

Crossnation Differences in Attitudes of Secondary English Learners

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In the present work, Yi & Reitz's (2002) approach is adopted in the numerical simulations of a viscous water jet issued.

Abstract

Learning a second language (L2) is part of the skills required for many citizens in today's cross-national world; in some cases as a strict matter of survival in a non-native context, in others as a prerequisite for promotion and professional climbing. In both cases the emotional, motivational and attitudinal states of the language learner play a crucial role in the learning process. In this article we explore the impact of attitudinal variables related to the context of teaching and learning a second language with two samples of students from different geographical areas, conditioned by varying language needs. A set of hypothesis on variables such as age, sex, social class or systematic formal training complete the analysis included in both samples: Mexican American students residing in California and Spanish students residing on the Southern coast of Spain.

Keywords: Second and foreign language acquisition, Attitudes, English language learners

1. Literature

Why are some students more successful than others when learning a language? Where do those differences arise from? These questions have been lingering for a long time, but the need to resolve them is becoming imperative not only for the researcher, but also for the language instructor. Dornyei (2008; 2010) clings to individual differences to account for the discrepancies in learning a language. That is, the "dimensions of enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by a degree (pg. 41)". And Gardner (1985) adds that to understand those differences, studies have to "treat language as a whole: its nature, its history, its relationship to culture, the acquisition of it, the immediate use to which it can be put, and the development in our students of an appreciation for the gift of tongues (pg. 1)." Because, in some cases, learning a second language is a relatively important educational task that students face during their academic formation, while for others it is a straight path to bilingualism. In both cases, researchers seem to agree, "affective variables such as attitudes influence language learning" (Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant and Mihic, 2004).

In his seminal work, Allport (1954) laid the ground for the expansion of the concept of attitudes. He stated that attitudes are a "mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which is related (pg. 45)." Since then numerous

definitions have been proposed to describe the essence of the term “attitudes.” All definitions, though, acknowledge that attitudes can not be measured directly, but have to be inferred through beliefs, behaviors, feelings, and intentions. Most researchers believe nowadays that attitudes have cognitive, affective and behavioral components (Manzaneda & Madrid, 1997). The cognitive component refers to the individual’s beliefs system; the affective component is based upon emotional reactions, and the behavioral component to the tendency to behave before the attitudinal object. From an operational standpoint, an individual’s attitude is an evaluative reaction, positive or negative, to a referent or attitudinal object inferred from the individual’s belief system toward the referent (Uribe, 2001). There is no agreement, however, which components should be included when measuring attitudes. Els (1984) explained that while some researchers only include the affective component, others incorporate all. Rokeach (1973) believed that the connection between all factors is so robust that no matter which one is measured, results will be reliable.

In the second language acquisition field, scholars have focused their attention primarily on two types of attitudes: attitudes towards the learning of the language, and attitudes towards the community of the target language. While the first set of attitudes is educational in nature, the second is social. There are reasons to believe that attitudes towards language learning are strongly correlated with achievement in the language (Masgoret and Garner, 2003), even more than to other subjects of the curriculum (Jordan, 1941). Attitudes to language learning seem to be associated to other factors. For example, some researchers found sex differences; girls tend to have more positive attitudes towards learning a language than boys (Wright, 1999). And there is ample evidence that girls are more successful than boys learning a language (Clark & Trafford, 1995). What researchers do not seem to concur is in the nature of such attitudinal differences. Ehrlich (1997) declared that is was not gender *per se*, but rather the complex sets of “gendered” practices associated with the individual in a particular setting that make a difference. Attitudes towards learning the language also appear to be influenced by the setting and the epoch (Pulcini, 1997) the learning occurs. Parents seem to have a strong impact on the attitudes of their children at least initially (Oskamp, 1977). Attitudes towards language learning also seem connected to the context where learning takes place (Gagnon, 1974). Krashen (1997), from a theoretical perspective, distinguished two different learning situations: “foreign language (FL)” and “second language (SL)” contexts. Differences occur because in FL contexts: a) students do not have the chance to use the target language in a natural and meaningful way; b) language teachers are often non-native. Therefore, language models are quite imperfect; c) students do not usually aim to integrate as the ultimate goal, and d) instruction is limited to a few hours a week. Contact with the L2 speakers, in conjunction with the desire to integrate in the community of the target language, posit themselves as strong predictors of students’ attitudes.

Gardner (1985) was one of the pioneers in the study of the relation between attitudes, motivation and the integrative motive. He maintained that motivation refers “to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward the learning of the language (pg. 10).” All four components need to be interrelated to achieve a desired goal. There are diverse reasons to study a language. Once these reasons are classified, they are identified as orientations. According to Gardner (1985), there are two types of orientations: integrative and instrumental. Integrative orientation is based upon the individuals’ interest of learning a language to blend in with the community of that language. Cultural contact is therefore necessary for positive attitudes to arise. If this also entails effort, desire to learn the language and positive attitudes towards the target language, the community and the learning context, that’s what Gardner called integrative motive. Instrumental orientations denote the learning of a language to pursue a determined benefit or reward. Integration in the community is not a goal. Gardner and Lambert (1972) found that students with integrative orientations had more positive attitudes to learning the language than those with instrumental motivations. Some other studies (Lukmani, 1972; Uribe, 2000) suggest that individuals with instrumental orientations seem to be more motivated. Discrepancies in findings are based upon the idea that the aforementioned concepts are inherent to some areas and cultures (Horowitz, 1999).

In a rather ambitious study with more than eight thousands students, Dornyei (2005) confirmed that “cultural contact, by and large, promoted positive language attitudes”. Contact tends to affect motivation, attitudes and other affective variables. It is what is known as the Contact Hypothesis. Contact with the L2 speakers promotes positive attitudes, as well as motivated language learning behaviors. It is expected that attitudes and motivations then correlate with achievement. The depth of the relation depends on a series of factors, or as Brown and Hewstone (2005) called them: optimal conditions. For optimal contact to happen, five requirements should be met: equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, authority support and friendship potential (Pettygrew, 1998). The attitudinal/motivational impact on the acquisition of a language was already been demonstrated in a series of studies (Gardner, 2001; Dornyei, 2001, MacIntyre, 2002). The compound of motivations and attitudes was correlated to performance in the second language. The commonality to all these studies is that they embraced past research on the “intergroup model” for examining contact between ethnic groups or lack thereof. The goal of this research was to investigate the attitudinal similarities or

divergences of two groups of English learners of Spanish speaking origin in secondary schools in the South of Spain and California towards learning English in a formal setting such as the school. It is the intention of this article to facilitate educational practitioners, local and state educational agencies, and educators in general with curricular policies, delivery and teachers training. The contexts where this study took place were completely different. It will possibly generate some ideas for future research to understand crossnation commonalities and differences in attitudes to learning a second or foreign language; especially when studies in this field have been scarce and date back in time. This study aimed to ask two research questions: a) are there any significant attitudinal differences between the Mexican American and the Spanish groups and b) are there significant attitudinal differences between groups per variables compared?

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The sample of this study consisted of 177 secondary English learners from 1 high school in California and 110 students from 5 high schools in Spain. Schools were chosen according to availability of students. The school in California was located south of Los Angeles in a low income area. The school serves grades nine through twelve with a curriculum that emphasizes mainly the mastery of California Content Standards. The school has a total population of 2,600 students enrolled on a semester schedule. 70% of the student body is Latino and 27% African American. 90% of students are labeled “socioeconomically disadvantaged”, 40% English learners and 4% Students with disabilities. All students have access to free lunch programs, materials and after school programs. Students in California were taking English Language Development (ELD, Intermediate level) grades 9 through 12; were born in Mexico, and emigrated through different ways to the US at an early age. Students from the Spanish sample came from small schools, average about 300 students. The four schools were situated along the Southwest coast of Spain and lived in middle class neighborhoods. Students in Spain were in the second cycle of the post-compulsory secondary education; were natives to the land and had English as a foreign language as part of the curriculum. Students were asked to complete the questionnaires in Spanish on a voluntary basis. The return rate of the questionnaire was 78.9%. The 287 cases included 138 females and 149 males. Students self-reported their grade point averages for the academic year immediately preceding the survey.

2.2 Instrument

The questionnaire on attitudes was an adaptation of Gardner’s “Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB).” The AMTB was originally a 7-point Likert scale intended to elicit the “opinions” and “feelings” of students about a series of positive and negative statements. It was designed for the Canadian context to measure a) attitudes to native speakers of the target language, b) interest in foreign languages, c) attitudes towards learning the target language, d) integrative orientation, e) instrumental orientation, f) class anxiety, and g) parental encouragement. It has been used as a research instrument in numerous occasions with strong reliability and validity (Gardner, 1985). Uribe (2001) adapted slightly the AMTB to the Spanish speaking context. A questionnaire with four subscales was devised to gauge student’s attitudes towards a) the classroom teacher and the methodology, b) curricular materials (books, handouts...), c) activities and tasks performed during the English language period, and d) subject matter. See Table 1 for the number of items and internal consistency of sample of students per subscale. The instrument consisted of 73 Likert-type statements (5 = Very Positive, 4 = Positive, 3 = Neutral, 2 = Negative and 1 = Very Negative) on each of the 4 attitudinal factors to be measured: work, teacher, materials, and classroom. Demographic data was collected through an appendix section attached at the end of the questionnaire. It consisted of 6 items requesting information regarding student’s interest learning English (High, Medium, Low), father and mother profession (Open), initiating grade to English study (1st grade through 10th), private tuition classes in language academies or agencies (Yes, No), and grade average in English (A, B, C, D, F). Validity tests were performed to the 73 items included in the questionnaires. Results confirmed the validity of the instruments (Uribe, 2001). The questionnaire showed strong internal consistency overall reliability ($\alpha = .94/96$) and for each of the subscales, as indicated in the table.

<Table 1 about here>

2.3 Procedure

Data gathering followed the same pattern in all cases. Permission was requested from the superintendent office to administer the questionnaire from previously selected schools. Once this was granted, principals were contacted and a date was scheduled. The primary investigator and classroom teachers personally administered the questionnaire to all students. An explanation was given for the rationale of the research work prior to the administration of the questionnaire as well as directions for the correct application. Finally data was input in a SPSSV.15 program for analysis. Respondents were given an hour to complete all 73 items. All information was strictly confidential and used for research purposes only. The total subject size (N = 287) was reduced to 286 cases because one case had missing information.

3. Results

Demographic composition of both samples was gathered from two sources. Participants self-reported on “average grade in English”, “private tuition”, “social class”, and “sex”; while schools provided data for the “grade they started to learn English”. No differences between Spanish and Mexican American groups were found in “sex” or “self reported grade in English”. However, important differences were found with respect to “social class”, “private tuition”, and “grade they started to learn English”. The Spanish sample self-reported data indicates that students generally see themselves as middle class, have attended private academies to improve their English and started to learn English formally at school in grade 6. By comparison, the Mexican American participants assigned themselves to a much lower social status, have not taken supplemental English language courses, and although most students started to learn English at school in grade 6 showed more variability as newcomers to the country. See Table 2 for a more detailed break down of the demographic data.

<Table 2 about here>

To explore group differences in attitudes to learning English, effect sizes of the differences between means were calculated. The means on each subscale for each group are shown in Table 3. The results revealed that the Mexican American group showed more positive attitudes to learning English than the Spanish group in each of the four subscales of the questionnaire. Differences existed in Attitudes to English Classroom ($d = .78$), Attitudes to the Teacher of English ($d = .88$), Attitudes to Class Materials ($d = .88$), and Attitudes to Tasks in English ($d = .84$). The effect of each independent variable on each of the attitude subscales was examined in a separate one way analysis of the variance (ANOVA) for both the Mexican American and Spanish groups. For the Mexican American sample, univariate ANOVA was used to explore the main effects of sex (Male = 149; Female = 138), social class (Low, Medium Low, Medium High, High), initiation grade to English (1st grade through 10th), average grade in English (A, B, C, D, F), and private tuition (Yes, No) on attitudes to learning English. Means on each subscale for each comparison for the Mexican American group are presented in Table 4.

<Tables 3 & 4 about here>

The F tests results showed statistically significant attitudinal differences within groups for some subscales. The Mexican American female group showed more favorable attitudes than their male counterparts in classroom work. No other significant effects of gender were observed. Those students with higher average grades in English showed more positive attitudes to the teacher and the materials of the English classroom. No other significant effects of average grades were found. None of the effects of social class, grades in English, private tuition or initial grade for English on attitudes were significant. The ANOVA results for the Mexican American sample are presented in Table 5.

<Table 5 about here>

For the Mexican American sample, univariate ANOVA was used to explore the main effects of sex (Male = 56; Female = 54), social class (Low, Medium Low, Medium High, High), initiation grade to English (1st grade through 10th), average grade in English (A, B, C, D, F), and private tuition (Yes, No) on attitudes toward learning English. Means on each subscale for each comparison for the Spanish group are presented in Table 6. Regarding the Spanish group, results also showed attitudinal differences by sex. The female group showed more positive attitudes to classroom than the male group. No other significant effects of sex were observed in the Spanish students. Participants who learned English at an earlier age showed significantly more positive attitudes to work in the English classroom than those who began later. No other significant effects of the year initiating English study were observed among this group of students. The F tests results indicated no differences at all in any of the two groups regarding the variables social class and private tuition. The ANOVA results for the Spanish sample are presented in Table 7. For the Spanish sample, again univariate ANOVA was used to explore the main effects of sex (Male = 93; Female = 84), social class (Low, Medium Low, Medium High, High), initiation grade to English (1st grade through 10th), average grade in English (A, B, C, D, F), and private tuition (Yes, No) on attitudes toward learning English. Means on each subscale for each comparison for the Spanish group are presented in Table 7.

<Tables 6 & 7 about here>

4. Findings and Discussion

Mexican American and Spanish secondary school students in the study showed statistically significant differences in their attitudes to learning English in all four subscales of the questionnaire. Mexican American participants systematically exhibited more positive attitudes to English language learning than Spanish students in most items of the questionnaire. It is possible that frequent contact with the community that speaks the target language has fostered those positive attitudes and affected motivation to learning the language. Previous studies already reached the same conclusion

(Ollenrenshaw, 1994; Van der Keilen, 1995; Dodick, 1996; Masgoret & Gardner, 1999). Students who are frequently in contact with the target language and community seem to have more positive attitudes. The motivations and attitudes of Mexican American students might very well be affected by their external world. Those attitudes are possibly born from positive experiences with the language and the other language group. This probably promoted self-confidence with the language and the desire to be part of the culture that speaks the language (Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant and Mihic, 2004). These participants may have experienced an integrative motivation when learning English. Integrative motivation, integrative motive or integrativeness as Gardner has referred in the past (Dornyei, 2009), refers to the desire to be part of the other community. It not only affects motivation and attitudes but possibly a conglomerate of other affective variables. Although many of the Spanish speaking communities are segregated and isolated *de facto*, and Mexican American students can probably speak in their mother tongue to survive, students may still feel the need to learn English to be accepted and integrate in American society in equal terms. Their motivations and attitudes necessarily have to be different from the Spanish group. It is plausible to think that pressure to learn English has increased especially in California with the passing of propositions such as 227 that have curtailed enormously the use of Spanish in the classroom.

In the case of Spanish students, learning English is important for their lives. It is an instrument that can complement their present occupations and help them gain access to more prominent jobs in the societal ladder. It certainly can help individuals gain mobility across borders and make the world more accessible to them. However, English is not the vehicular language of the land or language used in the community for everyday activities. There is no social pressure to learn it. Speaking the native language will suffice to get by. Contact with native speakers of English does not happen on a daily basis. Therefore, their motivations to learn English are purely instrumental and most likely different from those of the Mexican American group.

5. Limitations of the Study

Samples differed significantly in terms of social class and the grade they started to learn English. This could very well explain the attitudinal differences between both groups. Furthermore, the Spanish used in the questionnaire is slightly different from Spanish used in Mexico and very different from the Spanish used in this area the United States where code switching is constant. With that in mind, generalizations of the results to ample segments of the Mexican American population are severely limited.

6. Pedagogical Implications

With the findings in this study we can hypothesize that teachers, schools and educational agencies, including governments, should start contemplating the possibility of abridging the physical gap with community of the target language via language excursions, field trips, mass media (TV programs, movies, etc.) or educational exchanges. It is true that lately this type of activities are on the rise, but it is no less true that with the increase negative experiences have also been flourishing. But it will have to be future research that confirms or denies the importance of cultural contact as a means to expedite language acquisition. If this is the case, and to encompass a truly attitudinal change in students where English is studied as a foreign language, an effort has to be made on all sides to create the proper institutional channels that guarantee the success of these educational enterprises. Contact *per se* does not seem to have a real impact on attitudes (Dornyei, 2005). For favorable changes to take place several conditions have to be met between groups in the contact situation: equal status, pursuit of common goals, common interests, friendship potential, and government support (Pettygrew, 1998; 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that the activities to promote language contact between groups follow a sound educational policy. Not as something isolated that some schools or individuals do, but should be embedded in the national policy.

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Table 1. Description of the questionnaire

Questionnaire	Description	#Items	α	
			MA*	SP*
Attitudes to Teacher	Measures students attitudes towards the English teacher and methodology	17	.83	.86
Attitudes to Materials	Measures students attitudes towards curricular materials	19	.85	.85
Attitudes to Work	Measures students attitudes towards activities and tasks	16	.85	.87
Attitudes to Classroom	Measures students attitudes towards subject matter	21	.88	.88
Global Questionnaire		73	.94	.96

*MA = Mexican American; SP= Spanish

Table 2. Demographic characteristics

		Mexican American		Spanish	
		N	%	N	%
Sex					
Boys		56	50.9	93	52.5
Girls		54	49.1	84	47.5
Self Reported Grade					
A		9	8.2	12	6.7
B		30	27.3	56	31.6
C		54	49.1	88	49.7

<i>D</i>	9	8.2	12	6.7
<i>F</i>	5	4.5	9	5.0
<i>Social Class</i>				
<i>Low</i>	2	1.8		
<i>Medium Low</i>	40	36.3	6	3.3
<i>Medium High</i>	17	15.4	81	45.7
<i>High</i>	41	37.2	90	50.8
<i>Private Tuition</i>				
<i>Yes</i>	99	81.8	105	59.3
<i>No</i>	11	18.2	72	40.7
<i>Grade Started to Learn English</i>				
<i>1</i>	8	7.2		
<i>2</i>	2	1.8		
<i>3</i>	5	4.5	7	3.9
<i>4</i>	3	2.7	1	0.5
<i>5</i>	7	6.3	13	7.3
<i>6</i>	35	31.8	153	86.4
<i>7</i>	17	15.4	2	1.1
<i>8</i>	16	14.5	1	0.5
<i>9</i>	13	11.8		
<i>10</i>	4	3.6		

Table 3. Means by group

Subscale	<i>M</i>	
	MA	SP
Attitudes to Teacher	4.04	3.58
Attitudes to Materials	3.87	3.38
Attitudes to Work	3.86	3.37
Attitudes to Classroom	3.96	3.50
Global Questionnaire	3.90	3.47

*MA = Mexican American; SP= Spanish

Table 4. Means for Mexican American sample

		Attitude Towards (Scale 1-5)			
		Class	Teacher	Materials	Work
Sex					
	Female	4.04	4.06	3.94	3.96
	Male	3.88	4.01	3.79	3.76
Social class					
	2	3.79	3.93	3.60	3.63

	3	4.03	4.05	3.95	3.92
	4	3.91	4.04	3.81	3.83
Average grade in English					
	A	4.24	4.26	4.25	4.15
	B	4.15	4.09	3.97	3.91
	C	3.86	4.03	3.78	3.80
	D	3.70	3.64	3.67	3.88
	F	3.83	4.18	3.86	3.12
Private Tuition					
	Yes	3.90	3.95	4.00	4.05
	No	3.97	4.04	3.86	3.85
Year Initiated Learning English					
	1	4.01	4.01	3.93	3.81
	2	4.02	3.82	3.52	3.95
	3	3.91	4.08	3.97	3.82
	4	4.47	4.28	4.13	4.34
	5	3.63	3.99	3.78	3.74
	6	3.95	4.03	3.73	3.72
	7	3.90	4.04	3.81	3.80
	8	4.03	4.06	3.86	3.98
	9	4.02	4.05	4.01	4.06
	10	4.01	4.00	3.97	3.64

Table 5. ANOVA Results for Mexican American Sample

Subscale	Sex		Social Class		Grade Initiated To English		Average Grade In English		Private Tuition		Year Started Learning English	
	F (1,109)	Sig.	F (2, 109)	Sig.	F (3, 109)	Sig.	F (2, 109)	Sig.	F (1, 109)	Sig.	F (9, 109)	Sig.
Attitudes to Teacher	0.34	0.56	0.18	0.83	0.24	0.98	5.42	.002*	0.37	0.54	0.24	0.99
Attitudes to Materials	2.92	0.09	2.18	0.11	0.80	0.61	3.72	.014*	0.73	0.39	0.80	0.61
Attitudes to Work	4.73	.032*	1.02	0.36	1.26	0.26	1.45	0.23	1.28	0.25	1.26	0.27
Attitudes to Classroom	3.67	0.06	1.29	0.27	1.28	0.25	2.21	0.09	0.16	0.69	1.29	0.25

* Level of significance p .05

Table 6. Means for Spanish Sample

		Attitude towards			
		Class	Teacher	Materials	Work
Sex	Female	3.65	3.66	3.44	3.45
	Male	3.46	3.53	3.33	3.29
Social Class	1	3.66	6.80	3.43	3.53
	2	3.61	3.57	3.41	3.38
	3	3.53	3.59	3.25	3.34
	4	2.53	2.12	2.56	2.95
Grade in English	F	3.53	3.68	3.39	3.31
	D	3.40	3.46	3.32	3.23
	C	3.64	3.66	3.37	3.43
	B	3.73	3.70	3.56	3.52
	A	3.60	3.60	3.38	3.48
Private Tuition	Yes	3.56	3.61	3.31	3.42
	No	3.60	3.58	3.38	3.39
Year Started Learning English	3	3.89	3.95	3.74	3.97
	4	3.39	3.26	2.97	3.05
	5	3.54	3.70	3.38	3.23
	6	3.50	3.54	3.29	3.31
	7	4.39	3.91	4.06	4.05
	8	4.53	4.12	4.31	4.58

Table 7. ANOVA Results for Spanish sample

Subscale	Sex		Social Class		Grade Initiated to English		Average Grade in English		Private Tuition		Initial Grade English	
	F (1,176)	Sig.	F (3,133)	Sig.	F (4,167)	Sig.	F (2,133)	Sig.	F (1,133)	Sig.	F (5,151)	Sig.
Attitudes to Teacher	3.05	0.08	2.08	0.10	1.09	0.36	1.11	0.35	0.09	0.75	1.10	0.37
Attitudes to Materials	1.32	0.24	1.14	0.33	1.86	0.10	0.65	0.62	0.40	0.52	1.87	0.10
Attitudes to Work	3.05	0.10	0.68	0.56	2.71	.02*	1.39	0.24	0.05	0.81	2.72	0.02
Attitudes to Classroom	4.56	.032*	1.44	0.23	2.09	0.06	2.20	0.07	0.13	0.71	2.10	0.07

* Level of significance p .05