

AN ANALYSIS OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDE IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstract

This study explores the attitudes of junior high school students toward learning English and the factors influencing their engagement and performance in English classrooms. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, the research aims to identify students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dispositions toward English as a foreign language. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews, focusing on the nature of students' attitudes (positive or negative), the underlying factors (such as teacher influence, parental support, peer environment), and the effects of these attitudes on classroom participation. The findings reveal that while many students show interest in learning English, negative perceptions related to difficulty and anxiety persist. Factors such as teaching strategies, classroom climate, and social support significantly shape student attitudes. The study highlights the importance of fostering positive learning environments and tailored instructional approaches to enhance student motivation and academic success in English language education.

Keywords: Attitude, Junior High School, English Learning, Motivation, EFL, Student Perception

INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, students' attitude plays a crucial role in determining the success of language acquisition, especially at the junior high school level where foundational skills are formed. Attitude refers to learners' feelings, beliefs, and predispositions towards learning a language (Gardner, 1985). It significantly influences learners' motivation, engagement, and performance in the language learning process (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

In Indonesia, English is a compulsory subject taught from junior high school onwards. However, despite early exposure to English, many students still struggle with low achievement and lack of interest in the subject (Putri & Herman, 2021). This phenomenon may be closely related to students' attitudes toward learning English, which can be either positive or negative, and may manifest in various aspects such as anxiety,

enjoyment, or indifference. According to Oxford (1990), a positive attitude enhances the willingness to take risks, increases classroom participation, and fosters autonomy in language learning.

Recent studies emphasize that attitude is not merely an affective factor but is interconnected with cognitive and behavioral domains (Ajzen, 2005). For junior high school students, whose cognitive and emotional development is still evolving, a supportive learning environment and positive experiences are essential in shaping constructive attitudes toward English. When students hold a negative perception—viewing English as difficult or irrelevant—it can hinder their motivation and ultimately their achievement (Yashima, 2002; Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009).

Despite its critical role, attitude in EFL classrooms, particularly at the junior high school level in Indonesia, has not been sufficiently explored. Most existing research tends to focus on vocabulary development, speaking ability, or grammar acquisition, while attitudinal aspects are often overlooked (Wahyuni & Fitriani, 2022). Therefore, this study is necessary to examine how students perceive learning English, what factors influence these perceptions, and how they affect students' behavior and performance in the classroom.

The urgency of this research lies in its potential to inform more effective teaching strategies and policy decisions. By understanding students' attitudes, educators and curriculum developers can design interventions that foster a more engaging and supportive English learning environment. Furthermore, identifying attitudinal patterns at an early educational stage can prevent long-term disengagement and resistance to learning English as students' progress in their academic journey.

In conclusion, analyzing students' attitudes toward learning English is essential to improve educational outcomes, enhance learner motivation, and create a more student-centered approach to language instruction. This research is expected to contribute to the development of more responsive and psychologically supportive English teaching practices in Indonesian junior high schools.

Attitude in language learning is broadly defined as a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular language or language learning situation with some degree of favor or disfavor (Gardner, 1985). According to Ajzen (2005), attitude is a multidimensional construct encompassing affective (feelings), cognitive (beliefs), and behavioral (intentions) components. These components work together to shape how a learner responds to the language learning experience.

Attitude to language learning is a term that refers to one's tendencies toward their efforts to learn a language. Attitude can be explained as a person's inclination to respond to something (concept, object, person, situation). Attitudes are feelings about perceptions and feelings. Gardner and Lambert (1972) categorized attitudes in language learning into integrative and instrumental types. Integrative attitude refers

to a learner's desire to integrate into the target language culture, while instrumental attitude is driven by practical goals, such as job opportunities or academic success. A positive attitude in either domain often correlates with higher motivation and better learning outcomes (Dörnyei, 2001).

In general, attitudes are classified as either positive or negative. The tendency in a positive attitude is to approach, like, and tend to certain objects. In terms of negative attitude, it is more prevalent to avoid, hate, and be disloyal to certain objects. Someone with certain characteristics is more likely to respond favorably or negatively to certain objects, depending on whether they are useful or valuable to them. Positive attitudes, according to Gardner and Lysynchuk (1990), help target language learners develop higher proficiency in that language. Khalid (2016) asserts that he has found a connection between learning English and having positive attitudes when it comes to studying English as a second language. Although one study found that positive attitudes led to favourable outcomes, other investigations found that negative attitudes led to poor consequences. Because they found that low student performance was a direct result of unfavourable attitudes in English learning, Tella et al. (2010) noted the detrimental effects of attitudes in English learning.

3. Factors Influencing Attitude

Several factors contribute to the formation of students' attitudes, including parental support, teacher behavior, peer influence, previous learning experiences, and perceptions of the English language and its relevance (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Lamb, 2017). Classroom environment and teaching strategies also play a significant role in shaping students' emotional responses to English learning.

Attitudes towards second or foreign language learning are influenced by factors such as personality, educational experience, social environment, age, and gender. Age and gender influence individuals' comprehension and acquisition of a new language (Wang et al., 2022). Understanding these factors enables the development of learning strategies tailored to enhance individuals' language skills. Contextual factors, including psychological, social, and educational conditions, significantly influence language learning. A positive attitude diminishes affective barriers and enhances student motivation. The teacher's influence on the classroom atmosphere contributes significantly to the establishment of a supportive learning environment. Moreover, students' attitudes, such as motivation and self-confidence, influence their capacity to acquire a new language. An optimistic and driven disposition can enhance student engagement in language acquisition. Self-confidence, self-efficacy, risk-taking, and anxiety are critical factors in language acquisition.

The educational environment, encompassing the learning atmosphere within schools, significantly influences students' attitudes and

motivation towards acquiring the target language. Similarly, educational contexts, encompassing instructional methods and classroom interactions, influence students' attitudes and motivation regarding language acquisition (Khan & Takkac, 2021). The teacher's role in fostering a positive and supportive learning environment significantly influences students' attitudes towards language acquisition. Social contexts, including interactions with family, peers, and the community, significantly impact language learning. The family and home environment of a student significantly affect their speech patterns and language comprehension. Peer interaction is essential in language learning, and the community or native speakers of the target language significantly impact this process. Previous findings indicate that enhancing motivation in English learning is essential. Students should not perceive it merely as a mandatory subject; rather, fostering intrinsic motivation is necessary to achieve optimal learning outcomes. However, in higher-level contexts, such as preservice English, individuals are not motivated to pursue a career. This research aims to identify the factors influencing students' attitudes and motivations towards learning English. Attitude and motivation represent intricate social, cultural, and psychological elements that influence pupil engagement with various life experiences, including the acquisition of a second language. Experienced educators recognize that students with a positive attitude progress more rapidly in second language acquisition.

Studies have consistently shown that students with positive attitudes toward English tend to participate more actively and achieve better academic results (Yashima, 2002). On the other hand, negative attitudes often result in avoidance behaviors, such as silence, lack of preparation, or anxiety in speaking activities (Horwitz, 2001).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the attitudes of junior high school students toward learning English. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the complex and subjective nature of students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the context of language learning. As Creswell (2012) suggests, qualitative research provides a deep understanding of human experiences by investigating phenomena within their natural settings. In this case, students' attitudes, shaped by various internal and external influences, were best examined through rich, descriptive data rather than numerical analysis.

The participants in this study were selected from a junior high school in SMP N 7 Medan using purposive sampling, where students who had received English instruction for at least two academic years were deliberately chosen. To collect the data, the researcher employed two main instruments: a Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed based on Ajzen's (2005) tripartite model of

attitude, which includes affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. This model recognizes that attitude is not merely a feeling but also includes beliefs about the subject and actual behavior toward it. The questionnaire aimed to measure students' enjoyment, confidence, interest, perceptions of difficulty, and participation in English classes.

To complement the questionnaire data and gain a deeper understanding of student perspectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selected group of students. This technique allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions and explore responses in more depth, capturing personal experiences and contextual influences in greater detail.

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and categorize students' attitudes as either positive or negative. Meanwhile, the interview data were processed using thematic analysis, which involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. This approach helped in uncovering common factors that influence attitudes, such as teaching style, peer influence, and home environment.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was applied by comparing the findings from both data sources—questionnaires and interviews. Furthermore, member checking was carried out by returning interview summaries to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), these techniques strengthen the credibility and dependability of qualitative findings.

Through this methodological framework, the research aimed to provide a holistic and nuanced understanding of junior high school students' attitudes toward learning English, while also identifying practical implications for improving English language instruction in Indonesian classrooms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

FINDINGS

This study sought to explore junior high school students' attitudes at SMPN 7 Medan toward learning English, the factors influencing those attitudes, and the impact of their attitudes on classroom participation and academic performance. The findings are presented according to the three core research questions.

1. Students' Attitudes Toward Learning English

The findings indicated that students' attitudes toward English learning varied significantly, falling into two main categories: positive and negative attitudes. A considerable number of students demonstrated positive attitudes. These students expressed enjoyment and interest in learning English, stating that they liked English because

it was fun, useful, and important for their future careers or education. They were motivated to attend English classes and were eager to improve their skills, especially in speaking and listening. These students often described English as "exciting," "challenging but enjoyable," and "an international language that opens opportunities."

However, a substantial portion of the participants exhibited negative attitudes. These students perceived English as a difficult subject, with grammar and vocabulary being particularly challenging. Some reported feeling anxious or nervous during English classes, especially when asked to speak or read aloud. There was also evidence of low self-confidence, especially among students who had previously performed poorly in the subject. Terms like "scary," "boring," or "too hard" frequently emerged in their descriptions. These negative emotions led to reduced interest and avoidance behavior in English-related tasks.

2. Factors Influencing Students' Attitudes

The study identified several internal and external factors that shaped students' attitudes toward English learning.

Internal factors included:

- a. Self-confidence: Students with higher self-esteem were more open to participating in class and were more motivated.
- b. Past learning experiences: Positive past experiences (e.g., praise, good grades) reinforced favorable attitudes, while repeated failures led to negative outlooks.
- c. Language anxiety: Many students reported fear of making mistakes, which contributed to their reluctance to speak or participate.
- d. Interest in global culture: Students who were exposed to English media (e.g., songs, movies, games) often developed greater interest and engagement.

External factors included:

- a. Teacher behavior and teaching strategies: Students who described their teachers as "friendly," "patient," and "encouraging" were more likely to have positive attitudes. In contrast, a strict or overly critical teacher contributed to anxiety and disengagement.
- b. Classroom environment : A safe, interactive, and supportive classroom atmosphere was crucial in shaping a student's willingness to participate.

- c. Parental support: Students who received encouragement or resources from home (e.g., English books, tutoring) were more likely to stay motivated.
- d. Peer influence : Supportive and collaborative classmates helped students build confidence and develop more favorable views of learning English.

3. The Impact of Attitudes on Participation and Performance

The third research question focused on how students' attitudes influenced their behavior and performance in the English learning process. The data showed a clear relationship: students with positive attitudes were generally more engaged and showed higher levels of participation in classroom activities such as answering questions, group work, and English speaking tasks.

These students also tended to complete assignments on time and were more proactive in asking for help or seeking clarification when they did not understand a lesson. As a result, they often achieved better academic outcomes, scoring higher in both written and oral assessments.

On the other hand, students with negative attitudes were more likely to withdraw from class participation. They often remained silent, avoided eye contact, and refrained from volunteering in discussions. Their reluctance was sometimes accompanied by incomplete homework and a lack of preparation for tests. These behaviors had a direct impact on their performance, which tended to be below average or inconsistent.

Additionally, many of these students reported a sense of disconnect or lack of purpose in learning English. Some expressed that English had little relevance to their daily lives, which lowered their intrinsic motivation. This finding supports the notion that attitude not only reflects emotional and cognitive dimensions but also plays a practical role in influencing learning outcomes.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reinforce previous research suggesting that attitude is a vital affective factor influencing language learning (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The presence of both positive and negative attitudes among junior high school students indicates that their emotional and cognitive engagement with English learning is shaped by multiple interrelated variables.

The fact that many students reported fear and anxiety, particularly in speaking, aligns with Horwitz's (2001) concept of language anxiety, which hampers willingness to communicate and can lead to avoidance behavior. This highlights the need for more psychologically supportive

classrooms where students are encouraged to take risks and express themselves freely without fear of judgment.

The impact of external influences, particularly from teachers and family members, is consistent with findings by Csizér and Dörnyei (2005), who emphasized the importance of the learning environment in shaping motivation and attitude. Teachers who apply student-centered methods and provide constructive feedback play a pivotal role in promoting positive attitudes, while punitive or indifferent approaches tend to have the opposite effect.

Moreover, students' behavioral engagement in English classes was closely tied to their attitudinal stance. This supports Ajzen's (2005) theory that attitude influences intention and behavior. When students believe in the relevance and benefits of English, they are more likely to engage actively, resulting in improved language skills and academic performance.

Overall, the findings suggest that to improve students' outcomes in English learning, educators must not only address curriculum and instruction but also focus on fostering a supportive emotional and social climate that nurtures positive student attitudes from an early age.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the attitudes of junior high school students toward learning English are diverse and significantly impact their engagement and performance in the classroom. The findings revealed that while many students hold positive attitudes—characterized by motivation, enjoyment, and a belief in the usefulness of English—others exhibit negative attitudes due to anxiety, low confidence, and perceived difficulty of the subject.

Several internal and external factors were found to influence these attitudes. Internal factors such as self-confidence, motivation, and personal interest, along with external factors like teacher support, classroom environment, parental involvement, and peer relationships, played crucial roles in shaping how students perceive and respond to English learning.

Furthermore, students' attitudes directly influenced their classroom behavior. Those with positive attitudes were more participative and performed better academically, whereas students with negative attitudes tended to withdraw, avoid participation, and showed weaker performance.

In light of these findings, it is essential for educators, curriculum developers, and school stakeholders to recognize the importance of

nurturing positive student attitudes from an early stage. Creating a supportive and engaging learning environment, applying student-centered teaching strategies, and fostering meaningful teacher-student and peer interactions can greatly enhance students' motivation and success in learning English. Ultimately, improving students' attitudes toward English learning is not only beneficial for academic achievement but also for their long-term language development and confidence in using English as a global means of communication.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several suggestions are proposed for different stakeholders involved in the English learning process:

1. English Teachers

Teachers play a central role in shaping students' attitudes toward English. Therefore, they are encouraged to create a supportive, student-centered, and emotionally safe classroom environment. Teachers should use interactive, varied teaching strategies that consider students' interests and needs. Encouraging participation, minimizing students' fear of making mistakes, and using positive reinforcement will help reduce language anxiety and foster more positive attitudes among learners.

2. Students

Students are encouraged to actively engage in the English learning process by building self-confidence and developing a growth mindset. They should make use of English-language media such as movies, music, and games to make learning enjoyable and meaningful. Setting personal goals and celebrating progress, no matter how small, can also increase motivation and improve attitudes toward learning.

3. Parents and Families

Parental support has a significant influence on students' attitudes. Parents are encouraged to show interest in their children's English learning, provide encouragement, and create a positive home environment that supports language practice. Simple actions, such as asking about English homework or watching English content together, can significantly boost a child's motivation.

4. Schools and Curriculum Designers

Schools should facilitate teacher training focused on affective factors in language learning, such as attitude, motivation, and classroom psychology. Curriculum designers should integrate attitudinal and motivational objectives into English learning programs to ensure a holistic learning experience that balances cognitive, emotional, and social development.

5. Future Researchers

Further studies can explore the longitudinal development of

students' attitudes or compare attitudes between different age groups or school contexts. Future research could also examine the impact of specific interventions—such as peer collaboration or technology-enhanced instruction—on improving student attitudes and motivation toward English learning.

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