

# Chinese Junior Secondary School Students' Attitudes towards Learning English: In the Context of Fujian Province

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## Abstract

The topic about the attitudes towards learning English in China is of intense interest for scholars, although most previous studies focused on undergraduate students and few on secondary-school students. This article represents findings of Chinese attitude to learning English from the perspective of junior secondary school students in Fujian Province. The study has drawn data with online questionnaires from 75 participants who were purposely selected from a middle school in Fuzhou, Fujian province and are taught by the same English teacher since entrance into this school 1.5 years ago. The results indicated that junior secondary school students mostly hold a negative attitude, and different genders have a divergent attitude toward English, a compulsory subject in Fujian Province in China, taking behavioural attitude, emotional attitude, and cognitive attitude into account.

## Keywords

Junior secondary school; Students' attitude; English learning.

## 1. The Development of English in China

English has been world Englishes (Jenkins, 2015). The number of non-native English speakers is higher than that of native counterparts regularly (Deterding and Kirkpatrick, 2006). The mode functions as the basic instinct of the wide diffusion of English, and the expansion circle countries are typical (Berns, 2019). In recent years, researchers have paid more attention to contexts of the expanding circle (Fang, 2017).

As a typical expanding circle country, China has its characteristics. China's reform and opening-up policies introduced private business and market incentives. Since then, English has become a tool for modernization with the rapid pace of globalization in China (Yong and Campbell, 1995). Entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the success of bidding for the 2008 Olympic games signify the ever-accelerating pace of globalization. English's role in China cannot be ignored as a global language. Yong and Campbell (1995) did a study among high school students and undergraduates, teachers and parents, by questionnaires and interviews in late 2009 to prove the importance of English after the Olympics 2008. In the context of this, in Asian countries, the central part English language played is as a lingua franca, which can be seen from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Charter signed in the second month of 2009 (Kirkpatrick, 2010). English has become a primary foreign language taught, especially since the late 1970s, as a result of people's increasing awareness of the importance of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (Lam, 2002). In China, the population of learning and using English is 400 million (Wei and Su, 2015), among which over 49 million is students studying in junior middle schools, which was recorded on the Chinese government website in 2020. The exam-oriented education system in China pushes numerous students far apart from the proper appreciation of English learning. Jain and Sidhu (2013) stated that attitude is the main factor in the success of learning languages. Then Abdullah and et al. (2014) claimed that attitude highly affects a student's level of activeness or passivity in class. Students' attitudes

influence their views of the class, professors, and the material (Zulkefly and Razali, 2019). Regarding attitude to language learning, Youssef (2012) believed it is possible either positive or negative. Therefore, many researchers pay attention to the role attitude plays in the process of language learning. There seems to be a scarcity of studies on young learners' attitudes (Galloway, 2017). In the Chinese context, the studies on undergraduates were widely concerned while on senior high school students could be found less, especially in junior high school, which the primarily former showed their positive attitude towards learning English. In contrast, the latter negative attitude is considerably more apparent. This article aims to focus on Chinese junior high school students' attitudes.

## 2. Background of Chinese High School

In a way that is more visible than it is for undergraduates, English is a required subject in high school. After junior middle school, education streaming will primarily disperse pupils to senior middle school, secondary vocational school, or the labour market. Students in senior high school are under much pressure to do well on college entrance exams. However, students' open and objective language attitudes must be an aim of English teaching and learning. As a result, high school is crucial for students to shape their language attitudes.

When it comes to education in China, it hardly dashes stereotype - test-oriented impression. In the old days, English teaching in secondary high schools tended to be "learning only" or "score only". The scores were utilized to assess teachers' teaching abilities and students' learning abilities without considering the development of comprehensive English application skills. At the same time, the new curriculum standard's three-dimensional target system combines instructional procedures and methodologies, students' emotional attitudes and value cultivation, and students' overall growth (Yang, 2021). Moreover, the latest guideline—"Double Reduction" education policy—which aims to alleviate primary and middle school students' homework burdens and eliminate the need for after-school tutoring jointly issued by the general offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council in July 2021. As a result, junior high school students should not be forced to do homework for longer than 90 minutes every day.

In terms of textbooks, there are around 10 different versions of junior middle school's textbooks in China mainland. It varies from city to city. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) expressed that one of the functions of textbooks is to propel students' learning. In the textbook Project English (version used in the school of this research), the course reading has numerous advantages. However, simultaneously it should be improved from the accompanying aspects, such as multi-modular materials ought to be involved, the extent of social culture and applied culture ought to be strengthened, cultural input data ought to be submitted to the standard of finding the times, cross-social materials ought to be increased, cultural topics ought not to be repeated, the extent of male and female individuals of note in course books should be balanced.

## 3. Literature Review

Learners need to have a positive attitude in order to learn a language more effectively (Zulkefly and Razali, 2019). Language attitudes can be thought of as positive or adverse reactions to a single language (Baker, 1992). It's possible that attitude is a result of experience. Following a term of language training, students may have a more favourable or unfavourable attitude toward language learning (Liu, Zhang and Fang, 2021).

Lopez (2007) defined "attitude" as sets of convictions moved by students about things like the objective language culture and the student's way of life. According to Gajalakshmi (2013), a successful language student should be able to identify with native speakers of the language. These understudies are the ones who might obtain or take on different parts of practices that

reflect the objective language culture or society. Gardner's (1985) pointed out that subsequent language (L2) students who check out the objective culture positively will become familiar with the objective language more successfully than the people who have adverse discernment towards the designated language culture.

Gardner (1985) also suggested that attitude is an evaluative response toward some referent or mentality object, construed on the premise of the person's convictions or conclusions about the referent. A positive change in the singular's character happens in learning since when one has taken in a particular subject, they are expected to think and act in an alternate way, and one's convictions have been recognized (Kara, 2009). Wenden (1991) presented a complete explanation of the attitude notion based on Gardner's argument. He divided the concept of "attitude" into three interconnected components: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. Beliefs, thoughts, or opinions about the object of the attitude make up the cognitive component. The affective component involves a person's feelings and emotions, regardless of whether they love or dislike it. The behavioural component refers to a person's proclivity to adopt specific learning behaviours. Compared to studies on the attitudes of ESL learners during the last three decades, many studies have been undertaken to study the nature of students' attitudes toward learning a foreign language in general and EFL in particular (Al-Zahrani, 2008).

Momani (2009) looked into secondary school students' attitudes to studying English as a second language and their reading comprehension abilities. The data revealed that students' attitudes to learning English were neutrally good. Students' attitudes about learning English are strongly correlated with their reading comprehension scores. Chalak & Kassaian (2010) evaluated the motivational orientation and attitude toward learning English of 108 English translation major students at Islamic Azad University in Iran. The findings revealed that these EFL students learn English for both instrumental and integrative purposes, with a generally favourable attitude toward the target language. Among terms of the gender variable, Fakeye (2010) looked at the relationship between attitude and English achievement in 400 senior secondary students from five different schools. According to the data, there was a tangible link between attitude and achievement. Furthermore, it was discovered that students' attitudes are not gender-based. As a result, there was no statistically large difference between male and female students' attitudes.

From the literature review, many researchers mentioned the students' attitudes towards English learning as a L2 even though there has been numerous focused on undergraduates in the Chinese context (for instance, see Lei and Hu (2014); Li et al. (2009); Hou et al. (2018);).

#### 4. Research Methodology

This research aims to identify Chinese junior middle school students' attitudes towards learning English. As a quantitative research method, the questionnaire is high-efficient, especially during the pandemic period of COVID-19. Because of the relatively low level of English proficiency of the participants, the questionnaire was designed in Chinese. Each attitude was put into a similar 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from First Level: Strongly Agree (SA) to Fifth Level: Strongly Disagree (SD). The questionnaire was developed in part from an attitude questionnaire test (Boonrangsri et al., 2004) in a study. Others were drawn from the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) which was designed from behavioural, cognitive, and emotional aspects of attitude made by (Garner 1985). Taking into consideration of Chinese cultural background and attitudes towards learning English, there were a total of 25 questions in the questionnaire, among which the first question was relevant to gender (Male and Female) selection and the other 24 questions selected from the original 30 ones. In general, excluding the gender question, there were 13 positive and 11 negative items. In terms of behavioural

aspect, there were 3 positive and 5 negative; as to cognitive part, there were 4 positive and 4 negative; with regard to the emotional aspect, there were 6 positive and 2 negative.

The participants were 75 students from two classes. In order to control variants, they are all in junior 8 (ages from 13 to 15 years old) and taught by the same English teacher since junior 7 in a middle school, which ranks top 3 in all private and public junior middle schools in Fuzhou -the capital city of Fujian Province. In addition, the school randomly admits students through an online lottery system. There were 42 males (56%) and 33 females (44%). Specifically, there were minor adjustments to the original questionnaire. For instance, the original question was changed from "The subject of English includes knowledge of various fields" to "The subject of English includes knowledge of various fields", which contributed to my future career to check the students' future planning among junior secondary school.

Because of the limited time and the approaching New Year holiday, the web-based questionnaire was delivered through a mini-program in Wechat named Wenjuanxin, a professional survey platform. The data then was analyzed by the SPSS program, a convincing data analysis system. To determine the frequency, mean and standard deviation, descriptive statistics were used to address the first research question. Comparison of the difference between two genders, positive questions will be listed and shown the frequency.

## 5. Results, Findings and Limitation

Among the items related to positive attitudes, as seen from Table 1, the mean scores were above 3.0, while the scores of the counterparts were below 3.0. The data reflected that the participants in the survey held a negative attitude toward learning English.

**Table 1.** The Students' Behavioral Attitudes towards Learning English

No	Statement	SA	A	NI	D	SD	Mean Score	SD (Standard Deviation)
1	It is an embarrassing experience to speak English in front of others.	29.3%	28%	28%	12%	2.7%	2.31	1.102
2	The experience of being asked to speak English in class makes me nervous.	26.7%	26%	29.3%	16%	1.3%	2.39	1.089
3	When told to appear in English class, I am not excited.	12%	21.3%	41.3%	20%	5.3%	2.85	1.049
4	I finish the English assignment at the last minute.	38.7%	38.7%	18.7%	2.7%	1.3%	1.89	0.894
5	I am uneasy when speaking English.	44%	34.7%	14.7%	4%	2.7%	1.87	0.991
6	I learn English independently in my leisure time.	1.3%	9.3%	48%	32%	9.3%	3.39	0.837
7	When hearing other classmates speaking excellent English, I want to learn from them.	1.3%	9.3%	45.3%	29.3%	14.7%	3.47	0.905
8	I am an active speaker in English class.	2.7%	20%	42.7%	26.7%	8%	3.17	0.935

Among the items relevant to the behavioural attitudes towards learning English, the respondents opted to disagree or strongly disagree with the positive statements while strongly agreeing or agreeing with the negative comments. Therefore, the students possessed a negative attitude towards learning English. The result reflected that most respondents would not like to learn English. For example, the statement "When hearing other classmates speaking excellent English, I want to learn from them." held the most strongly disagreed and disagreed percentage,

taking up 44% and “I learn English independently in leisure time.” achieved the second most percentages of the strongly disagree and disagree scales, taking up 41.3%, which showed their willingness in independent learning on English subject in free time.

In terms of the statements related to negative attitudes, the majority of them concerned the respondents' nervousness during their English learning in the class. As stated in the table, 29.3% of the respondents strongly agreed, and 28% agreed that it is embarrassing to speak English in front of the class. The percentage of the respondents who had strong agreement and agreement on the feeling of nervousness on speaking English in class was respectively 26.7% and 26%. What's more, 78.7% of the students strongly agreed and agreed that they felt uneasy when speaking English. This data, from another aspect, showed that the students held negative behavioural part of attitudes to learning English.

**Table 2.** The Students' Cognitive Attitudes towards Learning English

No	Statement	SA	A	NI	D	SD	Mean Score	SD (Standard Deviation)
1	Good English performances contribute to other subjects.	2.7%	5.3%	30.7%	45.3%	16%	3.67	0.905
2	Honestly, passing an examination is the goal of learning English.	26.7%	34.7%	21.3%	13.3%	4%	2.33	1.131
3	I want to prove my English because of my unsatisfactory performance.	0	2.7%	8%	48%	41.3%	4.28	0.727
4	For me, English is hard and intricate.	18.7%	32%	38.7%	8%	2.7%	2.44	0.976
5	It is difficult to put English knowledge into practice.	21.3%	40%	25.3%	10.7%	2.7%	2.33	1.018
6	I acquire much knowledge and have a deep understanding of English when learning it.	2.7%	0	16%	56%	25.3%	4.01	0.814
7	The subject of English includes knowledge of various fields, contributing to my future career.	0	4%	24%	40%	32%	4.00	0.854
8	Personally speaking, individuals mastering a foreign language are well-informed.	0	0	16%	38.7%	45.3%	4.29	0.731

According to Table 2, the respondents held both different attitudes towards the cognitive aspect of attitudes, even though the most part was about the negative. Among the four negative attitude items, 25% of the respondents showed a positive attitude towards learning English. That is, 48% and 41.3% of them disagreed and strongly disagreed that they performed poorly in English. Unfortunately, they could not understand the benefits of learning English. To be specific, only 2.7% strongly agreed, and none of them agreed that “I acquire much knowledge and have a deep understanding of English when learning it.” Moreover, no one found that learning more than one language makes them well-informed, and only 4% of the students agreed that English could be conducive to a future career.



**Table 3.** The Students' Emotional Attitudes towards Learning English

No	Statement	SA	A	NI	D	SD	Mean Score	SD (Standard Deviation)
1	Honestly, English class does not attract me.	24%	33.3%	36%	2.7%	4%	2.29	0.997
2	I am cheerful and elated when learning English.	4%	0	46.7%	34.7%	14.7%	3.56	0.889
3	I am fascinated by learning English.	1.3%	2.7%	61.3%	21.3%	13.3%	3.43	0.808
4	Learning English increases my self-confidence.	1.3%	6.7%	48%	29.3%	14.7%	3.49	0.876
5	I expect every moment in English class.	4%	12%	52%	21.3%	10.7%	3.23	0.938
6	In the course of learning English, I become a better person.	2.7%	5.3%	37.3%	38.7%	16%	3.6	0.915
7	I am not nervous when answering questions in class for the English language.	1.3%	8%	30.7%	41.3%	18.7%	3.68	0.918
8	Compared with a foreign language, my first language is more attractive for me.	8%	24%	38.7%	24%	5.3%	2.95	1.012

In this part, taking different emotional components into account, it contained great/good sentiments, interests, confidence and happiness (Eshghinejad, 2016). The result of the data reflected the validity of the aforementioned data on nervousness. The percentage of strong disagreement and disagreement on the statement that the students did not feel nervous when answering questions in English class was high. It has been a challenge for the Chinese for a long time. Again, the positive statements got a lower percentage on strongly agree and agree than the strongly disagree and disagree. Over half of them thought that the English class did not attract them. Less than 20% of the students strongly agreed and agreed that they had a good feeling about learning English, and only 8% strongly agreed and agreed that "Learning English increases my self-confidence." In general, the respondents possessed a negative attitude towards learning English.

The results concerned the disparities in the participants' positive attitudes toward English by gender variable. According to Table 4, 53 % of the items related to positive attitudes showed that the attitudes of male secondary school students towards English are slightly higher than that of female ones. Expressly, 2.3% of the male students strongly agreed, and 26.1% of the male agreed, compared with 3% of the female counterparts strongly agreed, and 12.1% of the female agreed with the statement, "I am an active speaker in English class." In the No.5 item about a future career, 7.1% of the boys could relate their English to career plans, but none girls had this kind of perception. Similarly, there were not any girls fascinated by learning English, but 7 per cent of boys were interested in the process of learning.

**Table 4.** Different Gender's Positive Attitudes towards Learning English (%)

No.	Statement	Gender	SA	A	NI	D	SD
1	I learn English independently in my leisure time.	Female	0	6	57.5	30.3	6
		Male	2.3	11.9	40.4	33.3	11.9
2	When hearing other classmates speaking excellent English, I want to learn from them.	Female	0	12.1	39.3	36.3	12.1
		Male	2.3	7.1	50	23.8	16.6
3	I am an active speaker in English class.	Female	3	12.1	42.4	39.3	3
		Male	2.3	26.1	42.8	16.6	11.9
4	Good English performances contribute to other subjects.	Female	0	6	27.2	54.5	12.1
		Male	4.7	4.7	33.3	38	19
5	I acquire much knowledge and have a deep understanding of English when learning it.	Female	3	0	18.1	51.5	27.2
		Male	2.3	0	14.2	59.5	23.8
6	The subject of English includes knowledge of various fields, contributing to my future career.	Female	0	0	21.2	39.3	39.3
		Male	0	7.1	26.1	40.4	26.1
7	Personally speaking, individuals mastering a foreign language are well-informed.	Female	0	0	9	36.3	54.5
		Male	0	0	21.4	40.4	38
8	I am cheerful and elated when learning English.	Female	0	0	48.4	30.3	21.2
		Male	7.1	0	45.2	38	9.5
9	I am fascinated by learning English.	Female	0	0	66.6	18.1	15.1
		Male	2.3	4.7	57.1	23.8	11.9
10	Learning English increases my self-confidence.	Female	0	12.1	51.5	21.2	15.1
		Male	2.3	2.3	45.2	35.7	14.2
11	In the course of learning English, I become a better person.	Female	0	9	42.4	33.3	15.1
		Male	4.7	2.3	33.3	42.8	16.6
12	I am not nervous when answering questions in class for the English language.	Female	0	12.1	33.3	33.3	21.2
		Male	2.3	4.7	28.5	47.6	16.6
13	I expect every moment in English class.	Female	3	12.1	60.6	12.1	12.1
		Male	4.7	11.9	45.2	28.5	9.5

## 6. Conclusion

The assignment is a research article to take a fresh look at the behavioural, cognitive and emotional attitudes towards learning English and attitudinal differences regarding gender in the context of Fujian Province of China. The research revealed that junior middle school students in the school held negative attitudes to learning English, and male students had more positive attitudes towards learning English. They lacked interest and good feelings about English. In the behavioural and emotional aspects of attitudes, most of the statements were relevant to anxiety in speaking English. The result probably gives the policy-makers and teachers a reminder of the education, and the latest "double-reduction" policy may be a good opportunity for the Chinese. It is worth noting that Libyan research conducted by Abidin et al. (2012) mentioned the negative attitudes among secondary school students, although most researchers mentioned the positive attitudes. A typical cross-national study toward China and

Japan was given by Tachibana et al. (1996). It showed that Chinese secondary students had more positive attitudes to learning English and girls had more positive attitudes than boys, which provides a gap. Regarding the positive attitude, the participants are confident in their scores, and the item of learning English for passing exams showed that most of the respondents are still exam-oriented. It is possible to be a factor contributing to teachers' ignorance of students' attitudes or motivation sometimes.

## 7. Limitation

Although the research described here is extensive in scope, it should be noted that it only includes 13- to 15-year-old secondary school students in Fuzhou of Fujian Province. In the growth of English Language Teaching, the economically and socioculturally developed regions differ significantly from the less developed ones (Hu, 2003). Although Fuzhou is the capital city of Fujian Province, it's still a China tier-2 city. That is, it unavoidably took no consideration of the regional disparity in China. Aforementioned different versions of junior middle school textbooks partly contribute to this situation. The second limiting factor falls on to the research method. Despite the fact that questionnaire has created powerful ways of working on the psychometric properties of study information, such information has innate shortcomings (Krosnick, 1999). There were no quantity research methods to use in the research to fill the gap. Due to the limited time and other factors, the questionnaire only was delivered in a school to limited students. Moreover, the survey cannot avoid other variables which could contribute to a different attitude, such as teaching method and teacher's personality. At last, the study showed that all the 13 positive statements achieved more disagreement, although the respondents held a positive attitude to their English performance in the cognitive aspect. However, the assignment was indeed based on other scholars' research, and most of the statements had proved to work in similar environments.

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