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Current University and College EFL Arab Learners` Attitudes towards  
the Study of the English Language

Abstract

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## **ABSTRACT**

Along with the global spread of English and the wide recognition of World English as an International Language, a whole range of surveys have been conducted to explore the attitudes of Arab learners on the basis of their ethnic affiliations towards different varieties of English. In Israel or other areas, however, no research was conducted regarding the issue of ethnicity or Druze attitudes towards the English language as far as I am aware, so I relied on the findings of my own research. To address this gap, this study investigated the attitudes of Arab EFL (English as a Foreign Language) university and college students towards English learning and language. Teaching English as an EFL to Arab students has always been a challenging task for any teacher and lecturer. Arab students encounter many difficulties while learning English. Rabab'ah (2003) presents many difficulties, and believes the major one is the very limited opportunity for Arabs to learn English through real-life situation and natural interaction in the target language. English is taught as a language in all public primary and high schools from Grade 3 onwards. Similarly, in universities, it is one of the required courses for acceptance into the academic world. Students must receive an exemption from English in the admission tests to universities and colleges. Otherwise, they must take courses in

English and receive an exemption so that they can begin their studies in a university or a college. By adopting the notion of English as an International Foreign Language as the theoretical framework, this pioneering study has explored the attitudes of university and college Arab graduates and undergraduates enrolled in English courses offered by English as a foreign language departments in the State of Israel. The study has also investigated their attitudes towards the language, culture, speakers and their purpose for learning English. Furthermore, the attitudes of the students have been examined in relation to the components that are likely to explain their attitudes, namely, gender, age, level of religiosity, their parents' job, and most importantly their attitudes towards the English language on the basis of their ethnic affiliation.

It examined students' attitudes and motivations to learning the English language, Western culture, and speakers of English in a predominantly Arab environment. The study focuses on the inter-relationships between attitude, motivation and ethnicity in the English language. This paper reports on an investigation of Arab EFL university and college student attitudes from different ethno-linguistic communities towards the learning the English language in relation to their motivation to learning the language and the cultural heritage of their ethnic identity. The Arab minority in the State of Israel consists of a number of ethnic sub-groups (Christians, Muslims and Druze) who use the English language differently and also grant different degrees of importance to English culture. According to the research literature in the field of language study, Christians give high importance to the English language since it is the language of the Christian Western world. The Druze who live close to Jewish cities and are particularly attracted to the Jewish and Western world, also grant considerable importance to the English language and culture. However, the Muslims have reservations about the study of the English language and culture because of their reaction and struggle against the Israeli Government and the Western world which English symbolizes for them.

In Arab schools, learning the English language plays a central role in the daily study schedule since it affects the academic future of the students for whom English is an essential requirement for acceptance into the academic institutions in Israel. English has reached a noticeable status in Israel. Crystal (2003) and Graddol (2010) indicate that English is used in technology, education, science, research, trade, media, commerce and tourism across the globe. Spolsky (2013) also adds that even though it is not an official language in Israel, English is a high-ranking language because it is a world

language used for various purposes as mentioned above. Eskicumali and Turedi (2010), Graddol (2000) add that English could be considered as a worldwide scientific language today; it has become the dominant language in business, finance and banking, media and technology, popular culture and international relations around the world. More importantly, as Sharifian (2009), Saraceni (2015) and Jenkins (2015) add, English has become the major means for communication among different cultures, which has noticeably granted and contributed to making English the World Language. Shohamy (2007) stated that in Israel, English is actually a dominant second language after Hebrew. Some of the studies by Shohamy and Donitsa-Schmidt (1998) indicate that English has become the most important language among Hebrew and Arabic speakers because it is an essential requirement for their social, academic and financial success.

The main difficulty for Arab learners of English is to achieve a level of competence in speaking and communicating easily in the language. Yashima (2004) examined the association between attitudes towards a language and the willingness to communicate in it. She concluded that a positive correlation between these variables and positive attitudes towards the language and its speakers has an effect on communicative behavior. The problem facing the Arab students lies in their unfavorable attitudes towards English which affect their achievements in the study of the English language as well. Significant awareness and attention should be given to the students' ethno-linguistic identity and its central role in language study. Furthermore, the method of teaching English in different ethno-linguistic communities in Israel has a significant influence on shaping these attitudes. Regarding the relationship between ethnic background and students' attitudes towards English, Gardner (1985) considers attitudes as components of motivation in language learning. İnal, S., Evin, İ. and Saracaloğlu (2005) also claim that the main role of attitude in language learning has inspired most investigators to consider attitude as one of the most important factors in second language learning education.

The motivation of Arab learners should be a combination of effort and desire to achieve the goal of learning the English language together with favorable attitudes toward learning it. Moreover, Islamic perspectives on the role of language and the attitude that Muslims may adopt towards learning English language has a strong influence on the attitudes of learners. The emphasis is on the need for English teachers to take into account the socio-cultural aspects of learning English when teaching



Muslim, Druze and Christian students. Concerning Muslim students in particular, they should stress the value and importance of learning English for the purpose of acquiring modern and current knowledge in spite of their hostility towards Israel and the Western world. The uniqueness of the Druze is that they are a minority that identifies with the majority population of the country in their language, politics, attitudes towards the Western world and culture. These facts have a positive effect on the attitude of Druze students towards the Hebrew language as well as towards the Western world and the English language. Druze learners are aware that the knowledge of English is essential for them because of its global reach.

Pavlenko (2017) indicates a strong link between language use and identity is widely acknowledged. Language, culture, and identity are interwoven and their relationship is a significant element for understanding the Arab students' attitudes and motivation to learn the English language. The language of students is directly associated with their identity. In addition, the students' motivation towards learning the English language is enhanced if they identify more closely with the culture of the speakers of the target language. In order to better understand the relation between Arab students' attitudes towards Western culture and the attitudes and motivation to learn English, this current study deals with how motivation affects learners and how attitude affects the learning process. Therefore, motivation is a central factor for learning a second language. Attitudes towards the English language, its culture, and its people have been confirmed to have a significant aspect on the motivational orientation to study English. Favorable attitudes towards speakers of the English language and their culture increase the learners' motivation. In other words, teaching the English language involves teaching another culture since English cannot be taught in a void and must be learned in a social and cultural context. Motivation also plays an important part in improving and developing the learners' communicative ability. Attitudinal studies conducted on Arab students, such as those of Zughoul and Taminian (1984), Shaaban, K., Ghaith G. M. (2003) and Harrison et al. (1975), have consistently shown that Arab students are instrumentally motivated to learn English, and that they are well aware of the advantage and benefit of knowing English. This means that the main stimulus for learning English is instrumental, to achieve a goal or a career. It is true that some learners are integratively motivated, but they are in a minority. According to Seedhouse (1996),

those with integrative motivation have a genuine interest in “the target speech community” which the learner is “aspiring to become a member of”.

Additionally, language attitude is considered as one of the most important factors in the success of learning a target language. Such arguments inspired me in this study to investigate those attitudes of the target population, and to know if their attitudes are influenced by their age, gender level of religiosity, their parents` education and their ethnic affiliation.

This investigation was inspired by the socio-linguistic model adopted by Gardner in 1985 that attitude is an important motivating component in language learning. This study adopted the embedded strategy of mixed methods design. In this approach, quantitative data from questionnaires of 50 participants and qualitative data from interviews of 13 students were gathered in several visits to the field. The subordinate and secondary qualitative data were included within the main quantitative data to provide a supporting role in explaining and expanding the questionnaire results. The study through questionnaires and interviews, describes a survey that assessed a group of university and college EFL Arab students` attitudes towards English who were surveyed using a 42-item questionnaire and another participants answered seven open-ended questions in personal interviews. Analyses of the data revealed a strong motivation among the students to learn English, their willingness to use English as a medium of communication, and their recognition of the value of their association with English culture and people. Yet, significant differences have been shown in their attitudes towards English language and culture among Arab students on the basis of their ethnic and community affiliation.

The findings of the study indicate that, as expected, Christians showed more positive attitudes than the Druze and Muslims, and the attitude of the Druze students towards the study of the English language was more positive than the attitudes of Muslim students. The Muslim participants revealed their uneasiness that the English language is the dominant language in the world because of their belief in Islam and the Quran and their desire that Arabic should be the dominant language and not English. Generally, the research model was corroborated.

This study has important theoretical implications. It seems that ethno-linguistic identity has a central role in influencing a student`s attitudes and achievement in the study of the English language. Additionally, the sense of cultural identity related to the English language was on the rise for the Christians and the Druze, while that related to the

Muslims remained as it was parallel to the other two ethnic communities. In light of the lack of studies dealing with the subject of student`s attitudes towards the study of the English language in Arab environments in the State of Israel, these findings will make an important contribution to policy makers in the field of education in Israel, especially for the Ministry of Education.

For the statistical tools, a weighted mean was employed to find out the attitudes held by the participants towards English and to determine if there is a significant relationship between the participants` language attitude and the variables identified. The findings illustrated that Arab EFL students have strong positive attitudes towards the English language, culture and speakers. Secondly, there is a relationship between ethnic identity and students` motivations and attitudes in the study of the English language. Thus, Christians grant high importance to the study of English language since it is the language of the Western Christian world. However, the Druze also reveal positive attitudes although they rather prefer the use of the Hebrew language while the Muslims have reservations about the English language because of their concerns about the Palestinian problem and conflict, and Western ties with the State of Israel. It was further discovered that there was no significant relationship between the attitudes of the participants towards the English language vis-à-vis gender and level of religiosity. In addition, a significant difference was found in the participants` positions regarding age and parents` job and education.

There were several factors behind the Muslim participants` favorable attitude towards English. They reported instrumental, social, educational factors behind their attitudes. Instrumentally, the participants emphasized the features that most influenced their attitude toward using English. These instrumental aspects included occupational opportunities, work progress and advancement, travelling abroad, using modern technology and practicing English skills. The participants agreed that there was no doubt that English proficiency added great value to their skills when they wanted to apply for a job, even for advancement or promotion in job opportunities related or even not related to English. Additionally, there was a kind of prestige associated with using English. Hence, in some cases the use of English was motivated by the desire to enhance self-esteem and to improve self-image. Social interaction with English speaking people was another social factor behind the Muslim positive attitudes towards English. The use of English as a lingua franca with foreigners was common among the participants as well. They considered that English proficiency could help them to have confidence

when participating in local or foreign conferences and committees and travelling abroad due to the position of English as the world lingua franca, as they stated. Furthermore, they are certain that knowing English is a necessity for using modern technology effectively. Also, attitudes were motivated by the position of English in the sciences and in the field of education. The textbooks used at the college and university are mostly in English. Furthermore, most of the resources for any subject are in English. On the negative side, attitudes toward English were mainly motivated by religious and cultural factors. Religious reservations were commonly expressed among all Muslim participants, although they recognized the importance and beauty of the English language and admitted that some cultural contexts demanded the use of English; they claim that they should be proud of their identity and language which is Arabic. They emphasized that if they ignore Arabic we will lose their identity. The cultural influence of English on the Arabic language and identity was of serious concern and worry for most the Muslim learners. They considered Arabic as the most important language since they cannot get a true understanding of the Qur'an without it.

As demonstrated by the study findings, this situation causes Muslim students to harbor a much less positive attitude than the Christians and the Druze towards the English language, and it is possible that in the long term this will lead to the devaluation of their use of the language. This study is unique in that it simultaneously documents the attitudes of the three ethnic communities (Christian, Druze, and Muslim) towards learning English where there was no documented or conducted research regarding the issue of Druze attitudes towards the target language.

The recommendations based on this study and its findings are as follows: In order to make the language learning process a more motivating and inspiring experience, teachers need to put a great deal of thought into developing programs which maintain student interest. Additionally, we should internalize the values of Western society and culture among Arab students at a young age. Furthermore, we should internalize and assimilate these values consistently in formal and non-formal education. Continuous investment in learning the English language and its uniqueness is required in order to strengthen and improve students' attitudes toward English language learning. The importance of English language and culture for Arab students in the curriculum should be clearly stated. There should be increasing awareness among the EFL Arab students of the importance of the English language in order to strengthen their motivation for

learning the language. This could be done from early stages through academic conferences, workshops and meetings with native speaker students at universities and colleges, exchange programs with other universities and colleges or any other workshops and activities which may help to stimulate and motivate students to improve their English language proficiency. Moreover, tours conducted by social and academic centers for the students could be used to discuss with students the significance of English language issues and improve their attitudes towards English.

Furthermore, informal methods of teaching English including direct and continuous contact with native speakers of the language should be used and not only formal methods. English speaking volunteers should be recruited and integrated with teachers in the English classes starting from the elementary school level which will make it easier to master the language later in the academic institutions. Teachers need to create interesting lessons in which the students are encouraged to become more active participants in a lecture or a lesson in order to help them to see a purpose for improving their communication skills in the target language. The use of interesting texts and special topics that are related to Arab society and appeal to students could also help to increase the motivation level of students in class. Texts that capture the concern, curiosity and interest of Arab students may also raise the students' positive attitudes towards the English language. With the focus of study being directed toward university entrance, students may have more desire or indeed motivation to improve their language proficiency. Meeting with English speakers may reduce the culture shock and the gap between Arab and Western societies. Additionally, learners' positive attitudes may lead to increased motivation, which, in turn, may lead to successful attainment due to increased input and teachers' investment. For this reason, my study of Arab EFL students' attitudes toward English may give some insight into the realization of the development strategies for English learning and teaching in the exemption departments in universities and colleges.

As a final remark, there are certain limitations in the research findings. Firstly, the study was conducted in only a few colleges and universities in the State of Israel and do not necessarily indicate the overall trend of universities and colleges. Secondly, the colleges and the universities are from the north and the center of Israel and no studies have been carried out in other universities and colleges in the south or the Negev or among the Arab Bedouins.

Several implications for university and college English instruction and policy-making in English education in Israel could emerge from the study. Possible directions for future research were also discussed.

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