

The Relationship between Attitude towards Communicative Language Learning and English Language Achievement among Ethiopian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The attitude one has towards language learning determines the success or failure of learning the language. To this effect, this study aimed to explore EFL learners' attitudes towards communicative language learning and the relationship between learners' attitudes and English language achievement. To address these objectives, the study adopted a survey research design. Two hundred seventeen grade 11 students were selected through simple random sampling technique. Attitude questionnaire, achievement test and interview were tools of data collection. In order to verify students' attitudes towards communicative language learning, the mean score obtained from attitude scale and qualitative descriptions of the interview data were utilized. To address the relationship between students' attitudes to communicative language learning and English language achievement, and to decide the predictive power of attitude on learners' English language achievement, Pearson correlation and regression were applied respectively. In addition, *t*-test was used to investigate if gender caused attitude difference or not. The findings indicated positive attitude towards communicative language learning. In addition, it was found that attitude to communicative language learning significantly predicted achievement scores of the students. Furthermore, gender was not found to be a determining factor in the attitude towards communicative language learning.

Keywords: Attitude, communicative language learning, gender, language achievement

Introduction

Since 1970s language teaching and learning has made paradigm shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach. To this effect, greater emphasis has been put on learners and learning than on teachers and teaching, meaning and linguistic forms in context, use of collaborative activities, promotion of authentic materials and of relevant and meaningful classroom activities, and new roles for teachers as facilitators and negotiators of meaning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Accordingly, students are required to take more responsibility for their own learning and decision making. In addition, this change has given place to a more useful and beneficial language learning situations which emphasize meaningful, purposeful and collaborative interactive opportunities (Savignon, 2002).

As communicative language teaching has shifted the focus from teachers to students, issues related to students' have been central in contemporary studies among which learner attitude is one. Learner's attitude to communicative language learning is a key factor that facilitates or limits one's ability in the learning process (Candline & Mercer, 2001; McGroarty, 1999). On the same line of discussion, Savignon (1997: 107) claimed that "ultimate success in learning to use a second language most likely would be seen to depend on the attitude of the learner". Consequently, students who hold positive attitudes to communicative language learning, learn language smoothly while those who cling to negative attitudes face problem in the learning

process (Dorney & Csizer, 2002). As long as learners are major stakeholders in CLT, their voices should be considered for effective language learning.

Attitude is one of the factors that affect students' communicative language learning and their English language achievement. Although there is no single agreed up on definition of attitude, the general concepts are similar. For example, Brown (1994: 168) describes that "attitudes like all aspects of the development of cognition and affect in human beings, develop early in childhood and are the result of parents and peers' attitudes, contact with people who are different in any number of ways, and interacting affective factors in the human experience". This implies that people's attitudes in all aspects of development begins from the early childhood period as the result of their parents' and friends influence which eventually bring either positive or negative value judgment.

In line with this, McGroarty (1999) asserts that attitude is linked to a person's values and beliefs and "promotes or discourages the choices made in all realms of activity, whether academic or informal" (p. 5). Furthermore, Oskamp and Schultz (2005:9) define attitude as a "predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given attitude object". Furthermore, attitude cannot be observed directly rather they can be inferred from certain behavior towards some class of objects, persons, event and issues over a time span. Therefore, attitudes are positive or negative feelings that an individual holds about certain objects or ideas. Accordingly, person's belief or knowledge about attitude object is cognitive component, feelings about the attitude object is taken as affective component), while inclination to act towards the attitude object is behavioral component (Wenden, 1991).

Pertaining to learners' attitudes to communicative language learning, few studies have been done both at international and local levels. To begin with, the study carried out in Iran on medical students' attitudes towards learning English, displayed that the majority of the participants had favorable attitudes (Arani, 2004). Similar to this, Soleimani and Hanafi (2013) also revealed that Iranian medical students hold highly positive attitudes towards English Language Learning in terms of the three aspects of attitude. In Chinese context too, Yang (2010) disclosed that College students had positive attitude towards English language learning. In addition, Rukh (2014) confirmed that business students had positive attitudes towards English language learning. Conversely, Abidin, Mohammadi and Alzwari (2012) indicated that Libyan Secondary school students' showed negative attitude towards learning English in terms of the three aspects of attitude. On the same line of discussion, the study done by Lasagarbaster and Huguet (2007) in Spain demonstrated that students had negative attitude towards learning English.

One local study worth to mention was done on Grade 12 students' attitudes towards group work (Abebaw, 2011). The result revealed that the students' had favorable attitude towards group. This may indicate to some extent that the students' had favorable attitudes to communicative language learning as group work is one of the most important features of communicative language learning in which students learn from each other.

Concerning the relation between students' attitude to communicative language learning and their English language achievement, a couple of studies documented asserted that students' attitude to communicative language learning is closely connected to their English language achievement (Malallaha, 2000; Rukh, 2014). Conversely, no statistically significant correlation was found between students' attitudes towards learning English and their English achievement (Al-Emadi & Al-Buainain, 1998; Zerfan, 2014).

Students' attitudes to language learning can predict their language performances. Although there is no direct study on the predictive power of attitude towards language learning

on students' achievement, there is an indirect study on the issue. Cabansag (2013) studied students' attitude towards English language learning strategies in Philippine. Accordingly, the results showed that only the cognitive aspect of attitude was statistically significant predictor of language learning strategies. Nevertheless, both behavioral and emotional components of attitude did not reach statistical significance. In addition, the study indicated the three attitude components in combination predicted students' language learning strategies significantly.

Gender is an important aspect recognized as one type of individual differences in second language learning that can affect language learning. Concerning the issue of participants' attitudes towards language learning due to gender, some studies were carried out in different contexts. Accordingly, female students had more favorable attitudes than male students in language learning in Pakistan (Hashwani, 2008) and Libyan (Abidin, Mohammadi & Alzwari, 2012). In addition, Shoab and Dornyei (2005) also found that females had more favorable attitude as compared to males.

Divergent to the above findings, in a study done on Iranian Medical Students' attitude towards English language learning with regards to gender, it was revealed that male students had more positive attitudes to English language learning than female students (Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013). Similarly, Gajalakshmi (2013) disclosed that male high school students had more encouraging attitudes towards English language learning as compared to female students.

Inconsistent to the above two sets of findings; some studies indicated that gender difference has nothing to do with attitude towards English language learning. For instances, no statistically significance difference was found between female and male students attitudes towards English language learning in Iran (Zareian, Zangoei & Taghvaei, 2014) and in Pakistani (Akram & Ghani, 2013). On the same line of discussion, Fakeye (2010) as well discovered no statistically significant disparity male and female students in their attitudes towards learning English language.

Since communicative language learning is intended to involve students in their own learning, it is particularly important to consider their attitudes towards communicative language learning. However, less empirical study has been done on the attitude of students to communicative language learning and its relation with students' English language. Moreover, as long as the knowledge of researcher is concerned, no study has been carried out on the predictive power of students' attitudes towards communicative language learning in terms of their English language achievement. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following specific research questions:

- Q1. What kind of attitudes do pre-college students have towards communicative language learning in terms of Behavioral, Cognitive and Emotional aspects?
- Q2. Is there any relationship between students' attitudes towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement?
- Q3. To what extent does attitude towards communicative language learning predict students' English language achievement?
- Q4. Is there any significant difference among students' attitudes towards communicative language learning due to gender?

Based on the research questions provided above, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

- H01. There is no statistically significant correlation between students' attitudes towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement.

H02. Attitude has no predictive power in connection with the students' English language achievement.

H03. There is no difference between female and male students in their attitude towards communicative language learning.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The research design of this study was mainly co-relational one as the purpose of the study was to see the relationship between students' attitude towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement. Therefore, this study adopted correlation research design to execute its stated objectives. In addition, the study utilized mixed research approach to explore issues of the study from quantitative and qualitative perspectives. In this study, the independent variable is attitude to communicative language learning with its three components - behavioral, cognitive and emotional components as measured through attitude scale. The dependent variable is English language achievement test score. In addition, gender is also considered in the study as moderator variable.

Participants and sampling technique

The population of this study comprised of grade 11 students at Areka preparatory and secondary school in South Nation Nationality People State, Ethiopia. The study was carried in 2016 academic year. During the time, there were a total of 700 grade 11 students among which 217 were selected through simple random sampling as this technique provides equal chances for every individual in the target population to be selected and included in the sample (Kothari, 2004). However, only 194 students filled the attitude questionnaire completely and took the achievement test. Among the participants of the study, two students (a male and a female) were selected for interview on the basis of their willingness to be interviewed.

Instruments

Language learning attitude scale and Achievement test were used as tools of data collection in this study. A self-report questionnaire of a five point attitude scale was used to measure students' attitude towards communicative language learning. This instrument was adopted from Soleimani and Hanafi (2013). The questionnaire consists of 30 items in terms of behavioral (10 items), cognitive (10 items) and emotional (10 items) aspects of attitude. The researchers determined the items' reliability through the reliability coefficient test. The value of Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire was 0.904, which was highly acceptable consistency of reliability.

The standardized attitude scale adopted from Soleimani and Hanafi (2013) was translated into Amharic to make the instrument clearer and easily understandable to the respondents of the study. In order to establish the reliability of the Amharic version of the scale and to ensure its suitability for this study, the instrument was piloted. The result showed Chronbach Alpha value of 0.77, which is considered reliable for the purpose of the current study. The reliabilities of the three aspects of attitude questionnaire were also tested separately. Accordingly, the values of Chronbach's Alpha were 0.64, 0.67 and 0.76 for the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects respectively.

The second instrument used was English language achievement test. This instrument was developed by the researcher to measure students' achievement/performance. To do this, the researcher first set a table of specification for the test to ensure the content validity of the test. On

the basis of table of specification, the test was constructed with 40 items. The test focus was on reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and dialogue completion.

In order to keep the consistency of the test, the test was piloted on randomly selected students. Split-half was applied to calculate the correlation between odd and even item scores. The result indicated correlation coefficient of 0.86 which implies that the test is reliable enough for the study.

In addition to questionnaire and test as tools of data collection, a semi-structured interview was exploited to explore learners' attitude towards English language learning and triangulate data collected through questionnaire.

Data Analysis

To organize and analyze the data that were gathered through an attitude questionnaire and an achievement test, SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) 20.0 was employed. In order to examine the students' attitude towards communicative language learning, mean scores of the components of the attitude and grand mean of the scale were utilized. So as to explore the relation between attitude towards communicative language learning and English language achievement, a two-tailed Pearson product moment correlation was applied provided that the assumptions of Pearson product moment have been met. To analyze the predictive power of attitude towards communicative language learning on the students English language achievement, multiple regressions was employed. Moreover, independent sample T-test was applied to investigate the difference in the participant's attitude towards communicative language learning by gender provided that all assumptions of t-test have been met. Furthermore, qualitative description was exercised to analyze data gained through interviews.

Results

The first aim of the study was to know the attitudes of the students towards communicative language learning. The table below depicts the obtained data on the issue.

Table 1. *Mean scores of students' attitude to communicative language learning*

Attitude component	N	Mean	St.d
Behavioral Component	194	3.50	0.80
Cognitive Component	194	3.49	0.69
Emotional Component	194	3.55	0.85
Grand Mean		3.51	

As it can be seen from table 1 above, the mean score of the behavioral aspect of attitude of the items on the scale is 3.50, while the cognitive and the emotional aspect of attitude are 3.49 and 3.55 respectively. In addition, the grand mean of the entire scale is 3.51. This seems to suggest that the majority of the students hold positive attitudes towards communicative language learning.

In addition to the quantitative data acquired through closed-ended questionnaire, students' attitude towards communicative language learning was elicited using interview qualitatively. Accordingly, the first interviewed student (S₁) believes that she has positive attitude towards English language learning. In explaining it in depth, she goes on to say:

"I have good attitude to English language learning. Because English is an international language of communicative and I want to acquire it to be good at it. Moreover, it is a medium of

instruction and hence if I am poor in it, I will be poor in other subjects too. Therefore, I have reasons, enthusiasm and motivation to learn it better”.

On the same issue, the second interviewee (S₂) also reported that he has favorable attitude towards learning English. This student, elaborating the situation more, has the following to make: *“I think learning English is essential to survive in the world of competitions. I feel good to learn English and I am doing it smoothly with my friends in pairs and groups. I feel I have develop the basic skills to express myself. Moreover, I am curious to learn it more as it is language of education and world-wide means of communication.”*

Table 2. *The Relations between attitudes to communicative language learning and English language achievement scores*

		Behavioral	Cognitive	Emotional	Attitude scale
Achievement	r-values	0.088	0.091	0.061	-0.016
	p-values	0.22	0.20	0.06	0.82

Table 2 shows the correlation between students’ attitude to communicative language learning and their English achievement mean score. Accordingly, non- significant correlations were found between the components of students’ attitude towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement test score. In addition, there was no significant correlation between attitude towards communicative language learning scale and English language achievement test score.

Table 3. *Predictive power of students’ attitude to communicative language learning*

Source	SS	DF	MS	F	Sig
Multiple regression	198.191	3	66.06	2.85	0.03
Residual	4421.48	191	23.149		
Total	4619.67	194			

N=194, R=0.271, R² =0.043 and Adjusted R² = 0.028

Table 3 above is a summary of multiple regression analysis on the predictive power of students’ attitude towards communicative language learning on their English language achievement. As indicated, the result revealed that attitude towards communicative language learning significantly predicted students’ English language achievement [F (3, 191) = 2.85, P<0.05]. Additionally, adjusted R² value is 0.028. This indicates that the three attitude components combined together explained 2.8% of the variance in the English language achievement test scores.

Table 4. *T-test result on students’ attitudes towards language learning due to gender*

Gender	N	Mean	Sdt	df	t	p
Male	108	3.60	0.35	192	0.25	0.80
Female	86	3.42	0.30			

As two-tailed independent sample t-test table above showed, there is no statistically significant mean difference between male and female students’ attitude to communicative language learning at 0.05 level (t=0.25,df=192,p=0.80) since p>0.05. Therefore, both male and female students had the same attitude towards communicative language learning.

Discussion

The objectives of this study were to investigate pre-college students' attitude towards communicative language learning, the relationship between students' attitude towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement, and the predictive power of attitude on students' English language achievement at Areka secondary and preparatory school. The results of the study obtained both from questionnaire and interview pointed out that the majority of students had positive attitude towards communicative language learning. This result is consistent with other findings (Arani, 2004; Yang, 2010; Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013; Rukh, 2014). Nonetheless, this finding is contradictory to findings of Lasagarbaster and Huguet (2007) and Abidin, Mohammadi and Alzwari (2012) which found negative attitude towards learning English.

With regards to the relationship between students' attitude towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement, the current study revealed that there was no significant correlation between the variables. This result corroborates with discoveries of Al-Emadi and Al-Buainain (1998) and Zerfan (2014) which uncovered no significant correlation. Conversely, this result conflicts with Malallaha (2000) and Rukh (2014) that revealed significant correlation between the stated variables.

Regarding the combined effect of the aspects of attitude on students' English language achievement, the results indicated that the combined attitude aspects had significant predictive power on the students' English language achievement. The results of this study is similar to the finding of Cabansag (2013).

Finally, the study revealed that there is a difference in attitude towards communicative language learning due to gender. This finding is inconsistent with some studies which revealed gender difference has nothing to do with attitude towards English language learning (Fakeye, 2010; Akram & Ghani, 2013; Zareian, Zangoei & Taghvaei, 2014). However, the finding is in line with previous studies which discovered that female students had more favorable attitude towards English language learning than males (Shoaib & Dornyei, 2005; Hashwani, 2008; Abidin, Mohammadi & Alzwari, 2012). On the other hand, a couple of studies showed that male students had more favorable attitudes to English language learning as compared to female students (Gajalakshmi, 2013; Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013).

Conclusions

The findings of this study showed positive attitude towards communicative language learning. This implies that learners have awareness of the significance of attitude towards learning English language. Hence, EFL teachers should keep on strengthening the students' behavioral, cognitive and emotional attitude components in balanced manner to let the students have all-rounded development. Moreover, teachers are expected to employ effective pedagogy to maintain the existing favorable attitude and change the unfavorable ones, since good teaching methods/strategies, motivation, support and favorable learning environment have power to do so. The relationship between the students' attitude towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement was not proved to be significant. It should be noted that positive attitude towards communicative language learning is an indispensable but not sufficient condition for success. Although no statistically significant relationship was found between the students' attitude towards communicative language learning and their English language achievement, attitude towards communicative language learning was discovered to be a

statistically significant predictor of the learners' achievement in English language. Therefore, EFL teachers must be aware that attitude towards communicative language learning has a potential to facilitate or deter performance of students in learning the English language.

Finally, the study made known that gender is not determining factor in attitude towards communicative language learning. However, it would be impossible to conclude gender as a trivial factor in second language learning, since this study was done in a small scale. Moreover, studies done on this issue have not yet come up with consistent findings.

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