to time depending on the environmental and their specific individual factors.

1.8. Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a second language

AMTB: Attitude/Motivation Test Battery

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the theoretical background as well as existing viewpoints among attitude researchers. It also discusses the contribution of attitude studies to second/foreign language pedagogy. The relationship between attitude and language achievement, attitude vs. gender, and different types of attitude are also relevant issues that are considered.

2.2. The Concept of Attitude

Eagly & Chaiken (as cited in Albarracín, Johnson, & Zanna, 2005) believed that in the relatively long history of attitude theory and research, the potential breadth of the field seemed not to be fully realized by the scope of the research undertaken. Two reasons for this limitation stood out among others. First, many problems were inherently attitudinal such as the study of prejudice or interpersonal attraction. Second, most attitude researchers concentrated on a particular set of issues that remained encapsulated mainly within social psychology. For example, during the early history of attitude research, there was much interest in whether and how attitudes could be measured.

Although attention to assessment constituted a healthy beginning and helped attitude research to gain scientific credibility, these assessment advances did not consistently prove their worth in studies of attitudes the practitioners of which, often adopted relatively casual measurement practices. Subsequent attitude research, stimulated by World War II, came to focus on persuasion and attitude change, to the neglect of other

attitudinal topics (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). These efforts were widely admired by many social psychologists but did not hold center stage within psychology as a whole. Somewhat later, after attitude researchers were challenged by an apparent deficit in attitude ability to predict behavior, many moved forward to the critical psychological issue of how behavior can be predicted and what processes mediate between attitude and behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein as cited in Albarracín et al., 2005). Although the achievements of attitude-behavior research are formidable, its scientific profile within psychology as a whole has been modest.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of attitude has been a major concern of social psychology and has accordingly been defined in a multitude of ways. It is difficult to reach a definition that satisfies all the scholars in the field because hundreds of definitions exist in the literature.

Although definitions of attitude have varied throughout history, if one inspects how scholars have operationalized the concept of attitude, it will become clear that evaluative aspects have always played the prominent role in attitude conceptualization (Bogardus, 1931; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Katz, 1960; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986; Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Thurstone, 1928).

As early as 1901, Baldwin (1901) defined attitude as “. . . readiness for attention or action of a definite sort” (p. 11). Thurstone (1931) described attitude as “. . . the affect for or against a psychological object” (p. 261). By the 1950s, a multi-component view of attitude had been adopted and attitudes were viewed as constructs consisting of the person's beliefs about the object, feelings towards the object, and action tendencies with respect to the object (Allport, 1954).

The list of definitions increased as the number of theorists and researchers dealing