

Attitudes, Motivation and Parental Encouragement in Learning English as a Foreign Language: the Croatian Context

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate, establish and analyze differences in students' motivational patterns (attitudes, interests and parental encouragement) towards English as a foreign language (EFL) and to find possible differences in motivation. The sample consisted of 53 (34 male and 19 female) students at the Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Split, Croatia. Variable sample consisted of a questionnaire of 30 statements divided in 3 parts. The questionnaire is reliable (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80). The results show that male students have statistically significant positive attitude ($p = 0.03$) towards English as a foreign language than female students. Female students, on the other hand, have almost statistically significant difference ($p = 0.06$) concerning the parental influence in learning EFL. In addition, the results reveal that attitudes and interests in learning English in female students seem to be significantly correlated, while male students show statistical correlation between interest in learning a foreign language and parental encouragement in learning EFL. Furthermore, while male students express more positive attitudes towards English based on the level of their parental encouragement, female students do not base their interest in learning English on their parental encouragement but rather on their personal attitude towards English.

Key words: Language attitudes, language learning, parental influence, second language motivation.

1. Introduction

Knowledge of English as the most spoken language in the world is a *must* in non-native English speaking countries, such as Croatia. More than half of the world is bilingual while 330 million people are native English speakers (the number does not include people who learn English as a foreign or as a second language) (Rukh, 2014). In the era of globalization, the 'ever present English' (Penjak, 2012), as Jorge Luis Borges calls it, stands not only as pure means of communication but as a bridge between the national and the global context; as a feeling of belonging, connecting, exchanging and transmitting ideas and information with a larger international community. Although in some countries, for instance in India, English was seen as a mark of slavery; today, it enjoys the status of language of supremacy and is associated with academic achievements (Rukh, 2014).

In universities and colleges in Croatia the official language is Croatian; thus, English is only thought as the mandatory foreign language. For instance, at the Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Split, English is thought at the second year of the undergraduate study (obligatory subject) and at the first year of the graduate study (optional subject). Kinesiology students, as well as all people connected to sport, in general and in similar health related professions, due to nature of their job, should have good knowledge of English. Apart from finding a job outside Croatia, knowing English increases students' ability to read sports literature, scientific papers and many other sources of information that can help them improve their professional knowledge, skills and abilities, as well.

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In addition, numerous studies on foreign language learning, especially on learning English as a foreign language (EFL), underline motivation as one of crucial factors and mechanisms in the process of language learning (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Kormos & Csizer, 2008; Okuniewski, 2014). Although there is not a single definition on what the term motivation means that the researchers and theorists would agree upon, one fact is sure – the term motivation is used in various contexts (educational, psychological, business, political, etc.). In other words, while one sees motivation as being ‘responsible for determining human behaviour by energising it and giving it direction’ (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001), the others stress its key importance and influence in second language learning (Dokic Ahmedi, 2013). This assumes that even the most talented students without motivation would not achieve good results in any foreign language learning (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001). Since the 1990s, the motivation factor in foreign language learning has become an important issue, quite and often discussed upon in literature by many researchers and authors (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994; Fotos, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Schmidt, Boraie, & Kassabgy, 1996; Skehan, 1991; Williams & Burden, 1997).

While stating, in brief, a core concept of language learning, another element needs to be pointed at. Attitude, by Cambridge Dictionary, is defined as a very confident feeling or opinion about something or someone, or a way of behaving that is caused by this’ (Walter, 2008). According to it, having a positive attitude towards second language leads to a desire to learn foreign language that, in the end, results in motivation intensity that in case of a higher intensity leads to success in learning a foreign language. Tremblay and Gardner have come up with the similar structure which they elaborated upon in their Model of L2 motivation (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Furthermore, parents’ proficiency and positive attitudes towards foreign language learning seem to have positive influence on students’ motivation in the process of foreign language learning (Butler, 2009; Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2008; Portes & Hao, 2001; Wigfield, Esoles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006).

In trying to make all the aforementioned more clearly, the article focuses on the main idea, i.e., to establish foreign language learning motivation patterns in male and female students in order to affect their motivation in learning English during their education process. The outcome of it is the aim of this study, i.e., to investigate and establish gender differences in motivational patterns (interest in learning second language, attitudes towards English, parental encouragement) regarding foreign language learning.

2. Method

A sample consisted of 53 second-year-graduate students at the Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Split. The participants, age 20.0 ± 1.0 (min 19.0 / max 23.0), were divided in two groups based on their gender: 34 male (64.2 %) and 19 female (35.8 %). Students in both groups have been learning English since their elementary school onwards as their mandatory foreign language. The average grade in English in male students in the secondary school was 3.2 ± 0.9 , i.e., 3.6 ± 1.0 in female students. Also, among the participants there were no students who lived abroad in an English speaking country. Nobody has reported on having one or both of the English native speaking parents, either.

In order to conduct the present study, a questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consists of 30 statements divided into 3 parts: the first part consists of 10 statements covering parental encouragement in learning EFL; the second part consists of 10 statements covering students’ interest in learning foreign language; the third part consists of 10 statements covering students’ attitudes towards English language. For the purpose of this study, we used a part of Gardner’s questionnaire (3 out of 8 parts of the original version of the questionnaire), Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 1985). The original version of the questionnaire has been developed by Gardner (Gardner, 1958, 1960) but expanded by Gardner and Lambert (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Numerous other studies have been using parts of their questionnaire in various researches, as well as adapting it for other foreign languages (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei, 2001; Ellis, 1994; Gass, 2013; Laine, 1977; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Muchnick & Wolfe, 1982). The questionnaire was in English; each of the statements were linked to a 7-point Likert scale format (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) (Likert, 1932) that students had to choose.

Parental encouragement in learning EFL covered 10 positive statements in which students had to evaluate their parental encouragement. The highest possible score was 70 which points at high level of parental encouragement in learning EFL.

Interest in learning English covered 10 positive statements aimed at assessing each student's general interest towards learning a foreign language, in general. The highest possible score was 70 which points at students' high level of interest in learning a foreign language. Students' attitudes towards English language covered 10 positive statements adapted according to Randhawa & Korpan (Randhawa & Korpan, 1973). 5 out of 10 statements were positive while the other 5 mirrored negative attitudes towards English. When we scale negative score the other way around, the highest possible score is 70 which points at high level of students' attitudes towards learning English.

In order to examine the reliability of the statements, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient and interclass correlation was calculated; all the variables were calculated using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum value); normality distribution was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnovljjev test; differences in motivational parameters between male and female were tested using Fisherovim LSD test after the ANOVA test for retest; while for the purpose of establishing correlations among certain motivational parameters towards learning a foreign language interclass correlation matrix was conducted, separately, on male and female sample.

3. Description of the experimental procedure

During their English language class, the participants were asked to choose an option on the rating scale that best described their interests, attitudes and opinion. They have been warned that the questionnaire was anonymous and subject to their own will. Out of 79 second-year-graduate students at the Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Split, 53 students (67%) decided to fill in the questionnaire. There was no time-set length.

4. Results

Table 1 shows Cronbach's alpha values and interclass correlation (ICC), for assessment of reliability for each part of questionnaire.

	Cronbach's alpha	ICC
Parental encouragement in learning EFL	0.91	0.51
Interests in learning a foreign language	0.81	0.30
Attitudes towards English language	0.85	0.38

From Table 1, we notice that all 3 parts of the questionnaire fulfil the reliability criteria.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics parameters (mean and minimum and maximum values – Min / Max), KS test results in assessing normality distribution of data and differences among genders (Fisher LSD test) in motivational interests towards leaning foreign language.

		Parental encouragement in learning EFL	Interests in learning a foreign language	Attitudes towards English language
Male (n = 34)	Mean	44.6 ± 8.9	46.4 ± 7.2	42.4 ± 7.9
	Min / Max	16.0 / 64.0	27.0 / 59.0	30.0 / 34.0
	KS	p > 0.20	p > 0.20	p > 0.20
Female (n = 19)	Mean	49.5 ± 16.4	50.7 ± 4.3	36.6 ± 4.3
	Min / Max	10.0 / 70.0	37.0 / 63.0	30.0 / 43.0
	KS	p > 0.20	p > 0.20	p > 0.20
Fisher LSD test		p = 0.06	p = 0.10	p = 0.03

From Table 2, we notice that there is a statistically significant difference among genders in the attitudes towards English language (p = 0.03). Whatsmore, there proofs to be differences in parental encouragement in learning English that are almost statistically significantly different (p = 0.06).

Table 3 shows interclass correlation of some motivational aspects towards learning foreign language on the female sample.

Female (n = 19)		Interests in learning a foreign language	Parental encouragement in learning EFL
Attitudes towards English language	r	0.46*	0.19
	p	<0.05	0.43
Interests in learning a foreign language	r	1.00	0.25
	p		0.31

**Statistically significant difference; r – correlation coefficient, p – level of significance*

From Table 3, we notice statistically significant correlation between attitudes towards English language and interest in learning a foreign language on the female sample.

Table 4 shows interclass correlation of some motivational aspects towards learning foreign language on the male sample.

Male (n = 34)		Interests in learning a foreign language	Parental encouragement in learning EFL
Attitudes towards English language	r	0.20	0.17
	p	0.26	0.33
Interests in learning a foreign language	r	1.00	0.53*
	p		<0.001

**Statistically significant difference; r – correlation coefficient, p – level of significance*

From Table 4, we notice that there is a significant statistical correlation between parental encouragement in learning English and students' own interest in learning foreign language, on the male sample.

5. Discussion

When it comes to the process of learning English many elements, according to the above presented results (gender, motivation, attitude, parental encouragement), should be taken into consideration. Many studies of students' attitudes towards learning English language as a foreign language have been conducted. While some studies show no difference on the issue among gender (Fakeye, 2010; Gülşen, Demirok, & Uzunboylu, 2009), others underline statistically significant differences between genders. For instance, this study shows that male students have statistically more positive attitude towards English language learning than female students.

As stated, attitudes may vary not only among genders but they may be defined, and thus influenced, but the cultural context itself. For instance, in Japan women have more positive attitudes towards English language learning (Kobayashi, 2002) that, according to Kobayashi, may be due to marginalization of women in the society. On the other hand, in Iran men have more positive attitudes towards English language learning (Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013). This assumes that the marginalization of women in the society does not necessarily lead to an eager desire to learn other language that would enable them more freedom of speech and/or different status. For instance, women living in Turkey have more positive attitudes towards English language learning despite their socio-cultural status as being very restricted in their social actions (Karahan, 2007). To bring this closer, statistically significant difference between men and women in simply in their statement covering the fact that they find English language to be more musical and that it is a language of global world and culture, today. Additionally, we believe that having a positive attitude towards English language may be the outcome of the instrumental motivation, i.e., of the awareness that knowing English language may have many benefits in, for instance, finding a suitable job, in future.

'There is, nevertheless, quite a good deal of studies on attitudinal/motivational variations across genders regarding the specific socio-cultural and/or socio-political context of English foreign language learning' (Sugimoto, Rahimpour, & Yaghoubi-Notash, 2008). Motivation for English language learning, as stated by Sugimoto, Rahimpour, & Yaghoubi-Notash, seems to be slightly higher in women than in men, but not statistically significant. Many other studies confirm this fact, as well (Lee & Kim, 2014). Women seem to be more motivated for English language learning than men and due to this have better grades and are much better learners than men (Aldosari, 2014).

Although many factors may affect the students' interest and motivation in the process of learning EFL, in the questionnaire we were interested in the particular influence and the extent of that influence – parental influence. In particular, we were interested how do students see their parental influence: do parents encourage them and to what extent and do they need their encouragement, at the first place? Following these lines of thoughts, we were also interested if there were difference in parental encouragement between male and female students.

Seen through the prism of this study, there is a higher level of parental encouragement in learning EFL process in women than in men, but almost statistically significant ($p = 0.06$). This leads us to conclusion that parental encouragement is not gender based, as stated by many other studies on the topic, as well (Solak, 2012; Sung & Padilla, 1998). However, we may assume that there are cultures in which parents have different approach towards sons than towards daughters when discussing on language learning process, but it is not the case with this study.

This study draws attention at the fact that motivation for foreign language learning and parental encouragement, in male students, proof to be statistically correlated ($p < 0.001$; $r = 0.53$), while, at the same time, there is no significant correlation between attitudes towards English language learning and motivation for learning it. Seen as such, female students reveal different picture. Attitudes towards English language and motivation for learning it, among female students, is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$; 0.19), while parental encouragement and motivation for learning English do not correlate. In other words, motivational patters between men and women are significantly different. While male students reveal they need parental encouragement that would motivate them learn English, female students get motivated by their own positive attitudes towards English language. Indeed, men, in general, put less effort in school assignments than women and have less positive attitudes towards writing homework that, later on through their educational process, get revealed on their grades in foreign language (Van de Gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme, & De Munter, 2009).

6. Limitations

We find that a rather small sample, as well as in using only a part of Gardner's questionnaire present a limitation of this study. As such, the limitations lead us to insufficient overall picture in all the other motivational components (instrumental, integrative extrinsic, intrinsic), anxiety influence and the influence of the surrounding factors. By adding the successful variability in learning foreign language we could come out with pragmatic validity, i.e., the answer to the question on are high motivation and good grades connected to some extent.

7. Conclusion

Attitudes and motivations in foreign language learning have been studied by different researchers in various countries. This study presents one of these. Additionally, the outcome of this study reveals that the motivation issue as well as the extent of parental encouragement among the students at the Faculty of Kinesiology in learning English as a foreign language are different depending on gender. While one are motivated by themselves, the others need parental encouragement in order to achieve good results and develop positive attitudes. Following these lines of thoughts, the study also point at the importance and need of parental encouragement in motivating male students in the process of EFL learning. Also, it is important to know that there are gender differences when it comes to learning a foreign language in order to be able to influence and motivate students in different ways.

However, it is necessary to do further studies, interpretations and reconsiderations on the topic, as well as to find which are the motivational components and surrounding influences that lead to differences in motivation between genders. In this way, we could influence precisely on motivation and have direct impact on foreign language learning success, as well.

8. References

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