

An Exploration of English Students' Attitude towards English Learning

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Abstract

Attitude is one of the success factors in language learning. It includes students' feelings, beliefs, and behavior tendencies. This study was conducted using the qualitative method exploring English Department students' attitude towards English learning. The main focus of the study was to discover students' belief on English, and to understand students' attitude, feeling and behavior on learning English. The data were collected through semi-structured interview. The participants of the research were six students selected purposively to participate in an interview session. The results indicated that English department students showed positive attitude in three points of cognitive aspect; the students' reason for learning English, the students' level of English competence, and the students' thinking towards learning English which they considered important. Moreover, the students had four positive points of emotional attitude; the students' interest in learning English, the students' feeling in learning English, the students' preference in learning English, and the students' enjoyment in learning English which all showed good feeling towards learning English. Furthermore, the students had three positive points in behavioral attitude; the students' attention during learning English, students' positive participation during the English learning. In sum, it can be said that English Department students were found to have positive attitudes toward learning English.

Keywords: Learning Attitude; EFL Students; Language Learning; Language Belief

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INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language has been an obligatory subject in Indonesian schools. The government regulation mandates secondary schools and tertiary education institutions to include English in their curriculum as a mandatory subject. However, English is still a challenging subject for many. There are various factors considered to have influenced the learning process such as motivation, attitudes, anxiety, learning achievements, aptitudes, intelligence, age, and personalities (Pratolo, 2017; Hasan and Fatimah, 2014; Shams, 2008). Of all these factors, attitude is believed to be crucial in language learning. Inal, Evin, and Saracaloglu (2003) also stated that attitude refers to ones' feelings and shapes our behavior towards learning. Attitude is not only about behavior, but also about feelings, beliefs, and behavior tendencies (Baron, Robert, Byrne & Donn, 2003). Besides, Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) suggested that attitudes were constructed around three components: (1) A

cognitive component (beliefs); (2) An affective component (feelings); and (3) A conative component (behavior).

Students with positive learning attitudes are happy towards learning and thus they would actively engage in learning. While those with negative learning attitudes may feel anxious in learning; they would get bored easily and difficult to enjoy their learning. This suggests that the negative attitude leads to lack of learning success (Padwick, 2010). İnal, et al (2003), for example, assert that identifying the students' attitude is important to allow teachers understand their students well.

The student's behavior is also related to students' classroom participation. Lee, (as cited in Devi & Simanjalan, 2008) states that participation means students' interaction in the classroom with their colleagues and also their teachers. Zhafira (2019), for example showed that many students did not actively participate in the class. Lack of students' participation in learning can reduce the performance of the students. Those situations can be caused by a lack of motivation. Gardner (1985) states that motivation as the combination of effort, desire and favorable attitude in achieving the goals of learning a language. Katesi (1993) found that attitude and motivation were significant factors in determining the success and failure in language learning.

A teacher is viewed as one of the most important components in boosting students' motivation. They should be enthusiastic, inspiring, boosting students' confidence and encouraging them to have a positive attitude towards foreign language learning (Yazigy, 1991) as positive learning attitude is a significant requirement for learning. This research aims at exploring EFL students' beliefs and attitudes toward learning English. It is expected to complement the previous research, which was intended to explore the attitude of EFL students in an Islamic higher institution in Aceh by exploring students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes. This research includes the students' needs, preferences and view of their learning. This study explores the following research questions: How do the students believe that English is important? How do the students feel about learning English? And how do the students behave towards learning English?

Understanding Language Belief and Attitude

Experts in the field of learning theory defines attitude in different ways. For example, Schwarz, Almer-Jarz, and Breitenecker (2009) viewed attitude as a behavioral intention. It is also seen as a central component of human identity (Bohner & Wanke, 2002). Other experts such as Latchanna and Dagnev (2009) argue that understanding ones' attitudes enables us to be aware of human behavior. The attitude itself is seen as the state where one's beliefs and feelings are shaped. Mensah et al, (2013) also stated that attitude tells us individuals' performance, such as how they think, act, and behave.

The Components of Attitude

According to Wenden (1991) attitudes include three important components, namely cognitive, affective and behavior. The first one is made up

of beliefs and ideas or opinions of something. The second one refers to one's feelings and emotions towards something, and the behavioral component refers to one's action on an object.

Attitude in Language Learning

Attitude can be defined as a tendency of a person to respond positively or negatively towards something (idea, object, person, situation), therefore language learning attitude refers to one's tendencies toward their effort in learning languages.

Research on learners' attitudes on language learning has been a topic of many researches in EFL learning. Most findings suggest that positive attitude towards learning yields positive result and vice versa (Wang, 2010). Brown (2000) reviewed a large number of studies related to attitudes shaping the language learning. He found that positive attitude on one's language learning will shape the way these people learn the language, which results in positive result. At the same time, failure in language learning is the result of negative attitude towards learning (see Holmes, 1992; Karahan, 2008). If this is the case, to allow successful language learning, teachers should also pay attention on boosting their students' attitudes towards learning, which then in turn will increase possibilities for students' learning success (Mantle-Bromley, 1995).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This is a qualitative research in which it used an important method of data collection in this kind of methodology, and an in-depth semi structure interview. The research was designed by using mixed methods. It relied on the methodology to help explore the students' attitudes towards language learning. The qualitative method enabled the researchers to grasp inside into the students' attitude towards language learning.

Participants

The participants of this study were six students drawn from 55 students. These participants were taken through purposive sampling technique, in which they're selected because they got the highest and the lowest score of each aspect referring to the data from the questionnaire. However, this article did not take its liberty to analyze the data from the questionnaires because it was beyond the purpose of this study.

Methods of Data Collection and Collection

To answer the research questions, it was done an interview with the participants using in-depth interviews. The interview questions designed to explore the students' attitude toward language learning were open-ended, which allowed the researchers to explore deeply into the participants' attitudes. The data from interview was analyzed through coding technique, in which they were first transcribed, and then analyzed using open, axial and selective coding.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Students' Language Learning Attitudes

The interview with the six participants revealed some important information on students' learning attitudes. They were divided into three main categories, the Cognitive Aspect of Attitude; Emotional Aspect; and Behavioral Aspect of language learning attitudes.

Cognitive aspect of attitude

The data on the cognitive aspect was coded into three categorizations: students' reason for learning English, students' level of English competence, and students' perception of learning English.

The students' reason for learning English

The interview results suggested that six participants showed a great passion in learning English. These students believed that learning English was important and they had different reasons for learning English, one of which was because English was seen to be fun and important. As one of the participants reiterated:

I think learning English is fun and makes me more open about the new thing and new knowledge. Since many books of knowledge were written in English, thus by learning English I can know the other knowledge. (P1)

This quote suggested that one of the reasons students learned English was the fact that English was fun. The student also mentioned that English was important, since it helped those who learn English to gain access to the broader communities.

Future orientation

The other participants suggested that students learned English for the sake of future orientation. The student, for example claimed that English was important for their bright future. English allowed them to go overseas, as one of them stated that:

English language is international language. If I have the English skill, I will be easy to go abroad. Then, another reason I learn English because I love listening to music and watching an English movie. So, learning English is also in harmony with my hobbies. (P2)

This quote stated that there were many ways English could be applied. The participant stated that being competent in English enabled her to fulfill her hobbies as she liked to watch western movies and listened to English songs.

*Assessment purpose*

Still other participants also argued that they learned English to fulfill the academic requirement only. This was so because in all educational institutions in Indonesia, students were required to take an English class, and it was counted as the credit point for students to graduate. One of the participants stated:

I study English because I like English. Learning English can enrich new vocabulary and new knowledge. Besides, I study English also to pass the examination. (P1)

In the same tone, another participant also asserted:

There are some lessons that I want to learn seriously and other lessons just to pass the examination. For example, I am studying grammar seriously because grammar is needed whenever and wherever. But if the lesson such as discourse analysis, I studied it just to pass the examination because I don't know when I need it again. (P3)

These two quotations of the participants acknowledged that their main reason to learn English was not for knowledge *per se*, they in fact learned English to succeed in their summative assessment.

*Level of students' competence**English is an easier language*

In the interview, it was found out that the participants had different opinions that their language competence was different from one another. One of the participants, for example stated that:

I can understand the English learning well, but, I think the understanding depends on the lecturers' explanation especially the way he teaches. For example, a smart lecturer not always can explain the material well to the students. (P4)

This excerpt suggested that students' level of understanding of the lesson was very much influenced by teachers' qualification in transferring English. Other students argued that English was much easier than other kinds of language. One of them stated:

From other languages, I think English is the easiest language. Because, firstly, the tense is clear. Secondly, the grammar is easy unlike the other languages such as Japanese, Germany, Arabic which were hard to understand.
(P6).

This student was very confident about learning English. Comparing English with other subjects, English was seen as a much easier language to learn.

Cautious with language skills

Although some students claimed that English was an easy subject, some of them believed that some English skills were much difficult for them to acquire. One participant, for example stated:

I do not fully understand, because in English there are several skills. The most difficult skills are grammar and speaking which make me confused sometimes. I am afraid that what I said is wrong and my friends will comment about it (P5).

Additionally, the participant added:

Also, I can't understand well during English learning because of the lecturer and his teaching method. Some lecturers want their students to be able to comprehend the lesson the way they want. For me, it is difficult to follow them. The other students might be able to follow, but I am definitely cannot follow it (P6).

This quote suggested that students' mastery of English was very much dependent on the teachers' instructional approaches. It was understandable that students' passion in learning English was very much influenced by teachers' approaches.

Emotional Aspect of Attitude

In the emotional aspect of the attitude, it was found out at least four categories i.e. English is interesting, lack of interest, anxiety, and skill preference.

English is an interesting subject

The participants in the study were interested in English. They saw English as not only an interesting subject but also an important one. One of them asserted:

I'm so interested in learning English because I graduated from boarding school. Previously in the boarding school, I couldn't speak English well so I often got punished for not speaking the language. Then, after graduated from boarding school, I regret wasting my time without often speaking in English. Finally, I realized that English is important (P6)

This indicated that the participant was very much interested in learning English as he understood English. Meanwhile, other participants also showed some preferences toward language learning for different reasons. The participants then stated:

Yes. I'm interested. Because I want to continue my study abroad and I want to be a tour guide (P3).

This quote showed that the student was interested in English because of educational reason. This meant that they liked to study English to enable them to gain a bright future.

Lack of learning interest

Even though some students were interested in studying English, these particular students lacked learning interest. However, some students argued that their passion in learning language reduced because of their teachers' instructional approaches.

It depends on the lecturer. Last semester, I didn't have a spirit in learning English because the lecturer do not come to the class very frequently. Besides, the learning also is not in accordance with the course. For instance, in the listening subject, the lecturer always tells the story about his life and do not very much covers material that is related to the subject. So I feel annoyed. But the other subjects, I don't have problems and I am happy to learn. Sometimes, I also feel proud of learning English because of so cool (P5)

The quotation suggested that learning passion relied on the teaching exposure they received from their teachers. Other also suggested that students got bored in a language learning due to teachers' ineffective approaches. One of the participants stated that "sometimes, I am bored. The lecturer only explains the material without asks the students to participate. So, it makes the class is really boring".

Learning Anxiety

The other learning attitude emerged in the study was that the students experienced learning anxiety. One of the students, for example stated that he actually experienced tremendous learning anxiety, but then the teacher helped and boosted his confidence.

First, I was so scared and nervous. But, now I am very enthusiastic about learning because my friends are so enthusiastic which makes me don't want to lose from them. Besides, also the lecturer gives a bonus score to the student who wants to give opinion during the learning process (P4)

In contrast, the respondent P2 said:

I'm still nervous to speak in English. I'm not confident with my English and I am scared if my friends laugh at me. Sometimes, when I have to

...speak in front of the class, I often forget the things that I want to say (P2).

Prefer one skill to others

The interview with the students also revealed that the students were interested in English, but some of them preferred a certain skill, such as grammar over other types of skills, as one of them stated:

In learning English, I like the writing subject because I can get new knowledge such as grammar and how to arrange a good paragraph. I am happy that I can know that new information because the last time I write something it produces really bad writing which makes me concern about my writing skills (P2).

Other students also suggested that some of them liked to learn speaking, since they had a strong background in the speaking skill. The student stated: "I like to speak in English also. Because I graduated from boarding school, I used to speak English and it makes me like learning English".

The behavioral aspect of Attitudes

In the behavioral aspect of the attitude, it was found out at least three categories i.e. effective teaching strategies, lack of participation, and making self-scheduling.

Effective Teaching Strategies

In exploring the level of the students' attention during learning English, it was found out several types of attitudes as shown by students interviewed. One of them, for example suggested that she paid attention on the lecturer's explanation. Other participants argued that their attention on learning depended very much on the lecturer's teaching approach, as one of them said:

The lecturer. But it depends on the teaching method used by the lecturer. If the lecturer used the teaching method that I don't like and makes me bored and I don't want to pay attention to the lecturer (P1)

Other students stated that they would participate in the classroom, if they were given some compensations by the lecturers, such as given higher grade or some other types of compensation. One student, for instance, stated:

Yes, sometimes. It depends on the lecturers. If the lecturer gives me the bonus scores, I will participate (P3).

This quotation clearly informed that his participation occurred with the condition that was if the lecturers encouraged participation through compensation, then the students would be willing to participate.



Lack of participation

The interview results also suggested that some students participating in the research felt reluctant to participate because of anxiety reason. It was mentioned by one of the participants.

Never. Because I really don't like to participate. I'm not confident with my ability to present in front of the class. It is because I feel my English still bad. So, I prefer to be silent rather than participate in class (P2).

Another student also admitted that he chose to just keep quiet in the classroom, rather than expressing himself in front of the student, as he said "I choose to be silent and sit down on my chair"

Making self-scheduling

The other information obtained during the interview was the nature of students' learning. Part of the question addressed was related to the students' learning strategies. One of the participants suggested:

I learn English at night or sometimes in the early morning. I review the materials that will be examined (P2)

Others preferred to review their lesson differently, as stated in the following:

I prefer to study alone by my self rather than study in a group. I review the material at night before the examination (P4)

In the interview, it was also identified that some students spent so much time to study English. As seen in the following quotations:

Apparently, I learn English every day, especially about grammar which I learn it chapter by chapter. When I think I have understood the topic, I will stop study. So, I'm not sure how much time I spend to learn English in a week (P1)

I spend my time to study English about 4 hours/week. Because I'm busy, so I seldom to study English (P3).

This information suggested that students paid attention on learning English. This was because they seemed to learn English on their own.

Discussion

The research findings suggest important fact that the students participating in this research hold positive attitude towards language learning. This positive attitude indeed will shape their passion in language learning. Kara (2009)

argued that positive attitude towards language learning influences students' interest in language learning.

The findings map three important codings in regard with types of attitudes emerging through the research: cognitive, emotional and behavioral attitudes. The cognitive aspects of attitude range from personal to communal issues. The data reveal that all of them like English for several reasons: English is seen as an important language for brighter future and also assessment purpose. It is no wonder that English is seen important for their brighter future. This is because English is used in many different fields and careers. It is important to note English is not only used in academic institutions but also in many different spaces. For that reason, it is reasonable to see English students are increasing and EFL department reaches a large audience. The students also believe that they learn English so hard to pass their exam. Even though they do not like English that much, but the fact that they have to pass English exam, they have to develop their interests in English. The cognitive aspect of learning attitude is influenced by students' language level. For instance, when students acquire good language skills, they tend to like English better. Their ability in English encourages them to improve their language skills.

The emotional aspect and English learning attitudes yield very interesting findings as well. It shows that some students are indeed interested in learning English, while others argued that English is very difficult to learn and thus they do not have that much interest in learning English. Some of the students state that they feel anxiety in learning English. This feeling of anxiety actually distracts their learning and inhibits their language ability. Feng and Chen (2009) stated that learning language is shaped by emotional process, or influenced by some emotional factors. This is so because some students are not capable of learning the language effectively if they are suffered from language anxiety. This anxiety occurs due to the internal factor, in which they do not see English as important or due to the external factors, such as ineffective instructional process. The findings also show that students learn better if they are taught by effective teachers. These effective teachers will indeed help students learn better. It is very much understood that teachers play very important role in making their students successful in their study. Some students feel it is important to do their own scheduling for more effective learning.

CONCLUSION

The study found that students in a department of EFL education believe that English is such an important asset for their future. Most of them state that English is an interesting subject and it gives them many benefits for their lives. English can help them in their future careers, and this is due to most fields of studies or workforces require certain qualification of English. In addition, these students see that effective instructional process contributes significantly to their learning success. In fact, they see that making their personal learning schedule will allow them to engage in a more effective learning. However, some of them claim that most of the time they feel anxious in learning English; they are not sure what language skills they are more capable off.

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