Exploring the Role of Attitude, Motivation and Gender in EFL Learning (1)

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Abstract: It is argued that attitude plays a crucial role in motivating EFL learning. Along the same lines researchers in SLA believe that positive attitude facilitates EFL learning while negative attitude hinders it. The present study examines the attitude of male versus female university students as a motivating factor in studying English as a foreign language. The hypothesis set was whether the responses to each individual item significantly varied across the genders which may consequently lead up to better performance. Participants in the study were 84 male, and 102 female university students majoring in courses other than English (Science, Humanities, or Engineering) at The University of Tabriz and The Azad University of Tabriz. A Questionnaire was employed for data collection and the appropriate statistical means were employed for data analysis. Significant differences were found with 4 of the items corresponding to

- a) Hearing English language spoken,
- b) Being made to learn English,
- c) Appearing cosmopolitan as a result of knowing English, and
- d) Loss of identity as a result of foreign language ability.

Implications of the study are discussed.

Key words: EFL motivation, attitude, gender differences

Introduction

It is argued that attitude plays a key role in EFL learning. It is also believed that positive attitude facilitates while negative attitude acts as a psychological barrier against it (Dörnyei, 1998; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Rahimpour, 1990). Attitude to target language culture has been investigated within the framework of the broader notion of motivation. In what follows, attitude as a factor of motivation in EFL/ESL learning has been characterized.

Among a multitude of factors, motivation is probably one of the fundamental determinants of individuals' action. Dörnvei (1998) considers it decisive enough to be "...responsible for determining human behavior by energizing it and giving it direction..." (Dörnyei, 1998: 117). Richards et al. (1992) in Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics define motivation as "the factors that determine a person's desire to do something..." (Richards et al., 1992: 238). The appeal of such a definition is that 'motivation' as a singular entry in the dictionary is defined in plural terms (the factors ...) implying that it is an aggregate of subcomponents. Motivation in modern approaches to human behavior is no longer viewed as a static product characteristic of a learner. It is, nevertheless, seen as a *process* through which the learner is involved in some action or other. The word action suggests that the individual is a doer that performs out of determination, and conscious decision, which can explain why terms like goal-oriented, reasoned action, etc are dominantly employed in characterizing this process. It is along these very lines that Williams & Burden (1997) present their updated definition

Motivation may be construed as a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to *conscious decision to act*, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal(or goals) (Williams & Burden, 1997: 120).

Motivation in mainstream psychology

In mainstream psychology, research tradition on motivation is

polarized. One extreme pole is motivational psychology which is more internally driven and lays emphasis on the primacy of intra-individual factors. The other pole is social psychology and sees action as a phenomenon embedded in the social context and inter-personal relations. The action as such can be elicited from the individuals' social attitudes (Dörnyei, 1994a, 1994b).

Of the most influential theories falling in the former camp are the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishben, 1980), theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1988), expectancy-value (Pintrisch & Schunck, 1996), goal-setting theory (see Locke, 1996), and goal orientation (see Ames, 1992). Yet another trend in psychological studies is weighing up the issue in terms of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations. This dichotomy has reportedly been cited in more than 800 publications up till 1997 (Vallerand, 1997). Intrinsic motivation is the one in which task performance is for the sake of task performance, while extrinsic motivation involves an element of external reward. In other words, in the extrinsic motivation goals are of interim type at the service of a much more important achievement (see Brown, 1994).

Motivation in SLA research

The last decade of the twentieth century can be called an era of huge promise for L2 motivation studies. Up till then "[T]he emphasis in L2 motivation research had been on the [stable dimensions of learners' past experiences, and] generalized disposition towards learning L2 because it allowed researchers to characterize the motivational pattern of whole learning communities and then to draw inferences about intercultural communications and affiliation" (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002: 424). The 1990s, on the other hand, has extended the scope of characterizing motivation focusing on a) social as well as psychological dimensions, b) accounting for specific language tasks/behaviors, c) a tendency to address practical classroom realities.

Motivation studies in SLA following the paradigms in mainstream

psychology fall in either of the two categories of psychological and social approaches. The former is typically a paradigm yielding camp of research which seeks to look for theoretical frameworks to explain motivation. The other category is more descriptive in nature "examining the learners' motivational patterns in a given sociocultural or educational environment." (Dörnyei, 1998: 122).

Of the studies falling in the first category, Robert Gardner's social psychological approach (Gardner, 1985), Richard Clément and his colleagues' linguistic self-confidence theory (Clément, 1980; Noles & Clément, 1996; Noles, Pon & Clément, 1994, etc), and Deci & Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory are influential. For example, point of departure in Gardener's theory is that "students' attitudes towards the specific language group are bond to influence how successful they will be in incorporating new aspects of language" (Gardner, 1985:6). He proceeds to define L2 motivation as "the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (Gardner, 1985:10).

The second category studies, commonly known as descriptive studies provide us with statistical data that in a way support a contextual variability of motivation. Coleman (1996) investigated the L2 motivation of British-based university students as compared to that of students in Ireland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Austria, and France. The study came up with a rich source of data concerning attitude, and proficiency of the students. Dörnyei, Nyilasi and Clément (1996 cited in Dörnyei, 1998: 128-29) did a nation-wide survey on 4,700 Hungarian 8th-grader students to investigate their motivation to learn English, German, French, Italian, and Russian. English among other languages proved to be of more appeal. This was further supported in Dörnyei (2002) in which he attributes preference to learn English to a post-Soviet tendency towards open-market policies and integration with West. Laine (1995) studied Belgium and Finland (two bilingual West-European countries) teenagers' motivation to learn a third language. They were found to operate on a variety of ethnic, social, and cultural variables.

Nocon (1995) studies the attitude of American university students on the US-Mexico border towards learning Spanish. Spanish as the language of (supposedly) low-class minority groups in US, and the local medium of communication for the Mexicans as a sub-ordinate nation (compared to US) proved to be a viable basis for ethnic attitudes towards social integration.

Studies inspired by particular socio-political atmosphere of some parts of the world have also proved enlightening. Those addressing the issue of language attitude as a factor for language learning are very much so when there is a historical record of inter-ethnic clashes between populations with a language to accentuate the differences. The case of Middle-Eastern Arabic-Jewish linguistic interaction and English as a reminder of US presence is a case in point. Abu–Rabia (1996a, 1996 b), and Abu-Rabia & Feuerveger (1996) focused upon three different social contexts, i.e. Israeli Arab students learning Hebrew, Israeli Iewish students learning English, and Canadian Arab students learning English. Suleiman (1993) in his study concentrated on the attitude of US university students from Arabic backgrounds towards US and US citizens before and after arrival in America. He probed into the subjects' attitudes employing a nine point scale ranging from ultimate amusement to ultimate resentment. Sung & Padilla (1998) investigated learner motivation plus parental attitude towards learning Asian languages like Chinese, Japanese or Korean languages in schools, and could show age and instructional level interference in attitudinal patterns. An issue which has been extensively examined regarding its hypothesized correlational links with motivation is gender.

Gender, language, and motivation

A very fundamental categorization distinguished and abided by in all human societies is gender. Much earlier than any other categorization, it emerges in human life as a source of determining individual as well as social identity. Subsequently, language joins on the scene with clear distinctions of use across genders (see for example Kaplan, 1999) which have attracted attention in the early 1970s. Starting with the seminal work of Robin Lakoff (1973), and further promoted by Thorn & Henley (1975), Gumperz (1980a, 1980b), and McElhinny (1993), gender and language was developed into an area of study with a distinct sociolinguistic pedigree. Psycholinguistic concern with gender, however, has more or less been a matter of paradigm shift in psychology. In the swing from structuralism to functionalism, gender came to be recognized as one type of individual difference. This perspective was later adopted by SLA researchers. Interestingly enough, motivation has been juxtaposed with gender as another instance of individual differences. 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 EFL learning.

Results from these studies are far from confirmatory. Ludwig (1983) administered Language Learning Profile to New York University (in Buffalo) students enrolled in French, German, and Spanish language programs. The study shows that "men were more likely to enroll in language courses because languages are potentially useful (instrumental motivation) rather than intrinsic (which may be more closely aligned with integrative motivation)" (Ludwig, 1983: 224-25). Bacon & Fienmann (1992) declare higher levels of motivation among other factors as reported by females as compared to males. Baker & McIntyre (2000) cross–examined native English female and male learners involved in French immersion vs. non-immersion programs. Males and female immersion and female non-immersion learners displayed the same level of attitude to learning French while male non-immersion learners demonstrated a low-attitude. "The male, immersion students showed the highest job-related orientation while female non-immersion students showed the highest travel, knowledge, and personal achievement" (Baker & McIntyre, 2000: 334). In another study (Chavez, 2000), female university students of German in the USA were found to be more likely than male students to express concern with satisfying the teacher,

correctness of their contributions, and more vigilance of their language when using German. That (1996) using a random sampling concentrated on 50 students in 6 German, and Spanish classes at Chaffy Community College in California. Findings could not establish a significant link between gender and the personal sense of fulfillment. Suleiman (1993) investigated 15 male and 7 female students of Arabic ethnicities studying EFL at Arizona State University. The study revealed gender-related motivational differences. Sung & Padilla (1998) examined 144 elementary and 451 secondary school students' motivation towards learning Chinese, or Korean as L2. Along with this, parents' attitude was also measured. Findings confirmed significantly higher motivation for females irrespective of grade-level or instructional program. However, no gender differences could be found regarding parents' attitude. Corbin & Chiachiere (1997) conducted a study on 349 senior students from four secondary schools in New York City, Among other factors, they could show that females received significantly better grades in FL courses, but attitudes expressed towards FL learning did not vary across genders. Oxford et al. (1993) in their study of high school students enrolled in Satellite TV Japanese Course noticed gender differences in motivation and strategy use. Girls appeared to surpass boys in both motivation. Now, with this background in mind, consistent with various studies in different socio-cultural contexts, the following research question was posed:

RQ: Is there a difference in the motivational patterns across genders among Iranian non-English major university students? Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 186 (84 male and 102 female) non-English major undergraduates from two universities in Eastern Azerbaijan Province, that is The University of Tabriz, and The Islamic Azad University of Tabriz. Their major courses belonged to one of the branches of academic studies, namely Science, Humanities, or Engineering courses. Participants were either passing general English course, auditing these classes or took a personal interest to volunteer for the study. Data collection took place during the time range of a regular autumn semester of the national academic calendar for universities, that is September 2003 through February 2004 (Mehr 1382 through Bahman 1382 Iranian solar calendar year). Table 1 summarises the participants' statistics.

Table 1. Participants' Descriptive Statistics Distributed by Gender.

			Out of School Language Education Background					
	18-20	21-23	Yes	No				
Male	24	31	17	10	2	22	62	
Female	35	44	12	8	3	61	41	
Total	59	75	83	103				
	Un	Branch of iversity Stud	lies	Year at University				
	Science Humanities Engineering		Engineering	First	Second	Third	Fourth	
Male	18	18 37 29		24	33	18	9	
Female	39	45	18	34	27	31	10	
Total	57	82	47	58	60	49	19	

Procedures and Materials

The central item to elicit data was a questionnaire taken originally from Lo Castro (2000) (see Appendices). It contained a set of 30 questions addressed on a five-point scale, i.e. **Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree,** and **Strongly Disagree.** The scale was just slightly modified in terms of content of questions to fit them into Iranian context.

Procedures for data collection simply comprised handing out the questionnaire, instructing the participants to complete the questionnaire and hand it in personally to the author. Details and clarifications were provided in Persian when the students had difficulty in understanding the items. Participants were primarily supposed to check the box that most closely represented their reaction to each of the items on the

questionnaire. During the time they responded to the items, they were instructed not to share any ideas or talk to one another. Most questionnaires were handed out and collected after completion in regular three-credit General English class hours during the semester.

Attached to the questionnaire was a form requiring them to fill in the information about their age group, sex, background of language education in a setting/institute other than schools, the branch of academic studies they were majoring in, and the semester they were studying in (see Appendices).

Data Analysis

The data collected through the questionnaires were converted to empirical values. For this purpose the numerical values of +5, +4, +3, +2, and +1 were assigned to Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, and Strongly disagree, respectively. The statistical procedure employed to test the research hypothesis had to be a non-parametric counterpart of the T-test or Analysis of variance (ANOVA) due to the data type (i.e. scale data). Therefore, males' and females' responses to each individual item were compared for any significant differences employing Mann-Whitney U-test. For the statistical analysis of the data the authors used SPSS Version 11.5. In fact, 30 individual hypotheses were tested in this way by applying the same procedure for all 30 items. Results are presented in Table 2, 3, and 4. With the other items on the questionnaire no significant difference was found.

Discussion and Conclusion

As the tables 2, 3, and 4, suggest the males' patterns of response to the items 1, 9, 22, and 30 significantly differ from that of females. In other words, males and females reacted quite differently to the following items.

Item 1. I like hearing English spoken.

Table 2. Mann-Whitney U-test Results for Items 1-10

		Item1	Item2	Item3	Item4	Item5	Item6	Item7	Item8	Item9	Item10
Male	N	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84
	Mean Rank	80.43	91.03	89.98	92.07	94.57	97.04	91.80	93.65	83.60	91.14
	Sum of Ranks	6756.50	7646.50	7558.50	7734	7943.50	8151	7711.50	7866.50	7022.00	7655.50
Female	N	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102
	Mean Rank	104.26	95.53	96.40	94.68	92.62	90.59	94.90	93.38	101.66	95.45
	Sum of Ranks	10634.50	9744.50	9832.50	9657.00	9447.50	9240	9679.50	9524.50	10369	9735.50
Mann-Whitney U		3186.50	4076.50	3988.50	4164	4194.50	4141.50	3987	4271.50	3452	4085.50
Wilcoxon W		6756.50	7646.50	7558.50	7734	9447.50	7711.50	9240	9524.50	7022	7655.50
Z		-3.11	-0.59	-0.88	-0.38	-0.25	-0.43	-0.84	-0.037	-2.43	-0.56
P		.00.*	0.55	0.37	0.69	0.79	0.66	0.39	0.97	0.01*	0.57

*Significant at p < 0.05

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U-test Results for Items 11-20

		T. 11	T. 10	T. 10	T. 11	T. 15	T. 10	T. 10	T. 10	T. 10	T. 00
		Item11	Item12	Item13	ltem14	ltem15	Item16	Item17	Item18	Item19	Item20
	N	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84
Male	Mean Rank	100.97	92.09	92.10	99.56	100.54	89.38	98.08	99.71	97.24	91.95
	Sum of Ranks	8481.50	7735.50	7736	8363	8445	7508	8238.50	8375.50	8168	7724
	N	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102
Female	Mean Rank	87.35	94.66	94.66	88.51	87.71	96.89	89.73	88.39	90.42	94.77
	Sum of Ranks	8909.50	9655.50	9655	9028	8946	9883	9152.50	9015.50	9223.	9667
Mann-Whitney U		3656.50	4165.50	4166	3775	3693	3938	3899.50	3762.50	3970	4154
Wilcoxon W		8909.50	7735.50	7736	9028	8946	7508	9152.50	9015.50	9223	7724
Z		-1.813	-0.33	-0.390	-1.47	-1.69	-0.97	-1.09	-1.48	-0.91	-0.39
P		0.07	0.73	0.69	0.14	0.09	0.33	0.27	0.13	0.35	0.69

*Significant at p < 0.05

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U-test Results for Items 21-30.

		Item21	Item22	Item23	Item24	Item25	Item26	Item27	Item28	Item29	Item30
	N	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84	84
Male	Mean Rank	93.22	83.10	97.97	94.90	96.36	93.93	92.74	89.70	91.36	84.29
	Sum of Ranks	7830.50	6980	8229.50	7972	8094.50	7890	7790	7535	7674	7080.50
	N	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102
Female	Mean Rank	93.73	102.07	89.82	92.34	91.14	93.15	94.13	96.63	95.26	101.08
	Sum of Ranks	9560.50	10411	9161.50	9419	9296.50	9501	9601	9856	9717	10310.50
Mann-Whitney U		4260.50	3410	3908.50	4166	4043.5	4248	4220	3965	4104	3510.50
Wilcoxon W		7830.50	6980	9161.50	9419	9296.50	9501	7790	7535	7674	7080.50
Z		-0.06	-2.53	-1.08	-0.37	-0.68	-0.11	-0.18	-0.95	-0.52	-2.20
P		0.94	.01.*	.27	.70	.49	.90	.85	.34	.59	.02*

*Significant at p < 0.05

Figure 1. clearly illustrates that the females' ranks exceeds that of males with this item. It means that females tended to agree more with the idea in the item. Thus females like hearing English spoken more than males do.

Item 9. Children should not be made to learn English

Here again, Figure 2 clearly shows that females' average rank is higher, which means that females agreed more with the idea of not forcing children to learn English.

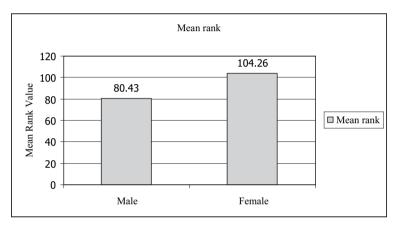


Figure 1. Mean Ranks of Male and Female Respondents to Item 1.

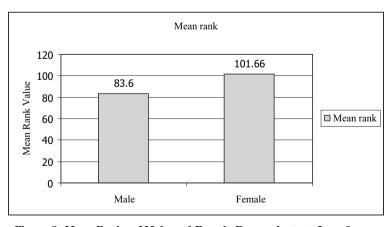


Figure 2. Mean Ranks of Male and Female Respondents to Item 9.

Item22. To be able to speak English is important to be cosmopolitan.

The same thing applies to item 22 as well where according to Figure 3 females are shown to be more supportive of the conviction that English promotes sophistication and cosmopolitan views.

Item 30. Knowing another language well might cause me to lose my identity.

Figure 4 reveals that females responded more supportively to the idea that knowing a foreign language well might interfere with their native identity.

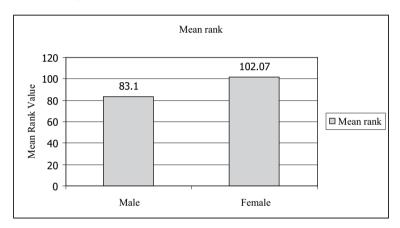


Figure 3. Mean Ranks of Male and Female Respondents to Item 22.

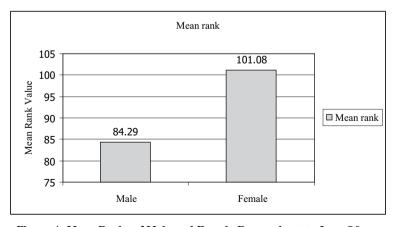


Figure 4. Mean Ranks of Male and Female Respondents to Item 30.

The differences demonstrated on these four items are supported by Oxford *et. al.* (1993), and Sung & Padilla (1998). They are, on the other hand, contradicted by findings of the studies by (Baker & McIntyre, 2000), Suleiman (1993), Thot (1996), etc. However, it is the converse for the rest of the 26 items. Generally speaking, while admitting a slight motivational pattern difference across genders, the study gives evidence as to the congruity on the part of both genders regarding their attitude.

The implication of study for the language practitioners is two-fold:

- a) They must free their mind of prejudice and try to see EFL attitudes as unified rather than divergent across men and women. A biased attitude to gender in language classrooms is an issue that continues to intrigue researchers.
- b) By probing into the male and female specific motivational patterns, language instruction can be geared up to learners' interests. In this way, language learning content can serve to prepare the learners for more autonomous kind of learning a foreign language.

While the present study reveals aspects of gender-related aspects of motivation, the results should neither be overestimated nor underestimated. By drawing up on larger data population and focusing on contextual variety of attitudinal patterns, more light can be shed on the EFL learners' motivation to learn EFL.

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SD = Strongly disagree

Appendix A
Please fill in the information below before moving on to the
questionnaire.
Sex: Male ☐ Female ☐
Age group : 18 – 20 \square 21 – 23 \square 24 – 26 \square 27 – 29 \square 30 or older \square
Do you have a background of language learning at an institute?
Yes No No
What is the branch of your university major? Science ☐ Humanities ☐
Engineering
Year at university: First ☐ Second ☐ Third ☐ Fourth ☐
Appendix B
Check the box in the column that corresponds most closely to your view.
SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree U = Undecided D = Disagree

No	Question	SA	Α	U	D	SD
1	I like hearing English spoken.		П	$\overline{\Box}$	П	
2	I prefer to watch TV in English than in Persian.	ī	ī	ī	ī	ī
3	It is a waste of time to learn English.	\Box	\Box	\Box	$\overline{\Box}$	
4	I'd like to speak English fluently.	\Box	\Box	\Box	$\overline{\Box}$	
5	English is a difficult language to learn.	\Box	\Box	\Box	$\overline{\Box}$	
6	There are more useful languages to learn than English					
7	English is a language worth learning					
8	English has no place in the modern world.					
9	Children should not be made to learn English.					
10	You are considered a higher class person if you speak English.					
11	In future, I would like to marry an English speaker.	П	П	П	П	\Box
12	If I have children, I would like them to be English speaking.					
13	It is important to be able to speak English.			П		
14	Knowing English makes people cleverer.	ī	ī	ī	ī	ī
15	Speaking both Persian and English helps one to get a job.	\Box	\Box	\Box	$\overline{\Box}$	\Box
16	It will cause problems if English is introduced into primary schools.					
17	People who speak Persian and English have more friends than those who speak only Persian.					
18	I respect people who speak both Persian and English					
19	Speaking both Persian and English helps people get promotion in their jobs.					
20	It is preferable for Iranian people to be able to speak English.					
21	If it were possible, I would prefer to have been born an English speaker.					
22	To be able to speak English is important to be cosmopolitan.					
23	People who speak English fluently are well–educated.					
24	English is the international language.					
25	When we study English, we need to learn to behave like its native speakers.					
26	The Iranian officials should give a speech in English when they are in the country where English is spoken.					
27	To be sophisticated one must speak English.					
28	It is not necessary to study English; any other European language (for example, French, or Spanish) will do.					
29	It is not necessary to study English; any other Middle Eastern language (for example, Arabic or Turkish) will do.					
30	Knowing another language well might cause me to lose my identity.					

Adapted from Lo Castro (2000)

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