STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES TOWARD ENGLISH AT ÇEMİŞGEZEK BOARDING SECONDARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims at observing students’ attitudes towards English at Çemişgezek Boarding Secondary School. English is taught from 4th grade to 8th grade in this school, but in this study 68 students were chosen from 6th, 7th and 8th grades. As a qualitative research, a questionnaire was used as a tool, which comprises of three questions. The questions were open-ended and the qualitative data obtained analysed via content analysis. The results indicate that most of the students at Çemişgezek Boarding Secondary School have a positive attitude as a result of teaching methods, techniques and the friendly atmosphere in the classroom. The students also reported that the course could be more enjoyable by using body language, playing games, watching cartoons and listening to music.

Key Words: Attitude, EFL students

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, background to the study is presented, which is based on the definition of the term attitude and language attitude and that is followed by the statement of the problem. Aim of the study is explained together with the research questions. Limitations of the study are briefly put forward.

1.1 Background to the Study

English is an outstanding foreign language in many countries including Turkey. It is neither an official nor a common language in Turkey but it is the most widely taught foreign language at each stage of the education system. Many Turkish students start to learn English as a foreign language during primary school; some learn when they are at high school. However, most of the students have poor foreign language skills despite the intensive of the English lessons. Therefore, the studies on foreign language learning have gained popularity in recent years in Turkey. Karahan (2007) emphasises that although a huge amount of time and effort are spent, learners either cannot go beyond the basics or they experience difficulty in developing their level of proficiency unless they are individually motivated. She states that while numerous debates over learning a second or foreign language focus on the efficacy of teaching methodologies, little attention is given to the contextual factors –individual, social and societal- that affect Turkish students’ learning. Students’ attitude is one of the main factors that determine their success in language learning (Ghazali, S.N., et al. 2009). According to İnal, Evin and Saracaloğlu (2003), most of the researches on the issue have concluded that student’s attitude is an integral part of learning and that it should, therefore, become an essential component of second language learning pedagogy.

Attitude has recently been the centre of the attention. Derived from the Latin word “aptitude” and the Italian “atto” (Latin= actus or English= act) the word “attitude” was considered an abstract mental concept less than a century ago (Villarroel, C.N., 2011). Initially, an attitude was the term used to describe a physical or pose that a person adopted when he or she had their portrait painted (Baker, 1992 cited in Villarroel, 2011). According to Longman’s Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) attitude is “the opinions and feelings that you usually have about something, especially when this is shown in your behaviour. Brown (2007) points out that, attitudes like all aspects of the development of cognition and affect in human beings develop early in childhood and are the consequence of parents’ and peers’ attitudes of contact with people who are “different” in many ways and of interacting factors in the human experience. Attitude is a general, defined as a positive or negative evaluation of people, objects, situations, events or ideas (Zimbardo et al., 1999 cited in Durer & Sayar, 2012). Attitude is an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual’s beliefs or opinions about the referent (Gardner, 1985, p. 93).
Tılaboğlu and Kınsiz (2011) define the term attitude as someone's opinions or feelings about something, particularly as shown by their behaviour. They indicate that students' attitudes may be positive, negative or neutral and they have an influence on and even shape students' behaviours accordingly. Attitude toward a language is related to the beliefs, feelings and thoughts about that language. In the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1192:199 cited in Karahan, 2007) 'language attitudes' are defined as follows: The attitude which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each others' languages or to their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language.

Ghazali and the others (2009) state that attitude has an evaluative aspect, a temperament and tendency to react in a positive or negative way to something. They sum up that attitude is the way someone thinks or behaves.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In order to reveal out the students’ attitudes toward English as a foreign language, this study is mainly based on receiving information about the 6th, 7th and 8th grade students’ attitudes toward English at Çemişgezek Boarding Secondary School.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The focus of this study is based on the answers of the subjects on the questionnaire. The purpose of the study is to find out the students’ feelings and thoughts, attitudes, toward English lesson. To attain these aims, the study answers the following question;

1. What are Çemişgezek Boarding Secondary School students' attitudes toward English?

1.4 Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations of this study. The number of the participants was 68 students at Çemişgezek Boarding secondary School. This could be increased in order to take a more reliable result. Moreover, this study only investigated the students' attitude in a positive or negative way. The next study may research if the attitude differs according to gender or the relation between attitude and motivation.

2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Numerous studies have been conducted so far on students’ attitudes towards second or foreign language learning not only in Turkey but throughout the world. Verma (2008)
conducted a research on learner's attitude and its impact on language learning in India. She studied with 350 students pursuing different professional courses in different English universities. She found that the students used English as an instrument for passing the examinations. Ling and Braine (2007) also carried out a study on the attitudes of university students toward non-native speakers English teachers in Hong Kong. The study was designed to investigate 420 students' attitudes toward their non-native speakers English teachers. As a result, they reported that the students did not experience problems with their teachers due to their non-nativeness. They also stated that the teachers understood and replied students' questions without difficulty. Dehbozorgi (2012) conducted a study on effects of attitude toward language learning and risk-taking on EFL students' proficiency in Iran. The participants were 120 female and male college students studying English Translation at Marvdasht University. The results of his study demonstrated in risk-taking between high and intermediate levels. He stated that correlational analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between attitude toward language learning and risk-taking. On the other hand, Yang (2012) carried out a study among non-English major master students. She stated that the hypothesis in the sense that learners who were highly and positively involved in their English proficiency had positive attitude.

Some researchers investigated young learners' attitude toward language learning. For instance, Villarroel (2011) wrote her doctoral thesis on young students' attitudes toward language. Her thesis consisted of five chapters including three different studies. Her first study was about attitudes of young Spanish-speaking students in two-way immersion programs. She conducted this survey with Marcia H. Rosenbusch, Holly Kaptain and Mack Shelley. They investigated Spanish-speaking kindergarten through second grade students' attitudes toward English and Spanish languages, school, teachers, and classmates. Students' attitudes were compared with the attitudes of Spanish-speaking kindergarten and first grade students enrolled in English-only programs in schools which had common characteristics within the same areas. The results showed that Spanish-speaking students enrolled in the two-way immersion program reported more positive attitudes toward both the English and Spanish languages in comparison with Spanish-speaking students in the English-only program. The researchers stated that there were not any differences in attitudes toward school, teachers and classmates. Villarroel, Rosenbusch, Kaptain and Shelley carried out their second research about attitudes of young English-speaking students in Spanish two-way immersion programs. The findings indicated that English-speaking students enrolled in the Spanish two-way immersion programs reported more positive attitudes toward the languages of instruction, English and Spanish, and their classmates and teachers than English-speaking students in the English-only programs. They also found that students had negative attitudes toward school. In their last study, Villarroel, Rosenbusch and Shelley undertook research into the attitudes of young English-speaking students in a Chinese world language program. The findings made it clear that young English-speaking students enrolled in Chinese programs reported more positive attitude toward both Chinese and English languages in comparison with English-speaking students enrolled in schools without world language programs.
There are a large amount of studies on this controversial issue in Turkey, too. In 2003, İnal and her colleagues conducted a research on investigating the relation between students’ attitudes toward foreign language and foreign language achievement. They chose the previous year high school students in Aşın and Elbistan, Kahramanmaraş. Language Attitude Scale (LAS) designed by Saracaloğlu was administered to 421 students. In the light of the results, they found out that there was a high positive relation between their attitudes and their achievements. They claimed that these results supported Gardner & Lambert (1972, 1985 cited in İnal, S. et al. 2003) "The learner’s tendencies and attitude determine how success he will be in learning the new language". Karahan (2007) carried out a study on language attitudes of Turkish students toward the English language and its use in Turkey. The participants were 190 eighth grade students of a private school where English was intensively taught in Adana. It was found that despite exposing to English in a school environment more frequently than other students at public schools, students had only slightly positive attitudes; particularly female students had higher rates. Another study was conducted by Tılfarlioğlu and Künsüz in 2011. They tried to reveal out the reasons for learning English in Turkey and the activities learners do to reach their goals. Results showed that for a great deal of student 90% English was crucial to actualize their personal goals, for 89% of them, being accomplished in their field of the study was important and for 88% of them gaining self-respect was important. The results also showed that the students rarely used English in their routine life and opposed using English as a means of communication in the classroom.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The present study was conducted at Çemişgezek Boarding Secondary School. 68 students took part in this study. 19 students of 6th, 25 students of 7th and 24 students of 8th grades attended to the study. 37 of them were female and 31 were male. The participants were EFL learners.

3.2 Data Collection Tools

A questionnaire including three questions was prepared and used as a data collection tool. It was administered to all 68 students. It was in Turkish and each student responded it. The questions were given below:
1. What are your likes about this course?
2. What are your dislikes about it?
3. What do you suggest?
3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from the students at Çemişgezek Boarding Secondary School in fall term of the 2013–2014 academic year. The questionnaire, which was in Turkish, was administered in 8 to 10 minutes. The students wrote their thoughts and feelings toward English. The responses of students were evaluated according to their grades.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first question was “What are your likes about this course?” All of the 19 6th grade students stated that they all liked the methods and techniques used by the teacher. Approximately 53% of them reported that they liked when the teacher wrote the vocabulary of the unit on the right part of the board. They indicated that this made it easy to understand the subject. They also liked to have worksheets as homework related to the topic. One of the students expressed that she liked when the teacher answered the exam and evaluated the results right after the examinations. Nearly 47% of the 6th grade students reported that they had fun during the lesson. Similarly, 32% of the 7th grade students liked studying vocabulary and taking vocabulary exams. 8% of them liked reading the dialogues loudly during the lesson and 20% of them liked the pronunciation of the words. 3 students out of 25 reported that they felt themselves happy and confident because of the teacher’s modest behaviours. 24% of 7th grade students indicated that they loved the activities and pair works. On the contrary, 2 students reported that they disliked the lesson. They did not explain the reasons for their dislikes. The results of the 8th grade students showed that nearly 37% of them loved taking a pop quiz soon after each unit. They expressed that these pop quizzes helped them to understand the unit clearly. 4 students out of 24 stated that they learned the vocabulary of the units better when they did the vocabulary tests. 21% of 8th grades reported that learning a different language was funny and interesting and they gained a better understanding of various cultures. Besides the results showed that half of the 8th grades loved the way the teacher taught English and her teaching techniques. They also added they loved the teacher’s modest and funny manner during the lesson. However, only one student reported that he did not like anything about English. He did not give any reason for it. These results show that most of the participants generally have a positive attitude toward English. A minor group of students, 4%, had a negative attitude toward English. Fortunately, attitudes do not remain static; they can be changed through the learning process such as by using appropriate materials and teaching techniques (Ghazali, S.N, et al. 2009).

The second question was “What are your dislikes about it?” A high percentage of 6th grade students, approximately 89% of them reported that the exam they took was difficult and this caused their failure. The evaluation of the lesson should be according to the students’ level. This is a crucial thing in the teaching process and the teacher has to take it into consideration. On the other hand, one of them reported that she had difficulty in understanding the paragraphs as a result of not knowing the vocabulary in it. Apart from these findings, one of the 6th grade students stated that the teacher was not funny and was lack of sense of
humour. 44% of 7th grades reported that they did not like memorising the vocabulary and answering the questions in English. (When I asked a question, I usually encountered with this question: “In English?” The students usually wanted to speak in Turkish. I’m not opposed to usage of mother tongue but they have to hear the language. So the target language that is, English should be dominant in the classroom environment.) 3 out of 25 7th grade students reported that they did not like the course when they had difficulty in doing an activity. 16% of them indicated that they disliked the course because they could not study on DynEd (Dynamic Education, software program based on English language teaching). By contrast with these findings, 3 students reported that there was nothing they disliked about the course.

The last question was about giving suggestions. 7 out of 68 participants suggested that the time they spent on studying DynEd should be increased. 15% of students reported that they should have pop quiz and vocabulary exam more often. On the other hand, 4 participants indicated that the exams should be easier. While 10% of students advised the teacher not to speak English during the course, 22% of students stated that the course could be more enjoyable by playing games, watching cartoons and listening to music. In addition to these, one of the participants suggested that a play could be done in English. 3 students reported that the teacher should use body language while teaching. 2 participants stated that the teacher should use visual materials more often. They said that visual materials helped to understand the subject better. Moreover, 21% of students indicated that there was nothing to be advised. Lastly, 4 participants reported that the teacher should be calm down when the students could not answer the questions. The teacher should be patient and tolerant when students make mistakes. It is known that mistakes and errors are inevitable in the learning process.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study aimed at revealing out the students’ attitude toward English at Çemişgezek Boarding Secondary School. The findings showed the most of the students had a positive attitude toward the course. However, some of them had a negative attitude. Numerous researches have been conducted on the role of attitude in second language acquisition, spurred by the knowledge that negative attitudes can be changed (Ghazali, S.N., et al. 2009). There are some factors such as creating a friendly classroom atmosphere, using different and suitable teaching methods and techniques can help reduce negative attitude. Also, the teacher should identify her students’ learning styles and prepare her lesson plans according to them as it is mentioned before negative attitudes are not stable so the teacher should be aware of this fact and encourage her students. In foreign language process, especially with young learners teachers have an important role. They have to be a model in the classroom. To sum up, attitudes can be changed in a positive way and a positive attitude can increase students’ success.
References


