

The Relationship between Students' Attitude towards Learning English, their Age and their English Proficiency: The Case of First Year Undergraduate Students of Ambo University

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between first year undergraduate students' attitude towards English language learning, their age and their English language proficiency. It employed descriptive research design and guided by two specific objectives. First, it investigated the relationship between students' attitude towards English and their English language proficiency. Second, it assessed the relationship between students' age and their English proficiency. To do so, a questionnaire of attitude and test of proficiency were used to collect pertinent data. First, the test of proficiency was administered to a randomly selected 172 first year students. Next, the participants completed a questionnaire of attitude towards learning English. The data collected were analyzed by using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The Spearman Rank-Order Correlation was run to determine the relationship between students' attitudes towards English language learning and their English proficiency. The findings disclosed that there was a low positive correlation ($r= 0.097$), and no significant relationship between students' attitudes towards English language learning and their English language proficiency ($p= 0.206 > 0.05$). On the other hand, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to determine how age correlate with language proficiency. To this end, it was found that there is a positive correlation between age and English language proficiency ($r= 0.05$) although there was no significant relationship between the two variables ($p=0.514 > 0.05$). Since learners' language proficiency can be influenced by the belief they hold about the language, English experts and instructors should devise a strategy of shaping learners' beliefs about the role of a language. Similarly, they should consider students' ages while planning lessons, delivering and evaluating their progress.

Keywords: Age, Attitude, English language proficiency, undergraduate students

Introduction

English is considered as an important language in the academic world, and it is a required course in Ethiopia like many other countries. In Ethiopia, recognizing learners' needs and finding the best strategies to develop positive attitudes towards language learning is not taken into consideration too much. Nunan (2000) claims that attitudes, skills, and strategies influence learners' underachievement or achievement. As University students' English

language proficiency is a significant standard in their academic achievements and employment; English language learning deserves special attention by language instructors as well as learners.

There might be some learner variables that influence language learning and language proficiency. Among these variables, learners' attitude towards learning second language is of

particular importance which motivates the learners to learn second language. According to Baker (1993), students with positive attitudes will try harder to learn the language by using strategies like questioning, volunteering information and answering questions. Hence, attitude influences the rate of development and the final proficiency achieved in the target language. Fortunately, attitudes are not static. They can be changed through the learning process such as by using appropriate teaching materials, teaching techniques and strategies. Attitude also improves due to language learning as students who learn well will acquire positive attitudes.

This study was mainly necessitated for two reasons. First, English as a foreign or second language is one of the ways of improving the knowledge of University undergraduate students. University undergraduate students have to learn English and improve their level of proficiency which is necessary to meet their goals. Although the students expose to English, its daily use is limited and the students' proficiency does not meet the teachers' expectations. Bachman (1990) describes the language proficiency as the ability of language use, and Oller (1983, as cited in David, 2014) asserts that language proficiency is not a single unitary ability that comprises several distinct but related constructs in addition to a general construct of language proficiency. Second, the language acquisition can happen if the students have favorable attitudes towards the English language. Baker (1992) conceived attitude as some abstract embrace both positive and negative beliefs such as beliefs towards a language situation. Students with more favorable attitudes towards English language and English speakers probably perform better in the language learning than otherwise.

Some international studies were conducted on students' attitude towards English and English proficiency. For instance, Begheri (2015) found that there was a low positive correlation between medical students' attitude towards English language learning and English language achievement. In addition, Ubonrat (2005) found that there exists relationship

between students' attitude toward a study of English and their English proficiency.

Moreover, Shams (2008) carried out a study on learners' attitudes towards English language learning and found that most language learners had positive attitudes towards English language learning. According to Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009), it is also conceived that students' motivation in language learning is influenced by their language learning attitudes. Chalak and Kassaian (2010) found that EFL learners' attitude and motivation towards English language learning and the target language community were explored. The research gave more emphasis on the motivation orientations of the students and their attitudes towards the target language and its community. The results indicated that non-native speakers of English learned the language for both instrumental and integrative reasons and their attitudes towards the target language community and its members were generally found to be highly positive. Latif *et al.* (2011) found the relationships between attitudes, motivation, anxiety and instrumental orientation and English language learning demonstrated that all these variables were correlative with learners' performance, with attitude having a positive effect. Also Dehbozorgi (2012) studied the effects of attitude towards language learning on Iranian EFL students' proficiency. To this end, correlation results were not substantial between attitude towards English language learning and proficiency.

Among the few local studies include studies conducted by Jibril (2021) and Dagnaw (2017) on the relationship between the attitude of students towards learning English language, and the relationship between students' attitudes towards school, values of education, achievement motivation and academic achievement respectively. Both studies focus on secondary schools. On the contrary, the present study emphasized on studying the relationship between student related variables such as attitude and age, and language proficiency at higher learning institutions. Form the researcher's observation as English language teacher in higher learning institutions so far, many students demonstrate less than

average level of language proficiency. Students' competency in almost all language skills is not satisfactory, and they did not have a strong desire to learn and improve their present status. It seems that they accepted their gaps and fail to put as much effort as possible to enhance their language competence. In addition, it is uncommon to see most students make communications in English in their everyday activities both inside and outside the classroom. Ironically, there are still very limited numbers of students who are able to communicate simple in English although they have better mastery of the grammar aspect. According to Shams (2008), in foreign language learning context, there are various factors that influence the English language proficiency which include motivation, attitude, anxiety, learning achievements, aptitude, intelligence, age, personalities, etc. Attitude is one of the most significant factors that impacts on English proficiency. Dehbozorgi (2012) states that attitude is directly unobserved hypothetical construct and must be inferred from measureable responses which reflect and evaluate positive or negative attitudes.

The students' attitudes have to influence all of the students' responses to the target language, especially the students' attitude towards English. Oller (1979) claims that attitude is merely one of the types of factors that give rise to motivation which eventually results in the attainment of proficiency in second language. According to Gowhary (2015), attitude is crucial in language growth or decay, restoration or destruction. It is internal states that influence what the learners are likely to do. The internal state is some degree of positive/negative/unfavorable reaction towards an object.

Likewise, undergraduate students are supposed to have good mastery of English as it is a medium of instruction for their courses and thesis works. Besides, most undergraduate courses involve essay tasks such as seminar, proposal and thesis writing. It also involves advanced reading ability such as reviewing literature when taking notes and making summary. Moreover, undergraduate students' writing tasks should be to the standard in terms

of grammatical structure. Grammatically incorrect structures affect the overall message of the essay. Obviously, these writing tasks should be presented where English speaking skill plays significant role. From experience, some students submit a well-organized piece of essay, but are not expressive enough due to limitations in speaking using English. The other most indispensable skill is the use of appropriate vocabulary in composing essay. Limitation in the use of relevant vocabularies leads to inability to meet the purpose of a given essay. It is also uncommon to see undergraduate students properly read in English. They mispronounce words when reading out for the class during presentations. In this case, attitude towards the language itself plays a significant role since someone who holds a positive attitude has a greater tendency to put much effort to improve one's language proficiency than someone who ignores its role as a tool for studying second degree. According to Dalvit and Klerk (2004), if someone has positive attitude to a language, he or she is more likely to learn it well. For Montano and Kasprzyk (2008), attitude is influenced by someone's beliefs about results or attributes of performing the behavior (behavioral beliefs), gained importance by evaluations of those results or attributes. Hence, a person who has strong beliefs that positively evaluated results will result from performing the behavior will have a positive attitude towards the behavior. On the contrary, a person who has strong beliefs that negatively evaluated results will result from the behavior will have a negative attitude. Chapman and McKnight (2002) state that attitude is your general tendency or your mental starting point for seeing life and the people and events in it.

Gardner (1985, as cited in Soleimani & Hanafi, 2013) states that attitude is the amount of a person's instinction and feelings, prejudice, preconceived ideas, fears, threats, and convictions about any intended topic. As to Gardner, attitude is, thus, connected to a learner's values and beliefs and encourages or discourages the choices made in all areas of activity, whether academic or informal. It is a part of motivation in language learning. He asserts motivation is the combination of effort

and desire to accomplish the goal of learning the language and favorable attitudes towards learning the language.

In Ethiopia, English as a second or foreign language is taught starting from primary school through tertiary education levels. Although the students are exposed to English, its daily use is limited and the students' proficiency does not meet the teachers' expectations. Regardless of its necessity for advanced education, most students speak English with poor fluency. English language proficiency is applied in different contexts. However, English language learning is comprehended to be a hard process. Stern (1983) defines proficiency as the actual performance of a learner in a given language, and it includes the mastery of (a) the forms, (b) the linguistic, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural meanings of those forms, (c) the capacity to use the language with focus chiefly on communication and minimum attention to form, and (d) the creativity in language.

Bachman (1990) describes language proficiency as the language ability or ability in language use, and Oller (1983, as cited in David, 2014) asserts that language proficiency is not a single unitary ability, but it comprises several distinct, related constructs in addition to a general construct of language proficiency. Bachman and Palmer (1996, as cited in Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014) believe that learner's language proficiency level is defined as his or her knowledge of L2 grammar and vocabulary, which is a subcomponent of general language ability. According to Cloud *et al.* (2000), language proficiency is defined as the ability to use a language accurately and appropriately in its oral and written forms in a variety of situations. This definition comprises four aspects of language namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The first two aspects represent oral proficiency which in most cases is developed outside the University environment without any exposure to written language.

On the other hand, age is one of the most determining variables in foreign or second language learning. There is no doubt that the learners can acquire the language effectively in

the critical period. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis by Penfield and Roberts (1959), there is a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning (Lightbown and Spada, 2001). The development of acquiring the language is very fast at the age from 0-12 years old. It is the time when the human brain affects the success in language learning. According to Singleton and Ryan (2004), people who begin learning a second language in childhood in the long run may generally achieve a higher level of proficiency than those who begin later. Obviously, this statement contributes to the hypothesis for starting foreign language instruction earlier. It seems as a good start for young learners holding the chances to acquire foreign language with early immersion to the foreign language instruction.

As Pinker (1994), brain research shows that children are at a suitable age for language learning. Although language study is advantageous and effective at any nearly age, some researchers suggest that human brain is more open to language learning from birth to pre-adolescence. During this critical period, or put in another term, window of readiness, there seem to be greater synapses and plasticity that is highest before the age of six, and then step by step declines.

Hu (2016) found that when young learners are exposed to foreign or second language earlier, they will achieve better performance and proficiency in the target language acquisition. This again correlates with the assumption held by Critical Period Hypotheses which assumes that early acquisition of foreign language will facilitate their learning later in the life. They will learn second language better and win the ultimate achievement in the long run. Childhood is considered to be the golden age for second language learning. Therefore, it is good idea to conduct the foreign language instruction at an early age to improve children's learning and enhance language proficiency as there is a logical association between the two variables.

Thus, both age and attitude are among the key variables influencing foreign or second

language learning. In short, success in a target language is based not only on intellectual capacity, but also the students' related variables such as attitude and age which may affect in learning English to enhance language performance. With this in mind, the researcher intended to study the interface between undergraduate students' attitude towards English language learning, their age and their proficiency in English language, particularly at Ambo University.

More specifically, the study aimed to answer the following two basic research questions.

1. What is the relationship between students' attitude towards English language learning and their language proficiency?
2. What is the relationship between students' age and their English language proficiency?

In connection to this, the study attempted to test the following research hypotheses:

Ha1=There is a significant relationship between undergraduate students' attitudes towards English language learning and their English language proficiency.

Materials and methods

Research design

In this study, descriptive study was used. Descriptive research design describes data on variables of interest. It is useful for gathering factual information, data on attitudes and preferences, beliefs and predictions, behavior and experiences both past and present (Weisberg *et al.* 1996, as cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

So, in this design, attempts were made to determine the relationship between variables followed by explanation and interpretation of the results that may appear. Towards answering the basic research questions of this study, pertinent data were collected from undergraduate first year students of Ambo University by using simple random sampling

Ho1= There is no significant relationship between undergraduate students' attitudes towards English language learning and their English language proficiency.

Ha2= There is a significant relationship between the age of undergraduate students and their English language proficiency.

Ho2= There is no significant relationship between the age of undergraduate students and their English language proficiency.

Operational definition of terms

Attitude refers to a predisposition or a tendency to respond positively or negatively towards a certain idea, object, person or situation. So, in this study, it refers to University undergraduate students' predisposition towards learning English. Learner variables refer in this study to student characteristics such as attitude, age and gender their relationship with students' language proficiency.

English Language Proficiency is the ability of students to use English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts at a certain level of study.

techniques. Finally, correlation was used to show the degree of association between two learner variables and their language proficiency.

Study participants, sample and sampling technique

For the purpose of this study, the researcher intended to undertake a study on first year undergraduate students of Ambo University in the academic year 2020/2021. The total population of first year undergraduate social science stream students who were admitted to Ambo University is 1,308. To this end, simple random sampling technique was employed to obtain the sample for the study. From the total

population of 1,308, the researcher took 15% as a representative sample for the study. The sample size of the study was 196, but 24 of them did not return the questionnaire and did not sit for the proficiency test as well. So, complete data was obtained from 172 students.

Data collection tools

Questionnaire

A questionnaire of attitude which is adapted from the attitude questionnaire used in a study by Soleimani and Hanafi (2013) was employed to collect pertinent data for the study. Surveys typically rely on large-scale data, e.g. from questionnaires, test scores, attendance rates, results of public examinations etc., all of which enable comparisons to be made over time or between groups (Cohen, 2007).

Proficiency Test (TOP)

Test of Proficiency (TOP) was used to determine undergraduate students' English language proficiency. The test of proficiency consisted of all the four language skills, vocabulary and grammar. Tests for reading skills, grammar and writing skills were given together at once whereas the remaining two tests (i.e., speaking skills and listening skills) were given separately. For the speaking skills test, a standardized speaking assessment rubric was prepared and administered. In doing so, the examinees were given codes and assessed in a

small group of five to six students. For the listening skills test, the researcher used an audio text in which the examinees listened to twice and answered cloze-type test and comprehension questions. Since the researcher tried to maintain its standardization, the tests were administered to all the sample participants regardless of their educational background and exposure to the target language.

Methods of data analysis

Quantitative data collected from students were analyzed quantitatively. Accordingly, descriptive statistics (such as frequency distribution, percentage, mean, variance and standard deviation) were used to analyze quantitative data which was obtained through questionnaire by the help of SPSS version 20. Similarly, for the quantitative data collected through attitude questionnaire and test, both Pearson and Spearman Rank-Order correlation coefficients were used to show the degree of association between learner variables and their language proficiency. In Kothari (2004), it is stated that Pearson Correlation Coefficient is the best test of correlation when two data sets for two variables are normally distributed (i.e., parametric data). On the other hand, the Spearman Rank Order Correlation is the best test of correlation when two data sets for two variables are not normally distributed non-parametric data).

Results

The main aim of the present study was to assess the relationship between undergraduate students' attitude towards learning English language, their age and their English proficiency. Data was collected from Ambo University first year undergraduate social science stream students through questionnaire and test of proficiency. Questionnaire was used to collect information pertaining to students' attitude towards learning English language. Test of language proficiency was administered to these undergraduate students to determine

their level of proficiency to enable the researcher gain an insight about the association between their attitude and their proficiency.

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

This section of the research report presents the demographic information of the study participants, analysis of the questionnaire data and test score to answer the basic research questions posed under the first chapter of this study.

Table 1. Age of the Participants

Age of the respondents	Frequency	Percent
Valid >18	172	100.0

Table 1 depicts the age of participants of the study. Hence, all the 172 (100%) of them were above 18 years old

The relationship between students' attitude towards English and their English language proficiency

The first basic question was whether there is association between students' attitude towards

English and language proficiency. So, in order to answer this question, it is important to see the descriptive statistics as in table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Attitude	172	1.87	4.11	3.0499	0.42019	0.177
Proficiency test	172	12.00	83.00	47.5087	15.02994	225.899
Valid N(listwise)	172					

Table 3. Test of Normality for the Proficiency Test of Participants and their Attitude.

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Attitude	0.159	172	0.000	0.912	172	0.000
Proficiency test	0.057	172	0.200*	0.992	172	0.449

*.This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As it can be seen in table 3, the significance value of the Shapiro-Wilk Test is higher than 0.05 (p=0.200) for the proficiency test score, but lower than 0.05 (p=0.000) for the attitude

score. This indicates that since one of the two sets of scores is not normally distributed, the best test of correlation for relationship would be the Spearman Rank-Order Correlation.

Table 4. Result of Spearman Rank-Order Correlation

		Proficiency	Attitude
Proficiency test	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.097
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.206
	N	172	172
Attitude	Correlation Coefficient	0.097	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.206	.
	N	172	172

The Spearman Rank-Order Correlation was run to determine the relationship between undergraduate students' attitudes towards English language learning and their English language proficiency. There was a low positive correlation between their attitudes towards English language learning and their English language proficiency, which was statistically described as ($r = 0.097$, $p = 0.206 > 0.05$). Thus,

it could be concluded that the null-hypothesis “there is no significant relationship between undergraduate students' attitudes towards English language learning and their English language proficiency” was accepted, meaning that there is no significant relationship between Ambo University first year undergraduate students' attitudes towards English language learning and their English language proficiency.

The relationship between students' age and their English language proficiency

Table 5. Tests of Normality

	Age	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Proficiency	23.00	0.307	3	.	0.903	3	0.394
	24.00	0.270	6	.194	0.828	6	0.103
	25.00	0.326	10	0.003	0.761	10	0.005
	26.00	0.107	24	0.200*	0.984	24	0.959
	27.00	0.121	13	0.200*	0.951	13	0.621
	28.00	0.147	14	0.200*	0.965	14	0.797
	29.00	0.109	36	0.200*	0.983	36	0.838
	30.00	0.128	19	0.200*	0.977	19	0.897
	31.00	0.115	26	0.200*	0.917	26	0.039
	32.00	0.205	8	0.200*	0.898	8	0.278
	33.00	0.300	5	0.162	0.771	5	0.046
	34.00	0.260	2	.			
	35.00	0.260	2	.			
	36.00	0.260	2	.			
	38.00	0.260	2	.			

* This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As can be seen in 5, the p value of the Shapiro-Wilk test is higher than 0.05 for age and test of proficiency, the two sets of scores are normally

distributed. Therefore, the best test for relationship would be the Pearson Correlation Coefficient

.Table 6. The Correlation Between Age of Participants and their English Proficiency Test

		Age of the respondents	Proficiency
Age	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	0.05 0.514
Proficiency test	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.05 0.514	1

In 6, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was run to determine the relationship between students' age and their English language proficiency. The result indicated that there is a moderate positive correlation between age and English language proficiency, which was statistically described as ($r = 0.05$, $p=0.514 > 0.05$). So, it could be

concluded that the null-hypothesis "there is no significant relationship between the age of undergraduate students and their English language proficiency" was accepted; meaning that there is no significant relationship between age of the participants and their English proficiency.

Conclusion and recommendation

This experiment has clearly demonstrated that nitrogen had significant effects on seed yield, oil content and fatty acid composition of linseed varieties. The optimum oil yield and percent of fatty acid compositions were obtained in response to application of 46 kg ha⁻¹ nitrogen in the study area. The maximum seed (1508 kg ha⁻¹) and oil (604.4 Lt ha⁻¹) yields were recorded from 46 kg N ha⁻¹ with Jeldu variety. The fatty acid composition of linseed oil had high level of unsaturated fatty acid such as linolenic (56.24%), oleic (19.43%) and linoleic (14.37%) fatty acids from 46 kg N ha⁻¹, while the saturated fatty acids like palmitic (5.82 %) and stearic (4.89%) were also to the optimal range. Therefore, based on this study Jeldu variety with 46 kg N ha⁻¹ gave high seed and oil yields, and oil quality, thus it can be recommended to the study area and other similar agro-ecology.

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