

Students' Attitudes towards the Study of English and French in a Private University Setting in Ghana

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Abstract

English and French are two important international languages taught as mandatory courses at Wisconsin International University. Therefore examining attitudes of students to these two languages was appropriate for reasons of improving its teaching and likeability by students. Four hypotheses were tested and results indicate that gender had a significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of English; where females showed a better attitude to the two languages than their male counterparts. However, gender had no significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of French, thus no significant difference exists between males and females in their attitudes to French. It was also found that age had no significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of both English and French. Further it was revealed that level of students had no significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of English and French. Likewise, language background had no effect on students' attitude to the study of English; however, the results showed that language block had a significant effect on students' attitude to the study of French. Francophone students indicated a much positive attitude to the study of French than their Anglophone counterparts. The results of this study are a firm indication that interventions should be made in encouraging male students to appreciate and develop the right attitude to the study of the two languages. Special attention should be given to the Anglophone students in the French lectures with the view of improving likeability and achieving a much positive attitude to the language.

Keywords: *Students' Attitudes; English; French; Gender; Age; Level; Language background*

1.0 Introduction

The study of English and French remain mandatory for all levels 100 and 200 students at Wisconsin International University College. English is the main language of instruction for all courses taught whereas French is supposed to assist students communicate effectively and subsequently use for business transaction

when necessary after school. However, many students tend not to take these two languages seriously as performance has not been as expected by instructors. The purpose of this study was to survey the attitudes of 130 students toward the study of English and French, and make recommendations for appropriate interventions to improve students' likeability of the two languages. In this regard, four hypotheses were tested:

H1: There is significant difference between the attitude of males and females to the study of English, and French;

H2: There is significant difference between the attitude of young students and the aged (middle-aged and older adults) to English, and French;

H3: There is significant difference between the attitude of students in Level 100 and Level 200 towards the study of English, and French;

H4: There is significant difference between the attitude of Francophone and Anglophone students towards the study of English, and French.

Gök & Sılay (2010) have indicated most researchers define attitude as a mental concept that depicts favourable or unfavourable feelings toward an object (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Freedman, 1997; Koballa 1988). Social psychologists have viewed attitudes as having three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive component is a set of beliefs about an object and its assessment is performed using paper-and-pencil tests. The affective component includes feelings about an object and its assessment is performed by using psychological indices. Finally, the behavioral component pertains to the way in which people act toward an object and its assessment is performed with directly observed behaviors (Salta & Tzougraki, 2004).

Considerable amount of research has been reported on attitudes towards different languages (Marley 2004, Balcazar 2003, Villa 2002, Malallah 2000), towards different varieties of English and other languages (Karstadt 2002, Zhou 2002, Assaf 2001, Birnie 1998, Al-Kahtany 1995, Dalton-Puffer & Kaltenböck 1995, Gibb 1999, Starkes & Paltridge 1994, Matsuura et al. 1994, Benson 1991, Shaw 1981, Cooper & Fishman 1977, El-Dash & Tucker 1975), on learners' beliefs about language learning (Sakui & Gaies 1999). Similarly, Saracaloğlu (2010) reports that studies on the issue of students' attitude is an integral part of learning and that it should, therefore, become an essential component of second language learning pedagogy. There are several reasons why research on students' attitudes toward language learning is important. First, attitudes toward learning are believed to influence behaviors, (Kaballa & Crowley, 1985) (Source: Weinburgh, 1998) such as selecting and reading books, speaking in a foreign language. Second, a relationship between attitudes and achievement has been shown to exist. Schibeci & Riley (1986), (Source: Weinburgh, 1998) report that there is support for the proposition that attitudes influence achievement, rather than achievement influencing attitudes.

In a recent study (Siti, 2008) suggest that students' attitudes correlate with their proficiency level as well as the location of their school and their classes. Students' attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context may all play some part in explaining their success in learning a language (Candlin & Mercer, 2001).

Individual differences also play a significant role in learning a language. In second language learning contexts, factors like age, gender, language background, type of school attended, and peer influences are some of the variables that influence language acquisition and attitudes (Merisou-Strom, 2007). Ellis (1994) found that female students have better attitudes towards second language acquisition compared to male students. Female students are found to allocate more time and money in purchasing and getting access to reading materials in English and they will probably have better attitudes towards studying literature compared to male students. Again it has been found that Non-Malays tend to "have better positive attitudes towards reading in English and the subject" (Pandian, 2000 p.12) compared to Malay secondary students. Again, this might translate into better attitudes towards literature as well, although there is no empirical evidence to support it so far. Science stream students, both at undergraduate and secondary levels have better attitudes towards reading in English and they also read a wider variety of reading materials compared

to students from the Arts and Commerce streams.

Moreover, senior students have been found to have high positive and less negative attitudes toward communication skills than sophomore and junior students (Ihmeideh, Al-Omari & Al Dababneh, 2010). On the contrary, a survey conducted by Kaur & Thiyagarajah (1999) suggested that even first year university students majoring in English language and literature found reading literary texts a major problem. A total of 48.6% of the participants agreed that they are not efficient and confident enough to read literary texts. Rahman (2001) however, found that although secondary students thought their low proficiency level was a constraint, it did not negatively influence their attitudes towards the Literature Component in English.

Karahan (2007) in a study examined the relationship between language attitudes towards the English language and its use among 190 Eighth grade students of a private primary school in Adana, Turkey, where English is intensively taught. It was reported that although these students were exposed to English in a school environment more frequently than other students at public schools, they have only mildly positive attitudes; especially the female students had higher rates. They recognized the importance of the English language but interestingly did not reveal high level orientation towards learning the language. On the other hand, they had mildly positive attitudes towards the English based culture but they were not tolerant to Turkish people speaking English among themselves.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

The study proposes a conceptual model with four personal characteristics (gender, age, level, language background) which is presented as independent variables and one dependent variable (attitudes). The model compares differences in each characteristic on the attitudes of students. In addition, the effects of all four characteristics are assessed with regard to attitudes toward the study of English and French. In other words, the researchers suggest that students' attitudes to the study of English and French are influenced by differences in such factors like gender, age, level and language background (See Fig. 1)

2.0 Method

2.1 Sample

A sample of 130 students from level 100 and level 200 participated in the study. These groups were chosen because English and French are taught at that level as university mandatory courses. Participants were selected on the basis of stratified random sampling. A total of 86 students were drawn from level 100 while 44 students were selected from level 200. Out of the 130 participants 69 comprised of males and 61 were females. A total of 96 participants were young, 20 participants formed the middle aged group while 14 participants comprised of older adults.

2.2 Instruments

A survey questionnaire was developed from literature by the researchers to measure the attitudes of students to the study of English and French. This was given to English and French lecturers to make input for the design of the final one. The questionnaire comprised of three sections. The first section measured personal characteristics such as gender, age, level, and language background. The second section of the questionnaire comprised of 7 items, scored on a 5 point scale ranging between strongly disagree to strongly agree with 1 as the minimum score and 5 as the maximum score. The third section also comprised of 7 items. The questionnaire was pre-tested on 35 students from the two levels. This yielded an overall Cronbach alpha of .76.

2.3 Procedure

Data was collected through self-administered tests. This was administered during lecture periods. Participants were met in the lecture halls and informed about the purpose of the study. Three days were used in the data collection exercise with participants spending 30 minutes each to fill the questionnaires. Participants were asked to put filled questionnaires into a box provided by researchers at one corner of the lecture hall. This was to assure participants of confidentiality and anonymity. A total of 130 questionnaires were returned upon which data was analysed.

3.0 Results

Means and Standard Deviations as well as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used as analytical methods for the study. Results show that females had a favourable attitude to English than their male counterparts' ($M = 24.87$, $SD = 3.60$; $M = 23.696$, $SD = 3.00$). There is a slight difference between males and females attitude to French ($M = 23.57$, $SD = 4.376$; $M = 23.23$, $SD = 3.81$). The ANOVA results show that gender had a significant effect on the attitudes of students to English, $F(1,128) = 3.875$, $p = 0.05$. However, gender had no statistically significant effect on the attitudes of students to French, $F(1,128) = .227$, $p > .64$.

Means and standard deviations results indicate that young adults had a favourable attitude to English ($M = 24.13$, $SD = 3.56$) than French ($M = 23.04$, $SD = 4.02$). In the same vein, among middle aged students they had a favourable attitude to English ($M = 25.05$, $SD = 1.67$) than French ($M = 24.90$, $SD = 3.31$). However, among older adult students there was a slight favourability for English ($M = 23.79$, $SD = 3.512$) than for French ($M = 23.64$, $SD = 5.12$). The ANOVA results show that age had no significant effect on students attitude to English, $F(2,127) = .775$, $p > .46$. Likewise, age recorded statistically no significant effect on students' attitude to French, $F(2,127) = 1.774$, $p > .17$.

Means and standard deviations results shows that level 100 students had a slightly favourable attitude to English ($M = 24.233$, $SD = 3.5668$) than their counterparts in level 200 ($M = 24.140$, $SD = 3.5668$). However level 200 students had a positive attitude to French ($M = 24.326$, $SD = 4.2242$) than their counterparts in level 100 ($M = 22.884$, $SD = 3.9360$). The ANOVA results show that level had no significant effect on students attitude to English, $F(2,127) = .652$, $p > .523$. Similarly, level of students recorded statistically no significant effect on students' attitude to the study of French, $F(2,127) = 2.235$, $p > .111$.

Means and standard deviations results show that Francophone students had a slightly favourable attitude to English ($M = 24.769$, $SD = 3.1399$) than their Anglophone counterparts ($M = 24.171$, $SD = 3.3613$). Francophone students had a positive attitude to French ($M = 26.15$, $SD = 3.9759$) than their Anglophone counterparts ($M = 23.085$, $SD = 3.9818$). The ANOVA results show that language background had no significant effect on students attitude to English, $F(1,128) = .375$, $p > .541$. However, language background recorded statistically significant effect on students' attitude to the study of French, $F(1,128) = 6.950$, $p = .009$.

4.0 Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate differences in students' attitudes to the study of English and French by focusing on gender, age, level, and language background. The results of this study indicate that gender had a significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of English; where females showed a better attitude to the two languages than their male counterparts. This finding is similar to Ellis (1994) study where he found that female students have better attitudes towards second language acquisition compared to male students. Female students are found to allocate more time and money in purchasing and getting access to reading materials in English and they will probably have better attitudes towards studying literature compared to male students. However, gender had no significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of French, thus no significant difference exists between males and females in their attitudes to French. It was also found that age had no significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of both English and French. Further it was revealed that level of students had no significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of English and French. Likewise, language background had no effect on students' attitude to the study of English; however, the results showed that language background had a significant effect on students' attitude to the study of French. Francophone students indicated a much positive attitude to the study of French than their counterparts Anglophone. Previous research show that in second language learning contexts, factors like age, gender, language background, type of school attended, and peer influences are some of the variables that influence language acquisition and attitudes (Merisou-Strom, 2007).

These findings partially support the results of the present study where gender and language background had significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of English and French respectively. It is recommended that instructors of the French language give extra attention to the Anglophone students when teaching as their Francophone counterparts' competence of the French language could influence instructors to neglect the Anglophone students from Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia. Male students should be actively engaged to

participate in class activities so as to improve likeability of the two important languages of instruction at Wisconsin International University College.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by Sex

Sex		Attitude to English	Attitude to French
Male	Mean		
	N	23.696	23.232
	Std. Deviation	69	69
		3.0015	3.8084
Female	Mean	24.836	23.574
	N	61	61
	Std. Deviation	3.6018	4.3759
Total	Mean	24.231	23.392
	N	130	130
	Std. Deviation	3.3330	4.0720

Table 2

ANOVA summary table of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by Sex

Source		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Attitude to English * Sex Groups	Between Groups (Combined)	42.108	1	42.108	3.875	.051
	Within	1390.969	128	10.867		
	Total	1433.077	129			
Attitude to French * Sex Groups	Between Groups (Combined)	3.784	1	3.784	.227	.635
	Within Groups	2135.208	128	16.681		
	Total	2138.992	129			

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by Age

Age		Attitude to English	Attitude to French
Young Adults	Mean	24.125	23.042
	N	96	96
	Std. Deviation	3.5578	4.0155
Middle Adults	Mean	25.050	24.900
	N	20	20
	Std. Deviation	1.6694	3.3071
Older Adults	Mean	23.786	23.643
	N	14	14
	Std. Deviation	3.5121	5.1232
Total	Mean	24.231	23.392
	N	130	130
	Std. Deviation	3.3330	4.0720

Table 4
ANOVA summary table of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by Age

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.	
Attitude to English * Age	Between Groups (Combined)	17.270	2	8.635	.775	.463
	Within Groups	1415.807	127	11.148		
	Total	1433.077	129			
Attitude to French * Age	Between Groups (Combined)	58.145	2	29.072	1.774	.174
	Within Groups	2080.848	127	16.385		
	Total	2138.992	129			

Table 5
Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by level

Level		Attitude to English	Attitude to French
Level 100	Mean		
	N	24.233	22.884
	Std. Deviation	86	86
		3.5668	3.9360
Level 200	Mean	24.140	24.326
	N	44	44
	Std. Deviation	2.8333	4.2242
Total	Mean	24.231	23.392
	N	130	130
	Std. Deviation	3.3330	4.0720

Table 6
ANOVA summary table of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by level

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Attitude to English * Level	14.565	2	7.283	.652	.523
Between Groups	1418.512	127	11.169		
Within Groups	1433.077	129			
Total					
Attitude to French * Level	72.713	2	36.357	2.235	.111
Between Groups	2066.279	127	16.270		
Within Groups	2138.992	129			
Total					

Table 7
Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by language background

Level		Attitude to English	Attitude to French
Anglophone	Mean	24.171	23.085
	N	117	117
	Std. Deviation	3.3613	3.9818
Francophone	Mean	24.769	26.154
	N	13	13
	Std. Deviation	3.1399	3.9759
Total	Mean	24.231	23.392
	N	130	130
	Std. Deviation	3.3330	4.0720

Table 8
ANOVA summary table of Students' Attitude to the Study of English and French by language background

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.	
Attitude to English * Lang.Bkgd. Between Groups (Combined)	4.188	1	4.188	.375	.541	
	Within Groups					1428.889
	Total					1433.077
Attitude to French * Lang. Bkgd. Between Groups (Combined)	110.155	1	110.155	6.950	.009	
	Within Groups					2028.838
	Total					2138.992

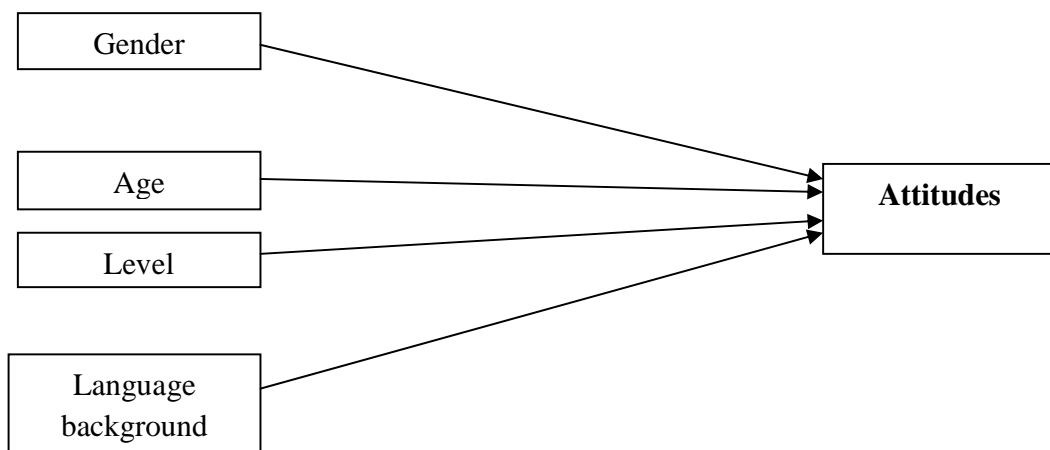


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework of the present study

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