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## **Attitudes of State School Students Towards Learning English as a Foreign Language**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this case study is to examine attitudes of state school students towards learning English both the language itself and as a lesson. It is aimed to see how their attitudes differ depending on the gender and how these attitudes might impact the outcomes of the learning process. The study was conducted at Celalettin Sayhan State School in Adana with 50 Turkish EFL learners. The gathered data were deeply analyzed according to positive or negative attitudes of the students. The survey reveals the fact that how the results differ from a previous one in the same subject and it emphasizes the importance of learning English. It is thought that the results of this study can be evaluated as a kind of feedback for future studies.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Student attitudes, EFL learners, language teaching



## **Devlet Okulunda Okuyan Öğrencilerin İngilizce Öğrenmeye Karşı Tutumları**

### **Öz**

Bu durum çalışmasının amacı, devlet okulunda okuyan öğrencilerin hem dilin kendisine, hem de ders olarak İngilizce öğrenmeye karşı tutumlarını incelemektir. Öğrenci tutumlarının cinsiyetlerine göre nasıl değişkenlik gösterdiği ve bu tutumların öğrenme sürecinin çıktılarını nasıl etkileyebileceğini görmek amaçlanmaktadır. Çalışma, Adana Celalettin Sayhan İlköğretim Okulu'nda, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen 50 adet Türk öğrenci ile birlikte yürütülmüştür. Toplanan veriler, öğrencilerin pozitif ve negatif tutumlara göre ayrıntılı bir şekilde incelenmiştir. Araştırma, İngilizce öğrenmenin önemini vurgularken sonuçlar, aynı konuda daha önce yapılmış başka bir araştırmadan nasıl farklılık gösterdiğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu çalışmadan çıkan sonuçların gelecekte yapılacak çalışmalar için bir geri bildirim olarak değerlendirilebileceği düşünülmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Öğrenci tutumları, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenimi, dil eğitimi



## **Introduction**

“English has become a dominant language in business, finance and banking, science and technology, popular culture and international relations around the world. It is widely accepted that fluency in the English language is a key to success in life” according to Hall’s view (as cited in Gömleksiz, 2010). As communication plays an important role in our lives, the language used for communication is also very important. Through an international language, it is possible for us to be able to communicate with others. There is absolutely no doubt that English is the lingua franca of the world today that helps us to communicate in different situations for various reasons. Therefore, the importance of teaching and learning English is not a fact that anyone can disagree.

Up until now, we come across with the illustration and discussion of the language teaching from the point of view of scholars and teachers. However, Richards argued that “while learning is the goal of teaching, it is not necessarily the mirror image of teaching. Learners, too, bring to learning their own beliefs, goals and attitudes, and decisions, which influence how they approach their learning” (as cited in Al-Bustan, Al-Bustan, 2009).

Many theorists and researchers have found the significance of recognizing the construct of motivation not as a single entity but as a multi-factorial one. Oxford and Shearin (1994), have analyzed several motivational theories on models and six factors that impact motivation in learning language:

- Attitudes (i.e. sentiments towards the target language).
- Beliefs about self (i.e. expectations about one's attitudes to succeed, self-efficiency, and anxiety).
- Goals (perceived clarity and relevance of learning goals as reasons for learning).
- Involvement (i.e. extent to which the learner actively and consciously participates in the learning process).
- Environmental support (i.e. extent of teacher and peer support).
- Personal attributes (i.e. aptitude, and language learning experience) (as cited in Al-Bustan, Al-Bustan, 2009).

Attitudes begin to develop in children at an early age and are influenced by age, parents, peers, interactions with people who have social and cultural differences, socio-economic status, environmental issues. These are also some of the factors that affect English language learning along with strategies, methods and techniques. Yeşil (2011) describes attitude “as a feature that is an indicator of individual’s point of view and feelings towards a subject and that motivates him/her to behave in a positive or negative way”. Therefore, attitude “forms a part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living” as Brown emphasizes (as cited in Al-Bustan, Al-Bustan, 2009).

Hall argued that “a student's attitude toward learning the language is one of the leading predictors of success in learning English. For this reason, teachers and educators should take motivation and attitude factors into consideration when designing English language training and instruction” (as cited in Gömleksiz, 2010). On the other hand, according to Schmidt, motivation has been identified as the learners' orientation with regard to the goal and beliefs of learning a second language (Al-Bustan, Al-Bustan, 2009).



It is a fact that all students have their own positive and negative attitudes towards language learning. When the students' attitudes are positive and their motivation is high, their learning potential increases. The negative ones should be identified and turn into positive through proper techniques. Brown states that "second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and, in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency" (as cited in Abu-Melhim, 2009).

As all these facts are taken into consideration, a better understanding of language learner's attitudes can have a beneficial effect on the process of helping language learners in learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine state school students' attitudes towards learning English. In line with this purpose, it is aimed to see how these attitudes might impact the outcomes of the learning process. The results can be evaluated as a kind of feedback for the English teachers, the school administrators and even for the ministry of education for their future contributions to this field. It can also help to encourage student motivation and their will to participate more actively in the learning process. The paper asks the following research questions:

- 1) What are the state school students' opinions about English language itself and English as a lesson?
- 2) Are there any differences between the attitudes of students depending on the gender?
- 3) How can negative attitudes of the students (if there is any) towards English be turned into positive?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Model**

This research was constructed as general survey model. According to Karasar, it is a research model that depends on the gathered data. It aims to describe a situation, an item or an event as it is how in its own condition (as cited in Ocak, Özçalışan & Kuru, 2010).

### **Participants**

The students who participated in the study consisted of 50 Turkish EFL learners enrolled in Celalettin Sayhan Elementary State School in Adana. The study was conducted in January, 2018. Randomly two classrooms which are named as 7-B and 7-E were chosen among six 7<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms. Name of the classrooms were written on small papers and had been put in a box. Two pieces of paper were taken out randomly and by this way, 7-B and 7-E were selected for the survey. 32 students from 7-B and 18 students from 7-E joined in the survey. 7-B consists of 17 female and 15 male students. 7-E consists of 9 female and 9 male students. The gender proportions of the students were 52% female and 48% male. The English proficiency level of the students is A2. Average age of the participants is 13.

### **Instrument and Data Analysis**

Data for the study were collected through an eight-item five-point Likert-type attitude scale. The questions used by Bağçeci and Yaşar (2007) in their survey called *Opinions of Students Attending High Schools in Gaziantep about the Teaching of English* were turned into a scale. Eight statements were placed in order to get student opinions and perspectives about the



importance of learning English. In addition to this, some variables including age and gender were placed on the top of the scale. The respondents rated each item as; *strongly agree, slightly agree, I can't decide, disagree* and *strongly disagree*. However, the results were calculated as *agree, I can't decide* and *disagree*. The scale was handed out to the students in their classrooms, completed in class and collected immediately. In order to scrutinize the issue, an overall analysis was done. The other analysis was conducted regarding the gender differences if there were any.

### **Results and Findings**

According to the scales, the results of the data gathered from the students are presented in the tables below.

**Table 1.** Student Responses on English Vocabulary and Teaching Grammar

<i>Rather than rigid vocabulary and grammar knowledge, nothing else is taught through the education provided by school.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>24 %</b>	<b>20 %</b>	<b>56 %</b>

Students were asked ‘Rather than rigid vocabulary and grammar knowledge, nothing else is taught through the education provided by school’. As can be seen in Table 1; while 24 % of the students agreed with the statement, 20 % of them could not decide. The fact that 56 % of the students disagreed with the statement shows that most of them think that they are taught far more than vocabulary and grammar.

**Table 2.** Student Responses on the Fear of Failure

<i>During the process of learning English language, students should not be put under the pressure of getting low grades.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>76 %</b>	<b>10 %</b>	<b>14 %</b>



Students were asked ‘During the process of learning English language, students should not be put under the pressure of getting low grades’. As can be seen in Table 2; 76 % of the students agreed with the statement while 10 % of them could not decide and 14 % of them disagreed. This shows that fear of failure causes most of the students to feel that they should learn English in order to get higher marks for the lesson. However, if such a fear does not exist, learning would be more enjoyable and effective for them.

**Table 3.** Student Responses on the Necessity of English for Developing in the Field of Technology

<i>In order to achieve improvement in the field of technology, being proficient in English language is necessary.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>74 %</b>	<b>18 %</b>	<b>8 %</b>

Students were asked ‘In order to achieve improvement in the field of technology, being proficient in English language is necessary’. As can be seen in Table 3; 74 % of the students agreed with the statement while 18 % of them could not decide. Only 8 % of the students disagreed. This shows that most of the students are aware of the fact that knowing English makes our life easier. Maybe we cannot say that there is a direct relationship between knowing English and development in technology, however, *scanning the literature* can be given as an example. It is one of the basic steps for achieving improvement in the field of technology and most of the sources are published in English. English is the lingua franca of science and technology. Besides, most of the web sites are in English as well.

**Table 4.** Student Responses on English Teaching Methods

<i>I believe that English teaching methods are not proper and I do not approve of these methods.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>24 %</b>	<b>22 %</b>	<b>54 %</b>



Students were asked ‘I believe that English teaching methods are not proper and I do not approve of these methods’. As can be seen in Table 4; 54 % of the students disagreed with the statement. On the other hand, while 24 % of them agreed, 22 % of them could not decide. The results reveal that most of the students are glad with the methods that their teacher uses. The role of the teacher, of course, is an important factor to develop positive attitudes towards learning English.

**Table 5.** Student Responses on the Effect of “Interest” for Learning English

<i>The first condition of learning English is interest.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>82 %</b>	<b>10 %</b>	<b>8 %</b>

Students were asked ‘The first condition of learning English is interest’. As can be seen in Table 5; 82 % of the students agreed with the statement while 10 % of them could not decide and 8 % of them disagreed. According to the results it can be said that, most of the students are aware of the basic factors of learning.

**Table 6.** Student Responses on English as a Lesson

<i>When I hear about the word ‘English’, rigid subjects and uninterestingly taught classroom teaching come to my mind.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>36 %</b>	<b>10 %</b>	<b>54 %</b>

Students were asked ‘When I hear about the word *English*, rigid subjects and uninterestingly taught classroom teaching come to my mind’. As can be seen in Table 6; while 36 % of the students agreed with the statement, 10 % of them could not decide and 54 % of them disagreed. Table 1, 4 and 6 are all questions directly related issues and according to the results, most of the students are glad with the techniques and methods that their teacher uses.



**Table 7.** Student Responses on the Fact that Knowing English Broadens One's Social Networking.

<i>Knowing English broadens one's social networking.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>90 %</b>	<b>8 %</b>	<b>2 %</b>

Students were asked 'Knowing English broadens one's social networking'. As can be seen in Table 7; 90 % of the students agreed with this statement while 8 % of them could not decide and 2 % of them disagreed. English language is accepted as the indicator of power, success and prestige in most places in the world. According to the results it can be said that almost all of the students are aware of this fact.

**Table 8.** Student Responses on Reading English Publications and Watching Movies in English.

<i>I like reading English publications and watching movies in English.</i>			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
<b>n</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>p</b>	<b>66 %</b>	<b>8 %</b>	<b>26 %</b>

Students were asked 'I like reading English publications and watching movies in English'. As can be seen in Table 8; 66 % of the students agreed while 8 % of them could not decide and 26 % of them disagreed.

**Table 9.** Attitudes towards English Based upon Gender

<i>Male: 24 Female: 26</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
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Rather than rigid vocabulary and grammar knowledge, nothing else is taught through the education provided by school.	Male	5 21 %	5 21 %	14 58 %
	Female	7 27 %	5 21 %	14 58 %
During the process of learning English language, students should not be put under the pressure of getting low grades.	Male	16 67 %	2 8 %	6 25 %
	Female	22 85 %	3 11 %	1 4 %
In order to achieve improvement in the field of technology, being proficient in English language is necessary.	Male	18 74 %	3 13 %	3 13 %
	Female	19 73%	6 23 %	1 4 %
I believe that English teaching methods are not proper and I do not approve of these methods.	Male	5 21 %	8 33 %	11 46 %
	Female	7 27 %	3 12 %	16 61 %
The first condition of learning English is interest.	Male	19 79 %	3 13 %	2 8 %
	Female	22 84 %	2 8 %	2 8 %
When I hear about the word 'English', rigid subjects and uninterestingly taught classroom teaching come to my mind.	Male	9 37 %	4 17 %	11 46 %
	Female	9 35 %	1 4 %	16 61 %



Knowing English broadens one's social networking.	Male	23 96 %	0 0 %	1 4 %
	Female	22 85 %	4 15 %	0 0 %
I like reading English publications and watching movies in English.	Male	12 50 %	4 17 %	8 33 %
	Female	21 81 %	0 0 %	5 19 %

The results shown in Table 9 do not provide a meaningful difference as gender diversity is taken into consideration. However, percentages of female for the last question are higher than males. Therefore, it can easily be said that female students are more interested in learning English.

## Conclusion

As stated in the introduction part, the purpose of this study is to examine attitudes of students studying at middle state schools towards learning English. In this sense, by looking at the overall percentages, it has been found out that students mostly have positive attitudes towards English language.

According to a previous research which was conducted at 26 high schools in Gaziantep, in 2004 (Bahçeci, Yaşar, 2009) most of the students had negative attitudes in general towards English lesson when they were asked the same questions. The results of the statistic revealed the differences in students' attitudes in both of the researches. Needless to say, the results may differ as we consider some factors such as age, gender, peers, background and so on. However, the most important reason of the remarkable differences is the fact that the previous research dates back to nearly 15 years ago. This shows that there have been significant changes through these years and it affected English language teaching and learning positively. At that time, students did not possibly need to use English in their daily routines as much as we use today. This fact may prevent them to realize the necessity of English in all fields. However, when we look at today's results, the students of Celalettin Sayhan State School are aware of the importance of English learning though they are younger.

As a result of this research it can be said that "there is absolutely no doubt that English will remain the international language of the world for a long time to come and people will have no choice but to learn it regardless of their native language, culture, religion, or geographical location" as Abu-Melhim emphasizes (2009).



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