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PERSONALITY TRAITS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING ATTITUDES AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine out the existing language attitudes among first year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) college students using five personality traits namely self-image, inhibition, risk-taking, ego-permeability and tolerance for ambiguity as language attitude indicators. In addition, the challenges that EFL teachers have in dealing with developing language attitudes among EFL students as well as factors that may influence the formation of language attitudes among students were also unravelled. Besides student-survey, interviews with EFL teachers and student participants were also conducted to gain more comprehensive insights into EFL students' attitudes with regards to EFL learning. The results indicated that the participants demonstrated low self-image, high inhibition, low risk-taking, high ego-permeability and low tolerance for ambiguity in learning EFL. The findings from teacher and student interviews were congruent with the personality traits that emerged from the survey data. Discussion was focused on how instruction may help improve EFL learners' language attitudes towards EFL learning.

Abstrak

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk memeriksa atitud pembelajaran bahasa dalam kalangan pelajar kolej tahun pertama kursus Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Kajian ini menggunakan lima personaliti iaitu imej diri, kesekatlakuan, sanggup ambil risiko, ketertelapan ego dan toleransi terhadap kesamaran. Ke lima-lima personaliti ini mewakili sikap pelajar di dalam mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris. Selain itu, kajian ini juga cuba mencungkil masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh tenaga pengajar Bahasa Inggeris disebabkan sikap pelajar yang kurang positif di dalam mempelajari bahasa asing. Faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi sikap pelajar juga dikaji. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah soal selidik dan temubual dengan tenaga pengajar Bahasa Inggeris serta beberapa responden yang terlibat dalam kajian ini.

Pelbagai kaedah digunakan di dalam proses pengumpulan data dengan tujuan untuk mendapatkan hasil kajian yang lebih menyeluruh berkaitan perhubungan antara sikap pelajar dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar yang mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini mempunyai imej diri yang rendah, kesekatlakuan yang tinggi, ketertelapan ego yang tinggi, toleransi terhadap kesamaran yang rendah dan tidak berani mengambil risiko di dalam mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris. Dapatan kajian daripada temubual bersama guru dan pelajar adalah setara dengan dapatan dari kaji selidik. Fokus perbincangan dari hasil dapatan adalah tertumpu kepada bagaimana pengajaran dapat membantu memperbaiki sikap pelajar di dalam mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris.

INTRODUCTION

Before the 1960's, attitudes were regarded as unimportant variables to be studied in relation to language learning. During this period, the behaviourist approach to learning was very much in vogue. Since language learning was seen as the study of behaviour, cognitive or mental activity was denounced as mentalism, a construct which was perceived as cannot be measured. However, language attitudes have gained much interest especially among researchers in the field of Psychology. The findings of studies among psychologists on the roles of attitudes in language learning have acquired the attention of many language acquisition researchers regarding the importance of this internal construct in affecting language learning process and performance. In the early 1960's, language researchers began to attribute the importance of examining the cognitive aspects of learning. Studies (e.g., Lambert, et al. 1960) on bilingualism and immersion schooling had led to interest in how attitudes might affect language learning. Subsequently, many studies were conducted to examine the influence of language attitudes on second language (L2) learning in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). However, within the notion of foreign language learning, affects such as attitudes have not gained much attention particularly among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) researchers (Yamashita, 2005).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Within the psychological perspectives, 'attitude' may be defined as mental and neutral state of readiness, which abstract formation is organised by one's experiences that wields a directive or dynamic influence upon individuals' response to related objects and situations (Allport, 1935). Relating this description to language learning, Penalosa (1981) defined language attitude as a mental construct which covers all the values, beliefs and emotional aspects in relation to the target language (Penalosa, 1981). These psychological constructs in the forms of values, beliefs, and emotions may often be manifested behaviourally such as refusal towards learning by deliberately withdrawing participation in the target language or on the contrary demonstrating participatory behaviours.

Gardner and Lambert (1959) highlighted that attitudes play a significant role in learning another language. In a similar vein, Spolksy (1969) also agreed that one of the most important predispositions of L2 learning is the attitudes of the learner towards the language and its speakers. Findings of studies (e.g., Gardner, 1965a; Larsen-Freeman, 1991) have shown that one's social-psychological factors (such as attitude and motivation) play a significant role in ensuring the success of learning another language. In another study, Ngeow (1998) found that attitudes linearly affect motivation for learning. Since motivation is important to sustain learning and attitudes have been evidenced to may have a causal relationship with motivation, this increases the importance to study learners' attitudes.

Not only that attitudes influence motivation, but studies have also demonstrated that attitudes significantly correlate with L2 learners' performance in the new language. Oller, et al. (1977) investigated the relationship between attitudes and attained proficiency in English among a population of Chinese participants in the United States. The result of the study revealed that positive attitudes toward self and toward members of the native language group correlated with higher scores on the ESL proficiency test. If positive attitudes are correlated with better proficiency, negative attitudes may be concluded to have adverse effects on learners' proficiency. From statistical point of view, the more linear the relationships between two variables the more independently

the two variables are correlated without being significantly influenced by other factors. Therefore, in the case of attitudes and proficiency, the linear relationship framework suggests attitudes to be predominant in affecting proficiency, which makes it an influential variable.

In lieu of the view derived from past studies, more studies have been conducted in order to further unravel the relationship between language learning attitudes and L2 proficiency. To obtain the overview of attitude-proficiency notion, Krashen (1981a), who is well-known for his Affective Filter Hypothesis synthesized findings of studies on affects and concluded that attitudes and proficiency in L2 would be strongest when learners' affective filter is low, a situation that allows adequate intake for acquisition. Negative attitudinal factors in learners may result in the conditions under which learners may psychologically and cognitively refuse to enable intake from input exposure. When such a condition occurs, attitude may negatively influence the success of learning process which may subsequently affect opportunity for learners to improve proficiency via efficient and sufficient intake.

In a different study, Saville-Troike (1988) found that students who had active and competitive coping styles, and a more positive attitude toward learning EFL achieved better in school, a finding which corroborates with the findings of previous studies. The effects of attitudes on language learning were also found in several other studies (Celce-Murcia, et al. 1996; Crismore, et al. 2007; Gillete, et al. 1994; Henry & Apelgren, 2008; Kuldip, 1995). Since much evidence suggests that attitudes influence language learning, many L2 researchers emphasize explicit attention on students' attitudes (Weaver 1996; Camp, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1995). Walqui (2000) expressed the same agreement of the role of attitude in L2 learning. According to Walqui (2000), 'language attitudes in the learner, the peer group, the school, the neighbourhood, and society at large can have such enormous effect on the second language learning process, both positive and negative'[1].

Considering the role of this internal construct in affecting language learning and performance, the issue of attitudes deserves further investigation in various EFL contexts. In contrast to previous studies, this study examined how EFL learners' language attitudes in terms of their language learning personality traits such as self-image, inhibition, risk-taking, ego-permeability, and tolerance for ambiguity may

influence EFL learning. Since these personalities related to language attitudes have not been previously investigated particularly within the context of EFL in Malaysia, this study attempted to unravel learners' language attitudes in terms of the respective language personality traits among EFL adult learners in the Malaysian context.

METHODOLOGY

In obtaining data on students' language learning attitudes, a survey was administered to student-participants. Besides student-survey, interviews with EFL teachers and student-participants were also conducted. The interviews with student-participants were conducted in the participants' native language while interviews with teachers were carried out in English. In this study, language attitudes refer to five language personality traits; self-image, inhibition, risk-taking, tolerance for ambiguity, and ego-permeability. The study pursued the following research questions:

1. What are the types of language attitudes among developing EFL learners?
2. What are the factors that may affect language attitudes?
3. What are the challenges that EFL teachers face with regards to students' language attitudes?

Participants

The participants were 86 first year EFL students in the Islamic Studies program at a public institution in Malaysia. Since this study concerned with language attitudes among developing EFL learners, students who obtained below average EFL grade (grade C and below) were invited to participate in the study. In term of EFL assessment, students at this institution are assigned letter grades from A to E. Within the context of this study, in determining the participants' EFL level of proficiency, students who obtained cumulative grades A and B were considered as being above average while those with cumulative grades C to E were grouped as below average. Therefore, only students who obtained grade

C and below on the final EFL standardized test developed by EFL experts at the institution, meet the participants' criteria for the study. The participants were heterogeneous in gender and SES status, but homogeneous in terms of EFL general ability as well as first language background. One hundred and twenty students were identified to be in the below average proficiency group. However, only 85 students participated in the study.

Data Collection

In order to obtain data on student participants' language attitudes, a survey was administered to the participating students using untimed response. The participants were allowed to take as much time as needed to respond to the questionnaire. All participants were required to surrender the questionnaires upon completion. Interviews with EFL teachers as well as with a number of participating students were carried out at the conclusion of the study to acquire data on challenges.

Instruments

The data on language attitudes were acquired from a self-constructed questionnaire comprising 27 statements which reflect the five personality traits. For each item, five options using a Likert-scale were used (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). Since the questionnaire was to obtain data on students' language attitudes and not on language performance, the questionnaire items were presented in the participants' native language. By using the native language, more accurate responses were expected to be obtained and therefore the issue of participants' language proficiency with regard to the appropriate understanding of the questionnaire items could be minimized. Therefore, more accurate data could be acquired for better interpretation. The instrument has reliability of 0.73 and content validity of 0.81. Based on the comments of the EFL experts who carried out the reliability and content validity procedures, the instrument was further revised. Any disagreement on the questionnaire items was resolved via discussion.

Methods of Analysis

For the survey, each answer option in the questionnaire was assigned with a score ranging from 1-5 using Likert Scale; Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Not Sure (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1). The scores under each personality traits were totalled up and ranked in 4 categories as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 : Rank of Frequency Scores

Rank	Score Range
HIGH	48 – 64
ABOVE AVERAGE	36 – 47
AVERAGE	16 – 35
LOW	0 - 15

Table 2 : Personality Trait Indicator

Personality	Score	Language Attitude
Self-image	BS	Low self-esteem
	AS	High self-esteem
Risk-taking	BS	Risk-adverse
	AS	Risk-taking
Inhibition	BS	Extrovert
	AS	Inhibited/Introvert
Ego-permeability	BS	Admissive
	AS	Resistant
Tolerance for ambiguity	BS	Impatient
	AS	Patient

KEY: BS=Below Average Score AS=Above Average Score

As indicated by Table 2, the questionnaire items were grouped into ten types of personality traits. Below average score in self-image indicates low self-esteem or lack confidence in language learning. On the other hand, above average score in self-image is considered as an indication of participants having more self-confidence in learning the

target language. Below average score for items that suggest risk-taking trait was coded as the participants being risk-adverse or reservation in attempting the target language and a higher score represents participants' willingness to take risk and attempt the new language. Below average score for inhibition indicates learners' introvert personality or lack participation in the language learning process while score below average suggests more extrovert language learning personality. Learners are considered as admissive to learning from mistakes when their scores are below average. However, above average scores for ego-permeability imply resistant to learning from mistakes or desire for perfection. The perseverance to tolerate language ambiguities is essential for sustained language learning. Therefore, those who obtain below average score for this trait are considered as having less patience and those who obtain above average score is perceived as having more sustained determination in dealing with language ambiguities.

The data acquired from classroom observations, student, and teacher interviews were analyzed qualitatively and triangulated with the data obtained from student survey.

FINDINGS

The data obtained on student survey were analyzed using percentages as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3 : Tabulation of Frequency Counts

Types / Range	0-15 (Low)	16 – 35 (Average)	36 – 47 (Above Average)	48 –64 (High)
	Below Average		Above Average	
Self-Image	0	53	32	0
Inhibition	1	31	49	5
Risk-Taking	17	55	13	0
Ego Permeability	0	3	41	41
Ambiguity *	54	19	0	13

* Tolerance For Ambiguity

Table 4 : Language Attitudes

Traits	Language Attitude	Below Average (%)	Language Attitude	Above Average (%)
Self-Image	Low Self-Esteem	62	High-Self Esteem	38
Inhibition	Extrovert	37	Introvert	63
Risk-Taking	Risk-Adverse	85	Risk-Taking	15
Ego Permeability	Admissive	4	Resistance	96
Ambiguity *	Impatient	85	Patient	15

* Tolerance For Ambiguity

Table 4 indicates that majority of the participants have low self-esteem, are highly introvert or inhibited, are primarily risk-adverse, are substantially resistance to learning from mistakes, and have low tolerance in dealing with language ambiguities.

Student Interviews

From the interviews, the participants reported that EFL is hardly spoken at home. In addition, some participants have none printed materials in EFL in their homes. The participants also reported that their parents expect them to perform better on other subjects rather than EFL. They also prefer to watch television programmes in Malay than in English as they can understand them better. Besides, their parents also preferred Malay programmes. When asked if they prefer to receive a book in EFL as a gift in comparison to receiving other things, they chose the latter.

It is also not customary for the participants to use EFL when interacting with their peers. Many of the participants do use English with their peers unless they are very sure. Otherwise, they claimed that they might be ridiculed by their peers for highly accented pronunciation, mispronunciation, or if their peers are able to detect mistakes in their speech.

In terms of instruction, the participants felt that their EFL classes were dry and therefore, EFL is their least favourite. They also felt that they do not play any significant roles in EFL lessons. Some participants claimed that they spent a major part of their EFL lessons listening to teacher-talk. Only one participant commented that he would drop EFL course at all educational levels if he were given a chance to design the language policy.

Teacher Interviews

On average, about 75 percent of EFL teachers who were interviewed strongly agreed that the participants demonstrated low-self esteem, risk-adverse, introvert, resistance, and less tolerance for language ambiguities. Among the most frequent comments made were least participatory, did not do homework, regularly did not bring materials to class, showed disinterest in EFL lesson, and poor quality assignments. In response to instructional design questions, majority of the teachers claimed that their lessons were communicative in nature with focus on maximizing students' involvement and engagement.

DISCUSSION

Results from this study showed that majority of the participants have low self-confidence, unwilling to take risks, highly inhibited, considered that the target language should be attempted with perfection, and did not have sufficient tolerance for language ambiguities. Learners, as concluded by Prodomou (1994), are people who have feelings, and these feelings can either lower or raise their barrier to language learning.

Low self-esteem may lead to low self-efficacy. Alderman (1999) categorized learners with low self-esteem as the ones with weaker self-efficacy and always being doubtful about their own capabilities. When learners do not believe in their own potentials, this may gradually hurt the effectiveness of language learning process. According to Diener and Dweck (1978), learners who are lacking in self-esteem will gradually enter the phase of deterioration in cognitive performance. When learners are feeling insecure about their own learning capabilities, they build

defence mechanism and develop weaker self-esteem which causes them to experience learning blocks (Rao Zhenhui, 1999). In effect, learners' language performance might be severely affected. Learners would rather risk a poor grade than a poor image (Veroff, et al. 1971; Stoller & Grabe, 1993). Lack of positive self-image may also cause substantial learning anxiety. This debilitating high-anxiety state causes the learner to flee from the learning task in order to avoid the source of anxiety (Scovel, 1978). Students who feel good about themselves are more likely to succeed and have better self-confidence in language learning (Holly, 1987). Therefore, the issue of learners with low self-esteem should be properly addressed in order to insure that learner resources that come from within can be manipulated to scaffold learning.

Apart from self-esteem issue, inhibition is another language attitude that deserves attention. Rubin (1975) argued that a good language learner is the one who is less inhibited. In lieu of this view, inhibition may retard the potential transformation to become good language learners. Inhibited learners with thick, perfectionist boundaries find language learning more difficult than those learners with thin boundaries who favour attitudes of openness and the tolerance for ambiguity (Ehrman, 1993). Not only that inhibition affects learners' tolerance for language ambiguities, studies have also shown that inhibition also nurtures risk-adverse attitude. This indicates that inhibition may lead to the development of other negative language attitudes. Pavli's (1997) contended that the defensiveness associated with inhibition would later discourage learners from being risk-takers, a trait which is necessary for rapid progression in language learning.

Skehan (1989) argued that risk-taking plays an important role in the actual use of a target language. Besides inhibition that develops risk-adverse attitudes, learners' decision to attempt the new language is often influenced by the reaction of their peers concerning their performance when attempting the language. Pavli (1997) asserted that learners are often intimidated by what their peers may think of them and as a result learners become lack of confidence and often fear that they may commit a mistake in front of their peers. Their egocentrism results in failure to understand the concept that making mistakes are actually part of the learning process, where comparisons can be made and thus result in better understanding of the language (Krashen, 1981a). This

threatening peer community environment exerts peer pressure that is undesirable in language learning context. Studies have shown that such peer pressure may highly influence learners' risk-taking behaviour and subsequently restrict any language practices (Chapelle, 1983; Naiman et. al., 1978). Krashen (1981a) supported the effect that unsupportive learning community often causes learners to be overpowered by their self-consciousness and resorting to greater inhibition as avoidance strategy of language use. The desire to perform in perfection allows self-ego to permeate into learners' psychological beliefs that language should be attempted upon acquiring proficiency and competency. As a result, these learners are afraid to make necessary mistakes involved in language learning, as it would threaten their ego (Brown, 1978). Students are often frequently threatened by negative feedback from others (Baumeister, et al. 1996) that causes them to be unwilling to take risk by attempting the new language. Learners' choice to protect their self-ego for perfection is actually at the expense of learning opportunities. In other words, they deprive themselves from taking advantage of learning opportunities when they arise.

Majority of the participants also have low tolerance for language ambiguity. Littlewood (2000) concurred that if learners can tolerate uncertainty without feeling insecure or confused they are less likely to feel overwhelmed by the large amounts of strange material they must face when learning a target language. On the contrary, according to Pavli (1997), learners who are intolerant of ambiguity perceive confusion and difficulty as sources of threat. Therefore, learners with low tolerance for ambiguity (syntactical, lexical and semantical ambiguity) may choose to avoid dealing with uncertainties and do not actively search for possible solutions. When this occurs, they may simply abandon the language. The reinforcement of this action each time learners face with language uncertainties may strengthen the internalization of their intolerance in dealing with ambiguities.

The language attitudes reflected from student participants' survey responses are congruent with EFL teachers' perceptions concerning the attitudes of their low performing students in EFL. Besides obtaining information from teachers on students' attitudes, the interview with teachers was also aimed at acquiring data of the challenges that they face in relation to students' language attitudes. Students' poor language

attitudes translated to them treating EFL learning as of mere value in comparison to learning other subjects. Refusal to participate in class nurtured inhibition may injure the effectiveness and efficiency of instruction. Getting students to volunteer or respond to the teacher's prompt was time-consuming. As a result, oftentimes, instructional objectives could not be fully achieved because much time was spent on getting students to cooperate. According to Littlejohn (2000), poor language attitudes may cause learners to underestimate their capabilities which may result in learners refraining from participating in classroom activities. Lack cooperation from students may also cause instruction to be dysfunctional. In effect, instructional objectives could be severely handicapped. Over the long run, this situation may develop frustration on the teachers' part. Considering that the EFL grouping at the institution was based on students' academic area and not EFL ability, the teachers also voiced their concern that students with poor attitudes affect instruction adversely which subsequently impact learning opportunity of other students who are enthusiastic to learn EFL.

In addition to teacher interview, student interview was projected towards getting insights into factors that may influence students' language attitudes within home and school domains. Students' responses in the interviews suggested that their attitudes towards EFL may be influenced by lack parental support, least stimulating home ethos to promote EFL learning, parents' adverse attitudes towards the importance of learning English, lack peer support in and outside the classrooms, and instruction that failed to capture students' interest. It is interesting to note the difference between teachers' perception of the effectiveness of their instructional design and students' unfavourable perception of EFL lessons. Instruction should be designed to assist learners to improve performance, which aim should be parallel to instructional objective. When instruction fails to practically include learners as active agents towards achieving instructional goal, this indicates incongruent relationship between learner and instruction, the nature of which should be emerged.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that the participants as EFL learners have unfavourable language attitudes. Gardner (1983) pointed that learners' attitudes are the main factor that contribute to the success of acquiring a new language. Hence, in ensuring the success of language learning processes, it is vital for teachers to assist their learners to develop positive language learning dispositions (Chi, 1988; Pressley et. al, 1987). These dispositions include traits such as high motivation, risk-taking attitudes, mindfulness or attentiveness, and a sense of responsibility for learning (Salomon & Perkins, 1988). According to McClelland (1985) and Alschuler (1980), students who score in the target language are those who have positive attitudes toward the language. Therefore, it is important for teachers to identify their learners' attitudes at the beginning of the school year. There are many ways to acquire data on students' attitudes. One way is to administer language attitudes survey as well as keeping anecdotal record from daily observation, information that can be integrated into instructional designs. Having information on learners' attitudes may enable teachers to construct their instructional design around their learners. In other words, building close ties between instruction components and learner factor.

Nonetheless, prior to discussing instructional design, it is also of highly significance that teachers create classroom community at the very beginning. As shown in this study, threatening peer community is one of the factors that influenced negative language attitudes. Therefore, by building an intact classroom community, learning security can be enhanced. Teacher should make their learners understand the concept of supporting one another for learning to succeed for every member of the classroom community. When learners have the awareness of the importance of sustaining a secure learning environment, they will learn to not only cooperate, but acknowledge their peers' strengths and support improvement effort of their weaknesses.

Shaaban (2001) contended the importance of nurturing positive dispositions by helping learners to alleviate their level of anxiety in order to increase linguistic accuracy as well as increasing learning security via interactive and communicative lessons. However, merely devising communicative lessons may not directly remedy poor

attitudes. For inhibited learners, introducing communicative activities as a sudden change may further intimidate these learners. The issue of learning readiness should be taken into account when designing classroom activities to fight inhibition. One of the possible solutions is to use transitional communicative activities which degree of learner participation is gradually increased in each subsequent activity. Distributed participation requirement of ascending degree in nature will allow learners to increase the amount of participation in developmental manner. Therefore, learners' more participatory trait is subconsciously cultivated over time. Gradual permeation of positive traits may simultaneously reduce learning resistance, lower ego permeability, develop risk-taking trait, and build more tolerance for uncertainties in dealing with the target language. Teachers must also bear in mind that accommodating learners' needs and preferences is vital in designing a learner-centred curriculum (Nunan, 1989).

CONCLUSION

Considering the potential influence language attitudes may have on the effectiveness of EFL learning, this factor deserves appropriate attention especially among EFL instructors. The findings of this study which also support past studies provide evidence that positive attitudes affect language learning positively while negative attitudes adversely influence the learning process and outcomes. One of the practical conducts to combat negative language attitudes is by using instruction as a vehicle to nurture good language learning predispositions. However, effective pedagogy does not simply equate to good teaching. Instead, it is also defined by the extent to which instruction productively revolves around learners and an extant capacity of how instruction forms learning, an outcome which translates to the fulfilment of teacher-learner instructional objectives. Thus, a good instructional design is the one that takes into account learner-related variables into the pedagogical framework. Finally, it takes passion and dedication for a successful implementation because nurturing attitudes is developmental in nature.

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