

## *Original Paper*

# The Relationship between Attitudes toward Foreign Culture and English Proficiency Level in Taiwanese Students of English as a Foreign Language

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## **Abstract**

*In this study, we investigated the relationship between the English proficiency levels of students of English as a foreign language (EFL) and their attitudes toward foreign culture, addressing personal, school, family, social, and ethnic perspectives. Teaching culture facilitates a strong understanding of both familiar and unfamiliar worlds and encourages positive attitudes toward differences. The study sample comprised 90 Taiwanese students who were divided into 2 groups: high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners. The results showed a significant correlation between the English proficiency levels of the high-proficiency learners and their attitudes toward culture. Among the 5 examined factors, the results demonstrated significant correlations among the personal, family, and ethnic factors. Regarding the low proficiency learners, no significant correlation was demonstrated in the attitudes towards culture and none of the factors exhibited significant differences.*

## **Keywords**

*attitude, English proficiency level, EFL*

## **1. Introduction**

Student attitudes toward the culture of a target language greatly affect their proficiency level, and in turn, students are greatly influenced by this success. Typically, the attitudes of students who demonstrate positive attitudes are reinforced, whereas students who demonstrate negative attitudes may feel stress because of their lack of success. Positive attitudes may be both the cause and the result of learning success. However, in certain cases, students who possess positive attitudes when they begin learning may experience inadequate learning opportunities or environments, fail to progress at the expected rate, or develop negativity toward their target language. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between the attitudes and proficiency levels of Taiwanese students of English as a foreign language (EFL) and examined this correlation based on personal, social, educational, family, and ethnic perspectives.

## 2. Review of the Literature

Spolsky (1969) says that there are five factors in the attitudes of a typical language learning situation: the learner, the teacher, the learner's peers and parents, and the speakers of the language. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1999) extend this view and provide five major factors in language learning: parents, peers, learning situation, teachers, and ethnicity. In this study, five factors, namely personal, social, school, family, and ethnicity factors, were examined in a Taiwanese context.

### 2.1 Attitude within Personal Factor

McGroarty (2000) states that attitudes affect students unconsciously and thus it is difficult to detect their influence readily or unambiguously. Many researches (Oller, Hudson & Liu, 1977; Chihara & Oller, 1978) show that attitudinal variables were correlated positively with proficiency level. However, McGroarty (2000) states that positive attitudes do not necessarily bring language success if these attitudes are not accompanied by effective strategies that enable students to take advantage of instructional opportunities, and if they are not clearly presented to them. Students are easily affected by the attitudes and examples of their peers, teachers, and parents, with respect to language study. Also, students are influenced by social and institutional language policies as reflected in required courses of language study, both first and second language, in schools. In Taiwan, English is a compulsory course. It is a subject in every kind of school exam, a benchmark to graduate from universities, and a criteria for finding a job. Students do not learn English for personal preference or interest. It becomes a survival tool.

Brown (2000) explains that it seems clear that students benefit from positive attitudes. As a matter of fact, negative attitudes will lead them to decreased motivation, and, moreover, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency. It is important for teachers to know that negative attitudes can be changed and that they have to provide students with an accurate understanding of other cultures as being different from their own. Furthermore, teachers should emphasize that foreign cultures are to be respected and valued. Thus, students can be led to an organized and systematic understanding and appreciation of foreign cultures.

### 2.2 Attitude within School Factor

Poole (1992) says that teachers unconsciously bring their own language socialization background into their classroom discourse styles, and this can create difficulties when students come from different socialization backgrounds. The major objectives of formal schooling are to teach reading and writing, and schools play a central role in creating and standardizing a national written language, but McGroarty (2000) points out that schools are certainly not the only place which shape language norms. Both print and electronic media contribute to the creation, maintenance, and change of language norms. In Wright's (1999) study, school emerges as a relatively weak predictor of scores whereas inside-school factors, teachers and textbook, were recorded as strong influences. McGroarty determined that textbooks significantly influenced student attitudes toward culture, and there was significant correlation

between this influence and attitudes for many learners. These findings suggest that textbook authors should pay particular attention and take serious their responsibilities regarding cultural issues.

### *2.3 Attitude within Social Factor*

Social factors shape learners' attitudes and determinations of learning outcomes. The key element which affects language learning is social context. A general assumption is that learning takes place at two different settings: natural and educational setting. Different types and levels of second language proficiency are associated with each type of setting. Consequently, there can be considerable variation among learners within each setting (Ellis, 1999). Schuman (1978) suggests that learners are different in extent to which they acculturate, and social factors determine how much contact individual learners have with the second language. Similarly, Giles and Byrne (1982) developed a theory to explain the effect of various social factors on language and specified that students must be prepared to converge towards the norms of the target language and this only happens if certain positive social factors were involved.

### *2.4 Attitude within Family Factor*

Many studies show that there is a distinct and intimate relationship between culture, family, and learning achievement (Braxton, 1999; Bachtold, 1982; Chen, 2001). In Chen's study, he found that Chinese parents and students had more positive attitudes towards education and they placed higher emphasis on self-improvement, set higher standards, and more often helped their children to learn. Chinese parents spent more time working with their children, more frequently checked their children's homework, bought books or equipment for their children and they placed greater value on home involvement. In Browne's research (1986), he found that students had strongest possible support and encouragement from their families throughout their school career. It is well accepted that parents' expectations have a major effect on children's academic performance (Boocock, 1972; Vollmer, 1986).

Moreover, Farkas (1996) states that family is the primary vehicle of cultural transmission, and the influence of culture is passed from parents to child through certain skills, habits, and styles that increases their children's cognitive abilities. Also, Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulus and Dornbusch (1990) identified four ways in which family influences students' performance in school. They found out that in comparison with parents in a low socioeconomic situation, the ones with high socioeconomic status were more likely to be involved in their children's education. Students' academic achievement was improved when parents spent more time with their children in preparation of school homework and activities. Also, parents influenced their children's academic achievement by transmitting the appropriate values, aspirations, and motives needed to succeed in school. At last, parents who communicated with their children and promoted responsible behavior in their children also influenced student achievement.

Many studies (Gardner, 1985, Oller, Hudson & Liu, 1997, Chihara & Oller, 1978) have been done to investigate attitudes towards culture, but few have been done to examine Taiwanese EFL students'

attitudes from different perspectives, namely personal, school, family and social domains. Therefore, there were two primary questions that this study sought to answer: 1. Was there a significant relationship between High Proficiency Learners' attitudes and Low Proficiency Learners' attitudes towards foreign culture? 2. Were students' attitudes in personal factor, school factor, family factor, and social factor interrelated with their English proficiency levels?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants

Ninety students participated in this study. They took the course of General English in the first year of college and their English language proficiency level ranged from intermediate to high-intermediate level on the basis of their GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) score. The GEPT was developed by the Language Training and Testing Center at National Taiwan University. It is divided into five levels: Elementary, Intermediate, High-Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. The GEPT is commonly recognized by various government institutions, companies, and schools in Taiwan. The participants were divided into two groups equally: High Proficiency Learners (H.P.L) and Low Proficiency Learners (L.P.L), according to their scores from an English proficiency test (See Table 1). The test consisted of two parts: Listening Comprehension Test and Reading Comprehension Test. The total of each part was 120. The mean score of the HPL group was 202.93 and for the LPL group, it was 149.09. A *t*-test was used to compare the two groups. The results showed that there was a significant difference. It meant that learners in the HPL group obtained a significantly higher score than the ones in the LPL group. If there had been no significant difference, it would have signaled that there was no difference between the total scores of learners from the HPL group and the LPL group.

**Table 1. GEPT score distribution between high proficiency learners and low proficiency learners**

	N	Mean	S.D.	t	P-value
Whole group	90	181.01	27.30		
H.P.L. Group	45	202.93	11.31	12.837	.000***
L.P.L. Group	45	149.09	19.92		

\*Note: N=number of students, M= Mean scores, S.D. = Standard Derivation, \*\*\* = significant at .005 level, H.P.L. = High Proficiency Learners, L.P.L. = Less Proficiency learners.

#### 3.2 Procedure

Ninety students filled out the questionnaire at the same time, and all of their personal information was protected for privacy reasons.

### 3.3 Materials

The questionnaire was composed of two parts (See Appendix I). The first part was basic information. Students were asked to provide their names, gender, and GEPT scores. The second part consisted of questions. Forty questions were constructed and divided into four categories: personal factor, school factor, social factor, and family factor. Ethnicity factors included question 14, 15, 16, 29, 36 and 37. All questions were designed according to a Likert-type scale of 5 points, and they were tested by a Reliability Test, which was based on calculation of the correlation coefficient between each item score and the score of the whole scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used, and the reliability statistic was .90. It signaled that the questionnaire reached a high reliability. As Neuman (2001) points out, reliability tests are an indicator of the trustworthiness of a questionnaire. The high reliability was considered as significant and signaled that all items included were reliable.

## 4. Result and Discussion

### 4.1 Attitudes toward Culture with English Proficiency Levels for High and Low Proficiency Learners

The results of students' attitudes toward culture and their proficiency levels were shown in Table 2. For students in the H.P.L. group, the result ( $r=.48$ ,  $p=.001$ ) showed that there was a reliable relationship between their language proficiency scores and attitude for High Proficiency Learners. However, for Low Proficiency Learners, the result ( $r=-.068$ ,  $p=.657$ ) of the attitudes with language proficiency levels showed that there was no reliable relationship between language proficiency and attitude for L.P.L learners.

**Table 2. Correlational test between GEPT scores and attitude for 'High Proficiency Learners' and 'Low Proficiency Learners'**

	High Proficiency Learners				Low Proficiency Learners			
	M	S.D.	r	P-value	M	S.D.	r	P-value
GEPT Scores	202.93	17.59	.48	0.001***	159.09	19.93	.068	.657
Language Attitudes	137.98	11.31			142.67	15.98		

Note: \*\*\* = significant at .005 level

### 4.3 Five Factors within Attitudes towards Culture with English Proficiency Levels for High and Low Proficiency Learners

For High Proficiency Learners, the results of correlational test in personal factor, school factor, social

factor, family factor and ethnicity factor were listed in Table 3. Significant correlations appeared in personal, family, and ethnicity factor for High Proficiency Learners. On the other hand, the results of the correlational test in personal factor, school factor, social factor, family factor and ethnicity factor showed no significant correlation for Low Proficiency Learner.

**Table 3. Correlational Tests between GEPT Scores and Attitude in Five Factors for ‘High Proficiency Learners’ and ‘Low Proficiency Learners’**

	High Proficiency Learners				Low Proficiency Learners			
	Mean	S.D.	r	P-value	Mean	S.D.	r	P-value
Personal factor	62.6	9.82	.49	.001***	62.6	10.09	-.03	.87
School factor	24.78	4.51	.25	.173	26.82	3.96	.05	.77
Social factor	29.67	4.81	.25	.094	31.13	4.16	.19	.22
Family factor	20.93	3.73	.10	.023*	20.80	3.73	.10	.50
Ethnicity factor	16.18	3.73	.44	0.003***	17.11	3.99	.04	.79

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* = correlation is significant at the .005 level (2-tailed)

The results of the forty questions were listed in Table 4. Among the forty questions, the highest mean score was Q26 ( $M = 4.46$ ). Students thought they could find a good job if they could speak good English. The second highest one was Q1 ( $M = 4.37$ ), in which students felt very pleasant if they were able to speak English. The third one was Q30 ( $M = 4.34$ ). Students thought that they studied English because it might become an official language in Taiwan in the future. On the contrary, the lowest mean score was Q39 ( $M = 2.19$ ), in which students did not think they would receive more pocket money from their parents when they did well in the English tests. The second lowest mean score was Q35 ( $M = 2.31$ ) in which they did not study English because their brothers or sisters made them do so. The third lowest mean score was Q34 ( $M = 2.76$ ) in which they did not study English because of their parents' expectation. This result conformed to Q1 that students thought of the importance of English when looking for a job. The results were different from Boocock (1972) and Vollmer's (1986) studies which showed that parents' or family's expectations had a major effect on children's academic performance.

**Table 4. Results of the Forty Questions**

	M/S.D.		M/S.D.		M/S.D.		M/S.D.
Q1	4.37/.83	Q11	3.10/.84	Q21	2.79/.74	Q31	4.07/.90
Q2	3.73/.88	Q12	3.62/1.04	Q22	3.20/.99	Q32	3.26/.95
Q3	3.87/.89	Q13	3.91/1.01	Q23	3.13/.84	Q33	3.11/.93
Q4	3.63/.92	Q14	3.71/1.06	Q24	3.19/.91	Q34	2.76/1.04
Q5	3.67/.98	Q15	3.21/.94	Q25	3.21/.80	Q35	2.31/.88
Q6	3.82/.98	Q16	3.13/.88	Q26	4.46/.69	Q36	3.29/1.08
Q7	3.56/.95	Q17	3.79/1.04	Q27	4.21/.85	Q37	3.30/1.05
Q8	4.30/.83	Q18	3.41/0.96	Q28	3.38/1.02	Q38	3.72/0.87
Q9	3.93/.92	Q19	3.38/1.06	Q29	3.58/.89	Q39	2.19/1.00
Q10	3.90/.94	Q20	3.49/.99	Q30	4.34/.69	Q40	3.30/1.03

From the aspect of High Proficiency Learners, there was a significant correlation between their scores and attitudes towards culture. The result was similar to the result of the study conducted by Gardner (1985), Oller, Hudson and Liu (1997), and Chihara and Oller (1978). It also meant that positive attitudes brought language success in this study. However, for Low Proficiency learners, no significant correlation revealed in their attitudes towards culture ( $r = 0.068$ ).

Among the five factors, significant correlations were displayed in personal, family, and ethnicity factors for High Proficiency Learners. It meant that students liked English, and they felt proud of being able to speak English. Because of this factor, they formed positive attitudes towards culture and it brought success in language learning. However, no significant correlations were shown in social factor, and school factor. On the other hand, for Low Proficiency Learners, there was no correlation in the five factors. All of the results were exhibiting low correlation of their attitudes on culture. It was also parallel with the statement that students with low English proficiency levels did not show positive attitudes towards the target language either.

Furthermore, for High Proficiency Learners, personal factor was the most related factor, and the least important factor was ethnicity. It was the same result for Low Proficiency Learners. It meant that students cared about how others looked at them and they wanted to get attention in public while they were speaking English. It also explains why speaking is always the most challenging skill for Taiwanese EFL students. "Face" is an important issue for Taiwan students. According to Mao (1994), face in oriental societies is based upon a core concept of honor, a more collective self, which means one is more concerned about membership in social groups. Face relationships are prescribed for discourse among members or between members and outsiders. When students are practicing speaking English, the first problem is to overcome their own face issue, because they are afraid of making mistakes, being laughed at, and even being blamed by their teachers. It is worth bearing in mind the face issue when

teaching English in Taiwan.

## 5. Conclusion

Holmes (1998) states that there is no universal consensus about which languages sound most beautiful and which most ugly, despite people's beliefs that some languages are inherently more beautiful others. It is not for learners to internalize a particular culture, but to get the students to begin looking for the reasons behind human behavior (Seelye, 1984). The results consolidate the notion that positive attitudes towards culture are highly interrelated with EFL students' English proficiency levels in Taiwanese contexts. English teachers should not neglect the importance of teaching culture in language classroom.

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## Appendix I

### Investigating EFL (Taiwanese) Student Attitudes towards Foreign Language Culture with Their Proficiency Level

**Instructions:** The questionnaire is designed to investigate students' attitudes toward foreign language culture with their English proficiency levels. It should require about 10 to 15 minutes of your time to complete the survey. Usually it is best to respond with your first impression without giving any single question too much thought. Your answers will remain confidential and only researchers of this study will have access to your responses. Your participation will certainly benefit the revision and adjustment of English education.

#### Part I Basic Information:

1. School Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Major: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female (Put a tick)
4. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part II Question Items

(Put a tick in the box. 5 = "very true", 3 = "somewhat true", 1 = "not at all true".)

##### A. Personal perspectives

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
1 I like the idea of being able to speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
2 I like to be able to say things in English.	1	2	3	4	5
3 I like English because it is nice and flowing when spoken.	1	2	3	4	5
4 Learning English is very enjoyable.	1	2	3	4	5
5 English is one of my favorite subjects.	1	2	3	4	5
6 I will keep on learning English.	1	2	3	4	5
7 I like to learn English because I like the culture.	1	2	3	4	5
8 I think English will have a great impact on my future.	1	2	3	4	5
9 I like to sing and listen to English songs.	1	2	3	4	5
10 I like to watch English movies and TV programs.	1	2	3	4	5
11 I like to read English novels.	1	2	3	4	5
12 I like foreigners.	1	2	3	4	5
13 I like the way they live.	1	2	3	4	5
14 I feel proud of speaking English.	1	2	3	4	5
15 I like to read English books or novels at fast-food restaurants or coffee shops, because people see me differently.	1	2	3	4	5
16 I like to read English books or novels on the bus or MRT train, because people see me differently.	1	2	3	4	5
17 I like to travel so I learn English.	1	2	3	4	5

##### B. School Perspectives

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
18 I study English because of examinations	1	2	3	4	5
19 I study English because English is one of the required courses.	1	2	3	4	5
20 I study English because English is highly valued at school.	1	2	3	4	5
21 I study English because there are many activities, such as English Speech Contest or English Singing Contest.	1	2	3	4	5

22	I like English because I want to pass graduation requirement.	1	2	3	4	5
23	I like English because teachers are very interesting.	1	2	3	4	5
24	I like English because teachers do know how to teach.	1	2	3	4	5
25	I like English because textbooks are interesting.	1	2	3	4	5

### C. Social perspectives

	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
26	I think it will be easy if I can speak English when finding a job.	1	2	3	4	5
27	I admire people from TV who can speak good English.	1	2	3	4	5
28	I think people who can speak English receive higher education.	1	2	3	4	5
29	People see me differently when they know I can speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
30	I study English because it might become one of the official languages.	1	2	3	4	5
31	I study English because it is a social trend.	1	2	3	4	5
32	I study English because there are many commercial ads on TV and newspapers.	1	2	3	4	5
33	I study English because I get on-line quite often.	1	2	3	4	5

### D. Family members

	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
34	I study English because my parents want me to do so.	1	2	3	4	5
35	I study English because my brothers or sisters want me to do so.	1	2	3	4	5
36	My family members feel proud of me because I can speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
37	My family members think I am really good when I speak English in front of them	1	2	3	4	5
38	When my family members cannot understand anything written in English, they always ask me to help them.	1	2	3	4	5
39	I get more pocket money for doing well in English tests.	1	2	3	4	5
40	I watch English movies with my family quite often.	1	2	3	4	5