Relationship Between English Language Attitude and Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

It is essential to study language attitudes as influential aspects of learning languages. Having a positive attitude may result in a better student's performance; the negative could hamper the learning process and degrade the student's performance. This study examines the participants' attitudes towards the English language and some factors contributing to developing the attitude and the relationship between their English attitude and proficiency level. The participants in this research consisted of five Papuan men and five women pursuing a bachelor's degree at a private university in Jakarta. We collected data through the in-depth interview, which prompted them to answer fifteen questions. A descriptive-qualitative method was used in this research. The result showed that even though the overall attitude towards all participants' English language was positive, some had a negative impression of English due to their difficulties when learning English. Six factors were influencing the attitude, but social status and education access were among the most contributing factors.

Keywords: Attitude, motivation, Papuan students, proficiency level

1. INTRODUCTION

The expressions of "*Saya sedang di jalan, ya*" and "I am on the way" will result in different reactions from people who hear and express the utterance. Both expressions are of similar meaning; the difference is that the first expression is in Indonesian ("*Saya sedang di jalan, ya*"), and the other one is spoken in English ("I am on the way"). People who adore English will like to use and hear English expressions because they think that English sounds more beautiful and holds more prestige when using it. Indonesians who are loyal to their language will prefer to use Indonesian expressions as they are proud to use their language. As stated by Crystal (1997), it is known as language attitude: "The feelings people have about their language or the languages of others." (p. 215).

It is prominent to study language attitude because it is one of the influential aspects of learning languages (Fazzi & Lasagabaster, 2020). Having a positive attitude may result in a better student's performance (Genc & Aydin, 2017). On the other hand, having a negative attitude may hamper the learning process and degrade the student's performance. Therefore, we assumed that language attitude is one of the influential aspects of the language learning process. Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) explain that language attitudes impact second language or foreign language learning. In language, attitude lies essential aspects of the behaviour the people will then have towards the language (Shvidko, 2017). For example, expressions of positive or negative feelings towards the language may reflect on the difficulties and fears of learning and elegance when using that language. Therefore, measuring language attitude is beneficial to determine which is useful in language teaching and language planning. The result reveals improved students' performances since a successful learning process may lead to the students' achievement. This statement was also supported by Oxford (1990), who said that the most influential aspect of language learning success or failure is the affective side of the learners.

Seven areas relating to affective factors include acculturation, ego, personality, emotion, beliefs, attitude, and motivation, based on the works of some researchers, including Dornyei (1990), Gardner (1980), and MacIntyre and Chaos (1996). However, this research is limited to discuss the attitude only, not the other six significant factors.

According to McGroarty (1996), attitude towards language is one of the affective factors in learning

(Savignon & Wang, 2003) because attitude has cognitive, affective, and conative components. It involves beliefs, emotional reactions, and behavioural tendencies related to the language. Therefore, it may influence people's tendencies to act or evaluate behaviour in a certain way. It promotes or discourages the choices made in all realms of activity, whether academic or informal.

Therefore, it is essential to study language attitude (Isa et al., 2018) because it dramatically helps language learning and planning, for example, to determine which learning methods will be useful and suitable for the students, to address the students' fears and difficulties of learning. As this will promote a positive attitude among the students, they will be inclined to pursue learning in the future.

Besides, to influence the students' future behaviour, for example using technology to study language (Arrosagaray et al., 2019; Kaplan-Rakowski & Wojdynski, 2018), we believe that language attitude is the factor that differs underachievement and accomplishment of the students. According to Spolsky (2000), attitudes towards the language hint at students' fears, feelings, or prejudice about English as a second language. Learners' attitudes, skills, and strategies dictate whether or not they will absorb the intricacies of language, as stated by Oxford (1990) and Nunan (2000).

As the researchers above agreed on the same thing, which is a positive attitude towards language that will result in a better student performance, the writers of this study wanted to know about the proficiency. Proficiency is a part of the learning process that people achieved in certain stages. Therefore, we assumed that if students have positive attitudes towards the language they studied, they will likely have higher proficiencies, even though it is possible that different gender achieves differently (Chan, 2018).

According to Oxford Online Dictionaries, proficiency means "a high degree of skill; expertise" while Cambridge refers to proficiency as "great skill, ability, and experience." Therefore, by being proficient in a particular language, for example, English, it means that person must be able to converse and understand English to certain degrees depending on their proficiency level. As this is quite hard to determine somebody's proficiency in a language, many language organizations have developed scales to help identify a person's language ability. Those scales might vary in detail, but they are all the same in the core. This study used the Interagency Language Roundtable and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as the benchmark to measure proficiency, although Duolingo Test Centre measured the respondents' proficiency. We explained these levels further to inform the people what kind of competencies they have when situated in those certain levels.

Due to its far distance from Indonesia's capital city, Papua is ofttimes neglected by the government. The prices were a spike in this province as it took much fuel and energy to transport goods to this remote island; the transportation was in the abnormal condition as there was no regular transportation provided for the people there, and roads were also in poor condition. The same thing was also happening in academics. Schools and teachers were insufficient and sometimes in poor condition too. The authors wanted to determine whether those Papuan students lack in their performances due to their attitude in the English learning process.

2. METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative analysis as its research design. Samples of this research were obtained by purposive sampling technique, also known as judgment, selective, or subjective sampling, according to Black (2010), and was selected to understand the relationship between English language attitude and the Papuan university students' English proficiencies. Nevertheless, as there are many specific types of purposive sampling, according to Palys (2008), the authors used criterion sampling as her specific purposive sampling technique, which described the technique to find a particular criterion in the cases or individuals. Several criteria should meet all respondents, namely: (1) they should spend more than 15 years in Papua (any regions should apply); (2) they should be active students of bachelor's degree at the university, but their majors are not determined; and (3) the sample must consist of equal numbers of female and male students to prevent gender bias.

The writers recruited ten Papuan university students, consisting of five males and five females, as the participants in this qualitative research. The study focused on how and why a particular phenomenon happened, and the underlying factor causes such things to happen. There are no exact number on how many participants to take, but it is suggested that it should be between five to 25 (Creswell, 1998), and Morse (1994) suggested at least six. According to Creswell and Morse, since the samples for this research are ten respondents, they have met the minimum criteria. The primary data of this research were the answers from the in-depth interview sessions with the respondents.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 explains the respondents' data in more detail. We put down to their respective columns their genders, ages, proficiencies, overall attitudes to English, and fears in learning English. All of this information we obtained from the interviews. The writers then grouped the information into their categories, summarizes them, and put them into Table 1.

Table 1. English attitudes and proficiencies

Respondent	Gender	Age (years)	Proficiency	Attitude to English	Fears
A	Male	29	5%	Proud to use English	The difference in spelling and pronunciation
B	Female	18	10%	The flat response, not like English	Grammar difficulties
C	Male	27	2%	Positive, likes to be exposed to English	Having no fears, but never attend classes
D	Male	28	12%	Positive, like to listen to English songs	No fears, have to adapt
E	Male	23	9%	He does not take English seriously	To be asked by teachers, often skip classes
F	Male	20	5%	He is aware that English is essential.	Often forgets and hard to understand
G	Female	21	15%	Proud and likes English, very positive	No fears
H	Female	22	12%	Proud and likes English, very positive	Pronunciation difficulties
I	Female	20	12%	Positive, often exposed to English	No fears, only less confidence
J	Female	23	7%	Quite positive	Pronunciation difficulties

However, the data on the participants' proficiencies were taken from the result of Duolingo Test Centre, which the respondents completed after the interviews took place. Their proficiencies were presented in percentage according to their performances in doing the tests. These scores did not reflect on how they answered all questions, but which levels they belong. Since their proficiencies fall between 2% - 15%, all of them were categorized at Beginner level. Data of respondents' attitudes toward English and their fears are summarized based on the interviews.

At first glance, almost all respondents had positive attitudes toward English. Only two respondents did not have a positive attitude, judging by their answers during the interview. The two respondents are student B, and student E. Student B said that she understood that English was vital nowadays, but she did not often get exposed to English. She said that she would be proud to speak English, but she does not have the effort to study

English better. While Student E said that English was essential, he also admitted that English had no crucial roles because he did not get used to learning it. He said,"...*Belum ada karena dari SD sampai SMP tidak diwajibkan*." Translated as "...no significant impact in my life yet because since the elementary until junior high, English was not a compulsory subject at school." Therefore, he thought learning English was good, but he did not see it as his need.

Meanwhile, the other eight respondents had positive attitudes toward English. They are frequently exposed to English by listening to English songs, watching English movies, until reading English books. They all agreed that learning English was important nowadays because it could help them get better jobs later, especially with the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) in Indonesia. They also understood other benefits of learning English, such as getting new friends and being adored by the people in their village.

This finding seemed odd at the beginning. However, there was a contradiction between the statements uttered by Student C. He liked English and did not have any negative impressions toward English. He got exposed to English every day because he got used to listening to country songs. He also says that he does not have any fears when learning English. Nevertheless, he admits that he never attends English classes. When the writers tried to ask him why Student C never attended English classes, he did not want to give any further comments regarding this. Therefore, even though Student C thought learning English was right, he did not want to learn it. It meant that Student C did not have a positive attitude towards English. He might think that English was excellent and vital, but he might have previous experiences that made him hesitate to learn English.

This finding led to the conclusion that though at a glance, all respondents had a tremendous and positive English language attitude since all of them agreed that it was beneficial to learn English, 60% of them were not motivated enough to study English further because of the difficulties found in learning English. On the other hand, they still kept in contact with English because they fond of the culture, such as Western songs and movies. This conclusion was supported by Richards et al. (1998) as they stated that attitudes towards language might reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, and social status. In this matter, linguistic and learning difficulties and the degree of importance held essential roles in affecting their attitude towards English because most of them found difficulties in learning.

The research also showed that the Papuan university students had low proficiencies in English. Their proficiencies ranging from 2% - 15% according to their Duolingo test result. Referring to the Duolingo

proficiency guideline, 2% - 15% fitted in the Beginner level, the fundamental proficiency (see Table 1.2 page 20). Their abilities were limited to understand simple words or phrases in the language, for example: read public road signs, ask for basic directions, but not limited to fill out a simple form.

Internal and external factors might cause low proficiencies. Those factors were as follow:

1. Age (internal)

Age was one of the influen factors in learning a second language or foreign language. Children who had solid literacy skills in their language were perceived to be in the best position to efficiently acquire a new language. Therefore, if the respondents studied English since their childhood, they would be more likely to achieve a higher proficiency level. The result showed that four respondents learned English since the first grade in the elementary, one respondent learned English since the second grade in the elementary, one respondent in the third grade of the elementary, one respondent since the fourth grade in the elementary, two respondents in the sixth grade in the elementary, and one respondent in the first grade in junior high. Only four respondents learned English since the first grade in elementary school, but they did not have suitable learning materials, as explained later in this section.

2. Motivation (internal)

Intrinsic motivation correlated strongly with educational achievement. Students who enjoyed language learning and took pride in their progress would do better than those who did not. In this study, the result displayed that only three respondents did not have fears in learning English, but these three respondents were not motivated to study English. They did not have any eagerness to learn English. Only one of them had a confidence issue. The other seven respondents admitted that they had fears in learning English, mostly caused by English's difficult pronunciation. Two of these seven respondents even often to skip English classes because they were afraid. Therefore, the assumption was that all ten respondents did not have enough motivation to learn English.

3. Native language (internal)

Students who were learning a second language, which was from the same language family as their first language, had, in general, a much easier task than those who were not. Since Indonesian was not in the same language family as English, therefore the Papuan university students were hard to learn English, which led to their low proficiencies. These respondents mostly spoke in Indonesian and their native language, which was their subethnic language.

Their tribal language's utterances affected their difficulties in learning English because they had to master at least two languages, their native language, and Indonesian.

4. Curriculum (external)

Curriculum indicated one of the influential factors in learning a language as well. The totality of the educational experience should be customized to meet the students' needs. Language learning was less likely to place if students were fully submersed into the mainstream program without any extra assistance or, conversely, or not allowed to be part of the mainstream until they had reached a certain level of language proficiency. This research found that the Indonesian curriculum still does not meet the requirements to make the students understand English at an advanced level. Most public schools, the classrooms were set as EFL (English as Foreign Language) classroom. The curriculum only provided the necessary competencies in English. For example, they were learning numbers from 1-10 and mentioning the alphabet in English. This study also found that the curriculum did not apply to all regions in Indonesia. Even in Papua regions, the curriculum may differ. The findings that not all respondents started learning English. At the same level. Some of them started to learn since elementary school, and some did not.

5. Teachers' Instructions (external)

Teachers' instruction also held essential roles in making a better achievement of proficiency. If the teacher provided appropriate and compelling learning experiences for the students in their classrooms, the students would make faster progress. Unfortunately, three respondents stated that the teachers were seldom to come to the class, let alone providing appropriate learning experiences. One respondent also said that she did not enjoy how the teacher taught them. Meanwhile, the other six respondents stated that their schools and teachers were standard. It was the fact that the teacher who initially assigned to respondents' villages—situated in remote areas—would only come to class in the first two months of the academic year. After that, the teacher would go back to the nearest city as he/she could not stand being in remote areas. It was also affecting the Papuan university students to have low proficiencies in English because they did not have sufficient teachers to provide them with the learning process.

Among the five factors, all five of them significantly impact the respondents' proficiency level. Since the five factors did not fulfil their educational background, they had a low proficiency level.

These findings were following McGroarty (1996). McGroarty stated that "Attitude is linked to a person's values and beliefs and promotes or discourages the choices made in all realms of activity, whether academic or informal" (p. 5). It means attitude has an impact on people's behaviour. Having a positive attitude towards English will promote the choices of the learners to keep on learning English. By having a positive attitude, learners of English believe that English will benefit them in the future. The learners will have the motivation to learn English because they want to achieve specific goals. For example, they like English very much and dream of visiting England one day. For other students, they want to work in a multinational company where English skill is undeniably required. They can picture themselves speaking English fluently in the future. Therefore, they would be motivated to learn English. These learners would absorb the lesson more effectively because they reminded their goals and not too far away to achieve. In other words, these goals are reachable.

Richards et al. (1992) also argued that language attitude affected the second or foreign language learning. A positive attitude would result in motivation, and motivation would help the students achieve a better understanding. They also confirmed that we provided the information on which was useful in language teaching and language planning by measuring language attitude. The more productive and enjoyable classroom will result in better students' performance. No more fears or hesitation will overpower the students and hamper them from learning effectively.

To become proficient in English, the students must acquire positive attitudes toward English for the first time. Appropriate teaching methods may develop these positive attitudes. For example, the teachers have to address the students' fears of learning difficulties in English and handle them accordingly. Integrating English culture into the curriculum of learning English will also help the students to know better English. Finally, introducing the benefit of English is also an appropriate way to develop positive attitudes. If students had positive attitudes, it would also grow students' motivation to learn English. This motivation will help them to continue learning English. It is what will move the students to achieve progress in English. Therefore, if the students possess motivation, it will result in a more successful learning process than those who do not. Unfortunately, having a positive attitude and motivation are not the only factors affecting students' English proficiency. Other factors affecting proficiency such as social status, educational attainment, ethnicity, age, rural and urban origin, and place also have to be considered. After they have fulfilled these factors appropriately, proficiency will likely establish.

Unfortunately, based on findings, it is found out that all factors affecting proficiency; positive attitude, motivation, and other factors, have not been attained by the Papuan university students. Therefore, all of them had low English proficiencies.

4. CONCLUSION

After researching came to an end, the conclusion was there are three findings in this study: First, at a glance, all the participants have positive attitudes toward English. Second, six factors were affecting the development of the Papuan university students' attitudes toward English. The factors are social status, educational attainment, ethnicity, age, rural and urban origin, and place. All these factors contribute to developing the attitude of the Papuan university students toward English. Among these factors, social status and educational attainment give a significant impact to the attitudes of the Papuan university students. Third, all the participants have low English proficiencies. Their proficiencies only range from 2% to 15% of the Duolingo Test Centre score guideline. It means that all the participants situated at the beginner level of English proficiency, even though they have studied English for years. In addition to that, the participants turn out to have wrong impressions toward English, even though at a glance, they all seem to have positive attitudes toward English. Hence, it is deemed essential to create positive attitude in learning English as it will increase students' motivation to better proficiency.

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