

The relationship between attitude and English speaking skills of Chinese college students

Su Dongying^{1,*}

¹*School of Foreign Languages, Yinchuan University of Energy, Yinchuan, China*

*Corresponding author: sudongying@graduate.utm.my

Abstract: Among various factors influencing English learning, affective variables such as attitudes, motivation, and anxiety are highly significant. Among these factors, learners' attitude towards learning English is considered a key element in inspiring learners to acquire proficiency in the language. This study investigates the correlation between attitude and speaking proficiency in the Chinese context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The study sample comprises 90 sophomore students majoring in non-English disciplines from Yinchuan Energy College in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region of China. Data were collected using Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery questionnaire and a speaking proficiency test to assess the level of English speaking proficiency. Mean values, standard deviations, percentages, Pearson product-moment correlations, and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test were employed to analyze the data. The results indicate that Chinese college students exhibit a highly positive attitude towards learning English, and there is a positive correlation between students' attitudes and their English speaking proficiency. The paper also discusses some insights derived from the study.

Keywords: Attitude; Chinese college students; English speaking skills

1. Introduction

Attitudes are crucial in language growth or decay, restoration or destruction. Attitudes are internal states that influence what the learners likely to do. The internal state is some degree of positive/negative or favorable/unfavourable reaction towards an object. Research on attitudes towards foreign language learning began in 1950. Researchers became interested in attitudes towards English learning, leading to relevant studies [1]. Tang pointed out: "Students' attitudes towards foreign language learning consist of three parts, namely, cognition (beliefs held by learners in foreign language learning), emotion (learners' preferences and aversions towards the target language), and intention (how learners approach foreign language learning and how they learn the language under the drive of the first two)." [2] In other words, learning attitudes consist of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral intention components. Generally, learning attitudes refer to students' psychological tendencies in learning. In relatively stable learning situations, attitudes are typically judged and explained based on students' attention, emotional state, and volitional state.

The topic of attitudes towards foreign languages has been a focal point for sociologists. The earliest studies date back to the 1950s; however, the most influential research began in the 1960s when Gardner and Lambert investigated attitudes towards French and English among individuals living in Montreal, Canada [3]. Edwards examined language attitudes in different countries and regions, such as the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and the Middle East, considering various social classes and ethnicities [4]. In the following years, many studies focused on examining the impact of language attitudes in conjunction with other factors on second language acquisition. For example, Ahmad Riza conducted research aims at investigating Indonesian EFL students' attitudes toward oral presentations in the local context. The design of the study was qualitative descriptive research [5]. The findings revealed that the EFL students' view toward oral presentations were twofold, on one side they found it challenging, however, on the other side, they also found it useful to develop their English speaking skills.

In Chinese research, Pan based on the theory of General Linguistics, investigated the attitude differences among college English learners towards language variation and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) consciousness using different methods [6]. The research reveals that learners, at an implicit level, are beginning to develop awareness of English language variations and a lingua franca consciousness, with language attitudes being influenced by the rules of the socio-cultural environment. Zhao conducted

an empirical study on the English language learning attitudes of 2,450 students in teacher training colleges in Yunnan Province, using a quantitative questionnaire survey method [7]. The results indicated a significant positive correlation between English learning attitudes and English proficiency. The participants' English learning performance was strongly and positively associated with the factors of English learning attitudes, highlighting that attitudes towards English learning are crucial factors influencing English proficiency.

Attitude is one of the factors influencing foreign language learning because the level of effort students put into learning English is, to some extent, dependent on their attitude [8]. It can be inferred that learners with a positive attitude towards English are more likely to engage in spoken English activities and may attempt to employ more strategies to help them navigate challenges during conversations. On the other hand, learners with a negative attitude may be less inclined to participate in spoken English activities. Unfortunately, not only in China but also in other countries, there is a significant lack of research on English oral proficiency. Studies examining the relationship between English oral proficiency and attitudes are no exception.

This study aims to explore the relationship between the attitudes of Chinese college students and their English speaking proficiency. To achieve these objectives, the researcher formulated the following research question:

Is there a significant relationship between the attitudes of Chinese college students and their English speaking proficiency?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Attitude

The attitude of students towards English language learning has been a focal point of research in various cultural and educational contexts [9]. In China, studies have revealed a generally positive attitude towards English among college students, attributed to the language's perceived utility and global significance [10]. This positive attitude is seen as a catalyst for enhancing motivation and interest in learning English [11]. Comparable findings have been observed in other Asian countries, such as Korea and Japan, where English is also viewed as a key skill for academic and professional success [12].

However, the complexity of attitude is evident in its multidimensional nature, encompassing affective, cognitive, and behavioral components [13]. This complexity is reflected in studies across different regions. For example, European students exhibit a more utilitarian perspective towards English, often influenced by their immediate environment and educational policies [14].

2.2 English speaking skills

English, as its name suggests, is a language, and language is a unique characteristic of humans. The presentation of language takes two forms: spoken and written. Written language consists of symbols used to record spoken sounds, and every language initially developed speech before script, with some languages even existing solely in spoken form. When it comes to language acquisition, humans invariably learn to speak before they learn to read and write. The same principle should apply to learning English, starting with spoken language. However, most English educational materials in domestic contexts predominantly focus on written language. It's important to recognize that English speaking differs from written English in its spontaneity, conciseness, and flexibility, and is frequently used in daily life for direct communication.

English speaking skills refer to the ability to effectively communicate in English through oral expression. This encompasses a range of competencies including accurate pronunciation, appropriate use of grammar, a wide-ranging vocabulary, and the ability to construct coherent, fluent sentences. Beyond these linguistic aspects, effective English speaking skills also involve understanding and employing various social and cultural nuances, such as appropriate register and tone, understanding idiomatic expressions, and the ability to engage in conversational turn-taking. These skills are essential not only for casual day-to-day communication but also in academic, professional, and cross-cultural contexts where English serves as a medium of interaction. Mastery of English speaking skills enables individuals to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings clearly and confidently in various situations, making it a critical component of overall language proficiency.

The proficiency of English speaking skills among Chinese college students has been widely studied, often highlighting challenges such as limited opportunities for practice and linguistic interference from their native language^[15]. Despite the high emphasis on English in the Chinese education system, practical speaking skills lag due to the traditional focus on reading and writing^[16].

Comparatively, in countries where English is spoken as a second language, such as India, students often exhibit higher proficiency in speaking due to greater exposure and the use of English in everyday communication^[17]. The integration of English into daily life and education systems plays a crucial role in developing speaking skills^[18].

In conclusion, while there is a positive attitude towards English language learning among Chinese college students, this does not always translate into high proficiency in speaking skills. This discrepancy can be attributed to various factors, including educational approaches and environmental influences, highlighting the need for more communicative and interactive teaching methods to bridge the gap between attitude and actual speaking proficiency.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The subjects of this study are Chinese sophomore students majoring in non-English disciplines. The study sample includes 90 university students from Yinchuan Energy College in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region of China. Within this sample, there are 45 female learners and 45 male learners.

3.2 Instruments

The data collection tool used in this study is an adapted version of Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB)^[8]. The Attitude/Motivation Test (AMTB) (2004) consists of a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (see Appendix A). The survey questionnaire comprises 48 questions. The questionnaire demonstrates good reliability and validity. It should be noted that in this study, the researcher made some appropriate modifications to the questionnaire to make it more understandable for Chinese college students.

Additionally, the English speaking proficiency level of the participating Chinese college students was assessed using a speaking test. To ensure the credibility of the speaking test questions, this study uniformly used real questions from the Chinese College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) as the test material. After the test, the responses were rigorously scored according to the standardized grading criteria.

3.3 Procedures for Data collection and Analyses

Before distributing the questionnaires, the researchers provided detailed explanations to the participants about the purpose of this study. Students were asked to complete the survey questionnaire in the classroom. The participants' teachers generously allocated 20 minutes of their class time to the researchers. After the researchers completed and collected the questionnaires, the learners were informed about the oral proficiency test, and the entire process was explained to them.

Participants were instructed to strictly adhere to the requirements of the Chinese College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) speaking exam, which lasted for three minutes. Subsequently, based on the assessment criteria, the students' performance in the speaking test was scored on a scale of 0 to 20.

Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted on students' responses to the survey questionnaire. In order to address the research questions, inferential statistics were computed using SPSS 26.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Subsequently, a correlation analysis was performed between the questionnaire data and the students' English oral proficiency to gain a deeper understanding of whether a relationship exists between the attitudes of Chinese university students and their speaking abilities.

4. Results

The data in Table 1 indicates that among all participants, 24.23% completely agree that the attitudes of Chinese college students are positive.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of attitude questions

	Completely agree		agree		Neither agree nor disagree		disagree		Completely disagree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Q1	21	23.3	19	21.1	18	20	20	22.2	12	13.3
Q2	17	18.9	10	11.1	25	27.8	29	32.2	9	10
Q3	24	26.7	17	18.9	15	16.7	21	23.3	13	14.4
Q4	20	22.2	20	22.2	14	15.6	25	27.8	11	12.2
Q5	20	22.2	18	20.0	15	16.7	25	27.8	12	13.3
Q6	22	24.4	15	16.7	15	16.7	28	31.1	10	11.1
Q7	18	20.0	22	24.4	14	15.6	26	28.9	10	11.1
Q8	22	24.4	20	22.2	23	25.6	16	17.8	9	10
Q9	23	25.6	19	21.1	15	16.7	22	24.4	11	12.2
Q10	20	22.2	21	23.3	18	20.0	19	21.1	12	13.3
Q11	20	22.2	20	22.2	15	16.7	25	27.8	10	11.1
Q12	23	25.6	16	17.8	18	20.0	22	24.4	11	12.2
Q13	18	20.0	28	31.1	15	16.7	17	18.9	12	13.3
Q14	22	24.4	22	24.4	15	16.7	19	21.1	12	13.3
Q15	19	21.1	22	24.4	15	16.7	24	26.7	10	11.1
Q16	22	24.4	22	24.4	18	20.0	16	17.8	12	13.3
Q17	24	26.7	20	22.2	13	14.4	21	23.3	12	13.3
Q18	27	30.0	21	23.3	8	8.9	24	26.7	10	11.1
Q19	27	30.0	19	21.1	13	14.4	20	22.2	11	12.2
Q20	24	26.7	21	23.3	16	17.8	20	22.2	9	10.0
Q21	22	24.4	22	24.4	13	14.4	22	24.4	11	12.2
Q22	22	24.4	20	22.2	14	15.6	24	26.7	10	11.1
Q23	19	21.1	18	20.0	14	15.6	24	26.7	15	16.7
Q24	20	22.2	16	17.8	16	17.8	25	27.8	13	14.4
Q25	18	20.0	22	24.4	14	15.6	22	24.4	14	15.6
Q26	20	22.2	17	18.9	17	18.9	23	25.6	13	14.4
Q27	18	20.0	21	23.3	15	16.7	24	26.7	12	13.3
Q28	22	24.4	14	15.6	16	17.8	26	28.9	12	13.3
Q29	23	25.6	18	20.0	13	14.4	21	23.3	15	16.7
Q30	21	23.3	18	20.0	16	17.8	22	24.4	13	14.4
Q31	23	25.6	18	20.0	17	18.9	19	21.1	13	14.4
Q32	27	30.0	14	15.6	19	21.1	17	18.9	13	14.4
Q33	23	25.6	17	18.9	14	15.6	22	24.4	14	15.6
Q34	21	23.3	21	23.3	11	12.2	25	27.8	12	13.3
Q35	26	28.9	16	17.8	14	15.6	21	23.3	13	14.4
Q36	18	20.0	23	25.6	19	21.1	18	20.0	12	13.3
Q37	26	28.9	19	21.1	13	14.4	20	22.2	12	13.3
Q38	29	32.2	18	20.0	11	12.2	21	23.3	11	12.2
Q39	25	27.8	18	20.0	16	17.8	20	22.2	11	12.2
Q40	22	24.4	23	25.6	12	13.3	19	21.1	14	15.6
Q41	23	25.6	21	23.3	17	18.9	20	22.2	9	10.0
Q42	25	27.8	17	18.9	16	17.8	20	22.2	12	13.3
Q43	22	24.4	17	18.9	16	17.8	22	24.4	13	14.4
Q44	21	23.3	18	20.0	19	21.1	19	21.1	13	14.4
Q45	25	27.8	17	18.9	16	17.8	21	23.3	11	12.2
Q46	16	17.8	16	17.8	25	27.8	21	23.3	12	13.3
Q47	19	21.1	19	21.1	19	21.1	22	24.4	11	12.2
Q48	18	20.0	21	23.3	23	25.6	18	20.0	10	11.1
Total	-	24.23	-	21.08	-	17.68	-	24	-	12.99

As can be seen from the above table, Besides 24.23% of Chinese university students strongly agreeing, 21.08% of Chinese university students agree, from which it can be seen that most students still maintain a positive attitude.

To investigate the normality distribution of variables the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was utilized. If the obtained significance level is more than 0.05, distribution of variables is normality. According to Table 2, mean, standard deviation, and significance level of each variable were computed.

As can be seen from table 2, the N of attitude and achievement is 90, where the mean of attitude is 2.8 and the mean of achievement is 12.22, According to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the value of Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) for attitude is 0.06, and the value of Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) for achievement is

0.06, all greater than 0.05. Therefore, the data conform to the normal distribution rule.

Table 2: The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		Attitude	Speaking Proficiency
N		90	90
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	2.80	12.22
	Std. Deviation	1.11	5.32
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	0.09	0.09
	Positive	0.08	0.07
	Negative	-0.09	-0.09
Test Statistic		0.09	0.09
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		0.06	0.06

The result of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test indicated normality distribution of variables, so to investigate this question Pearson correlation test was employed.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Test to investigate relationship between attitude and English speaking proficiency

	Attitude		N
	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Speaking Proficiency	-0.440**	0	90
Attitude	1		90

According to the Table of 3 the obtained level of significance is lower than value $p < 0.05$, so there is statistically significant relationship between attitude and English speaking skills of Chinese college students.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between the attitudes towards English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English speaking skills among non-English major sophomore students at a general university in Northwestern China. It was found that students from Yinchuan Energy College in Yinchuan City, China, hold a positive attitude towards learning English, and there is a significant relationship between this attitude and their English speaking skills.

Over recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to examining human personality in order to find solutions to language learning challenges. Consequently, many studies have focused on the significant role that affective variables can play in the process of learning a second language. Among these variables, attitude is often considered a potential influential factor in successful second language acquisition, especially in contexts or countries where learners have little or no opportunity to interact with native speakers of the target language. Hence, an ensuing question is the extent to which attitude plays a role in such specific contexts in fostering learners' English speaking skills.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of attitude factors; however, so far, there has not been a comprehensive study on the relationship between attitudes of non-English major Chinese students and their English speaking skills. Confirming the obtained results, the data presented in the descriptive statistics section indicated that the 'completely agree' option had the highest percentage among the choices selected by participants. These data suggest that the attitude of Chinese university students is positive.

To determine the relationship between attitude and speaking proficiency, students' grades in speaking tests and their responses to attitude questionnaire items were analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation. A significant positive correlation was found between attitude and speaking proficiency as the obtained level of significance was lower than the p-value of 0.05, indicating a statistically significant relationship between attitude and the English speaking skills of Chinese university students.

This result aligns with previous studies investigating the relationship between attitude and English speaking, which report that attitude is one of the factors influencing foreign language learning. The effort students put into language learning partly depends on their attitude. Thus, it can be inferred that learners with a positive attitude towards speaking English are more likely to engage actively in speaking activities and may try to utilize more strategies to overcome difficulties in conversation; conversely, learners with

a negative attitude are less inclined to participate in speaking activities^[8]. In another study, Johnson (2012) investigated the attitudes of Japanese non-English major EFL learners^[17]. These engineering students exhibited a range of attitudes towards learning English. Their positive attitudes correlated positively with their proficiency levels, with higher-level students expressing the least dislike for English.

Contrary to the findings of our study, the results of a study by Jahin and Idrees (2012) showed no significant correlation between the attitudes of EFL major students towards English language learning and their overall English language proficiency^[18]. In Iran, Dehbozorgi (2012) investigated the effects of attitudes towards language learning on EFL college students majoring in English translation^[19]. The results indicated that the relationship between language proficiency level and attitude towards language learning was not significant.

6. Implication and Limitations of the study

The findings of this study can serve as a starting point for providing some pedagogical insights for English teaching. Moreover, the results of this paper can assist administrators in English education, curriculum developers, syllabus designers, and decision-makers in developing courses, designing curricula, creating engaging materials and programs, all aimed at encouraging students to engage in oral communication. Utilizing international exchange programs can aid students in interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, understanding and appreciating their lifestyles, and facilitating easier communication with speakers of other languages, particularly English. At the university level, the adoption of new, more communicative methods (as opposed to the Grammar Translation Method, which focuses on vocabulary items, grammatical rules, and translation) can spark students' interest. Teachers can also motivate students to continue learning English and enhance their oral skills.

The findings of this study are limited to participants from the Yinchuan Energy College in Northwestern China. Hence, the applicability of this study to foreign language contexts in different cities or countries may be limited. It is therefore challenging to generalize the findings of this study to all EFL learners. Not all variables influencing foreign language learning were controlled. For example, personality, self-perception, beliefs, intelligence, and classroom climate are also significant variables in acquiring foreign languages. Additionally, the study's limitations include its sample size and scope, which may not adequately represent the diverse range of EFL learning environments, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results.

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