

Is It Language Learning Anxiety and/or Attitude of University Students That Determines Their Academic Success?¹

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Abstract: The psychological factors affecting foreign language learning have long been the one the main interests of researchers. It is because the learners' views, feelings, self-confidence, motivation, and so forth have undoubtedly great importance on their language learning processes. The present study examined the effects of foreign language learning anxiety and language learning attitude in predicting academic achievement of pre-service freshmen students. Also, the relation between attitude and anxiety was also sought in this study. Participants included 106 freshmen students in a state university in Turkey. Quantitative data were collected by one anxiety scale and one attitude questionnaire, and the qualitative data were collected through a free writing activity to the given questions. The quantitative results showed that there is no significant relationship between students' anxiety and their attitude. It has also been found that their academic achievement is not affected from their anxiety and attitude. Qualitative findings have revealed that although many students have positive attitudes towards learning English they do not want to learn it due to some reasons (learned helplessness, past experiences with English, previous teachers, etc).

Keywords: *language learning anxiety, attitude, academic success*

1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language is a long and challenging process for learners. Students' success and academic achievement in learning this new language depend on many internal and external factors. The quality of language education, teacher, and curriculum can be considered as some of the external factors in language learning. Internal factors, such as anxiety, attitude, and self-confidence exert a distinctive influence on university students' individual success at their foreign language courses, and therefore it is important to reveal these internal factors. Among these, foreign language learning anxiety and language attitude have gained more attention because it is important to foster positive attitudes to foreign language learning (Zefran, 2015) and to have low or no language learning anxiety.

Language anxiety can be considered as the feeling of worry, nervousness, or fear when learning a foreign language. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) described anxiety as "subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the

¹ This study is an extended version of the paper presented in The Self in Language Learning Conference (SiLL) 2015.

autonomic nervous system” (p.125). There are many studies in which anxiety has been considered as one of the most important affective factors that influence second language learning (Cheng, Horwitz and Shallert, 1999; Dalkılıç, 2001; Lucas, Miraflores and Go, 2011). In their study, for example, Batumlu and Erdem (2001) found that there was a significant negative relationship between students’ foreign language anxiety and their English achievement at the significance level of 0.45. Sener (2015), similarly, found in her study that “while the speaking scores are falling, the anxiety levels are rising. This might be due to the fact that more anxious students cannot express themselves freely and inevitably they score lower points” (p.886).

Due to the fact that English is not their mother language, another important internal factor in language learning is certainly the attitude towards this new language (İnal, Evin & Saracaoglu, 2004). Attitudes are cognitive and affecting; that is, they are related to thoughts as well as to feelings and emotions. “Attitudes govern how one approaches learning, creating positive attitudes towards English as a foreign language which in the case of language requires exposure to a different culture and also to the difficult task of mastering a foreign language” (Elyildirim & Ashton, 2006: p.2). The relationship between achievement in language learning and attitude towards the new language has drawn the attention of many researchers (Bain, McCallum, Bell, Cochran, and Sawyer, 2010; Fuligni, 1997; İnal, Evin & Saracaoglu, 2004). Rukh (2014) concluded in his study that students have positive attitudes towards learning English in association with achievement. In another study Al samadeni and Ibnian (2015) found that “students with high GPAs have the highest positive attitudes towards learning English, followed by the medium GPA students and finally the low GPA students” (p. 92).

There are also many studies focusing on the correlation between language learning attitude and language anxiety. Hussain, Shahid and Zaman (2011), for example, found a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and students’ attitude towards English. Female students had a positive attitude toward English and less anxiety. Also, rural students were found to have a higher anxiety level and low attitude towards English. Similarly, Liu and Chen (2013), in their study, found that students who had a higher level of positive attitudes had significantly lower anxiety.

Since attitudes and foreign language anxiety may have a negative or positive influence on foreign language achievement, it is important to explore the connection between foreign language anxiety and attitude, as well as discovering the correlations of these two factors with foreign language achievement. For this reason, the main aim of the study was to identify non-English major freshmen students’ attitudes towards EFL courses and their anxiety levels. Also, this study aimed to discover the relationship between attitude and foreign language anxiety, and if these two factors have any effect on students’ language achievements. Last purpose of the current study was to find the possible reasons of attitude, anxiety and fail in English achievement.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were selected using convenient sampling technique. They were 107 non-English major students of classroom education department at Sinop University. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23 (29 males and 78 females), and they were mainly freshmen students, only 10 of them were sophomore students taking this course (Foreign language II) second time. All the students had taken English courses from 7 to 10 years before taking freshmen English course in 2015-2016 academic year. 42 of the students wanted to take part only in the qualitative

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part of the study. The rest of the students (n: 65) voluntarily took part in both quantitative and qualitative parts of the study.

2.2. Data Collection Tools and Procedures

In this study, two different data set were collected first of which was quantitative and the other qualitative data. One scale and one questionnaire were used for collecting quantitative data. The first one was “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)” developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The FLCAS has 33 items which are scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The original version of this scale was first translated into Turkish, and then was controlled by Turkish Language experts of the department of Turkish Language. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the FLCAS was .94, which means Turkish version the scale was highly reliable in terms of its internal consistency.

The other data collection tool for was the language learning attitude questionnaire (LLAQ). It consisted of 14 items which are scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s coefficient alpha for the LLAQ was .71, which means Turkish version the scale was satisfactorily reliable in terms of its internal consistency.

For collecting qualitative data, students were given three open-ended questions, and they are asked to answer those questions (Free-writing activity). The questions were: 1- *Do you have any kind of personal desire to learn English?* 2-*Is there any reason (such as career planning, family, etc.) that fosters you learn English?* 3- *Do you feel anxious while learning English? If yes, give specific examples of your anxiety.* They were told not to write their names or any kind of information about them to make the students more comfortable in explaining their real feelings about learning English. This data were analyzed through content analysis.

Data collection procedures were completed in different steps. Firstly, students were asked to complete FLCAS and LLAQ, which took 40-50 minutes. The following week, they were given the open-ended questions to answer, and they completed the questions in 30 minutes. Their final exam grades were used to find out students’ academic achievement. These exam results were used in the analysis to see if students’ attitude or anxiety levels had any effects on their academic achievements. This pen and paper exam consisted of different sections (1- a reading passage and related questions about this passage, 2- fill in the blanks with the correct words, 3- a short writing activity about a given topic). If a student got 50 in this exam, s/he was accepted as successful in the analysis.

3. Data Analysis

In this part, quantitative and qualitative data will be analyzed separately. First the FLCAS and questionnaire results, as parts of quantitative data, and then the qualitative data will be presented.

3.1. Quantitative Data Results

Cross tabulation results of the successful and unsuccessful students and their relation with their language learning attitude are presented in the first table.

Table 1. Cross Tabulation Results in terms of Gender and Students' Attitudes

		Attitude			Total
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>High</i>	
Gender	Female	3	42	1	46
	Male	0	19	0	19
Total		3	61	1	65

In the table above, three female students have low attitudes, and only one of them has high attitudes towards learning English. Besides, most of the female students (n: 42) have average attitudes. All male students, similarly, have average levels of attitudes towards learning English. The next table (Table 2) gives the results of the relation between the successful and unsuccessful students and their attitudes towards English.

Table 2. Cross Tabulation Results in terms of Student' Grades and Students' Attitude

		Attitude			Total
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>High</i>	
Achievement	Successful	2	32	0	34
	Unsuccessful	1	29	1	31
Total		3	61	1	65

In Table 2, it can be seen that only two of the successful students and one unsuccessful student have low attitude, and similar to gender, almost all students have average levels of attitudes towards learning English. In Table 3 below, the results of gender and students' anxiety levels are given.

Table 3. Cross Tabulation Results in terms of Gender and Students' Anxiety

		Anxiety			Total
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>High</i>	
Gender	Female	1	44	1	46
	Male	1	18	0	19
Total		2	62	1	65

As can be seen in table 3 above, one female and one male student have low and only one female has high anxiety. Almost all of the students have average level of foreign language learning anxiety. In Table 4 below, the relationship between students' grades and their anxiety levels are presented.

Table 4. Cross Tabulation Results in terms of Student Achievement and Anxiety

		Attitude			Total
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>High</i>	
Achievement	Successful	2	31	1	34
	Unsuccessful	0	31	0	31
Total		3	2	62	1

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In Table 4, only two successful students have low anxiety, and one of them have high level of anxiety. On the other hand, all unsuccessful students have average levels of foreign language anxiety. Table 5 below presents the t-test results of students gender, attitude and anxiety levels.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-Test Results of Attitude and Anxiety in Terms of Gender

Gender		N	X	S	p
Attitude	Female	46	1,9565	,29488	,525
	Male	19	2,0000	,00000	
<hr/>					
Anxiety	Female	46	2,0000	,21082	,376
	Male	19	1,9474	,22942	

Firstly, in terms of language learning attitude, female ($x=1.95$) and male students ($x=2.00$) means do not show a statistically significant difference ($p=.525$). Although male students' anxiety levels ($x=1.94$) are slightly lower than the female students' anxiety levels ($x=2.00$), there is no statistically significant relationship between the anxiety levels.

Table 6. Independent Samples T-Test Results of Attitude and Anxiety in Terms of Students' Achievement

Gender		N	X	S	p
Attitude	Female	34	1,9412	,23883	,344
	Male	31	2,0000	,25820	
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Anxiety	Female	34	1,9706	,30003	,587
	Male	31	2,0000	,00000	

As can be seen above, the attitudes of successful ($x=1.94$) and unsuccessful students ($x=2.00$) do not show a statistically significant relationship ($p=.344$). Similarly, there is no significant difference ($p=.587$) between the mean scores of successful ($x=1.97$) and unsuccessful students ($x=2.00$) in terms of foreign language classroom anxiety.

Table 7 Correlation between Foreign Language Anxiety and Attitude towards English

		anxiety	attitude
anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	-,009
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,943
	N	65	65
<hr/>			
attitude	Pearson Correlation	-,009	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,943	
	N	65	65

As can be seen from Table 7, there is no significant correlation between students' foreign language anxiety and their attitude towards learning English. Therefore, it can be said that if students have better attitudes for English, it does not mean that they have higher or lower anxiety, or vice versa.

3.2. *Qualitative Data Results*

Qualitative data were separated into two parts: attitude towards English and foreign language anxiety. These two parts were analyzed in two different sections: internal and external reasons for positive/negative attitudes and anxiety.

a- Attitudes towards learning English

In the analysis, 95.32 % of the students (n=102) stated that they have positive attitudes and desire to learn English. 29.9 % of these students had internal reasons for learning English such as "personal improvement and feeling happy to learn and speak another language". For example one student in his answers stated:

S1: ...I surely have positive attitude and desire to learn English because a new language can bring me many things. Also, I will be different from other people and friends if I can speak English with a tourist...

Another student similarly wrote:

S2: I want to learn English because I wanted to be respected more by learning a new language...

30 % of the students, who stated positive attitudes towards learning English, had many external reasons for learning English. In his answer, a student wrote:

S3: I need to learn English for my professional career. I would like to go abroad (may be in ERASMUS program, for example) and communicate on my own...

Many other students said in their answers that they may need in English in their future schools because they can be classroom teachers in very far and small villages where there is no other English teacher, and they may have to teach this language to their students.

On the other hand, 4.6 % of the participant stated that they do not want to learn English or any other foreign language. 2.8 % of these students had internal reasons such as *learned helplessness, past experiences, etc.* For example a female student stated:

S4: I have been learning English for nine years but I could never learn it up to now, and I do not believe I can learn it from now on...Also, in high school my English teacher made fun of me, once, since then I do not want to learn it anymore... I would not be here if I did not have to...

All these qualitative data and their analysis indicate that although most of the students have positive attitudes towards learning English, there some internal and external reasons that retards students' learning process. Besides, these reasons may also prevent students to have high motivation or higher attitudes towards learning English.

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b- Foreign language Anxiety:

Qualitative analysis of foreign language anxiety showed that 70.09 % of the students (n=75) feel anxious while learning English. 54 students' (50.43%) answers reveals that they have anxiety due to internal reasons such as *not believing in himself/herself, feeling shy, not feeling secure, etc.* one of the students, for example, stated that:

S5: Although I try a lot to learn English (taking courses at school, studying at home), I still have the idea of being unsuccessful. Especially, in the exams, I feel much more anxious...

As above, another student stated her similar anxiety as:

S6: yes, I feel anxious in the classroom, Also, I feel like I will forget the answer or I will misunderstand the question, or I will give a wrong answer...

Besides internal reasons that cause anxiety, 13 students stated that there are some external factors that make them feel anxious while learning English such as *worrying about the reaction of teacher/friends if s/he answers the questions wrong, fear of being made fun of by their friends even if they know the correct answer, etc.* This anxiety may be seen in different ways such as fast heartbeat, sweating, shaking hands and legs unconsciously, breathing faster than normal, etc. In a student's answer, we can see such effects:

S7: I always feel frozen whenever I am asked a question in English although I know the correct answer... my voice lowers and lowers...

Other students (n=32) stated that they do not feel anxious while learning English. However, almost of them stated some kind of anxiety in their following sentences as in the example below:

S8: No, I do not feel anxious, but when I do not study enough I feel anxious. Also, I worry about my pronunciation...

As in the examples above, most students seem to have some kind of foreign language anxiety, although they do not have a high anxiety level. Only few students who have high self-confidence and whose English levels are higher than his friends do not have foreign language anxiety.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first aim of the current study was to show the non-English major students' attitudes towards English and their foreign language anxiety levels. Based on the above findings of this sample group of university students, it can be said that although almost half of the students were not successful in learning English, most of these students have average level of positive attitudes towards learning English.

Another purpose of this study was to discover the relationship between students' attitudes and their foreign language anxiety levels. In Zefran's (2015) study, students were found to have high levels of anxiety and "alarmingly negative attitudes towards EFL courses and teachers" (p.167). According to the current results, in contrast, there is no significant correlation between these two internal factors in learning English. Namely, having average or higher attitudes towards English does not lower students' anxiety levels, or, even if a student have high level of foreign

language anxiety, s/he does not have to have really low levels of attitudes towards learning English. Contrary to Tran and Duong's study (2013), academic achievement or failure does not change the attitudes of students towards learning English and vice versa. In their study Awan, Azher, Anvar and Naz (2010) found that language anxiety and academic achievement are negatively related to each other. However in this present study, there is no significant difference between academic achievement and students' foreign language anxiety. Almost all of the students in this study, whether successful or not, had average levels of foreign language anxiety. Therefore, we can clearly state that being successful does not necessarily lower the anxiety levels of the students, and also, being unsuccessful in learning English does not always increase students anxiety levels.

Last aim was to discover the possible reasons of students' attitudes, anxiety and academic achievements/fails. Firstly, analysis of the qualitative data indicates that students' having average levels of positive attitudes towards learning English is a sign of awareness of the importance of English in this fast globalizing world. In new Turkish education system, English courses begin at second grade, and in some schools there are no English teachers, which mean, as the future classroom teachers, they need to know and teach English in their classes. Also, they want to learn English because they want to go abroad for different purposes such as education, travel, work, etc.

Second finding was that most students had still average levels of foreign language anxiety although they have been learning English for more than 7-8 years. In their answers, they gave different reasons for having this anxiety. Some stated that they are afraid of being unsuccessful no matter how hard they try because they always got very low grades in English before being a university student. Seligman and his colleagues called this psychological event as "learned helplessness" (Natalie, 2015). Another reason for having anxiety was the past experiences with English teachers and classmates. Some students stated their English teachers and classmates made fun of them while trying to answer the question in English. Since then, they always feel anxious and stressed whenever they are asked a question, and they do not want to participate in English courses even if they know the correct answers.

In continuing efforts to increase our knowledge in this important psychological domain, it is necessary for future studies to replicate these results with non-English major students. Also, it is important to consider other factors such as learned helplessness, past experiences, teacher-students or student-student relations that may possibly create positive attitudes and that decrease the foreign language anxiety levels of the students.

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