

The Interplay between Ethnic Identities and Social Attitude toward Foreign Language Learning and Language Proficiency of Young Gilak EFL Learners

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Abstract

As a social-psychological phenomenon, language learning involves several factors. The two significant factors that attracted scholars' attention recently are ethnicity and social attitude toward L2. Taking in to account this issue, the present study sought to investigate the relationship between Gilak ethnic identity, social attitude toward foreign language, and L2 proficiency. Using purposive sampling, 109 BA students (both male and female) majoring in the fields of English literature and Translation were selected from two branches of Islamic Azad University in Gilan province, Iran. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 24. Three instruments including the TOEFL Test, General Ethnicity Questionnaire, and Attitudes towards Foreign Language Learning Scale were used for the purpose of data collection. The results of Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple regressions revealed that there was no significant correlation between learner's social attitude towards L2 and their ethnic identity. Moreover, the results of the study indicated that from among the two variables, learners' social attitude had significant effect on learners' L2 proficiency.

Keywords: Gilak Ethnicity, Young, Attitude, Language Proficiency.

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1. Introduction

Language learning is a social-psychological phenomenon which involves several factors (Ellis, 2008). Among the various social-psychological factors, ethnicity (Ellis, 1994; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) and social attitudes (Bachman, 1990; Rahimpour, 1990; Dornyei & Csizer, 2002) attracted scholars' attention the most. Various scholars have underscored the significant roles that ethnicity and social attitude play in learning language. For example, Ellis (2008) stated those who have the closest ethnicity to the target language culture have greater opportunities in learning the language. The concept of ethnic identity has been approached from various perspectives (Rummens, 2003; Ashmore et al., 2004); however, scholars unanimously defined it as an individual's subjective experience of belonging with an ethnic group (Phinney, 1990, Ashmore et al., 2004).

As a dynamic and socially formed construct, ethnic identity pertains to an individual's sense of belonging to an ethnic group with who have a shared language use, values, religious practices etc. (Hecht et al., 1993). Ethnic identity is believed to be created through the social interaction with others (Yep, 1998) and it includes both one's self-awareness of an ethnic group and other's perspective regarding the ethnicity (Nagel, 1999).

With respect to the significance of learners' social attitude in L2, Ellis (2008) stated that attitude is a key component regarding the interplay between ethnicity and L2 achievements. He further mentioned that learners' social attitude regarding the learning of an L2 indicates their views about their own ethnicity and those about the L2 culture. Accordingly, these views will affect both L1 and L2 in the society.

As Brown (2001) put forward, attitude is described by a large amount of emotional involvement such as feelings, self, relationships in the community. Accordingly, learning process requires learners' positive attitudes toward it. Ellis (1994) and Fakeye (2010) also claimed that learners' attitude is a major variable in learning process. Learners' have positive or negative attitude toward a language which might in explain their level of achievement. Positive language attitudes draw learners to have positive orientation towards learning English (Karahana, 2007, p. 84).

2. Background of the Study

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the impact of learner's social attitude on the language achievement. For example, Visser (2008) stated that language performance is not only influenced by intellectual capacity or language skills, but also on learner's attitudes towards target language. He emphasized

that attitude, as a key factor that improves the process of language learning, affects the nature of learners' behaviors towards the target language, its culture and community, and their tendency to acquire that language in general. In addition, Titone (1990) stated that there is a causal relationship between attitude and achievement in a way that positive attitude may result in satisfactory achievement. He also mentioned that attitude can be developed and nurtured and a sound attitude is the first step toward L2 learning.

Considering attitude as an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object which is rooted in individuals' opinions about the referent, Gardner (1985) pointed out that attitude is a link that connects a person's values and beliefs and encourages or discourages the alternatives made in all academic or informal activities. Attitude plays an important role in understanding human behavior and usually it is considered as the mental state that encompasses beliefs and feelings (Latchanna & Dagneu, 2009). Ajzen (2005) stated that attitude and beliefs are important concepts correlating with learning a second language.

In order to examine the role of learners' social attitudes and motivation in L2 study within an online language course context, Ushida (2005) employed a socio-educational framework (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) to study students' attitudes. To examine learning context, motivation and components of foreign language learning motivation (Dorneyi's, 1994) were used. She found a relatively positive and stable level of motivation and attitudes during the course.

In an attempt to study the impact of Iranian medical students' attitudes towards English language learning, Soleimani and Hanafi (2013) found that Iranian medical students had a highly positive attitude regarding language learning. More specifically, male students had a higher attitude.

In a descriptive study to explore the interplay of learners' attitudinal factors in learning English as a foreign language, Mustafa et al., (2015) established that students hold positive attitudinal factors in learning English. It was also indicated that learners' attitude toward English language learning can influence their learning results. Furthermore, the results showed a positive correlation between attitude and motivation and the learner's enthusiasm, commitment and persistence as the key determinant of success or failure.

In another study Hashemian and Heidari (2013) sought to investigate the correlation between motivation/attitude and L2 writing of M.A students of TEFL. The analysis of the data collected using Gardner's attitude/Motivation Test Battery Questionnaire and a Writing Proficiency Test indicated a relationship between the

participants with integrative type of motivation and the writing skill and no relationship between the learners with instrumental type of motivation and success in L2 academic writing. Moreover, no relationship was found between negative attitude and success in L2 writing, but there was a relationship between positive attitude and the writing skill.

Regarding the effect of ethnicity on language learning and language achievement, Ru (2004) examined the relationship between academically high achieving Korean-American adolescents' ethnic identity and self-esteem. According to the findings of the study, most participants recognized themselves as Koreans and Korean-Americans, not Asian-Americans, and ethnic self-identity played a key role in learners' ethnic involvement and ethnic evaluation. Besides, a positive correlation was found between ethnic evaluation and active involvement. The results also revealed that ethnic evaluation exerted the greatest influence on learners' self-esteem.

In another study, Gatbonton and Trofimovich (2008) examined the effect of factors related to ethnic group membership on the L2 learners' proficiency. They examined the response of 59 French–English bilinguals who read an English text and completed a questionnaire. According to the results of the study, significant, though complex, relationship was found between learners' ethnic group membership and L2 proficiency. The results revealed no relationship between feelings of pride and loyalty towards the ethnic group and L2 proficiency. There was a relationship between strong supports for the group's sociopolitical aspirations and low L2 proficiency, while, there was a relationship between strong ethnic group identification and positive orientation towards the L2 group with high L2 proficiency.

Also, Yu (2015) carried out a study on the interplay among heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem on Chinese children who were born in America. The results of the quantitative survey revealed a positive relationship between Chinese heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity, language proficiency and self-esteem, and ethnic identity and self-esteem.

In the Iranian EFL context, the relationship between ethnicity and language proficiency was explored by Mehrpour and Hosseini (2015). They studied the interplay between Baluch ethnicity and motivation and learners language proficiency. The study revealed that ethnic identity and motivation did not significantly influence the learners' language proficiency. Moreover, the correlation between ethnic identity and motivation was not significant.

3. Purpose of the study

Considering the significance and definitions put forward so far, the relationship between L2 learners' ethnic identity, social attitude and outcomes of L2 learning is still relatively unclear. Most of the studies approached these concepts separately. However, the study of these concepts together would provide the students and teachers with valuable insights. In line with this idea, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Is there any relationship between Gilak ethnic identity and social attitude towards L2 learning?
2. Do Gilak ethnic identity and social attitude towards L2 learning have effect on learners' language proficiency?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

For the purpose of the present study, 109 BA students (both male and female) majoring in the fields of English literature and Translation were selected from two branches of Islamic Azad University in Gilan province, Iran. The selection of the participants was based on purposive sampling since Gilak students had to be selected for the purpose of the study. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 24.

4.2. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were: 1) TOEFL Test, 2) General Ethnicity Questionnaire (Tsai et al., 2000), and 3) Attitudes towards Foreign Language Learning (A-FLL) Scale (Vandewaetere & Desmet, 2009).

In order to measure the proficiency level of the participants, a paper-based TOEFL test was employed. The test included 50 items focusing on three sections of English grammar and written expressions, vocabulary, and a reading comprehension.

The abridged version of General Ethnicity Questionnaire developed by Tsai et al., (2000) was used to collect the data regarding the participants' viewpoints. The abridged version of the questionnaire was developed to fit in Chinese context. For the purpose of the present study, the term Gilak was substituted for Chinese ethnicity. Therefore, the 38 items of this likert-type questionnaire would elicit the respondents' idea regarding the Gilak ethnicity. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated and found to be 0.87.

Participants' social attitude toward foreign language learning was elicited using the A-FLL scale developed by Vandewaetere and Desmet (2009). This 7-point likert scale

(ranging from 1.totally disagree to 7.totally agree) includes 31 items focusing on three components (including cognitive component, affective/evaluative and behavioral/personality component) with four subscales (exhibition, inhibition, tolerance of ambiguity, and learning effort). The reliability of the scale was 0.84.

4.3. Procedure

In order to collect the data, the participants took the TOEFL test first. The students were asked to respond to the items of the test in 60 minutes. Then, the General Ethnicity Questionnaire was distributed among the participants and 20 minutes were allotted for completion of the questionnaire. After that, the participants filled out the A-FLL scale in 25 minutes. Each individual participant was assigned a number to write on the three data collection instruments in order to know which instrument belongs to whom. The necessary information was also given to the participants to avoid any misunderstandings. In order to analyze the data, they were fed into SPSS 21.

5. Data Analysis and Results

Before providing the results for the research questions of the study, the descriptive statistics regarding participants' performance on TOEFL test is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for participants' scores on TOEFL test

N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
109	27	48	36.5	4.652

As table 1 indicates the participants' score on TOEFL ranges from 27 to 48. The mean of the scores is 36.5 and the standard deviation is 4.652.

In order to answer the first research question of the study which was "Is there any relationship between Gilak ethnic identity and students' social attitudes toward foreign language?" Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was carried out. Table 2 indicates the results of the analysis.

Table 2. Correlation between learners' social attitude and ethnicity identity

		Gilak Ethnic Identity
Attitude Towards	Pearson Correlation	.018
Foreign Language	Sig. (2-tailed)	.680
	N	109

As table 2 shows, the relationship between learners' attitudes towards L2 and their ethnic identity is not significant ($r = .018$, $n=109$, $p<.05$).

The second research question sought to investigate the effects of learners' social attitudes towards foreign language and their ethnic identity in predicting their language proficiency. Therefore, multiple regression analysis was run and table 3 and 4 presents the results of the analysis.

Table 3. Analysis of variance

Sources	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	F	R ²	Adjusted R ²	P
Model	3542.262	2	1771.131	11.151	0.243	.214	0.000
Error	18975.453	106	179.014				
Total	22517.715	108					

As table 3 indicates, 21 % of the variance in learners proficiency is explained by attitude towards L2 and ethnic identity ($F(2,106)=11.151$, $p < 0.05$).

4. The results of multiple regressions on learners' proficiency

Variables	B	sig.
Learners' attitude	.498	0.004
Ethnic identity	.057	.352

As the results of multiple regressions in table 4 shows, learners' social attitude toward L2 affected learners proficiency at the 0.05 level of significance ($B= .498$, $p<.05$). On the other hand, learners' ethnic identity did not have a significant effect on learners' proficiency ($B= .057$, $p>.05$).

6. Discussions and Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the interplay between ethnic identity, social attitude toward foreign language learning and language proficiency of young Gilak EFL learners. The result of the study regarding the correlation between learners' ethnic identity and their social attitude towards L2 learning indicated no significant correlation. As mentioned in the literature review, Mehrpour and Hosseini (2015) also found no significant correlation between motivation and social attitude of L2 learners with their ethnic identity.

Moreover, the results of the study show that learners' social attitude toward L2 affect their proficiency. In line with the findings of the present study, Mustafa et al., (2015), Yu (2015), Soleimani and Hanafi (2013), Ushida (2005), and Titone (1990) found that attitudinal factors have impact on learners' proficiency. They mentioned

that the language learning results, to a certain degree, are influenced by learners' attitude toward that language. The results further support the idea proposed by Visser (2008) who pointed out that language performance is influenced by intellectual as well as attitudinal factors. As Visser (2008) mentioned, attitude is a key factor that improves the process of language learning and affects the nature of learners' behaviors towards the target language. The results corroborate the idea of Gardner (1985), who suggested that attitude is bridge that connect individuals' values and beliefs and encourage or discourage the learning. However, the results are contrary to that of Mehrpour and Hosseini (2015) who found no relationship between motivation and attitude and language proficiency. The result of the present study is also in line with the study conducted by Gatbonton and Trofimovich (2008) which revealed no relationship between ethnicity and L2 proficiency. In contrast with the finding of the present study, Yu (2015) found a positive relationship between language proficiency and ethnic identity.

Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of developing and exploiting strategies to enhance students' attitude towards L2 learning. Attitude is not a characteristic that an individual is born with; rather it is developed throughout his lifetime. As it was mentioned in the literature, positive attitude plays a key role in learners' level of achievement. With positive attitude comes positive achievements and vice versa. Accordingly, the learning situation which promote positive attitude is more preferable. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers' provide situations that increase learners' awareness of L2 and consequently enhance their positive attitude towards L2.

The generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. For example, the small sample size would affect the results of the study. More specifically, since the ethnicity in question was a minority group ethnic identity, the result could not be generalized to other ethnic identities. Another limitation of this study is that only questionnaires were used as the instrument of data collection. Other instruments, along with questionnaire, would provide more robust data about the variables in question.

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