

The Attitudes of University Students towards English within the scope of Common Compulsory Courses

Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Ortak Zorunlu Dersler Kapsamındaki İngilizce'ye Yönelik Tutumları

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ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, üniversite 1. sınıf öğrencilerinin ortak zorunlu dersler kapsamındaki İngilizce dersine yönelik tutumlarını belirlemek ve öğrencilerin tutumlarının cinsiyetlerine, bölümlerine ve mezun oldukları liselerin türüne göre anlamlı farklılıklar gösterip göstermediğini araştırmaktır. Bu çalışmanın denekleri, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, Buca Eğitim Fakültesi ve İzmir Meslek Yüksekokulu'nun 1. sınıf öğrencilerinden oluşmaktadır. Araştırmanın ortaya çıkardığı sonuçlar şunlardır; araştırmaya katılan 1. sınıf öğrencilerinin yarısının ortak zorunlu dersler kapsamındaki İngilizce dersine yönelik tutumları olumsuzdur. Öğrencilerin tutumları ile cinsiyetleri arasında anlamlı bir farklılık yoktur. Fakat öğrencilerin ortak zorunlu dersler kapsamındaki İngilizce dersine yönelik tutumları öğrencilerin bölümlerine göre anlamlı farklılıklar göstermektedir. Öğrencilerin tutumları mezun oldukları lise türlerine göre de anlamlı farklılıklar göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ortak Zorunlu Ders, İngilizce'ye Yönelik Tutum, İngilizce Öğretimi.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine the attitudes of the freshmen towards English within the scope of common compulsory courses and investigate whether the students' attitudes indicate significant differences with regard to their sex, their departments and the types of high schools from which they have graduated. The subjects of the study were composed of the first year students at Buca Faculty of Education and İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education at Dokuz Eylül University. The findings of the research lead to the following conclusions; half of the freshmen in the sample hold a negative attitude towards the English course within the scope of common compulsory courses. There is not a significant difference between the attitudes of the students and

their sex . But the attitudes of the students towards English within the scope of common compulsory courses differ significantly according to their departments. The attitudes of the students indicate significant differences with regard to the kinds of high schools from which the students have graduated, as well.

Key Words: Common Compulsory Course, Attitude towards English, English Teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is clearly evident that many factors have a great impact on the learning and teaching of a foreign language. Many research carried out in the field of second or foreign language learning reveals that in order to explain the components of effective and successful language learning, certain factors need to be examined. As McDonough (1986:130) claims “Individual characteristics of learners may be directly or indirectly related to achievement in foreign language learning”. In addition, Williams and Burden (1997:88) state”.... learners bring many individual characteristics to the learning process which will affect both the way in which they learn and outcomes of that process.”

For a number of years, a lot of research has been concentrated on these factors, especially on psychological factors. Researchers are inclined to examine the depth of the emotional side of human behaviour in the language learning process. It is extremely natural that feelings have a great influence on us, for we are human beings. In the process of learning a language the role of emotions (that is, affective factors) should be taken into consideration. Although all domains serve for achievement in language learning, researchers propose that affective variables play the most complex and important role in success or failure in language learning. Brown (1994: 134) claims “Affect refers to emotion or feeling. The affective domain is the emotional side of human behaviour.” Brown and Dubin (1975: 207) state that “the affective contexts which we look for deal with emotional states, moral and ethical values, personal and subjective feelings, characteristics of personalities, qualities of personal appearance, moods and feelings both negative and positive, and sense experiences such as touch, smell, sound, sight and task.”

It is possible to mention two facets of the affective domain. The first facet deals with the essential side of affectivity: personality factors refer to a person's personality traits like self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, introversion, extroversion, motivation. Another side is made up of extrinsic factors. Socio-psychological (or socio-cultural) factors are defined as attitudes (Brown, 1994). Defined traditionally, attitude is a complex and durable tendency that predisposes the individual to act in a certain way. As a socio-psychological factor, the role of attitude on the language process should be taken into consideration. Attitudes of students towards language are closely associated with the success or failure in language learning. The studies of Gardner et al., 1976; Genesee and Hamayan, 1980; Cooper and Fishman, 1977; Bourgain, 1978; Oller et al., 1977 emphasise the importance of attitude in foreign and second language learning (Els et al., 1987). Many researchers point out that there are certain factors which are said to influence attitudes toward learning a second and/or a foreign language language. Chambers (1999:25) clarifies that “pupils do not come to the foreign languages classroom as *tabulae rasae*. They bring with them some attitudes born of conversations shared with family, friends, the media and personal experience of the target language community.” Attitudes towards a language develop beginning from childhood. In other words, attitudes are held at home by parents, later they are shaped by peers and by some other variables. This is due to the fact that children's attitudes are nearly always their parents' attitudes, and the influence of parents should not be neglected in the failure of their children in foreign language learning (Wilkins, 1974). Learners' attitudes influence the level of achievement in language learning, and also the learner is affected by this success. In other words, the learner's positive attitude is strengthened by success. Similarly, the learner's unfavorable attitude can be reinforced by lack of achievement. In some cases, learner begins to learn a language with favorable attitudes, but he cannot succeed in learning a language. As a result, the learner's point of view changes negatively. The learner's negative attitude directs him not to make any effort to learn the language (Ellis, 1994). Language learning can be affected by attitudes towards the cultural sides of language, as well. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972) learner's attitude towards the culture of the target language is the most significant

component affecting foreign language acquisition (Chambers, 1999). It is a known fact that language and culture are interwoven. Understanding and admiring a foreign culture can help the individual attain proficiency in the language being learned. People should accept the real differences between the members of two different cultures. In addition, they should learn to perceive those differences and to admire them (Brown, 1994).

It is strongly believed that favorable attitudes towards the target language group are necessary to learn a language. So, there is a need to break down any prejudices about the second language community (Littlewood, 1984). The learner's positive attitudes towards a language, towards the target language community and towards the culture of that community facilitate learning, but an unfavorable attitude impedes learning (Ellis, 1994). Mitchell and Myles (1998: 19) clarify that "social psychologists have long been interested in the idea that the attitude of the learner towards the target language, its speakers, and the learning context may all play some part in explaining success or lack of it."

The role of teacher at all stages of the language learning process cannot be denied. A good teacher should never overlook the fact that students have a tendency to reflect his attitudes since he is a model for his students. The teacher plays a key role in the motivational and attitudinal perspectives of the student. Cook (1994: 75) says that "...teachers have to be aware of the reservations and preconceptions of their students. What they think of the teacher, and what they think of course heavily affect their success."

Teachers have a great effect in cognitive, affective and moral development of learners and play a major role in young people's education in an international world (Byram and Morgan, 1994). In addition, humanistic approaches that have a great impact on the English language teaching methodology suggest that the language teacher should involve the feelings and emotions of his students (Willams and Burden, 1997). Titone (1981) points out that the teacher's attitude towards the foreign language and its culture definitely affect the student's achievement. For that reason, attitudes of the first year students towards English as a compulsory course deserve to be searched. It is clearly

observed that the majority of the students at the university where foreign languages are taught within the scope of common compulsory courses have difficulty in learning a foreign language.

2. METHOD

This research is a kind of descriptive study done by the survey model.

2.1. Sample

The sample of the research comprises the freshmen of the Chemistry, Physics, Biology, History, Geography, Music, Art, Turkish Language and Literature, Turkish Language Teaching, Social Studies, Primary Education and Computer Education departments of Buca Education Faculty at Dokuz Eylül University, and the freshmen of the Office Administration and Secretarial and Sales Administration departments of İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education at Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir. The sample of the research is composed of 427 freshmen (272 females, 155 males). The research was carried out at twelve departments of Buca Faculty of Education and two departments of İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education. Some departments were grouped under the same heading. In this way, the departments of History, Geography, and Social Studies were brought together, and they were regarded as “The Social Science Department”. Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Computer Education were named as “The Applied Science Department”. In the same way, the departments of Art and Music were unified under the heading of “The Fine Arts Department”. Two departments related to Turkish Language, Turkish Language and Literature, and Turkish Language Teaching were joined under the heading of “The Turkish Language Department”. Together with the Primary Education Department and İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education, the departments in the sample were grouped under six headings.

2.2. Data Collecting Instruments

In this research, the data have been obtained as a result of administration of the attitude scale towards English developed by the researcher. The researcher prepared an attitude scale that consisted of 53 questions and a personal information form composed of six questions. Then, for examination and evaluation, the questionnaire was presented to a total of 15 specialists at the Department of Educational Sciences, the Department of English Language and Teaching at Buca Faculty of Education of Dokuz Eylül University. Later, necessary changes were made in accordance with their advice to obtain necessary evidence concerned with the scope validity of questionnaire. After that, the questionnaire was administrated to a group of 40 students in the department of Primary Education. Having made necessary changes about the wording of some questions according to comments made by students, a pilot study was conducted.

The pilot study was administrated to 183 students. Then, Factor Analysis, Item Scale Correlation, Cronbach Alpha, Split Alpha were calculated by means of the data obtained from this pilot study. After the factor analysis was applied to Attitude Scale towards English, it was realised that the items on the scale were gathered in four main factors. Namely, the questionnaire consists of items in four dimensions such as affective features (Cronbach Alpha: 0.95), perceptions about its usefulness and importance (Cronbach Alpha: 0.87), the reasons for negativeness (Cronbach Alpha: 0.77), and the reasons related to the teacher (Cronbach Alpha: 0.79). The questionnaire was composed of two parts. In the first part, there were six questions related to the student himself. The second part consisted of 45 questions that attempted to determine the attitudes of the freshmen towards English as a common compulsory course. The items in this part were in the forms of affirmative and negative sentences. A 5- point likert-type scale was used to determine the level of subjects' agreement or disagreement on the items.

2.3 Analysis

The obtained data were analysed by using SPSS for Windows 8.0 statistic programme. In the process of analysis of data Frequency, Mean, Percentage, Standard Deviation, Variance Analysis and Scheffé Test were applied.

3. FINDINGS

The findings obtained in connection with each research question and interpretations based on those findings are presented.

3.1. The Findings Related to the Attitudes of the Freshmen towards English as a Common Compulsory Course

The students are divided into two groups as “positive” and negative” with respect to the level of attitude determined by taking account of their responses to the scale of attitude towards English. In distinction of two groups, the means of the responses are taken into consideration (M=124.49). If the students’ attitudes towards English as a compulsory course are under the mean, they are interpreted as negative attitudes, but above the mean, they are interpreted as positive attitudes. The distribution of the students’ attitudes towards English course is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Distribution of the Subjects’ Attitudes towards the English Course

Attitude	n	%	M	SD
Negative	218	51.2	1.34	0.48
Positive	209	48.8	1.38	0.49

When Table 1 is examined, it is clearly seen that 51.2 % of the students demonstrate a negative attitude towards their English course. However, 48.8 % of them hold a positive attitude towards the English course. The findings reveal that half of the students’ attitude towards English as a common compulsory course is negative.

3.2. The Relationship between the Freshmen's Attitudes towards English as a Common Compulsory Course and the Students' Sex

The second question of the study serves to find out whether the attitudes of the freshmen towards English indicate significant differences with regard to sex or not. As for the analysis of this problem, the scores that both male and female students got through the attitude scale are added together. Later, Means and Standard Deviation of these scores are calculated. After that, t-test is applied so as to determine whether differences between the means of male and female students are significant or not. The relevant findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The Relationship between the Freshmen's Attitudes towards English as a Common Compulsory Course and the Students' Sex (Mean, Standard Deviation and t-values)

Sex	n	M	SD	t-value	DF	Sig.
Female	272	124.4	29.1	1.83	425	Difference is not significance
Male	155	128.1	32.7			

As can be deduced from Table 2 the means of the male and the female students are very close to each other. However, the findings show that the means of the males are a little higher than those of the females. As a result of calculation, t-value is determined as 1.83. This value shows us that there is no significant difference between the attitudes of the males and those of the females at the level of 0.05.

3.3. The Relationship between the Attitudes of the Freshmen towards English as a Common Compulsory Course and Their Departments

Variance Analysis is applied to determine whether the differences between the attitudes of freshmen and their departments are significant or not. The results of Variance Analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The Relationship between the Freshmen's Attitude towards English as a Common Compulsory Course and Their Departments

Source of Variance	DF	SS	MS	F	Sig
Between Groups	5	2040.1	4080.2	4.58	The difference is significant
Within Groups	421	374815.0	890.3		
Total	426	395216.2			

The figures on the Table 3 show that there are significant differences between the students' attitudes and their departments. Then Scheffé test is applied to determine the origin of the difference which appeared as a result of Variance Analysis. The findings obtained are indicated in Table 4.

Table 4. The Results of Scheffé Test according to the Departments

Department	Social Science	Primary Education	Turkish Language	Fine Arts	İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education
Applied Science					
Social Science					
Primary Education					
Turkish Language					
Fine Arts					
İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education		*	*		

*($p < 0.5$)

The results obtained from Scheffé Test indicate that the difference stems from İzmir

Vocational Institution of Higher Education where the students have the lowest mean, but the Turkish Language Department has the highest mean. As the findings in Table 4 point out that there is a significant difference between the attitudes of the students at İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education and the students at the Turkish Department.

3.4. The Relationship between the Freshmen's Attitudes Towards English as a Common Compulsory Course and the Types of High Schools from which They have Graduated

The Variance Analysis is applied to understand whether the differences between the students' attitudes and the types of high schools they have graduated from are significant or not. The findings obtained from that process are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. The Relationship between the Students' Attitudes towards English as a Common Compulsory Course and the Types of High Schools from which They have Graduated

Source of Variance	DF	SS	MS	F	Sig
Between Groups	2	11485.2	5742.6	6.33	The difference is significant
Within Groups	423	3833641.2	907.1		
Total	425	395216.4			

In the Table 5, there is a significant difference between the students' attitude towards English course and the types of high schools they have graduated from. Then, Scheffé Test is applied with the aim of determining the origin of the difference, which appeared as a result of Variance Analysis. The results are indicated in Table 6.

Table 6. The Results of Scheffé Test according to the Types of High Schools the Students have Graduated from

High School	State High School	Anatolian High School	Vocational High School
State High School			
Anatolian High School		*	
Vocational High School			

*($p < 0.5$)

The findings in Table 6 reveal that there is a significant difference between the attitudes of the students who graduated from the State High Schools and the students who graduated from Anatolian High Schools. In other words, the State High School graduates exhibit a more favorable attitude than the Anatolian High School graduates do.

4. CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the results of the research, half of the students who took part in the questionnaire survey exhibit a negative attitude towards English as a common compulsory course. There are many factors that affect the student's attitude towards language learning. Chambers (1999:41) explains the factors which have a great part in student's success in language learning as follows:

“There are so many factors which may contribute to a pupil's attitude. Some of these are in-school factors and the responsibility of the classroom, the teacher-pupil relationship, pupils' perceptions of the relevance of the target language to them. Others are in-school factors but related rather the school management and society. Still others are factors external to the school: gender, age, home background, general lack of interest in learning.”

Thus, the reason for this finding related to the first research question may be due to the shortcomings of any components which take part in the language learning process. In other words, the shortcomings in curriculum, ineffective teaching methods and techniques used, poor materials, limited time allocated to the English course and the features of the foreign language teacher determine the attitude of the student. If appropriate conditions are provided, the learner may succeed in learning the language. The classroom environment is effective in mastering the language. The learner should feel comfortable in the classroom. Besides, the learner's relationships with his classmates and his teacher have a major impact on proficiency in the foreign language. Time is one of important characteristics of the learning context. However, the number of students in the class is a much more discussed variable than is time. Besides, physical arrangements should not be ignored (Wilkins, 1974).

Another reason for negative attitude towards English held by half of the students may stem from the students' perceptions of the concept of common compulsory courses. The students should choose freely to learn a foreign language. As foreign language courses are one part of the compulsory curriculum, the majority of the students have no chance to choose. Perhaps, none of the students may actually select to learn a language. When the students are volunteers and also interested in learning a language, foreign language courses can reach their objectives (Wilkins, 1974).

In recent years, the function of the teacher in the teaching process has changed. These changes assign new roles to the teacher. Apart from teaching the target language, the teacher is regarded as a facilitator, a model, an organizer etc. On the other hand, foreign language teachers should take into consideration the personality variables of their students. Williams and Burden (1977: 88) suggest that “ it is undoubtedly true that learners bring many individual characteristics to the learning process.” Thus, teachers must be aware of the importance of individual differences in learning a language.

Another conclusion of the study is that there was not a significant difference between the sex and the attitudes of the students. This finding contradicts the studies which

examine the relationship between sex and attitude reveal that the girls exhibit more favourable attitudes toward learning language than the boys do (Spolsky, 1989).

The result of this research also denote that the attitudes of the freshmen towards English as a compulsory course indicate significant differences with regard to departments. The freshmen of Turkish Language department hold a more positive attitude towards English course according to the result of the research. This finding may be explained by language aptitude of the students in the Turkish Language department. his finding may also imply that the freshmen of Turkish Language department are predisposed to learn another language. In other words, it is common belief that prior experience in another language may influence the student's aptitude towards learning a new language. Gardner and Lambert (1959; 290) state “.....the student who is aware of grammatical distinctions in English will do well in French courses where the emphasis is on grammar” (Krashen, 1981). It is important to bear in mind that some people may have an aptitude for languages. Individuals bring with them various language learning potentials. These can be referred to as language aptitude (Wilkins, 1974). On the other hand, the freshmen of the İzmir Vocational Institution of Higher Education have an unfavourable attitude towards English as a compulsory course.

According to the findings, significant differences exist between the freshmen's attitudes and the types high school from which the students have graduated. It is fairly interesting that Anatolian High School graduates exhibited negative attitude towards English as a common compulsory course. On the other hand, the students who graduated from the State High Schools demonstrate the most favorable attitude towards English with respect to all the other high school graduates. The possible explanation for this finding may be due to the fact that the first year Anatolian High School graduates may be bored with English and with the intensive study of English, as well. In addition, they might think that they have enough capability or knowledge to pass the English course.

It should be born in mind that teachers and students are two basic and indispensable factors which influence the teaching-learning process. Attitude is not genetically endowed, that is to say, it can be changed. In order to change the negative attitude of the

students, the teacher must take responsibility and try to find out the reasons for negative attitudes towards language learning. Foreign language teachers should follow effective methods and modern techniques of language teaching. Using different and appropriate materials, they may arouse students' interest. Teachers should use various kinds of supplementary materials such as video, pictures, games, tape-recorder, language laboratories, wall pictures, wall-charts, television, computer and slides which contribute to effective and efficient language teaching. Classroom atmosphere is a major component of effective language learning. Therefore, if the atmosphere in a language classroom is authentic and relaxing, it will enhance the learners' success.

As another suggestion, a new foreign language teaching syllabus should be designed for each department to meet the learners' needs and expectations. As the majority of the students at universities select English as a foreign language, what is to be taught in the English course should be relevant to their vocations in the future. Besides, the hours of the English course should be increased.

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