

## Iranian Language Learners' Attitudes towards Teaching/Learning English: The Role of University Major, Gender, and Age

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### Abstract

Attitudes towards learning and teaching a subject play a major role in determining individuals' success or failure in any educational programme. Hence, this paper delves into the attitudes of university and non-university students towards teaching/learning English in Iran. To this end, thirteen MA and forty-three BA students majoring in English, twenty-nine non-university students attending language institutes, and twenty-nine university students majoring in a field other than English were recruited to participate in the study. They were both male and female and were requested to complete a five-point Likert-scale attitudes towards teaching/learning English questionnaire. The analysis of elicited data indicated that overall students had positive attitudes towards teaching/learning English. *t*-test analyses revealed no significant difference neither between males and females nor among different age groups and nor between non-English majors and other groups in terms of their attitudes towards teaching/learning English. The paper concludes that paying attention to students' attitudes towards the subject being taught/learned is of utmost importance. It also highlights the usefulness of such research for every teaching/learning context. The results can be used in a wide range of contexts from the very stage of designing to the final evaluation stage of programme design and implementation. Further findings and implications are discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Age, Attitudes towards teaching/learning, Gender, University Major

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## 1. Introduction

The term attitude is defined as associations between objects, events, groups, etc., and relatively lasting evaluations, beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards them stored in memory (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Attitude has as well been referred to as a set of opinions whether rival, which hinder or oppose the ideas, or acceptable, which support the ideas and facilitate taking them up (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Attitude is also understood as the degree of one's agreement or disagreement towards an institution, event, etc. By the same token, it is the willingness to react constantly favorably or unfavorably to a stimulus. Attitudes, rather than beliefs and opinions, are believed to be quite stable across situations (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Mousavi, 2012) but they can differ from language to language (Gardner & Tremblay, 1998), from period to period (Pavlenko, 2003), and from region to region (Dörnyei & Clément, 2001). These characteristics are also true for language attitude, defined by Richards and Schmidt (2002) as expressions speakers of various languages or language varieties show towards their own language or each other's languages.

To the best knowledge of researchers, the expression of positive or negative feelings towards a language would somehow reflect individuals' interpretation of linguistic simplicity or complexity, ease or difficulty of learning of the language, the importance of the language, its elegance, social status, etc. In addition, everyone knows that since language plays a paramount role in any society and in educational settings, students in communities where different languages are in contact realize, from the early school days, that society, school, and family all contribute to the importance of these languages. Therefore, it can be concluded that their own assessments as well as the knowledge they gain using these languages for various purposes in the society lead to the formation of different attitudes towards these languages and their speakers, which affect their learning processes. Ellis (1994) states that negative attitudes can impede learning a language. However, learners' negative attitudes can be turned into positive ones so that they can facilitate achieving a positive result (Elyıldırım & Ashton, 2006).

Nowadays, with the spread of English as a dominant language in international trade, business and technology, as well as intercultural communication, it is self-evident that a student's attitude towards learning this language can shape his future success (or failure) in these international encounters. In line with the emergence of English as a global language, the popularity of teaching/learning English is spreading rapidly in many countries including Iran. At the same time, there is a strong and growing conviction among Iranians that English competence and computer literacy are a must for the young generation. Feng (2002) states that English is becoming 'the world language' and there is an increasing focus on teaching it

at all levels, a claim which applies to the Iranian context too. Learning English in Iran starts at the seventh year of schooling at the junior high school and runs through the nation-wide school and college curriculum (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). However, what is important is that ideal learning can occur only when all necessary conditions are met; one of the most influential ones is students' attitudes towards the foreign language, which seems to be a neglected component in programme design and policy-making (Snow, 2007; Young, 2006). So, teachers, administrators and programme designers should take students' attitudes into consideration when planning well-designed English language training courses. Learners have clear preferences for how to go about the learning of new materials knowing that recognizing and taking care of individual characteristics and attitudes can create better conditions for learning in the classroom (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Young (2006) asserts that "learners' positive attitudes may lead to increased motivation, which, in turn, may lead to successful attainment of proficiency due to increased input and interaction" (p. 480). Consequently, the present researchers believe, considering the role student attitudes can play in facilitating their learning or hindering the process, studies looking at language learners' attitudes are of significant importance for language policy makers and education researchers as well as teachers and administrators. Noting the significance of learning about learner attitudes in educational settings, the present study was designed to explore Iranian university students' attitudes towards teaching/learning English in an attempt to contribute to a more efficient learning process. In fact, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate attitudes of learners towards English language in different parts of the world (e.g., Ahmed, 2015; Akay & Toraman, 2015; Khatib & Rahimi, 2015; Kulkarni, 2016), with the overall finding that learners have positive attitudes towards the Standard English. Thus far, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, however, few studies have systematically compared the attitudes of EFL students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Similarly, the present researchers believe, few, if any, studies have compared university students not majoring in English with English majors on the one hand, and with those learning English in private institutions on the other. In addition to these less explored areas, the study also explores the link between attitudes and such demographic variables as gender and age in context where little published research is available on the topic. The rest of the paper consists of the following sections: First a brief literature review is presented followed by the questions explored in this study. The method follows next with detailed information on participants, instruments, procedure, and data analysis. The results are then described and discussed with notes on limitations and implications.

## 2. Literature Review

Attitudes have been regarded as a strong predictor of academic success. The topic, school, teacher, and similar elements all shape students' attitudes, which, if positive, can boost success (Açıkgöz, 1992). Positive attitude towards new knowledge necessitates that the student be open to new encounters in life and 'want' to learn new things too. Attitude as a construct is itself as important as cognitive behaviors (Bloom, 1995). Gardner (1985) sees attitude as a component of motivation which depends on three elements for its existence: effort, desire to attain and favorable attitudes.

Similarly, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) relate attitude to a psychological tendency towards favouring or disfavouring a particular entity. Attitudes are therefore one of the central affective variables influencing language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) in addition to personality (Dewaele & Furnham, 2000; MacIntyre, 1999) and motivation (Dörnyei, 2000, 2003). In spite of the significance of learner attitude (towards the subject matter) and its impact on their achievement, the role of EFL students' attitudes towards English has not received due attention in the context of Iran, a gap which this study hopes to bridge.

Oxford (1990) and Nunan (2000) believe that attitudes of learners, as well as the skills and strategies they use determine whether or not they will absorb and understand the intricacies of a language. Sociolinguistic research in second language acquisition has documented that social, cultural and psychological factors affect acquisition (e.g., Hou, 2015), among the most important of which are social factors; indeed, learning the language of another community is not separated from learners' social inclinations and dispositions towards the speech community whose language is being learned. By the same token, as Long (2010) asserts, interpreting the meaning of a message is not devoid of the context in which the message is produced and this social context is what can shape learners' attitude towards learning a second or foreign language (Smith, 1996; Strong, 1983).

Social psychology is the science that tries to accurately, open-mindedly, objectively, and continuously study why and how individuals act in social settings (Adler, 1973). Social psychology is a powerful framework to account for how social and psychological variables can affect success in different walks of life, and attitude is one of the main areas of interest within this framework (Zhou, 2002). Tesser (1993) first advanced a hypothesis on how attitudes are formed as though the roots for strong likes and dislikes are in our genetic composition. Baker (1988) claims that attitudes are internalized predispositions and not subject to inheritance. de Bot, Lowie and Versoor (2005) state that "teachers, learners and researchers will all agree that a high motivation and a positive attitude towards a second language and

its community help second language learning” (p. 72), with motivation itself including attitudes as its integral component (Saville-Troike, 2006).

The authors believe a common observation among students is that some are struggling with learning another language, while others are not, probably as a result of having different attitudes and motivation levels. Reece and Walker (1997) stress that a student who is not well intelligent but has a high level of motivation can be more successful than the less-motivated yet highly intelligent one, with the motivation itself being linked to positive attitudes. As Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009) claim, motivation for learning a language is undeniably affected by attitude towards that language. In a similar vein, Ellis (1994) notes that students' ability to learn a target language may be affected by their attitude towards that language, the language speakers and their culture, and the social value of learning that specific language. Brown (2000) also states that students' positive attitudes towards the target language groups will enhance their proficiency. Since as stated above attitude is seen as part of motivation in the present research, attitude as related to motivation is taken as the theoretical framework of the study. To understand the link between motivation and attitudes a brief description of factors affecting motivation and the development of attitudes seems appropriate. Generally speaking, as Ellis (2003) highlights, social factors including attitudes play a crucial role in language learning and have a major impact on foreign/second language learning.

Dörnyei (2001) asserts that the language teacher's pedagogical approach, ideology, and even personality are the factors that certainly affect the learners' attitudes and motivation towards a target language, though it may not always happen in the expected direction. By the same token, if students show respectful feelings towards their language teacher, this will help them learn a language more efficiently (Abu-Melhim, 2009). Family expectations may be placed among the other affecting variables shaping attitudes towards language learning among learners; however, they can cause anxiety too if the student cannot fulfill these expectations (Csize'r, Kormos, & Sarkadi, 2010; Yamamoto, 2001). Likewise, parents' socioeconomic status is important in moulding students' attitudes towards learning and can predict their academic performance (Furnham & Heaven, 1998). Talking about Turkey, where most of the students have negative and mostly instrumental attitudes towards English, Yashima (2002) and Saville-Troike (2006) claim that the more motivated the students are, the better self-confident, the more willing to communicate, and the better learners of a new language they are. In an Iranian context, Savaedi and Vahdat (2017) have carried out a study on junior high school students' attitudes towards learning English. They used students' demographic information to justify their findings which were mostly concerned with students having positive attitudes towards this language and its learning. In what follows, a selection of recent studies on

attitudes towards a foreign language is reviewed followed by studies on variables of interest in this study, that is, attitude and university major, attitude and gender, and attitude and age.

Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) examined students' attitudes at a university in Beijing towards standards and varieties of both Chinese and English. The participants included 88 students majoring in English and 83 engineering students. The students were asked to respond to a 44 five-point-scaled questionnaire on attitudes. The results revealed that the students were aware of the fact that several varieties of English exist in the world. However, they found that the majority of students felt it was unlikely to have a Chinese variety of English. The students also expressed that they did not want to sound like Chinese while speaking English, a finding which was particularly true of the female students. Ibnian (2012) also investigated the effect of using group-work technique on developing the attitudes of 64 non-English major students at the World Islamic Sciences and Education University towards learning English as a foreign language. He found that this technique had a positive effect on increasing non-English major students' attitudes towards learning English.

Chairat (2015) surveyed the attitudes of first year Public Health undergraduate students' attitudes towards English. She found most of the students were positive towards learning English. Rather recently, Mamun, Rahman, Hossain (2012) in an investigation of 79 undergraduate students of Life Sciences found their sample held positive attitudes towards English Language. Similarly, in a research on college non-English major students' attitudes towards English language learning, Tran and Doung (2013) found that their 241 participants hold positive attitudes towards English. They further found that number of years of learning English did not account for any alternation in attitudes among the students. In another study, Ahmed (2015) examines 238 public-university undergraduate EFL students' attitudes towards English in Malaysia. Her research showed students held extremely positive attitudes towards English and that students of different fields varied in their attitudes towards this language and the learning of it which as the researcher claimed may be an indication that a single curriculum or methodology would not be appropriate.

Corbin and Chiachiere (1997) carried out a study with 349 senior students at four secondary schools in New York City. They found that, among other factors, their female participants gained significantly higher grades in foreign language courses, however, attitudes expressed towards foreign language learning did not vary across genders. Kobayashi (2001) accounted for factors that end in Japanese females showing more positive attitudes towards English learning than males. Kobayashi related this finding to Japanese social elements, such as the status of English as feminized

academic, professional choices and the marginalized status of Japanese females in mainstream society. In contrast to the Japanese society, recently, Soleimani and Hanafi (2013) found that although Iranian medical students held positive attitudes towards English, males were revealed to be more positive than females.

According to Ellis (1994), it has been shown that female learners do better than men because they are more open to new linguistic forms; however, there are also studies that argue that men do better, or simply that there are no, or just few, differences between women and men. Ellis (1994) adds that women usually have a more positive attitude towards learning a second language, which has a huge impact on their way of learning. Kulkarni (2016), in a survey-based investigation of 100 IX standard students' attitudes towards English language learning, found significant differences based on gender, locality of school, and medium of instruction of students, their female participants gained a greater mean score on their attitudes towards learning English. In line with the previous research, Hou (2015) found that among 271 male and 249 female Taiwanese elementary school participants with an average range of 8.5 years old, female students had higher means than males in attitudes, integrative orientation, and motivation to learn English.

The present researchers hold that starting age for learning English and the total years spent in learning English (the more years spent learning supposed to be an indication of the older the student) are also factors contributing to learners' attitudes towards English. Indeed, the present researchers, took age and years of English learning as the focus in this section. For instance, Matsuda's (2000) work on these two factors showed that even though they positively affected Japanese students' attitudes towards English, parents, peers, and teachers also exerted influence on these students' attitudes towards English. Similarly, Chalak and Kassain (2010) investigated the multiple socio-psychological tendencies of Iranian undergraduate (taken typically as an age factor) students towards English language leaning. Their study focused mainly on students' attitudinal orientations and their attitudes towards the English language and its community. They found that these Iranian non-native speakers of English had both 'instrumental' and 'integrative' reasons for learning English and their attitudes towards that language community and its members were found to be generally highly positive. In a recent study in an Iranian context, Azizifar, Ghaitisi, and Gowhary (2014) collected survey data from EFL students at a state university and found that their adult participants had negative behavioral attitudes towards speaking skill (they did not feel relaxed when speaking and felt embarrassed), while they had positive cognitive and emotional attitudes towards English speaking skill. In another research study of 520 Taiwanese elementary students' English learning/motivation and the impact of some social factors on their attitudes, higher grade students were found to have

more positive attitudes towards learning English than lower aged or lower grade students (e.g., Hou, 2015).

The studies in the previous section showed that there are different socio-demographic variables affecting learners' attitude profiles towards learning a foreign/second language. A survey of literature revealed that university major as well as age and gender has potential for affecting attitudes towards EFL learning. However, the fact is that the number of research studies carried out on variables influencing attitudes of EFL/non-EFL students towards English in Iran is relatively limited and there is still space for research of this type in this context (e.g., Zareian, Zangoei, & Taghavee, 2014). Focusing on multiple variables in a single study gives credit to the study. It will be more conducive to making the whole picture and process clearer and will allow more efficient decisions to be made in educational settings. In addition, the link between university degree, university major, and the context where English is learned has not been dealt with satisfactorily in previous studies (e.g., Khoshsaligheh, Jamali, & Saeedian, 2014). Especially paying attention to non-English major students' and institute learners' attitudes towards English has been identified a main gap (e.g., Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013) which this study tries to fill. Drawing on Gardner and Lambert's (1972) and Midraj's (2003) recommendation that a better understanding of students' attitudes will assist instruction designers to prepare programs that generate the motivation most conducive to the production of more successful English as a foreign language learners, the present research was set to investigate what attitudes Iranian students hold towards English. In particular, it sought to establish whether university major as the main variable would have any effect on students' attitudes towards English, an under-researched area in the Iranian context to date.

More specifically, the present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Does university major (English vs. non-English) affect Iranian language learners' attitudes towards teaching/ learning English?
2. Does gender affect Iranian language learners' attitudes towards teaching/ learning English?
3. Does age play a significant role in Iranian language learners' attitudes towards teaching/ learning English?

So the following research hypotheses were posed for further scrutiny:

1. University major (English vs. non-English) does not affect Iranian language learners' attitudes towards teaching/ learning English.
2. Gender does not affect Iranian language learners' attitudes towards teaching/ learning English.
3. Age does not play a significant role in Iranian language learners' attitudes towards teaching/ learning English.



### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants (N = 113) were 42 BA students in EFL, 13 MA students in EFL, 29 EFL learners at a language institute. These students formed English major participants. In addition, 29 BA non-English major (Chemistry) students also contributed to the study (all university students came from Urmia University, Iran). This particular sample was conveniently selected with the aim of investigating whether university degree (BA vs. MA in EFL) and university major (English vs. non-English), as well as the context where English is learned (university vs. institute) would make a difference to students' attitudes towards English in light of age and gender differences. Based on what researchers observed, actually, the English language proficiency of BA and MA students was approximately upper-intermediate, and learners at institutes and non-English students had a rather intermediate and lower-intermediate level of language proficiency, respectively. Table 1 presents simple frequencies of the participants in each group with information on gender and age ranges as well as the university degrees/majors involved.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of the Participants*

University degree	Gender		Age range			
	Male	Female	-18	18-23	23-28	28-33
BA	14	28	0	29	11	1
MA	1	12	1	0	11	1
Institute	0	29	18	5	1	3
Non-English majors	10	19	1	28	0	0

*Note: BA (Bachelor of Arts); MA (Master of Arts)*

#### 3.2. Materials and Instruments

The data collection tool used in this study was a tailor-made attitude questionnaire which for the main part included 39 items. A few items were adapted from previous similar studies (e.g., Yashima, 2002) but the majority were made by the researchers. The items for the most part measured students' attitudes towards the teaching and learning of English. The questionnaire was validated by seeking advice from three experts in the field. Indeed, the experts examined the questionnaire for content coverage and appropriateness and clarity of language. Their comments were then consulted in revising the final draft of the instrument. The questionnaire was piloted with nearly 30 undergraduate English students before finalizing it for the study. The final version of the questionnaire enjoyed a Cronbach Alpha reliability index of .84. The questionnaire included the following sections: a cover letter (stating the purpose of the research, providing information on the confidentiality of participants' personal information, noting that the data will be used for

research purposes only), a section eliciting demographic information, and 39 items intended to seek the candidates' attitudes towards teaching/learning English language. The items were based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (corresponding to a score of 5) to strongly disagree (equaling a score of 1). The English version of the questionnaire was administered to English majors and institute students and its Persian equivalent was filled out by non-English major students. It needs to be mentioned that the translated version of the questionnaire was also checked by two experts for validity issues. The items of the questionnaire are included in the Results section below as part of the analysis.

### **3.3. Procedure**

Following the principles of a descriptive design study, the attitude questionnaire was distributed among the participating groups in different sessions at the presence of one of the researchers. The 'attitudes towards English' was treated as the dependent variable with age, gender, and university degree/major acting as independent variables. In addition to receiving written instructions, the candidates were also given oral instructions in Persian on how to complete the questionnaire and were asked to provide answers to items in the first part of the questionnaire, i.e., demographic section, either by filling in the blank or ticking the appropriate choice. For other items, they were instructed to choose the option best matched the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the associated statement. English major students were given the English version of the questionnaire, but non-majors filled the Persian version. The candidates were assured that their personal information would not be disclosed to third bodies and that their performance had nothing to do with passing or failing the course. The time allocated was 30 minutes and most students handed in their completed questionnaires in less than half an hour.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

For analyzing the data, first, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was run to get an overall picture of the general differences among groups on their attitudes towards English. Then a series of one-way ANOVAs were employed to compare groups on each single item in the questionnaire against the criterion of university degree/major. To find out whether gender affected attitude or not, an independent samples t-test was utilized. Finally, another one-way ANOVA was employed to see whether any differences existed among different age groups in terms of their attitudes towards English. All these analyses were conducted using the SPSS (Version 19) software. The following section presents the analysis results using relevant statistical data and tables.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

In order to arrive at a general picture of the participants' attitudes towards English, an ANOVA was run to compare different groups' mean responses to the questionnaire items. As it is represented in the following table (Table 2), all the mean scores are above the midpoint in their respective group. For example, considering the number of participants in the BA group, if all the participants had given a score of 5 to all the items, the maximum score would have been 170, the midpoint being 85. As such, the participants in all university degree/major groups held positive attitudes towards English. The highest mean belonged to institute students followed by MA students and then BA students with non-English majors having the least mean score. Such an observation can imply that in the first place university major influences attitudes towards English with EFL students being the most positive in comparison to non-English majors and secondly length of exposure to English learning (MA vs BA) could also affect students' attitudes with those having more exposure harbouring more positive attitudes. However, institute students had even more positive attitudes towards English than MA students. It could mean that institute students might have different views about and aims for learning English or that institutions simply teach in a less formal more interesting ways than university and this is what makes their students more positive towards learning English than university where formal instruction is adhered to. Institute students accordingly may possess higher levels of motivation too which could have affected their attitudes in a more positive way.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of Attitudes towards English per University Degree*

Total attitudes towards English language			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
BA	34	99.6765	10.16745
MA	13	101.0000	9.90791
Institute	20	102.9500	8.93529
Non-English majors	23	96.6522	12.64770
Total	90	99.8222	10.63762

*Note: BA (Bachelor of Arts); MA (Master of Arts)*

Although slight differences were found among the participants in each university degree/major on their attitudes towards English, ANOVA (Table 3) discovered that none of these differences were statistically significant  $f(3, 86) = 1.32, p = .27$ . So the answer to the first research question is negative and the first null hypothesis is accepted.

Table 3

*One-way ANOVA for the General Attitudes towards English Based on University Degree*

Total attitudes towards English language					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	445.547	3	148.516	1.327	.271
Within Groups	9625.609	86	111.926		
Total	10071.156	89			

We also investigated whether there is any significant difference between males and females in their attitudes towards English. Table 4 below shows relevant descriptive statistics.

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics of Attitude towards English per Gender*

	Your gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total attitudes towards English language	Male	19	100.31	12.983
	Female	71	99.69	10.022

T-test results showed no significant difference between the two genders on their mean scores on the attitude questionnaire (Table 5). Both groups are equally positive towards English, and the second null hypothesis has to be accepted.

Table 5

*Independent samples t-test for the general attitudes towards English based on gender*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
									Lower	Upper	
Total attitudes towards English language	Equal variances assumed	1.17	.28	.22	88	.82	.625	2.76	-4.86	6.11	
	Equal variances not assumed			.19	24.04	.84	.625	3.20	-5.99	7.24	

Finally, in order to understand whether age played any role on the participants' attitudes towards English, a further ANOVA was run. The table that follows (Table 6) shows descriptive statistics for the groups' mean scores on the attitude questionnaires

Table 7 provides ANOVA results showing that there is no significant difference among different age groups in terms of their attitudes towards English. Based on this finding, the third null-hypothesis can also be accepted.

Table 6

*Descriptive Statistics of Attitude towards English per Age Range*

Total attitudes towards English language			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
18-23	48	98.20	11.62
23-28	21	99.57	8.10
28-33	4	100.75	4.42
-18	15	104.40	10.57
Total	88	99.70	10.57

Table 7

*One-way ANOVA for the General Attitudes towards English Based on Age Range*

Total attitudes towards English language					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	442.9	3	147.63	1.33	.26
Within Groups	9285.41	84	110.54		
Total	9728.31	87			

All in all, the above findings reveal that Iranian university students and language institute attendants are generally positive towards English and the university degree (MA vs. BA & major), gender, and age range do not lead to differences in attitudes towards this language, except for certain items for which non-English majors did not seem so positive.

## 4.2. Discussion

This study was an investigation into Iranian university and institute students' attitudes towards English. A survey of EFL learners at university and institute as well as university non-English majors found that overall university major/degree did not make a difference in students' attitudes towards English, generally, all groups held positive attitudes towards English. Even though institute students gained higher means than English-major students and although English-majors in turn gained higher mean scores in their attitudes towards English compared to non-English major students, none of the differences were significant. Furthermore, gender and age range did not contribute significantly to distinguish participants in terms of their attitudes towards English although males had a little higher mean than females and older students were more positive than younger students.

Positive attitudes towards English in this study were due to students' being interested in learning English and believing that it is an important language that makes them more educated and confident, asserting that they

would take English even if it were not a compulsory subject at school. In addition, students in different groups claimed they felt good, proud, and excited when studying English and communicating in it, which helped them have more effective relationships with friends, giving them more knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, they stated that not only did they get anxious when speaking in English but also studying English made them more self-confident in expressing themselves helping them to improve their personality. They also added studying English and doing activities in English were enjoyable, helped them to create new thoughts and new information and to link it to their previous knowledge. However, Lasagabaster (2005) found that language competence, the socio-linguistic context, and the knowledge of the second/foreign language played a significant role in shaping students' attitudes towards each of these languages. He further claimed that this is an inevitable challenge in every society where a minority language is spoken along with an official one and where a foreign language is also learned. The various factors contributing to students' attitudes towards the foreign language might be an evidence of the truthiness of the idea of complex dynamic systems which is increasingly gaining currency in our field.

In line with the present research findings, a range of surveys conducted with secondary school pupils (Pennington & Yue, 1994) and university students (Hyland, 1996) provide empirical evidence of a strong positive instrumental orientation to English. Similarly, many studies in different contexts revealed Iranian students hold positive attitudes towards learning English (Shams, 2008). Although being positive towards English language may be a general trend among Iranians, this study found significantly more positive attitudes among the English majors compared to non-English students. Such differences implicitly may mean that the positive attitudes of English majors are mostly related to the nature of their major as well as the expectations which they might have formed for themselves in addition to the external benefits which proficiency in English language may bring for them. It should be added that the results regarding non-English major students should be interpreted with caution, noting that if BA students were recruited from other non-English majors, say business, different results could have been observed. Business students can be argued to be more cognizant of the role English plays in their future career advancement and expected to harbour more positive attitudes towards English than other students (e.g., Rukh, 2014). ThChalak and Kassain's (2010) findings support the present research in that they found generally high positive attitudes among their undergraduate participants towards learning English and its community. Similar to the results of this study, Akay and Toraman (2015) found that gender, age, and time spent on language learning English and proficiency level variables did not create significant differences in attitudes towards English.

In contrast, Lin and Warden (1998) in a survey on attitudes of non-English major college-level English learners in Taiwan found that most of the participants held negative attitudes and unpleasant feelings towards their English learning. Furthermore, studies with students majoring in different fields have found different attitudes towards learning English (e.g., Ibnian, 2012). Differing from the present results, most of the students in Turkey were found to have negative and mostly instrumental attitudes towards English, (e.g., Saville-Troike, 2006; Yashima, 2002). Gömleksiz's (2010) study also found different attitudes towards English in terms of gender, grade level, and department variables among their participants. In opposition, some studies found significant differences based on gender (e.g., Houe, 2015; Kulkarni, 2016). Zainol Abidin, et al. (2012) also found that their Libyan secondary school learners of English had obvious negative attitudes towards English.

It is worth noting here that in Iran English is taught and learnt as a foreign language. Persian is the official language of the country and the first language of the majority of Iranians. Azeri is the native language of a good number (between 17 percent and 20 percent, Demographics of Iran, n.d.) of Iranians; since most of the participants in this study had an Azeri background, they could be considered as trilingual with Azeri being their mother tongue, Persian their second language and English the third. In justification of the results of the present research then, we can refer to recent research on trilingualism indicating that the knowledge of a previous language clearly affects attitudes towards subsequent languages to be learnt. For example, Lasagabaster's (2001) study on 133 university students including first language Basque and Spanish, and bilingual speakers revealed that the native language exerted a significant influence not only on Spanish and Basque as official languages but also on English as the foreign language which had been taught in instructed settings. The students' more favorable attitudes towards English can also be a consequence of the perception of English as a lingua franca, a tool that allows interaction with people from other countries (e.g., Dawaele, 2005). Since in general, university major, gender, and age were not found to play any significant roles in distinguishing among Iranian students regarding their attitudes towards English, it can be tentatively concluded that there should be some more general factors that would override the influence of university major, gender, and age. It seems logical to attribute the similarity in attitudes to cultural and contextual variables as well as students' perceptions of their capacity to maintain authentic and relatively error-free communications in a language (e.g., Hou, 2015), a claim requiring further research to be substantiated.

Furthermore, it is believed that when people are involved in authentic language use, attitudes towards the language and its community will be more positive, which naturally is aligned with a stronger motivation in learners to learn the target language and to communicate more frequently in that

language, to achieve higher levels of proficiency and more self-confidence, and to decrease their levels of communicative anxiety (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). Indeed, motivation and attitude, as discussed under the literature review section are in a positive relationship with each other, higher levels of one may lead to higher levels of the other. So the lack of significant differences among English and non-English major students in this study can be attributed to the fact that English is not taught in a more authentic, communicative, and student-centered way in Iranian universities but the story is a little bit different in institutions where more informal and interacting ways of teaching is followed which can create more positive attitudes towards English in their learners. Lasagabaster (2001) and Muñoz and Tragant (2001) conclude that early compulsory classes in foreign languages may have positive effects in the long run on students' attitudes and since English is taught from the secondary school in Iran's educational system, the finding that students in this study all had positive attitudes towards English is something logical.

On the notion of individual differences, Kök (2007) in a research on the effect of hemispheric dominance argued that the characteristics of both hemispheres of the brain should be considered in designing learning environments to enable students to have better achievements and positive attitudes towards learning English. It follows from such an argument that since males and females may differ in their hemispheric dominance, they are expected to have different attitudes towards different things in their environments. Based on our findings, attitude does not seem to be exclusively a property related to and dependent on the one of the hemispheres or genetically determined; rather, attitudes are gender-neutral and independent open to influence by other factors in either gender (Fakaye, 2010).

The present researchers claim students' attitudes towards a subject being learned (e.g., English) is the result of a complex interaction among multiple sources: attitudes towards the learning system and context, attitudes towards classroom tasks, attitudes towards the teacher, and towards the target language people and in addition to various other factors such as personality, environment, belief system, etc. This study found Iranian English and non-English major as well as institute students held positive attitudes towards English. Positive attitudes of these students afford recommendations for every individual responsible in any of the mentioned offices above. With the advancements of educational technology, teachers and university professors in every field are recommended to provide learners, especially younger students, with a free learning environment and a variety of teaching methods using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities in order to create more motivating learning environments and materials for their students and lead to



more enhanced positive attitudes towards the foreign/second language in them. Since English versus non-English students may benefit differently from different methods of teaching English as well as from different classroom materials, educational policy makers and curriculum developers should pay due attention to these distinct needs of the learners and various goals for which they learn English which necessitate varying procedures for delivering courses and different ways for fostering motivation to boost positive attitudes towards the target language. Furthermore, English and non-English major professors and institute teachers can as well act in a way which will improve love of learning in their students, and this endless desire to learn on the part of students, among other factors, could be an indication of positive attitudes towards learning. As an example, like some other parts of the world and sometimes in Iran, when the educational system highlights the significance of end of term examinations and assessments, the students may feel they should study as hard as they can to be approved by the system. So when teachers help them understand the importance of learning in itself, stress and anxiety of assessments and scores may come to play a less active role in preventing students from having positive attitudes. Since when students of both genders do not feel pressured by external factors, it seems they will express more positive attitudes towards the subject they are learning. Therefore, a further implication is for test developers to possibly revise their assessment systems which would reduce the credit devoted to the end of term examination results and may invest some value on formative assessment techniques. Keeping students away from negative feelings about examinations and the development of positive attitudes towards learning in students help them cope with worries and negative thinking and make them more open to learning resulting in more success. Having positive attitudes allows students to be optimistic and see the bright side of life, assisting them to confidently, inspiringly, and actively use more positive, critical, and creative thinking abilities. The results of the present study can also offer advice to English language teacher-training courses wherein among the various subjects, principles of educational psychology would also be directly discussed and these teachers would be encouraged to learn how to deal with their male and female students, the negative attitudes of students and how to assist them in coping with these affective filters in an authentic and independent manner, which will in turn make students life-long learners.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

The present researchers claim students' attitudes towards a subject being learned (e.g., English) is the result of a complex interaction among multiple sources: attitudes towards the learning system and context, attitudes towards classroom tasks, attitudes towards the teacher, and towards the target language people and in addition to various other factors such as personality,

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negative attitudes of students and how to assist them in coping with these affective filters in an authentic and independent manner, which will in turn make students life-long learners.

One limitation of our study is to do with the particular sample which included participants from almost the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as a small sample size that would limit the extent of generalizability of our findings. It should also be noted that our results reflect attitudes and reported behavior, not the behavior itself, and accordingly mixed methods studies are needed to delve into the nature of factors affecting students' attitudes towards learning English. Another limitation of the study which should be taken into account in the interpretation of findings is that the participating students were at different educational levels, which could have affected the attitudes as a moderate variable.

One possible area of study is trying out action research, as well as observing and interviewing students at other universities, and with a variety of university majors as well as lay people with no formal education and those with no exposure to English language. Studies may be conducted to find out whether negative attitudes can be changed into positive ones through experimental research projects (e.g., Elyıldırım & Ashton, 2006). Future studies can also investigate the relationship between students' identities, attitudes towards English, and their multiple intelligences since self-identity has been reported to influence people's behaviors in interpersonal relations (e.g., Furnham & Medhurst, 1995; Park, 2012). Further in-depth studies can be conducted to investigate the reasons for certain attitudes by asking the candidates to write about why they like or dislike English language and culture. Future researchers can also carry out triangulations and longitudinal studies and investigate how students' attitudes and variables affecting their attitudes may have different interactions over time.

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### Appendix: Items of the Questionnaire

1	Studying English is important because it will make me more educated.
2	Being good at English will help me study other subjects well.
3	I feel proud when studying English language.
4	I feel excited when I communicate in English with others.
5	Speaking English anywhere makes me feel worried.
6	Studying English helps me to have good relationships with friends.
7	I like to give opinions during English lessons.
8	I gain more knowledge and more understanding when studying English.
9	I look forward to studying more English in the future.
10	I don't get anxious when I have to answer a question in my English class.
11	Studying English is enjoyable.
12	I am able to make myself pay attention during English classes.
13	When I hear a student in my class speaking English well, I like to practice speaking with him/her.
14	Studying English makes me feel good.
15	I prefer studying in my mother tongue rather than in English.
16	Studying English makes me have more confidence in expressing myself.
17	Studying English helps me to improve my personality.
18	I put off my English homework as much as possible.
19	Studying English helps me get new information which I can link to my previous knowledge.
20	Frankly, I study English just to pass the exams.
21	I enjoy doing activities in English.
22	I do not like studying English.
23	I am not relaxed whenever I have to speak in my English class.
24	I feel embarrassed to speak English in front of other students.
25	I wish I could speak English fluently.
26	I am interested in studying English.
27	In my opinion, people who speak more than one language are very knowledgeable.
28	Studying English helps me communicate in English effectively.
29	I cannot apply the knowledge from English subject in my real life.
30	Studying English subject makes me feel more confident.
31	To be honest, I really have little interest in my English class.
32	Studying English enables me to create new thoughts.
33	I like to practice English the way native speakers do.
34	I wish I could have many English speaking friends.
35	When I miss the class, I never ask my friends or teachers for the homework on what has been taught.
36	I feel uneasy and lack confidence when speaking English.
37	I would take English even if it were not a compulsory subject at school.
38	I like people who learn/teach English.
39	I like people who attend English classes.