

# Language Attitudes of University Students in China

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**Abstract.** This paper reports on an investigation of one university EFL learners' attitudes towards English in relation to their motivation to learn the language and awareness of their ethnic identity. 111 university students answered a 22-item Language Attitudes Questionnaire. Analyses of the data reveal that the respondents held positive attitudes towards English. They wish to speak fluent and accurate English, were motivated to learn the language by watching English-speaking films, and valued their association with English-speaking culture and people, whereas considering their native language superior to English. Thus the paper concludes that the students had a sound sense of Chinese identity with an appreciation of the value of the English language.

**Keywords:** Language Attitudes, EFL, Motivation, Ethnic Identity

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development in China, the interaction between China people with English speaker increase rapidly. In contemporary, the youth in China have strong desire to learn English because they believe that mastering English will help them find lucrative employment in the future or because English is necessary for tertiary education [1], [2], [3].

At the same time, English is a major or first foreign language to the vast majority of university students. While the teaching and learning of English has become been important in the country by making it compulsory subject since primary schools, it has now taken a crucial role in education. Because of the high acceptance of English, it is quite clear that students are generally willing to learn it.

## 2. Defining Attitude

Traditionally, attitudes are described as having three components: affective, which refers to a person's feelings about the attitude object; behavioural, which entails how such attitude influences our behaviour; and cognitive, which involves a person's knowledge about the attitude object. The three components are usually another [4]. Also, it has been shown that the cognitive and affective components sometimes do not match with an individual's behaviour towards the attitude object [5]. This is particularly relevant to the study of language attitudes, as a speaker may deem a specific linguistic variety important and profess positive feelings towards it, but choose not to include it in his/her everyday linguistic repertoire.

How do these considerations now form a definition of "attitude"? Within the cognitive tradition, definitions more or less overlap with the following:

Attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour ... Evaluating refers to all classes of evaluative responding, whether overt or covert, cognitive, affective or behavioural [6].

Recent work suggests that attitudes 'may subsume both positivity and negativity' [7], which speaks of the multilayered and complex nature of attitudes. The idea of attitudes as an internal, not directly observable, mental state [8] reflects the mentalist approach, upon which most research work on attitudes is based [9]. In contrast, the behaviourist approach views attitudes as overt responses, and thus directly observable.

Thus language attitudes involve some aspects of languages in use and groups of language users as attitude holders and attitude targets. That is, we deal here with individuals who have specific emotive, cognitive and behavioural evaluations of specific language varieties.

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### 3. Literature Review

Language attitude research has been actively pursued since 1960s until today, with basically enthusiasm. When cutting out all research concerned with attitudes in the wider sense such as idea, conviction etc, the central social psychological research is very strong, diverse and multifaceted [10].

Attitude and motivation always interact each other and play an important role in language learning [11]-[15]. Just as Richards [16] claimed “students’ attitude towards their language course and their teacher can greatly affect their desire to learn and their classroom participation; their attitudes towards the language itself can shape their reasons for learning and the strategies they use; Numerous studies [12]-[17] have confirmed that positive attitudes towards a language often lead to higher motivation to learn and higher proficiency in the language.

Masgoret and Gardner (2003) [18] had conducted a meta-analysis of study to investigate the relationship of second language achievement to five attitude/motivation variables from Gardner’s socioeducational model: integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation. These relationships were examined in the study by using the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery and various measures of second language achievement including self ratings, objective test, and grades. In total, the meta-analysis examined 75 independent samples involving 10,489 individuals. Two additional variables, availability of the language in the community and age level of the students, were examined to assess their moderating effect on the relationship. The result clearly demonstrate that the correlation between the achievement and motivation are uniformly higher than those between achievement and integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, integrative orientation, or instrumental orientation, and that the best estimates of the population correlation are greater than 0. Neither availability nor age had clear moderating effects.

The English language has always played a significant role in Malaysia’s quest of becoming a develop nation. Despite this, the English proficiency level of Malaysian students is far from satisfactory. Motivational studies has shown that Malaysian students realize that the importance of English for their future development and that students are extrinsically motivated by the factors such as the desire to get good grades, opportunities to further their study and career advancement to improve their English. However in this case, extrinsic motivation does not necessarily translate into better performance in English. Thus there is a possibility that secondary school students may not be aware of the importance of English for their future. Conversely, it is also a probable that these problems stem from a lack of motivation and poor attitude beginning from secondary schools. Thang, Ting and Norjanah (2011) [19] investigated this issue by carrying out a questionnaire survey on attitude and motivation on 143 secondary school students in East Malaysia towards learning English as a Second Language. The study revealed an overall positive attitude towards learning English by Art and Science students. Further science students and higher proficiency students shown more interest in improving their English. This study also revealed a positive relationship between higher proficiency level and positive attitude and motivation to learn English.

Maegaard (2011) [20] did a study with the more traditional sociolinguistic area of language attitudes. Based on data from the city of Aarhus, Denmark, she discussed the methods used in speaker evaluation experiments. The method used was a mainly qualitative version of ‘the verbal guise technique’, and involves young people in Aarhus. Twelve speech samples (six female and six male voices) were used for this experiment, representing three different accents. The aim was to investigate the possibility of the Aarhus accent being a linguistic norm ideal among the young people in Aarhus. The results showed that this did not seem to be the case, and that speakers were evaluated differently according to both accent and gender.

As this research area has grown, the researchers turn their attention to the relationship of attitudes towards a SL/FL and their mother tongue, the role of the language and their own ethnic identity [21]-[26]. To investigate the relationship between language attitudes and English attainment, Pierson et al. (1980) [27] developed a 5-point Likert Direct Attitudes Questionnaire with items related to politics, interethnic relations, career, and education. They administered the questionnaire to 466 secondary school students in Hong Kong, and found six factors were significantly related to English proficiency: 1) freedom of language choice, 2) desire to learn English, 3) lack of self-confidence in using English, 4) approbation for using English, 5)

discomfort over Chinese speakers using English, and 6) English as a mark of education. Their study indicated that Hong Kong students saw use of English and Western values as a threat to Chinese identity.

Study done by Ciscel, Hallett, and Green (2000) [29] investigated language attitude and cultural identity within the national contexts in three European republics of the former Soviet Union: Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova. Results of a questionnaire given to two hundred subjects indicate that the cultural and historical differences among these republics have significantly affected the language attitudes of speakers in the three contexts. There is a strong sense of identity in Lithuania, a dual identity in Ukraine, and an unstable tripartite identity split in Moldova. Despite all of these divisions, it is English that is generally most favorably assessed in the study. This is because of the socio-economic,

Ibarraran et al. (2008) [26] examined the language attitudes held by 125 local and immigrant secondary school students in the Basque Country in Spain. The results showed that both groups held rather negative attitudes towards Basque, but far more very positive attitudes towards Spanish. The immigrant students' attitudes toward English were positive than those of their local counterparts. And their attitudes towards their own languages were the most positive. Thus, the researchers claimed that a language awareness component should be included in the Basque secondary education curriculum.

Language is not only a method of communication, but also a mechanism of power. The ethnographic research done by Gao (2009) [30] documents how a group of Korean students, who are participating in a bilingual Korean school in Northeast China, construct their language attitude and practice. Research findings indicate that the Korean students value both Korean and Chinese language acquisition, and adopt the two languages for self-empowerment in the academic hierarchy of the Korean school. The positive attitude and practice of Korean students towards Korean and Chinese language studies highlight the politically and economically functional power of Korean and Chinese languages as a means of acquiring a larger benefit from China's economic marketisation, especially increasing business contacts with South Korea. He argues that the increasing significance of transnationalism for ethnic minorities within globalisation emphasises bilingual proficiency, or even trilingualism in China's reform period which implies the necessity of relevant policy initiations for the increasing needs of language acquisition.

Much research has also been done on Mainland Chinese EFL learners, often via Gardner's attitudes questionnaire (1985), which has revealed that Chinese students often hold positive attitudes toward English and are more instrumentally motivated to learn the language [2][31][32][33]. For example, 30 Chinese postgraduate students studying in America participated in Zhang and Hu's (2008) [31] study of second language learners' attitudes towards English varieties. The results showed that the learners were positive towards the varieties of English they had been exposed to and their attitudes were not related to the understand ability of the passage delivered by the speakers of the three varieties.

On the other hand, Liu and Zhao (2011) [34] did an investigation of Chinese university EFL learners' attitudes towards English and Chinese in relation to their motivation to learn the language and awareness of their ethnic identity. 302 university students answered a 22-item Language Attitudes Questionnaire and 112 of them answered four open-ended questions. Analyses of the data reveal that the respondents held positive attitudes towards English, were motivated to learn the language, and valued their association with English-speaking culture and people, meanwhile considering their native language superior to English. Thus the paper concludes that the students had a sound sense of Chinese identity with an appreciation of the value of the English language.

#### **4. Objective of the Study**

Nevertheless, few studies on the relationship of language attitudes and ethnic identity are situated in Chinese EFL contexts. Therefore, knowing about their attitudes towards English and their mother tongue at present is important in understanding their ideas about their ethnic identity and adopting appropriate language policies in education in the future. For this purpose, the present study sought to examine Chinese university students' attitudes towards English and Chinese in relation to their motivation to learn the

language and awareness of their ethnic identity using the Language Attitudes Questionnaire adapted from Axler *et al.* (1998) [28].

Thus the research question in this study was “What is undergraduate’s language attitude towards English in Peking University?”

## **5. Research Design**

### **5.1. Respondent**

Respondent in this study were selected from a top-rank university in Beijing. With an age range of 19 to 22, the respondents came from various disciplines such as business management, civil engineering and environmental engineering.

### **5.2. Instrument**

The Language Attitudes Questionnaire used in Axler *et al.* (1998) [28] was modified to better fit the present situation. The original item 1 “It is a good thing to have English as the main official language of Hong Kong” was changed to be “It is a good thing that English is enjoying a high status in Mainland China” since English is not an official language of the country; and the original item 15 “My history, geography, and mathematics textbooks should be written or translated into Chinese” was deleted since it is not true in the present situation. Thus resulted in the 22-item 5-point Likert questionnaire ranging from “1 = Absolutely Disagree” to “5 = Absolutely Agree”. And the items could be grouped into six categories, as done in Patri and Pennington (1998) [24]: (1) support of the high status of English (items 1, 6, 17, 21), (2) personal commitment to English (items 15, 19), (3) intrinsic/integrative motivation (items 7, 9, 11, 18, 22), (4) confidence in using English (items 8, 16), (5) association of English with education (items 2, 4, 13, and (6) ethnic identity (items 3, 5, 10, 12, 14, 20).

To allow for the possibility of “cross-cultural accommodation” [35], the questionnaire was worded in both mandarin Chinese and English, as done in Axler *et al.* (1998) [28]. In addition, three open-ended questions were added: 1) what do you think of the status of English in Mainland China? 2) Is it helpful to the development of China if the status of English is raised? How? 3) Which of the two do you think is more important to a Chinese, to learn English well or Chinese well? Why?

The pilot test among 30 undergraduate students showed that the reliability of the instrument was at the Cronbach Alpha .89.

### **5.3. Procedure**

About 135 students in one of the top universities in Beijing were invited to complete the questionnaire in 10 minutes after their lecture. Finally, 113 collected questionnaires were valid for further analyses.

### **5.4. Data Analysis**

The survey data were analyzed in terms of mean, standard deviation and rank to reveal the general pattern of the students attitudes towards English and Chinese. Then, within-group patterns were further examined. The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed according to the themes that occurred, with frequency and percentage being counted to indicate.

## **6. Respondents of the Study**

A total of 113 undergraduate students from one university in Beijing participated in the present study. Distribution of the respondents was from four years undergraduate. Female students (69.9%) were found more than male (31.1%). 74.3% students come from low income families compare to 23.9% from intermediate income families and only 1.8% from rich families. Total of 72.6% students were interested in learning English in university compare to 23% moderate and 1.8% not interested. Nevertheless, the level of their proficiency in English were fair (46.5%) in average, 39.8% were good and 9.7% were excellent. Most of the respondents were introvert (59.3%) compare to extrovert (39.9%).

## **7. Findings**

Research question: What is undergraduate's language attitude towards English in Peking University?

Table 1: University Students' Language Attitude towards English

Statement	Mean	SD	Rank
1. It is a good thing that English is enjoying a high status in Mainland China.	3.78	0.96	5
2. English is the mark of an educated person.	3.17	1.16	13
3. When using English, I do not feel that I am Chinese any more.	2.12	1.23	21
4. If I use English, I will be praised and approved of by my family, relatives, and friends.	2.97	1.14	15
5. At times I fear that by using English I will become like a foreigner.	2.26	1.35	20
6. I should not be forced to learn English.	3.40	1.28	9
7. To read English magazines is a kind of enjoyment.	3.29	1.16	11
8. I do not feel awkward when using English.	3.52	1.00	8
9. I love conversing with Westerners in English.	3.63	0.97	7
10. The Chinese language is superior to English.	3.36	1.24	10
11. I like to see English-speaking films.	4.04	0.99	2
12. If I use English, it means that I am not patriotic.	1.88	1.25	22
13. If I use English, my status is raised.	2.34	1.32	19
14. I feel uncomfortable when hearing one Chinese speaking to another in English.	3.27	1.28	12
15. I wish that I could speak fluent and accurate English.	4.21	0.97	1
16. I feel uneasy and lack confidence when speaking English.	3.03	1.06	14
17. The use of English is one of the most crucial factors which have contributed to the success of the prosperity and development in today's Mainland China.	2.56	1.21	17
18. The English language sounds very nice.	3.81	4.00	4
19. I would take English even if it were not a compulsory subject in school.	3.66	1.19	6
20. I feel uneasy when hearing a Chinese speaking English.	2.73	1.23	16
21. English should not be a medium of instruction in any school in Mainland China.	2.44	1.20	18
22. The command of English is very helpful in understanding foreigners and their culture.	4.01	0.94	3

The language attitude among the undergraduate in Peking University was found positive due to most of the mean score of the items were above 3.0, whereas the item which gained the low mean score consisted of negative statement, in other words, those items showed positive attitude of the respondents.

Based on the means and rank orders, the three highest ranking items were 15, 11 and 22 with a mean of more than 4.0, indicating strong agreement. With a mean range of 3.0 to 3.81, items 18, 1, 19, 9, 8, 6, 10, 7, 14, 2, and 16 were top-ranking items, indicating moderate agreement. Items 5, 20, 17, 21, 13, 5 and 3 (mean range: 2.12-2.97) ranked low in the questionnaire, implying moderate disagreement; and the remaining item (items 12) scored below 2.0.

The findings showed that the respondents held the most positive attitude to learn English so that they can converse fluently in English (mean 4.21, SD .97). The box office of the western movie especially from Hollywood attracted the university students to watch (mean 4.04, SD .99). Besides that, they also strongly believed the command of English to be helpful in understanding foreigners and their culture (mean 4.01, SD .94).

Whereas, they moderately agreed that the English language sounds very nice, that it is a good thing that English is enjoying a high status in Mainland China, and that they would learn English even if not required, that they love conversing with Westerners in English, that they do not feel awkward when using English, that they should not be forced to learn English, that the Chinese language is superior to English, that to read English magazines is a kind of enjoyment, that they feel uncomfortable when hearing one Chinese speaking to another in English, that English is the mark of an educated person, that they feel uneasy and lack confidence when speaking English.

Nevertheless, they strongly denied the feeling of being not Chinese or patriotic when using English (mean 1.88, SD 1.25). They were not worried that they would be like westerners (mean 2.26 SD 1.35), or felt that they were not Chinese anymore (mean 2.12, SD 1.23), or their status was raised (mean 2.34, SD 1.32) if they use English; beside that, they also disagree that English should not be a medium of instruction in any school in Mainland China (mean 2.44, SD 1.20). It showed the attitude of students language in Beijing on English were positive and they were confident of their native language' status and position in the country.

## **8. Discussion and Interpretation**

The within-group patterns are described in the six categories, as described by Pierson et al. (1980) [26] and done in Patri and Pennington (1998) [24].

### **8.1. Support of status of English**

Four items (items 1, 6, 17 and 21) were included in this category. Responses to these items (mean range: 2.44-3.78 as shown in Table 2) suggest that these respondents were generally supportive of the high status of English (item 1) and of English as the medium of instruction (item 21) in Mainland China, although they generally disagreed that the use of English greatly contributed to the prosperity and development of today's China (item 17) and more than half of them believed they should not be forced to learn the language (item 6). This showed that the university students felt knowledge of English to be essential to the securing of a lucrative position while disdaining the use of English except under compulsion.

This result is generally consistent with the responses to the open-ended questions. Among the 113 collected answers, the status of English in Mainland China was believed to be low by 1 (0.9%), ordinary by 7 (6.2%), and high by 105 (84.8%) of the respondents. Among the 105 respondents who maintained that English enjoyed a high status in Mainland China, 29 (27.6%) held that it surpassed Chinese in importance, 10 (9.5%) believed it was as important as the later, and 66 (62.9%) claimed that it was inferior to Chinese.

As to the benefits English could bring to China, 1 (0.9%) of these respondents denied any use of English, 36 (31.9%) believed it to be both beneficial and detrimental, and 4 (3.5%) believed it to be harmful to China in the long run mainly due to brain drain. The majority (102/91.1%) maintained that English contributed to the development in China in international communication, global cooperation, intercultural exchange, economic development, education, knowledge expansion and upgrading, and business. They held that because of the use of English, China had come to know the world better and make herself better understood by the world as well.

### **8.2. Personal Commitment to English**

This group had two items: 15 (mean = 4.21, SD= 0.97) and 19 (mean = 3.66, SD = 1.19), the positive responses to which show a strong orientation to English, implying that the students not only desired to know English well, but also were motivated to take actions to improve their English, as reported in several studies of similar students [2][28][32][36].

### **8.3. Intrinsic/Integrative Motivation**

Items 7, 9, 11, 18, and 22 were associated with intrinsic and integrative motivation to learn the English language [12], [24], [32], [37]. The fairly positive responses to these items, with means ranging from 3.29 to 4.01 as reported in Table 2, demonstrate that the respondents agreed that it was an enjoyment to read English magazines, to watch English-speaking films, and to converse with westerners in English. This indicates that the respondents learned English for its own sake rather than only for fulfilling instrumental goals or the expectations of others, different from the finding in Liu (2007a) [2] and Yang et al. (2010) [31]. This might be due to the fact that all the respondents were studying in Beijing, the capital city where students normally have more access and exposure to English as well as more opportunities to use the language.

### **8.4. Confidence in Using English**

This category consisted of two items: 8 (mean = 3.52, SD =1.10) and 16 (mean = 3.03, SD= 1.06). The responses to these two items were implicative of moderate confidence in speaking English, which is both cause and effect of frequent use [38], [39], [1], [40]. This might be because English, as a foreign language, is

still rarely used in the students' daily life despite their more exposure and access to the language in Beijing. This is due to the monolingual environment in China where Chinese language is hegemony above all the foreign languages.

### **8.5. Association of English with Education**

This cluster had three items: 2 (mean = 3.17, SD=1.16), 4 (mean=2.97, SD=1.14), and 13 (mean = 2.34, SD=1.32). The responses to these items indicate that English was less associated with education for these students than for their peers in Hong Kong reported in Axler et al. (1998) [28] and Patri and Pennington (1998) [24]. They did not believe that English was the mark of education or that one's status was raised if they used English. It seems that these respondents were fairly aware of the status of English as a foreign language in Mainland China and the predominant role and use of Chinese as the majority language, as happened in Ibararan et al. (2008) [26].

### **8.6. Ethnic Identity**

This category included six items: 3 (mean = 2.12, SD=1.23), 5 (mean = 2.26, SD=1.35), 10 (mean = 3.36, SD=1.24), 12 (mean = 1.88, SD=1.25), 14 (mean = 3.27, SD=1.28), and 20 (mean = 2.73, SD=1.23). The responses to these items show that the respondents generally held the view that their mother tongue (Chinese) was superior to English and felt uncomfortable when hearing one Chinese speaking to another in English. Whereas, they vetoed the other four items indicating the denial of Chinese identity or being patriotic by using English.

This finding is further supported by their responses to the open-ended questions. Except that 1 (0.9%) and 7 (6.2%) of the 113 respondents believed that English was more important and that English was as important as Chinese respectively, 105 (92.9%) of them maintained that Chinese, as the mother tongue, was definitely (much) more important than English. Hence, when asked to comment on the present enthusiasm in learning English, although 72 (63.7%) of them considered it to be meaningful, they, as well as the rest of the 112 respondents, held that not every Chinese should learn English, that Chinese learners should not spend too much energy on the language, and that Chinese should never be ignored at any time. All these clearly manifest that English was not seen as a threat to their own identity by the respondents, as found in Axler et al. (1998)[28], Patri and Pennington (1998) [24]. As claimed by Hall and Gudykunst (1987) [41], competence in an out-group language may increase with strong in-group identification. As all the respondents were native Chinese studying in Beijing, English was hence unlikely to be perceived as a threat to their native language or their ethnic identity. The ethnocultural orientation which they present can be accounted for in two fundamental ways: 1) the socio-historical past of the community and 2) the specific characteristics of China as a country of settlement where Chinese language play a prominent and dominant role in shaping their ethnic identity.

## **9. Conclusion**

As conclusion, the present study reveals that the undergraduate in Peking University were positively oriented towards English, were motivated to learn the language, and valued their association with English-speaking culture and people. Nevertheless, they considered their native language superior to English and were not praised by their families for being able to associate with English culture and language. This pattern of attitudes illustrates a sound sense of Chinese identity with an appreciation of the value of the English language. These results confirm that there is a communal social identity that involves support for and knowledge of English in China. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that all the respondents of the present study came from Beijing. Their attitudes towards English might be more positive since they normally had more access and exposure to the language and had more opportunities to use it. A different picture might be revealed if university students in other parts of China were involved. The pattern may also be different to younger students such as middle school students. Thus, future studies are called for to compare the attitudes towards English and Chinese held by different groups of Chinese students with diverse backgrounds.

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