

Undergraduate Students' Attitudes towards Studying English as a Specialization: The Case Study of Jordanian EFL Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate undergraduate students' attitudes towards studying English as a specialization in terms of attitude toward English-speaking people, the emotional aspect of attitude, interest, and motivation. It also aimed to explore if there were any significant differences between students' responses according to gender, study year, grade point average and the type of school they graduated from. To this end, a questionnaire survey was administered upon a total of 190 randomly selected students. Results showed that students' motivation was the most and interest in English was the least influential aspects which caused them to study English as a specialization. They also revealed no significant differences according to gender, study year and grade point average. However, results showed significant differences due to the type of school students graduated from.

Keywords: undergraduates, attitudes, English, specialization, Jordan

1. Introduction

1.1 Attitude and Foreign Language Learning

It is widely accepted that attitude and set of beliefs about learning a foreign language, especially English, are among the determining factors that can influence efficiency of the students in language classes. Therefore, the instructors and educators should be careful in taking these factors into account (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). According to Latchanna and Dagnev (2009) attitude is accepted as an important concept to understand human behavior and is defined as a mental state that includes beliefs and feelings. Regarding foreign language learning, Bain et al. (2010) argue that attitude can play a primary motivating factor role in goal attainment for students. These attitudes seem generally favorable to foreign language learning, with the exception of two factors. They are: (1) the strong reliance on vocabulary memorizing as a way of learning to comprehend language, and (2) the failure to grasp the importance of syntax in the comprehension of language (Slevenson, 1977). In English as a foreign language (EFL) context, students who consider the learning of English as positive and rewording experience are less likely to suffer from foreign language anxiety. By contrast, they usually have higher levels of motivation, willingness to participate, and high language performance (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010).

An attitude towards studying a foreign language is often connected with motivation, which is some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course or action. In general, strongly motivated students with long-term goals are probably easier to teach than those who have short-term goals and therefore no real drive. Students have motivation that is separated into two main categories: extrinsic (i.e., instrumental) motivation, which is concerned with factors outside the classroom, and intrinsic (i.e., integrative) motivation, which is concerned with what takes place inside the classroom (Harmer, 2002). The researcher adds that there are many reasons for studying a foreign language. Probably a major number of language students in the world do it because it is on the curriculum. Some people want to study English or another foreign language because they think it offers them the chance for advancement in their professional lives. They will get a better job with the language than only know their language.

An attitude includes several aspects such as behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. It influences foreign language learners' behaviors such as showing more enthusiasm to solve problems, to acquire what is useful for daily life, to select and read books, and to engage themselves emotionally (Weinburgh, 1998). Regarding the cognitive aspects of

attitude, it involves beliefs of language learners about the knowledge that they receive and their understanding of the process of language learning (Eshghinejad, 2016). In terms of the affective or emotional aspect of attitude, the learning process offers the teacher and students the chance to engage in various activities and varied results of emotions are revealed (Feng & Chen, 2009).

The sociocultural perspective is an approach which helps to explore issues in second language learning and/or teaching (Hawkins, 2008). This approach is important to some foreign language learners because it is often concerned with understanding why humans behave the way they do. It seeks to understand human behavior and personality development by examining the rules of social groups and subgroups in which an individual is a member (Mckay, 2018). In this regard, we mean by the sociocultural approach the extent to which students admire the English language as a result of their admiration to the society and culture of English-speaking people.

Many studies were conducted on students' attitudes towards studying English as a specialization in different teaching-learning contexts in higher education. A few of these studies attempted to explore these attitudes in Jordan and the Middle East as a whole. Therefore, the present study has come to the scene to explore undergraduate students' attitudes towards English as a specialization and the factors which cause them to choose this specialization.

1.2 Study Aims

This current study aims to investigate undergraduates' attitudes towards studying English as a specialization. That is, the study explores four main aspects or domains which normally contribute to study English as a foreign language. They are: (1) Attitudes towards English-speaking people, (2) Emotional attitudes, (3) Interest in studying English, and (4) Motivation orientation (instrumental and integrative). All in all, the study attempts to answer the four research questions:

1. What are the most and least influential aspects which cause students to study English as a specialization?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha= 0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the four aspects according to gender?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha= 0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the four aspects according to study year?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha= 0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the four aspects according to grade point average?
5. Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha= 0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the four aspects according to the type of school they graduated from?

2. Literature Review

A large number of studies on EFL learners' attitudes with various dimensions, aspects and variables were conducted over the course of years. Some of these studies were done on students' attitudes toward learning English in terms of the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects and whether there were significant differences based on their demographic profiles (Eze, 2015; Abu-Snoubar, 2017). Others were carried out on students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language (Drbsen, 2015) and on anxiety and attitudes towards English language courses (Coskun & Tasgin, 2018).

As for the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects which normally affect students' inclination to study a foreign language, Jafre (2012), for example, investigated 180 Libyan students' attitudes towards learning English in terms of these three aspects. Results showed negative attitudes towards learning English in general and the three aspects in particular. They also revealed statistical significant attitudinal differences regarding gender and field of study but not year of study. In the Iranian teaching-learning context, Eshghinejad (2016) explored students' attitudes towards learning English in relation to the three aspects stated above. Results indicated a positive attitude towards English language learning in the three aspects.

Various studies were done on EFL students' attitudes and motivation or on attitudes, motivation, and anxiety. In a study done by Shams (2008) on students' motivation, anxiety, and attitudes toward the learning of English, the findings underlined that the students had affirmative attitudes and high enthusiasm toward English because it is valuable in their daily life. Lim (2012) explored instrumental and integrative motivation of 68 Cambodian EFL students and possible correlation between motivational orientation and English proficiency. Results revealed that instrumental motivation was found to be the main reason for the students to learn English. They also showed that English was found to promise its learners pragmatic, utilitarian benefits or rewards. Similar findings were obtained

by Fadlalla's study (2017), which investigated the motivation and attitudes of 65 university students toward learning English. These findings indicated that the Sudanese undergraduate students were instrumentally motivated to learn English. They admitted learning English because their parents believed that learning English is important for them. Finally, the findings revealed that most of the students had positive attitudes towards the social value and educational status of English.

Some of the studies done on EFL students' attitudes towards language learning were comprehensive in terms of the aspects or domains they explored. Chalak & Kassaian (2010), for example, did a study on 108 English major students' attitudes toward the target language, its community and on their motivation orientation. The domains used for the purposes of the study were: a) interest in English, b) parental encouragement, c) motivational intensity, d) attitudes toward learning English, e) attitudes toward English-speaking people, and f) instrumental and integrative orientations. Results revealed the Iranian non-native speakers of English learn the language for both instrumental and integrative reasons and their attitudes towards the target language community and its members were general found to be highly positive. Results also revealed the students agreed that their parents tried to help them learn English and encouraged them to practice and continue studying English. Therefore, they had external locus, control and motivation to learn. Tahaineh & Daana (2013) investigated the two most important psychological and social variables. The motivational orientations (instrumental and integrative) of the Jordanian EFL female undergraduates and their attitudes towards the target language and its community. The domains used to achieve the aim of the study were interest in foreign language, parental encouragement, motivational intensity, degree of instrumentality, integrative motivation, attitudes toward learning English, attitudes toward English-speaking people, and desire to learn English. The findings showed the subjects' greater support of instrumental reasons for learning the English language including utilitarian and academic reasons. They also showed their attitudes toward the target language community and its members were generally highly positive.

In terms of the variables which normally affect students' attitudes towards learning English, many were involved in the studies done in this area such as gender, educational background, achievement and study year. Diab (2006) examined Lebanese students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language and compared these beliefs with learning French. Findings revealed statistically significant differences in the students' beliefs in favor of females and of those coming from highly educated families. In a study done on students' attitudes toward learning English, Jafre (2012) found significant differences between their attitudes in favor of females but not in year of study. Al Samadani & Ibnian (2015) found that students with grade point averages had the highest positive attitudes toward learning English, followed by the medium grade point average students and finally the low grade point average students. Eshghinejad (2016), for example, explored learners' attitudes towards English as a foreign language taking only into account gender as an independent variable. Results showed statistically significant attitudinal differences between the two groups in favor of females. As for gender, educational background and grade point average, the researcher has chosen two relevant studies in this regard.

3. Method

3.1 Study Design

A quasi-experimental study was used to explore undergraduate students' attitudes towards studying English as a specialization in terms of attitude towards English-speaking people, the emotional aspect of attitude, interest, and motivation. That is, the design of the study is quantitative in nature, descriptive as well as inferential. In order to achieve the aims of this exploration, a questionnaire was employed to collect data from a sufficient sample including males and females and involving students from the four study years.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 190 English majoring students. Only 37% of these participants were males (N= 70), whereas 63% were females (N= 120). They were 44 first-year students, 40 second-year students, 50 third-year students and 56 fourth-year ones. In terms of the participants according to grade point average (GPA), they were 33 with GPA 2-2.49, 58 with GPA 2.5-2.99, 64 with GPA 3-3.49, and 35 with GPA 3.5-4. With regard to school type, the participants were 118 public school ones and 72 private.

3.3 Data Collection Tool

The research instrument employed to achieve the aims of the study is a questionnaire through which four domains were explored, which are: (1) Students' attitudes toward English-speaking people, (2) Students emotional attitudes, (3) Students' interest in studying English, and (4) Students' motivational orientations. The questionnaire items were

adapted from Chalak & Kassaian (2010) and Eshghinejad (2016), and were derived from ideas highlighted by L2 researchers. On the whole, the questionnaire included 25 items, of which 3 are related to students' attitudes toward English-speaking people, 4 are linked to emotional attitudes, 9 are related to interest in studying English, and 9 are associated with motivational orientations. These items were distributed randomly throughout the questionnaire.

3.4 Procedure

After drafting the questionnaire, it was offered to a group of experienced professors to elicit their viewpoints about the clarity of its items and if each suits what was intended to measure. The comments were taken into account, and the instrument was modified accordingly. After the researchers assured that this questionnaire enjoyed satisfactory construct validity and reliability (Cronbach Alpha: 0.76), the final version was used for the main study. Then, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants.

3.5 Data analyses

The SPSS Software was used to analyze the data collected from the participants of the study. The T-test was employed to analyze the significance of the observed differences between males and females and between public and private school graduates. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also employed to analyze the significant differences between study-year groups and grade point average ones.

4. Results

Concerning the first research question 'What are the most and least influential aspects (domains) the students think they cause them to study English as a specialization?', results showed that the students' motivational orientation was the most influential ($M= 3.26$), which caused them to study English as a specialization. However, it was found that the students were more integratively motivated ($M= 3.33$) to study this language. Results also revealed that the least influential aspect ($M= 2.54$) was related to interest in English or in studying it. Table 1 illustrates the analysis of these results:

Table 1. The Mean (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of Students' Responses to the Four Aspects

Rank	Aspect	M	SD
1	Motivation orientation	3.26	.385
	Integrative motivation	3.33	.432
	Instrumental motivation	3.19	.439
2	Emotional attitudes	2.90	.327
3	Attitudes toward English-speaking people	2.71	.450
4	Interest in English or in studying it	2.54	.298
	All aspects	2.88	.251

For further explanation, the means of students' responses to the motivational orientation are close to each other. However, results indicated that the first four reasons which had a great impact on making them study English as a specialization are associated with future career ($M= 3.54$), interaction more easily with the native speakers of English ($M= 3.47$), making them more educated ($M= 3.43$), and with getting a job later on ($M= 3.42$). The results also indicated that having a better salary ($M= 3.29$), understanding the way speakers of English behave ($M= 3.26$), and appreciating English people and their culture in general ($M= 3.17$) had also that level of impact. As for the least influential aspect (i.e., interest in English or in studying it) which caused the students to study English, results revealed that it was related to desire to know all aspects of English ($M=3.20$), being more at ease with people who speak this language ($M= 3.18$), being at a great loss if Jordan had no contact with English-speaking people ($M= 2.97$), reading books and articles in English ($M= 2.91$), not paying much attention to the feedback they receive in their English class ($M= 2.29$), having no interest in English ($M= 2.18$), and hatred to the English language ($M= 1.72$).

The items of each aspect or dimension were arranged decreasingly to show which item in each aspect played a more influential role in studying English as a specialization. As presented in table 2:

Table 2. The Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) of Students' Responses to Each Item in Each Aspect

	M	SD
Motivation orientation		
Studying English is important because I will need it for my career.	3.54	.560
Studying English is important because I will be able to interact more easily with its native speakers.	3.47	.541
Studying English is important because it makes me more educated.	3.43	.676
Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a job.	3.42	.660
Studying English gives me the chance to have a better salary later on.	3.29	.649
Studying English is important because I will be able to understand the way speakers of English behave.	3.26	.686
Studying English allows me to appreciate English people and their culture in general.	3.17	.605
My parents feel that I should continue studying English all through life.	3.00	.777
My parents helped me to study English.	2.72	.886
Emotional attitudes		
Studying English is a pride for me.	3.21	.607
Studying English makes me feel more confident.	3.15	.720
I am calm whenever I have to speak English.	2.94	.644
Studying English makes me feel worried.	2.28	.722
Attitudes toward English-speaking people		
To be frank, studying English is important because native speakers of English are dynamic and easy to communicate with.	3.07	.683
Native speakers of English are very sociable and kind.	2.91	.703
Studying English is important because most native speakers of this language are friendly.	2.78	.819
Studying English is not important because some English-speaking people play down our role in making the world stable.	2.10	.687
Interest in English or in studying it		
I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English.	3.20	.714
Studying English is important because it will allow me to be more at ease with people who speak this language.	3.18	.593
If Jordan had no contact with English speaking countries, it would be a great loss.	2.97	.743
I prefer to read books and articles in English.	2.91	.733
I do not pay much attention to the feedback I receive in my English class.	2.29	.702
To be honest, I really have no interest in English.	2.18	.897
Studying English is a waste of time.	1.89	.885
I hate English.	1.72	.819

As for the second research question which investigates whether there are any statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the four aspects according to gender, results showed statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) regarding the emotional aspect of attitude in favor of males. That is, they were more sensitive than females since they thought that studying English was a pride and made them more confident, calm and worried at the same time. Results also showed no statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the other three aspects and to all together. Table 3 illustrates the results of this analysis:

Table 3. Results of the T-test on Gender and the Four Aspects

Aspect	Gender	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Attitudes toward English-speaking people	Male	2.73	.428	.246	188	.806
	Female	2.71	.463			
Emotional attitudes	Male	2.96	.340	2.098	188	.037
	Female	2.86	.315			
Interest in English	Male	2.55	.282	.255	188	.799
	Female	2.54	.308			
Motivation orientation	Male	3.30	.358	1.317	188	.189
	Female	3.23	.398			
All aspects	Male	2.92	.246	1.332	188	.184
	Female	2.87	.252			

Regarding the third research question which investigates whether there are statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) in the four aspects according study-year, results revealed no statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) between the means of first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students' responses to each aspect and to the four together. They had the same or relatively the same attitude, interest and motivational orientation as shown in table 4:

Table 4. Results of One-way ANOVA on Study Year and the four Aspects

Aspect		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Attitudes toward English-speaking people	Between groups	.596	3	.199	.982	.402
	Within groups	37.602	186	.202		
	Total	38.198	189			
Emotional attitudes	Between groups	.062	3	.21	.189	.902
	Within groups	20.198	186	.109		
	Total	20.260	189			
Interest in English	Between groups	.305	3	.102	1.145	.365
	Within groups	16.457	186	.088		
	Total	16.762	189			
Motivation orientation	Between groups	.126	3	.042	.282	.839
	Within groups	27.833	186	.150		
	Total	27.959	189			
All aspects	Between groups	.103	3	.034	.541	.655
	Within groups	11.700	186	.063		
	Total	11.863	189			

Concerning the fourth research question about whether there are any statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the four aspects according to grade point average, results indicated no statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) between their responses to each aspect and to the four together. This means that they had the same or almost the same attitude, interest and motivational orientation regardless of their level of achievement. Table 5 illustrates the results of this analysis:

Table 5. Results of One-way ANOVA on Grade Point Average and the Four Aspects

Aspect		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Attitudes toward English-speaking people	Between groups	1.23	3	.374	1.878	.135
	Within groups	37.075	186	.199		
	Total	38.198	189			
Emotional attitudes	Between groups	.034	3	.011	.103	.958
	Within groups	20.226	186	.109		
	Total	20.260	189			
Interest in English	Between groups	.435	3	.145	1.653	.179
	Within groups	16.327	186	.088		
	Total	16.762	189			
Motivation orientation	Between groups	.457	3	.152	1.030	.380
	Within groups	27.502	186	.148		
	Total	27.959	189			
All aspects	Between groups	.077	3	.026	.406	.749
	Within groups	11.786	186	.063		
	Total	11.863	189			

In terms of the fifth question which explores whether there are any statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) between the means of students' responses to the four aspects according the type of school they graduated from, results showed statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) between students' responses in favor of those graduated from private schools. That is, they had more positive attitudes towards English-speaking people, more emotional attitudes, more interest in English, and a greater motivation orientation to study this language. As table 6 illustrates this analysis:

Table 6. Results of the T-test on Type of School and the Four Aspects

Aspect	Type of school	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Attitudes toward English-speaking people	Public	2.65	.446	-2.638	188	.009
	Private	2.82	.437			
Emotional attitudes	Public	2.85	.316	-2.421	188	.016
	Private	2.97	.336			
Interest in English	Public	2.49	.277	-3.037	188	.003
	Private	2.63	.315			
Motivation orientation	Public	3.20	.393	-2.662	188	.008
	Private	3.35	.354			
All aspects	Public	2.83	.231	-3.971	188	.000
	Private	2.97	.258			

5. Discussion

This study set out with the aim of investigating undergraduates' attitudes toward studying English as a specialization. That is, the study explored students' attitudes towards four aspects which might have contributed a great deal to make them study English as a foreign language. They were: (1) Attitudes toward English-speaking people, (2) Emotional attitudes, (3) Interest in English or in studying it, and (4) Motivation orientation (instrumental and integrative). This study also explored if there were significant differences between the means of students' responses according to gender, study year, grade point average and the type of high school they graduated from.

Analysis of quantitative results showed that students' motivational orientation was the most influential aspect which caused them to study English. However, it was found that they were more integratively motivated to study this language. These results also showed that the least influential aspect was related to interest in English or in studying it. Harmer (2002), for example, highlighted the importance of motivation in learning a foreign language. He argued that it is some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course or action. In terms of integrativeness and instrumentality, it was found that the results of this study counter those obtained by many researchers such as Lafye & Tsuda (2002), Chalak & Kassaian (2010), Lim (2012) and Tahaineh & Daana (2013). All of them found that students often learn English for instrumental reasons or for utilitarian benefits. However, Fadlalla (2017) found that the Sudanese undergraduates were both instrumentally and integratively motivated to study English although instrumental motivation out did their integrative one.

Results also revealed significant differences in the emotional aspect of attitudes in favor of males. They thought that studying English was a pride for them and made them more confident, calm and worried at the same time. However, the results showed no significant differences between the means of students' responses to the other three aspects and to all together. That is, they had the same attitudes toward English-speaking people, the same interest in English or in studying it, and the same motivational orientation. These results do not agree with the majority of those obtained by researchers such as Diab (2006), Jafre (2012) and Eshghinejad (2016). All of them found significant differences in favor of females.

Concerning study year, results revealed no significant differences between the means of first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students' responses to each aspect and to the four together. These results agree with what Jafre (2012) obtained in his study. It was expected from third- and fourth-year students to have a greater motivation orientation to study English, a greater interest in it, and a more positive attitude towards English-speaking people. The reason may lie in the fact that the more students deal with the language and the more they go in depth with it, the more they will understand its secrets, be interested in it, and have a better motivation orientation to study it.

As for grade point average, results showed no significant differences in students' responses regardless of their achievement. These results do not agree, for example, with what Al Samadani & Ibnian (2015) obtained in their study. They found that students with high grade point averages had the highest positive attitudes towards learning

English, followed by the medium grade point average students, and finally the low grade point average ones.

Regarding the type of school students graduated from, results indicated significant differences in students' responses in favor of those graduated from private schools. We expected this result since the majority of private schools try hard to make English a second language rather than a foreign language. In other words, they teach almost all of their curricula in the English language from childhood or Kg 1. This might have influenced positively students with regard to their attitudes toward English-speaking people, their interest in English and their motivation to study it.

6. Conclusion

The present study shed light on some of the factors which normally influence EFL students in choosing English as a specialization. It investigated undergraduate students' attitudes towards studying English as a specialization with respect to attitude towards English-speaking people, the emotional aspect of attitude, interest, and motivation. The study was quantitative in nature. It used the questionnaire as an instrument which could collect data from a relatively large sample of students. Therefore, it is necessary for the researchers interested in attitude and motivation to conduct further studies in higher education institutions, using another research instrument such as interviews so that the results can provide us with a clearer picture regarding the factors which enhance and prohibit studying English as a specialization. Since students' attitudes towards studying English as a foreign language is important, it is of vital importance for the Ministry of Education to empower English language teachers with more and more teaching strategies through continuous in-service programs. The reason lies in the fact that the school is regarded as the base for having more interested, more motivated, and better skilled English language specialists at the university level.

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