

# The Relationship between Students' Attitudes and English Language Accomplishment: The Instance of Freshmen in a Private Learning Institution

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The relationship of students' affective, behavioural and cognitive attitudes and attainment of English language among first year students at a Malaysian private learning institution is explored through this study. For research purposes, adapted questionnaires are preferred to interviews in order to obtain information from a total of 175 respondents. Findings from the research suggests a relationship between students and English Language achievement, while also recognising the pivotal roles of instructors, parents, media, instructors, organizations and the government to effectively improve students' English Language learning. Overall, this study revealed that the relationship is apparent, and all parties involved should take further steps to promote a conducive English Language teaching and learning environment.

**Key words:** *Attitude, English language, achievement, behavioural, cognitive, affective.*

## Introduction

As a former British colony, English language is taught as a second language after Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. It is one of the prerequisite subjects in all education levels in the country and is stipulated in the primary and secondary curricula (*Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah* and *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah*, respectively).

As the lingua franca and as a second language, English is widely used in various sectors and industries. Here, a perception exists whereby an individual who is proficient in English

language is considered highly educated and affluent; therefore making the study of English a must for students to secure jobs and placements at university. At the same time, attitudes towards English language proficiency have long beleaguered students as the sociocultural setting dictates how the language should be approached. Students who are proficient in English are often ridiculed for being arrogant, albeit none of those who are less proficient are respected as well. Throughout various studies, it is suggested that positive attitudes could influence students' interests to learn English which would then benefit them later as they progress. With a negative sociocultural setting surrounding students' attitudes, it is impossible to experience best English language learning.

### ***Statement of Problem***

At a private learning institution, a preliminary English 1 course was introduced in 2010. Coded ULC0013; the course was designed for first-semester students who, upon passing, proceed to take the advanced English 2 course. Following the announcement of results in May of that year, the course leader tabled a report at the Board of Examiners' Meeting with a worrying figure of only 13.45% of students obtaining good marks of 75% and above. Course lecturers were questioned and subsequently led to discoveries pertaining to students' attitudes towards learning English. Based on lecturers' preliminary observations, it is implied that students generally have a negative attitude towards learning English. As the subject is mandatory, students only studied for the sake of passing without fully understanding its importance for the future. Another part examined was the low motivational level among affected students. On the other hand, lecturers were pleased to celebrate the impressive development of students who had positive learning attitudes towards the language. These students found that English language proficiency was vital for future undertakings, among other elements. Additionally, their high motivational levels were deemed as the passing factor along with near-seamless language concentration to perform in the subject.

### ***Research Objectives***

To drive the study, objectives were drawn to guide the researchers to accurately determine the correlation between first-year students' attitudes and English language learning in a private learning education. The objectives were:

- a) To study the connection between students' **affective attitudes** and their accomplishment in English language learning;
- b) To study the connection between students' **behavioural attitudes** and their accomplishment in English language learning;
- c) To study the connection between students' **cognitive attitudes** and their accomplishment in English language learning; and

- d) To propose recommendations for English language learning improvement to first-year students.

### ***Research Questions***

To justify the study, researchers were seeking to determine whether there was:

- a) A substantial connection between the students' **affective attitudes** with their accomplishment in English Language?
- b) A substantial connection between the students' **behavioural attitudes** with their accomplishment in English Language?
- c) A substantial connection between the students' **cognitive attitudes** with their accomplishment in English Language?
- d) Recommendations on improving first-year students' attitudes towards English language learning.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Attitude and Language Learning***

At present, greater emphasis on attitudinal issues is seen highly by a majority of first and second language researchers, which they resolved to be a vital part in the language learning process. This forms an integral factor in second language acquisition as suggested by a number of researchers. In his work "*Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*", Cook (2017) refers to 'attitudes' as the development of mental aspects and feelings of a human being, which begin to develop at the early age. He also suggests that parental factors and environmental contact contribute to outcomes, where humans form attitudes based on social links, experience and emotions. By examining this, we can understand how positive or negative attitudes are portrayed within an individual. Second language learning is related to the levels of student involvement and, with motivation, only then positive attitudinal predispositions occur. Redzuan, et al (2014) records that attitudes are required but must be of "insufficient indirect conditions for linguistic attainment". As cited by Sengkey and Galag in 2018, Obeidat's view (2005) on second language learning attitude refers to students' principles in English language acquisition in general and their views about the course attended for learning the language..

#### ***Attitude factors***

According to Abu-Melhim (2009), attitudes are comprised of three factors: affective, behavioural and cognitive. A factor that contracts emotions on the attitude pertaining to an object is affective; a behavioral factor is a predisposition that causes a behaviour towards an attitude; object belief and attitude are caused by cognitive attitude.

### ***Affective***

Wenden (1991) describes an affective factor as the feelings and emotions that an individual possesses towards an object: 'likes' or 'dislikes', 'with' or 'against' (Shi, 2017). Gardner (1985, cited in Atchade, 2002) further elaborates that affective factors can influence attitudes in language learning and is divided into two categories. The first deals with the learners' approaches prior to second language learning, and the second category develops during the process of learning. These attitudes provide either a negative or positive predisposition to second language learning. Consequently, learners' attitudes will be determined by learners' impressions about a particular second language and its community and of those who speak that language. Instead, their classroom experiences may influence their attitude development to either accept or, simply, reject the process. The attitude will determine the level of successful language acquisition, or a student's feeling about learning the language in a particular course and from a particular lecturer. That the learning process causes anxiety can affect learners' attitudes to become negative.

### ***Behavioural***

Both Wenden, and Al-Mhasnah, et al (2018) have defined overt actions or intentions towards an object as behavioural. A study conducted by Eshghinejad (2016) found that 60% of respondents strongly agreed that they like to learn English; a positive behavioural attitude and confidence in language learning. Similar outcomes were recorded from among Iranian medical students who were fond of learning the English language (Soleimani and Hanafi, 2013).

### ***Cognitive***

Wenden describes a cognitive factor as comprised of beliefs, ideas or perceptions about the object of the attitude. Furthermore, students have different perceptions of their peers, class, lecturers and syllabus regardless of their motivation level (Verma, 2005 also cited in Sales, 2016). It is clear that students' attitudes reflect their perceptions as suggested by Afthanorhan, Awang and Fazella (2017). In a related finding, during their study to investigate the PISMP in IPBA students' attitudes to English Language learning, Basar et al (2006) discovered that students had moderately positive thoughts regarding language and the culture of its native speakers.

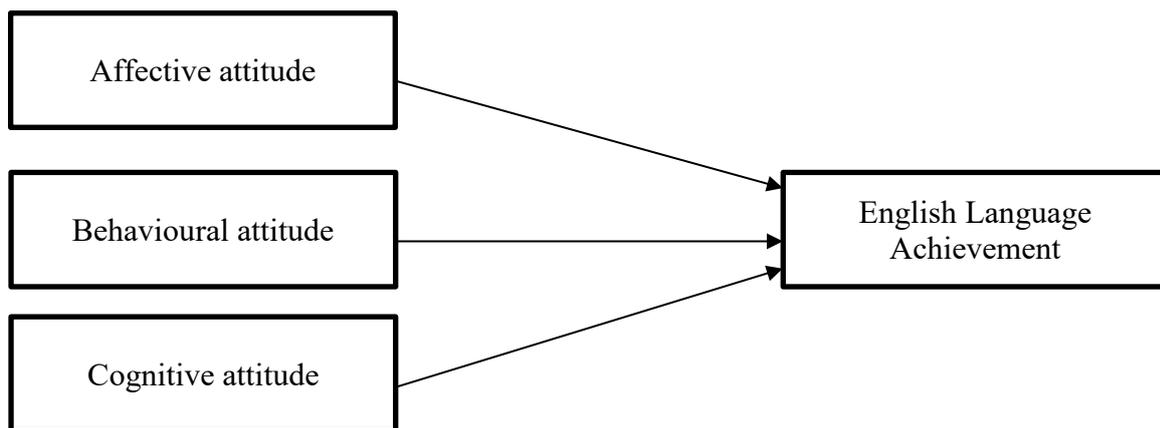
### ***Attitude and English Language Accomplishment Connection***

In language learning, the correlation between attitudes and accomplishment do exist, as proven by several researchers. As cited in Liu (2007) and based on Clement's et al (1994) research, a

survey was conducted to evaluate students' attitudes, motivation and anxiety encountered in English language learning. The discovery was that classroom experience is highly connected to students' self-confidence, learning environment evaluation and motivations. In elaborating on a learning mentality and effort, a majority of respondents possessed positive attitudes to English language learning and was linked to a perception that it is a working language and that it could provide for a better career. This has helped students to react well in class, attain good results and better manage the language (Abu-Melhim, 2009). In their study of students' foreign language learning attitudes and accomplishments, Inal et al (n.d) discovered that such connections existed, verified by results showing positive connections between attitude and accomplishment in learning English. Moreover, they also cited similar findings by Gardner and Lambert (1985) that established learners' attitudes do determine language-learning outcomes.

In addition, Ghanbarpour (2016, citing Clement and Noels, 1994) agreed that second-language learners in Hungary demonstrated positive attitudes towards English language learning and its accomplishment. In learning English, students' accomplishments can also be measured by assessing their proficiency in the target language. Atchade (2002) went on to state that several researchers discovered that attitudes influence second language learning. The research also established that American college students possessed a positive mentality towards the German language and their ability to speak that language, thus correlating highly to their German language proficiency (Scherer and Wertheimer, 1964; as cited by Atchade). Moreover, Hsieh (2008) discovered that successful scholastic acquisition of Spanish, German and French stemmed from students' positive attitudes towards language learning.

**Figure 1.** Proposed Framework



### ***Research Hypothesis***

H1: That a substantial connection between students' affective attitudes and their English language accomplishment exists;

H2: That a substantial connection between students' behavioural attitudes and their English language accomplishment exists; and

H3: That a substantial connection between students' cognitive attitudes and their English language accomplishment exists.

### Research Methodology

The researchers employed both quantitative and qualitative strategies in a single study. For sampling purposes, purposive sampling was selected with 175 respondents using questionnaires and interviews as data gathering instruments. Each instrument was divided into Section A and consisted of questions on respondents' demographic profiles whereas Section B dealt with respondents' dispositions towards their English language accomplishment. With regard to the questionnaires, previous instruments were adapted and divided into three aspects or domains of attitude: affective, behavioural and cognitive. In conducting the interviews, each respondent was instructed to attend English 1 class for three days and subsequently spend ten minutes answering the questions on the third day of the course. Data gathered from the interviews was processed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software.

### Research Findings

#### Correlation Analysis

Figure 2. Correlation Analysis

*The relationship between Students' Attitudes and Their Achievement in English*

		English 1				
		Marks (first test)	Total affective	Total Behavioral	Total cognitive	overall
English 1 Marks (first test)	Pearson Correlation	1	.453**	.477**	.467**	.486**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	168	168	168	168	168

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the analysis, it is apparent that an average and substantial connection between the components of behavioural attitudes and English 1 results exist ( $r=.477$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ). This also appears in relation to cognitive attitudes with a substantial connection between the two variables ( $r=.467$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ). Through a given test, affective attitudes show the variables of ( $r=.453$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ) demonstrating this connection.

Hypothesis	p-value	Decision
H1: That a substantial connection between the students' <b>affective attitude</b> with their accomplishment in English Language exists	0.000	Accept H1
H2: That a substantial connection between the students' <b>behavioural attitude</b> with their accomplishment in English Language exists	0.000	Accept H2
H3: A substantial connection between the students' <b>cognitive attitude</b> with their accomplishment in English Language exists	0.000	Accept H3

### *Interview Analysis*

To further elaborate on the connection, nine students with varying results for their English 1 subject were selected for the interview. The fundamental point of the interview was to find students' recommendations on approaches to improve English language learning. Categorically organised as high achievers (labeled as Students 1, 2, 3), medium achievers (Students 4, 5, 6) and low achievers (Students 7, 8, 9), students were instructed to answer questions relevant to English language learning attitudes. As indicated in the schedule below, the results show that a majority of students emphasised community roles in improving English language learning.

Interviewee	Theme
Student 1: "Classroom lesson has to be interesting as students can be further motivated to learn. Lecturers must be creative to realise this, or alternatively conducting it outside at the compound like English camp."	Role of Teachers or Educators
Student 2: "I would prefer my lecturer to engage students in class activities such as	

film screening, lyric composition, language games or drama.”	Role of Individual
Student 4: “Lecturers must use only English in classroom and encourage students to use it too for effective learning.”	
Student 1: “Students should engage English language in their reading, reference and watch English programmes. Reading, as a habit can help them to gain knowledge and improve our proficiency.”	
Student 2: “Listening to English songs can help to improve our proficiency. Students can sing along, learn and understand the lyrics simultaneously.”	
Students 3 & 4: “No English subtitles while watching English movies would be useful to improve listening skill.”	
Students 7 & 9: “Establish a study group and engage with students who has good command of the language.”	
Student 8: “Students must realize that English is important for their future, thus motivate themselves to learn it.”	
Student 3: “More English learning programmes should be included in television programming.”	Role of Media
Student 5: “With increased articles or stories provided in newspapers, students can practice more often.”	
Student 8: “Television should show more English language movies sans subtitle, or those only in English.”	
Student 2: “At home, parents should converse more in English with children from the beginning.”	Role of parents
Student 5: “Parents should provide sufficient English language materials such as books, magazines, newspapers, cartoons in order for their children to master the language.”	

Student 9: “To help improving children’s English language proficiency, parents should send them for tuition or extra classes.”	
Student 2: “Innovative measures should be executed by the government in English language mastery by the populace.”	Role of government
Student 1: “Higher learning institutions should strategize English-language driven activities for students.”	Role of institutions
Student 3: “Compulsory English language modules such as communication skill and public speaking should be instructed so students would attend, focus to learn English and gain self-confidence, based on my experience.”	
Student 7: “There must be English language campaign at institutions to get students to be aware of the importance of the language.”	

## Discussion and Conclusion

### *Attitudes of First-year Students on English Language Learning*

In the study conducted, students displayed positive attitudes and a high motivation to learn the English language. The high marks obtained by respondents in a particular subject support this statement. This is important as the courses form an integral part of the institution’s English programme. Researchers used an adapted version of an attitude and motivation test sequence, which was divided into affective, behavioural and cognitive attitudes. Concerning the affective factor, the study demonstrated that students experienced pleasant learning, grew fond of the language and looked forward to developing their language mastery in the future. Furthermore, this positive attitude was enhanced by their English lecturers and their teaching methods. The behavioural factor is positive and represents increased participation. In their learning, students displayed an exemplary attitude to completing homework and took part in class activities relating to English language acquisition. This positivity is also evident in the cognitive factors where students’ perceptions and beliefs in English learning and teaching are concerned.

### *Students’ Attitudes and Accomplishment Connection to English Language*

This study demonstrates that a positive association between students’ attitudes and accomplishment in English language learning exists and parallels similar research in the field of study. A clear indication of this is the high achievement obtained by students in their English

class. Moreover, data obtained from questionnaires and interviews support the findings. From the data, high-performing students highlighted their endeavours in enriching their English acquisition by attending extra classes, through personal consultation with the lecturer and speaking practice and reading. Contrastingly, students from other performance categories did not fare satisfactorily in their assessment, citing lack of motivation, effort and a low perception of English. Previous research by Makrami (2010) found that students of Learners of English for Specific Purposes at Saudi University, who achieved better results, have a positive attitude towards language learning. Makrami also noted that in Hungary, a positive correlation between attitudes and accomplishment, as demonstrated by second-language learners, existed (citing Clement and Noels, 1994). Furthermore, this positive connection occurred among students who studied English as a foreign language, and also those learning a foreign language (Inal et al, n.d). Additionally, a connection between academic achievement and attitudes in English learning can be based on performance level, where top achievers are better placed to learn advanced English (Malallah, 2010).

### ***Effects on English Language Instruction and Acquisition***

A general rule of a thumb for second language learners is to have an interest in learning an intended language and then to enrich themselves by engaging in skills-focused activities such as reading, speaking, listening and writing. In this particular study, findings suggest that there are several effects, or implications, concerning English language instruction and acquisition, and second language learning in general. Students and lecturers must work together to positively instil language enthusiasm through various activities, encouragement, creativity, enjoyment and satisfaction, inside and outside of the classroom. Therefore, to enable students to unlock their language learning anxiety, lecturers should create a welcoming environment for students.

Moreover, through targeted engagement, students' perceptions would encourage a motivation to learn and subsequently focus on acquiring the language almost seamlessly. Another implication to be considered are the external factors that could affect students. Parental attitudes also contributed to children's learning and their mindset towards learning English. By nurturing their children to love and learn English, parents would become a significant factor in determining students' attitudes towards this particular language. At the same time, institutions should provide progressive English programmes that combine theoretical, technical, cultural and experiential aspects to better enhance students' English learning, proficiency and functionality. Moreover, institutions can emulate the success of other institutions in English language learning by organising short courses and training to better equip students with English language competence.



### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

The core of this study is to establish connections between students' attitudes toward English language learning at a private higher learning institution. This study also serves as a basis for future researchers to explore similar connections by investigating other lecturers or academicians' points of view. Further exploration should be encouraged on other factors concerning English language learning, i.e. methodology, pedagogy, sociology, strategies and others. Moreover, future research could expand to encompass greater respondents and institutions in finding correlations to English language learning and accomplishment.

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