



## IMMIGRANT PARENT vs. IMMIGRANT CHILDREN: ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE US

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**Abstract:** Interlocutors who come from different cultural backgrounds often find themselves in need of a shared language in order to successfully communicate. Sometimes the language they share may be the native language of one and the second language of the other, or it may be the lingua franca of both speakers. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of immigrant families' attitudes toward language learning in the United States. Developing second language proficiency in English is important for both social interaction and educational achievement of immigrant children in the US whereas their parents may have a different set of linguistic needs for social interaction or professional advancement. This research investigated perceptions of immigrant parents and children about second language learning by administering an attitudinal questionnaire developed by Henry & Apeltren (2008). Data were collected from both children and their parents in the Southeastern US, and analysis revealed that parents perceived their children's attitudes toward second language learning to be more positive than the children's actual attitudes.

**Keywords:** Immigrant children, English as a Second Language, language learning attitude, elementary education

**Özet:** Farklı kültürel birikimlere sahip insanlar başarılı bir şekilde iletişim kurmak için kendilerini sıklıkla ortak bir dil ihtiyacı içerisinde bulurlar. Bazen paylaştıkları dil bir tanesinin ana dili veya bir başkasının ikinci dili olabileceği gibi, bazen de bu her ikisi için de geçerli olan bir uluslararası dil olabilir. Bu çalışma göçmen ailelerin Birleşik Devletler'de dil öğrenmeye karşı olan tutumlarını açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. İngilizce'de ikinci dil yeterliğini geliştirmek Birleşik Devletler'deki göçmen çocukların hem eğitim başarıları hem de sosyal etkileşimleri açısından önemli bir hal alırken, onların ebeveynleri profesyonel gelişimleri ve sosyal etkileşimleri için farklı dil ihtiyaçlarına sahip olabilirler. Bu araştırma, Henry & Apeltren (2008) tarafından geliştirilmiş olan bir tutum anketi uygulayarak göçmen ebeveynlerin ve çocukların ikinci dil öğrenmeye alakalı tutumlarını incelemektedir. Güneydoğu Birleşik Devletler'deki çocuklardan ve onların ebeveynlerinden veri toplanmıştır ve analiz ortaya çıkarmaktadır ki ebeveynler çocuklarının ikinci dil öğrenmeye ilişkin tutumlarının onların gerçek tutumlarına göre daha olumlu olduğunu düşünmektedirler.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Göçmen çocuklar, İkinci dil olarak İngilizce, dil öğrenme tutumu, ilköğretim

### 1. Introduction

Interlocutors who come from different cultural backgrounds often find themselves in need of a shared language in order to successfully communicate. Sometimes the language they share may be the native language of one and the second language of the other, or it may be the lingua franca of both speakers. The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of immigrant families' attitudes toward language learning in the United States. This is particularly important since the number of immigrants arriving to the United States each year surpassed 60 million in the year 2000 and continues increasing (Rutter & Tienta, 2005). As a result, greater numbers of English language learners (ELLs) are entering American schools now than ever before. In fact, in

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2008 approximately one in ten students in U.S. schools were classified as English learners (Cook, et. al., 2011). Having their children develop sufficient proficiency in English so that they can fully participate in an academic context is a top priority for many immigrant parents (Carhill, Orozco & Paez, 2008). However, there has not been significant research to explore how immigrant children themselves perceive the language learning process (Zhou, 2008). According to Carhill et. al., (2008) many of the current conversations about how immigrants learn English fail to consider immigrant youth. This research investigated immigrant parents and children and their views of language learning by administering the attitudinal questionnaire developed by Henry & Apelgren (2008).

Specifically, this study investigated the following research questions: *Do immigrant children in the United States report significantly different attitudes toward language learning in comparison to their parents?*

## **2. Language Learning in the United States**

Currently, one in five students in American schools is the child of an immigrant parent (Chu, 2009). These students enter classroom settings with varied levels of English proficiency. Although approximately 25% of immigrant children arrive to the United States from countries in which English is the dominant language, these children do not always possess high levels of English proficiency (Chu, 2009). As such, it is becoming increasingly more important for researchers and educators to better understand how to better meet the unique learning needs of this subgroup of learners. One way to more effectively educate these learners is by developing an understanding of immigrant children's attitudes toward learning the English language.

Immigrant children may experience many barriers (e.g., limited prior educational experiences, limited parental involvement, psychological adjustments to a new culture) when acquiring the English language that can impact their attitudes and educational attainments (Wells, 2010). However, these children may experience more positive attitudes toward the English language learning process when they are provided constructive educational experiences that incorporate appropriate second language accommodations and strategies. The implementation of the strategies and accommodations can help to make the content more accessible and comprehensible to this subgroup of learners. McEachron & Bhatti (2005) found in their research that American teachers are committed to helping culturally and linguistically diverse learners succeed in their educational studies, but their schools may lack a socio-cultural context in their curriculum which is supportive of native-language maintenance. Depending on context, immigrant children may perceive educational experiences that solely focus on English language development as negative or positive. For example, language is often perceived as a central aspect of one's identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Therefore, immigrant children who do not receive native-language support in educational settings may feel resentful of their English language learning experiences since they may begin to become more dominant in their English abilities in comparison to their native-language abilities. However, immigrant students may express positive attitudes toward learning the English language since this can help them communicate with new friends and participate in classroom discussions. Moreover, immigrant children may possess positive attitudes toward English learning so that they are able to assist their siblings with homework assignments (Worthy & Rodriguez-Galindo, 2010). This may particularly apply to the

oldest siblings in families who have parents that lack English proficiency and are unable to provide homework assistance.

### **3. Parental Influence on Second Language Learning**

Immigrant parents may also perceive English proficiency as an important aspect of their child's academic success. This may be in stark contrast to their perceptions of their own personal English language proficiency needs. Specifically, immigrant parents may be able to "get by" in their employment and community settings without needing to become proficient in the English language. Nevertheless, they may perceive English proficiency as imperative to their child's academic and future employment success. Prior research suggests that immigrant parents may perceive educators' responsibilities as consisting of educating students and teaching English skills and parents' responsibilities as consisting of teaching morals and values (Janssen, Bakker, Bosman, Rosenberg & Leseman, 2012). These perceptions could impact both parents' and children's attitudes regarding the importance of second language learning.

Parents' sociocultural and educational backgrounds are often linked to children's attitudes about learning a second language as well as to their success as second language learners. However Carhill et. al. (2008) explain that second language acquisition is a complex process influenced by many factors.

In addition to parent demographics, other factors affecting language learners' motivation to learn a target language include (a) personal factors such as students' prior knowledge, Intelligence Quotient (IQ), home background, values, personality, and language proficiency in the local medium of instruction, and (b) situational factors such as course structure, curriculum content, methods of teaching and assessment, and rules and regulations pertaining to institutional and classroom situations. (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001, Dörnyei & Csizer, 2002). Students' metacognitive skills and teacher encouragement have been found to positively affect learning in second language classes. (Mori, Sato & Shimizu, 2007; Brownlee, Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003). Also, democratic educational environments have been found to increase language learner motivation (Woolard & Gahng, 1990). Sometimes cultural or linguistic aspects of the target language itself can impact on learner motivation and attitude towards a particular language.

Second language learners in a country where the target language is spoken as the native language have the opportunity for direct exposure to real life communicative situations. Language skills can be expected to develop more rapidly in such a context than in an artificial environment where the target language is learned as a foreign language and where there is little chance for interaction with native speakers, or any type of authentic communicative interaction.

Although immigrant parents may be well aware of the need for developing proficient language skills for themselves and their children, 26 percent of immigrant children in the U.S. live in situations in which their families are linguistically isolated (Shields & Behrman, 2004). In addition to coming from a variety of language backgrounds, immigrants come from a range of national origins and socioeconomic backgrounds (Zhou, 1997). According to Bankston & Zhou (2002), children of immigrant parents from some demographic groups in the United States tend to reach higher levels of actual achievement than native born Americans in American Schools. Educational attainment is often the principal marker of adaptation of immigrant youth (Zhou,

1997). Overall high academic success is often attributed to an “immigrant ethos” or an awareness of the need to adapt to a new homeland (Bankston & Zhou, 2002), and this academic success can be linked to a student's English proficiency.

#### **4. Motivation and Second Language Learning**

Ardasheva, Tong & Tretter (2012) summarize the definition of language learning motivation as “the drive to learn a new language associated with effort, desire to learn, and positive attitudes toward language study” (p. 474). Motivation is recognized as a central factor in both the rate at which students learn languages and the degrees of proficiency they reach in the L2 (Ghazvini & Khajehpour, 2011; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011).

Initial work by Gardner & Lambert (1972) identified instrumental and integrative motivation as two distinct types of motivation that could influence second language learning. Instrumental orientation refers to motivation to learn a second language for pragmatic reasons such as social or economic gain, and integrative orientation is that which is a result of a desire to be like members of an esteemed target culture, or simply those who speak the language (Ghazvini & Khajehpour, 2011; Johnson, 2001). Tremblay & Lambert (1995) elaborate a model that includes both motivational behaviors, which are observable, and motivational antecedents such as goal salience, valence (the perceived value of an outcome) and self-efficacy (one's belief that they can attain a goal), which can't be observed but must be reported by the language learner.

In their 2008 study on young learners, Henry & Apelgren (2008) found evidence of positive attitudes toward foreign language instruction by employing the concept of the “*ideal L2 self*” (Csizer & Dörnyei, 2005), or the “attributes a person would like to possess including hopes, desires and aspirations” (p. 610). Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System Model consists of this *Ideal L2 self*, the *Ought-to L2 self* and the *L2 Learning Experiences Dimension* (Henry & Apelgren, 2008). According to this model, learners are motivated as a result of balancing of these three components- the ideal, what they perceive they should be able to do in a language and the situational experiences that affect the opportunities they have in the target language. This model allows exploration of how a learner who needs to interact in multiple language environments might ideally perceive his or her multilingual skills.

#### **5. Methods**

A questionnaire about attitudes toward language learning developed by Henry & Apelgren (2008) was used to assess parents’ ratings of their own views toward the second language learning process as well as their child’s views of learning English as a second language (See Appendix). It was developed based on Gardner’s (1985) Attitude and Motivation Test Battery, and consisted of 23 items with an alpha coefficient of .88 for internal consistency. During data collection, the questionnaire was administered separately to immigrant children and then to their parents. All items were modified to gain insight on the particular role of parents and their children. For example, one item on the parents’ questionnaire related to attitudes about multilingualism read, “My child would like to be able to speak several languages in the future” and on the children's survey as, “I would like to be able to speak several languages in the future.”

Included items reflected participants’ ratings of the following subcategories: 1) attitudes toward foreign languages (e.g., My child could consider learning a new language later when he/she is an

adult, 2) attitudes about the learning activities (e.g., I believe it is great fun learning English, 3) integrative orientation (e.g., My child thinks it is fun to speak English in the US, 4) instrumental orientation (e.g., My child believes that learning English is important for him/her because it is easier to find things on the Internet), 5) the ideal second language self in regard to English (e.g., I believe speaking English is cool, 6) the idea second language self as related to foreign languages (e.g., My child admires people who can speak another language fluently, 7) attitudes about the learning environment (e.g., My child believes that is going to be great fun learning English in elementary school, 8) the importance of multilingualism (e.g., I believe that it is important for me to be able, in the future, to speak at least one other language, other than English., and 9) the desire to learn other languages in the future (i.e., My child believes that at some point in the future she/he could consider learning some of the following languages: Arabic, Chinese, Danish, Finish, French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, Turkish, or another language).

The majority of survey items were rated by participants on a 6-point Likert scale (1=not true at all, 2=not true, 3=not really true, 4=fairly true, 5=true, and 6=very true). However, survey items 21 and 22 were rated as “yes” or “no” by participants (1=not true, 2=fairly true, and 3=true), and item 23 was an open-ended item.

Immigrant families with elementary aged children located in the southeast United States were contacted via email and telephone to participate in this research. A total of 23 families responded and agreed to participate. Participants encompassed ethnic backgrounds that included Turkish, Korean, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Arabic. Two survey formats were provided. Families who had access Internet access were given separate links for parents and children to complete the survey. Participants without Internet access were provided paper copies of both surveys (i.e., parent survey and child survey).

## 6. Results

To explore possible differences between the independent variables (i.e., children and parents) and the dependent variable (i.e., language learning attitudes), t-tests were performed to analyze whether specific differences occurred across participants’ ratings with respect to language learning attitudes (see Table 1). Analyses found that parents’ attitudes toward language learning were significantly different from their children’s attitudes toward language learning [ $t(1, 44) = 5.67, p < .05$ , effect size = .33] (see Table 1). Indeed, both groups showed high levels of perceiving language learning as important (parents  $M=5.16$ ; children  $M=4.74$ ). However, parents were more positive about their children’s attitudes toward language learning than the children themselves.

Table 1  
*Means, Standard Deviations, and T-Test Analysis by Participants’ Attitudes toward Language Learning*

Variables	Participants		T-Value
	Parents (n=23)	Children(n=23)	
Language Attitudes	5.16 (.42)	4.74 (.74)	6.93***

\* $p < .05$

Participants also responded to an open-ended question. The children stated which language(s) they would like to possibly learn, and their parents stated which language(s) they believed their children would like to learn in the future. The results found that parents believed that the languages their children would like to learn other than English are Catalan, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, and Turkish. The languages children prefer to learn other than English are Chinese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Languages Participants' Desire to Learn in the Future*

<b>Languages</b>	<b>Parents (n=18)</b>	<b>Children (n=22)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Catalan	1	0	1 (2%)
Chinese	1	2	3 (5%)
French	7	5	12 (21%)
German	5	4	9 (16%)
Greek	0	1	1 (2%)
Italian	3	5	8 (14%)
Japanese	1	1	2 (3%)
Portuguese	1	1	2 (3%)
Russian	2	1	3 (5%)
Spanish	7	8	15 (26%)
Swahili	1	0	1 (2%)
Turkish	1	0	1 (2%)
<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>30 (52%)</b>	<b>28 (48%)</b>	<b>58 (100%)</b>

\*Percentage may not equal 100% due to rounding

## 7. Discussion

Attitudes towards language learning have been of great interest to many researchers in the field of second language learning and teaching since foundational work was done by Gardner & Lambert (1972). Developing an understanding of language learners' attitudes toward English can be vital in determining how to best meet immigrants' language learning needs. In order to better understand the unique learning needs of these individuals, our research investigated immigrant parents and their children living in the southeast United States.

Analyses found that parents' attitudes toward language learning were significantly different from their children's attitudes toward language learning. Specifically, our analysis found that parents' ratings of attitudes toward language learning were significantly higher than their children's ratings of attitudes toward language learning. One reason for the differences we found in parent and children attitudes could stem from the amount of exposure that these participants experienced in relation to the English language. Specifically, the children who participated in this research may have received more extensive exposure to the English language since their academic studies were completed in the English. If these children did not receive positive language learning experiences in their academic settings, they may be less likely to experience positive attitudes toward learning English. For example, educators may feel insecure in their

abilities to effectively teach ELLs this may negatively impact the learner. The self-doubts that teachers may experience in their own teaching abilities may be detrimental in ELLs language learning experiences. In a study conducted by Karabenick & Noda (2004), they found that slightly less than half (43%) of teachers indicated they would like to have ELLs enrolled in their classes. In order for children to feel optimistic toward learning a second language, they may need to be surrounded positive influences.

Parents' positive perceptions towards language learning have been found to be essential in helping their children become fluent in a second language. For example, Bartram (2006) found that children were more likely to view language learning as essential to their future goals if their parents communicated a utilitarian value for language learning. Moreover, in that same study, Bartram (2006) suggested that parents' perceptions of various languages impacted which languages their child perceived as important in acquiring.

Although participants provided a wide variety of languages they felt would be advantageous to learn, both parents and children listed French, Italian, and Spanish as being the languages they believed would be most beneficial or "fun" to learn. In a prior study conducted by Kormos, Kiddle & Csizér (2011), they found that participants perceived English as a lingua franca and they perceived English as a means of international communication that could be instrumental to their future goals. While we did not elicit further data to ascertain why children and parents selected French, Italian, and Spanish to learn in the future, the results demonstrate that immigrant families place a high value on bilingualism and multilingualism.

## **8. Limitations**

One limitation of this study was that the surveys were administered only in the English language. As such, participants may have inadequately responded to survey items or may have inaccurately interpreted survey items. Researchers using this survey in the future could translate items into the native language(s) of their participants. A second limitation of this study was a low response rate from participants. Although more participants volunteered to participate in this research, they did not return the surveys or did not complete the surveys in their entirety. Future researchers could provide incentives for participants to increase the response rate.

## **9. Implications for Teaching and Learning**

At present, there is a demand for language professionals with high levels of proficiency in many languages and communicative skills in multiple languages can provide economic benefits for multilingual speakers (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). Heritage speakers present a distinct advantage as they seek to develop oral proficiency and literacy skills in that their linguistic backgrounds often lead to higher levels of eventual attainment in their mother tongue. Results of this study show that parents perceived their children's attitudes toward language learning to be more positive than the children's actual attitudes. These findings could be because parents do not understand how difficult the acquisition of literacy and language skills are in multiple languages and/or because younger learners actually underestimate their language abilities. Future research should investigate why parents' perceptions of their children's language skills differ from those of the children themselves. Design of supportive second language programs or language maintenance programs in which students self-document the development of their language skills in multiple languages, could result in language teaching programs that not only help young

learners develop self their self confidence in multiple languages but could also motivate them for future study of additional languages.

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**APPENDIX**

**Henry and Apelgren Language Learning Attitudes Questionnaire**

Adapted from Henry, A. & Apelgren, B. (2008). Young learners and multilingualism: A study of learner attitudes before and after the introduction of a second foreign language to the curriculum.

**Questions about languages that are spoken in other countries**

1. If I were to travel to another country I would like to be able to speak to people in their own language.
2. I would like to be able to speak several languages in the future.
3. I could consider learning a new language later when I am an adult.

**A question about learning English**

4. It is great fun learning English.

**Questions about countries where people speak English**

5. I think it would be fun to speak English if I were to travel to a country where people speak English.
6. At one or another time in my life I would like to live in a country where English is spoken.
7. England, the USA, and Australia are exciting countries.
8. English language pop music, film and computer games are often very good.

**Questions about the uses of English**

9. Learning English is important for me because it is easier to understand pop music in English.
10. Learning English is important for me because it is easier to understand computer and TV games that have voices or instructions in English.
11. Learning English is important for me because it is easier to find things on the Internet.
12. Being able to speak English is important in order to be able to get a good job as an adult.
13. Being able to speak English will make my life easier in the future.

**More questions about English**

14. Speaking English is cool.
15. I admire people who can speak fluent English.
16. Speaking English is cool- no question about it!

**More questions about other languages**

17. It is cool to be able to speak several languages (other than just English).
18. I admire people who can speak another language fluently.
19. I admire people who can speak several languages.

**More questions about languages and the future**

20. It is/ is going to be great fun learning a new language.
21. It is important for me to be able, in the future, to speak at least one language other than English.
22. It is important for the United States, that in the future, people can speak at least one other language other than English.
23. At some point in the future I would like consider learning the following language(s):  
.....