

**Attitudinal Dispositions of Students toward the English Language:
Sociolinguistic and Sociocultural Considerations**

Ersoy Erdemir

erdemir@buffalo.edu

Suggested Citation:

Erdemir, E. (2013). Attitudinal dispositions of students toward the English language: Sociolinguistic and sociocultural considerations. *The Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 9(1), 23-49. <http://www.jlls.org/vol9no1/23-49.pdf>

Abstract

Problem Statement: The status, value, and importance of a language is often measured by the attitudes toward that language. Learning a second or foreign language and attaining proficiency in it is closely related to the attitudes of learners toward the language. A few studies have investigated language attitudes of Turkish students toward the English language in Turkey. However, the same issue has not been explored among Turkish students learning and using the English language in a country where English is spoken as the first language.

Purpose: This exploratory study investigated the attitudes of Turkish students toward learning and using English language as they lived and pursued their university degrees in a northeastern city in the United States. The study examined students' attitudinal dispositions toward English based on sociolinguistic and sociocultural considerations.

Methods: The study included 8 student participants (4 male and 4 female) who were born in Turkey and spoke Turkish as their native language. They were all enrolled in a state university studying different programs in Engineering Sciences and Social Sciences. Data were collected conducting in-depth interviews with students over a two-month period. Participants were interviewed twice individually, and 16 interviews were conducted in total. Each interview took 50 to 60 minutes and was transcribed by the researcher. Data

analysis included (1) intensive (re)readings of interview transcripts and identifying attitudinal themes and patterns in the data through *emergent coding*; and (2) making qualitative connections among themes and patterns through identifying their consistency by applying *axial coding*. Coded dataset was then descriptively interpreted in its entirety.

Findings: Participants displayed mostly positive dispositions toward learning and using the English language; however, their attitudinal patterns varied with regards to sociolinguistic and sociocultural considerations. While they described English as a *beautiful* language, their perceptions about the *beauty* of the language associated with different interpretations regarding linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of English, such as euphonic sound system and lexical richness, and English as the language of global connection in different discourses (i.e., academia, media, and corporate world). On the other hand, participants viewed English as a threat to cultural and linguistic identities at the individual and societal dimensions. Devaluing the native language against English and the recent phenomenon of lexical penetration of English words into the Turkish language engendered participants' patriotic feelings about their native language and surfaced their nationalistic ties with their cultural and linguistic identities. Lastly, participants attached a variety of instrumental and survival values to the English language. They felt restricted expressing their feelings in English when they engaged in affective conversational discourses with native speakers. These attitudes, as well as the patterns they demonstrated in enacting such attitudes differed across genders significantly.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Different than a few studies that investigated the topic with English language learners in Turkey, the present study presents new insights by exploring the issue from the perspective of Turkish students as they learned and used the English language in the United States. Attitudinal studies can potentially shed light on the ways in which perceptions attached a language may impact learners' willingness to learn and develop proficiency in that language, and reveal their critical stances toward that language at sociolinguistic and sociocultural dimensions.

Keywords: language attitudes, language perceptions, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, English language, Turkish language, international students, ESL, EFL

Introduction

Heterogeneity in the population of the United States (U.S.) is on the rise as the country continues to attract people from diverse linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Upon arrival to the U.S., newcomers go through a cultural adaptation period and begin mainstreaming into the American society wherein English language becomes the medium of communication. Thus, newcomers become language-minorities in this new environment and often struggle with developing communicative proficiency in the majority language in order to survive and fully function in the society. Emigration from the native land to the U.S. includes various reasons, such as work opportunities, marriage, or simply the pursuit of a better life. Education has also been another strong factor that has propelled many young students around the world to come to the U.S. in order to pursue their degrees. Some of these international students arrive to the country with a level of language proficiency that allows them to communicate fluently in English. Hence, these students primarily focus on pursuing their degrees rather than improving their English language proficiency. Some, on the other hand, come to the U.S. in order to learn and develop English as a second or foreign language by attending intensive English language institutions. Whether or not international students have attained academic and communicative proficiency in the English language, they may still be challenged to develop full competence with their language skills in order to excel in academic endeavors and survive everyday life. Thus, irrespective of their current proficiency, international students studying in the U.S. need to continually improve their English language skills in order to demonstrate robust academic development and acquire the essential communicative competencies exogenous to sustain their everyday needs.

Present Study

An important factor that needs to be examined in regards to second or foreign language learning are the perceptions of students regarding the target language, and how these perceptions impact the way they learn and develop competence in the language. In accordance with this, the present qualitative case study investigated the attitudinal dispositions of international Turkish students toward learning and using the English

language, and interpreted their attitudes in light of sociolinguistic and sociocultural considerations.

A review of relevant research shows that no studies have been published hitherto that focused on examining the attitudes of Turkish students toward English as a second language in the U.S. context. In fact, only a few studies have looked into the attitudes of Turkish native speakers toward the English language, and these studies were all conducted in Turkey (e.g., Karahan, 2007; Büyükkantarçioğlu, 2004). Thus, while a few studies have focused on the language attitudes of Turkish speakers as they were exposed to English as a foreign language in Turkey, no studies have been conducted investigating the attitudes of Turkish speakers who learn English as a second or foreign language in a country other than Turkey. The present study on the other hand brings a new perspective into this limited strand of research by examining the attitudinal dispositions of Turkish students toward English as a second language in the U.S. context.

The context in which individuals are exposed to a particular language may considerably influence the development of perceptions toward that language. For example, Turkish native speakers who are exposed to the English language in a country other than Turkey, and learn English as a second or foreign language in that country may have substantially different attitudes toward English than those who were exposed to and learn English as a foreign language in Turkey. That is, whether the language is learned and spoken as the first, second, or a foreign language in the country where learners/speakers are situated may have direct associations with their attitudes toward that language. With this presumption taken into account, the present study investigated the attitudes of Turkish native speakers toward the English language as participants were situated in the U.S. where English is spoken as the first societal language, as opposed to prior studies conducted in Turkey where English is learned as a foreign language.

This study is also educationally significant in its attempt to elucidate and make sense of the connections between language attitudes and language learning. It has been argued that learning a language is closely related to the attitudes toward that language (Starks & Paltridge, 1996). Since the individual perceptions of a language could substantially shape the learning process of that language, attitudinal studies may shed light on the intertwined dynamics as to how perceptions attached to a language may operate the motivation to learn

that language. In this regard, the practical focus of this study is to provide ESL/EFL teachers and educators with insights about the attitudinal dispositions of a group of international Turkish students toward English as they learned and used this language in the U.S., and delineate the ways in which these attitudes shaped their language learning processes.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do a group of Turkish students, attending a university in the U.S., perceive the English language in this context?
2. What kinds of sociolinguistic and sociocultural connotations does English evoke for these students?
3. What are their perceptions of the relationship between their attitudes toward English and how these attitudes influence their language learning experiences?

Review of the Literature

The status, value, and importance of a language is often measured by the attitudes toward that language. These attitudes may be measured at the individual level or explored within a group or community of people sharing the same language. At either level, information gathered from individuals, groups, or communities offers a way of democratically representing the views of the people toward the language (Baker, 1992). This information helps researchers understand the ways in which these views take shape and manifest themselves within the broader sociolinguistic and sociocultural domains of the society. Hence, the values and perceptions of individuals about languages may be influential factors in deeming these languages prestigious and valuable, or vice versa. If individuals' attributions to a specific language are likely to shape the status of that language and its use, these attributions then can be perceived as sociolinguistic indicators that determine the value of the language within the society at large.

Various empirical studies have documented the dynamics that underlie how people develop attitudes toward languages. For example, Villa (2002) indicates that language attitudes of people may lead them to suppress or change the use of particular languages that people do not favor or perceive positively. His study suggested that the use of Spanish

language in the U.S. for instance, specifically in the education domain, has been going through a deliberate change due to the unfavorable attitudes of some scholars toward the language. Therefore, devalued perceptions of Spanish language use in educational platforms have practically accounted for the decreased the use of this language in relevant discourses.

In his study, Marley (2004) investigated the language attitudes of high school students and teachers toward French, Arabic, and bilingualism in Morocco. The study showed that both students and teachers were widely in favor of a return to Arabic-French bilingualism within the education system and approved decisions to introduce foreign languages at an earlier stage in the curriculum. Thus, participants all displayed positively receptive attitudes toward Arabic and French and, in turn, more orientation toward learning both languages at the same time. The study demonstrated that the positive and favorable attitudes toward languages, as demonstrated by the majority, can in fact give more agency and autonomy to these languages at the pedagogical and even in educational policy levels.

El-Dash and Busnardo (2001) investigated the prestige and vitality of English as a foreign language in Brazil from the perspectives of adolescents. The study found that the majority of the participants perceived English more favorably than they did for their native Portuguese, and they acknowledged English as an international language. Thus, the study showed that native speakers of Portuguese attributed more privilege and prestige to English as opposed to their native language.

Flowerdew, Li and Miller (1998) examined the attitudes of Hong Kong Chinese university lecturers toward English and Cantonese. They found that rather ambivalent attitudes toward English existed among the participants. The researchers interpreted this pattern as an indication of the sociolinguistic tension existing within the society. In sum, the aforementioned studies have investigated attitudes towards particular languages, whether favorable, unfavorable, neutral, or mixed, can practically impact how these languages are used and practiced within society at large as well as the domains of the society, such as education.

The other strand of research focuses on examining individuals' language attitudes in conjunction with language learning, motivation, and the cultural manifestations of the language use. For instance, Graham (2004) investigated the relationship between attitudes

and the level of achievement in the language. She focused on the perceptions of students who were native speakers of English, toward the French language and how they perceived the factors that underlay their level of achievement in French. The study concluded that the students who attributed success to effort, high ability, and effective learning strategies had higher levels of achievement, and thus viewed French positively.

Relationships among language learning, motivation, and attitudes were also examined. Williams et al. (2002) looked into students' perceptions of motivation in language learning as they pertained to their attitudes toward learning French. The study found that the motivation to learn a foreign language may decrease with age regardless of the positive attitudes toward the language. Therefore, language learning was found to correlate more closely with the age of learners irrespective of the learners' positive perceptions about the language.

White (2002) examined the attitudes of Fijians using English in conversations with peers, and the extent to which peer culture valued or devalued the use of English language. The study found that English was viewed by many Fijians as a language of another culture and its usage in informal contexts was deemed inappropriate. That is, using English words and concepts among peers of Fiji was regarded disparaging by the participants. The finding also alluded to the sociocultural tension within the society as a result of the increasing popularity of the English language in the country.

Despite the variety of studies focusing on individuals' attitudes toward various languages, Turkish learners/speakers of English have been seldom examined as a focus of population within this fabric of research. Of the limited research with native Turkish speakers, all have been conducted with participants in Turkey. For example Karahan (2004) examined the relationship between language attitudes toward English and its use in Turkey. Participants in her study were found to have mildly positive attitudes toward the language, and especially female students assigned higher value rates. Participants recognized the importance of English but, interestingly, did not reveal high levels of orientation toward learning the language.

Büyükkantarcıoğlu (2004) looked into the present state of English language in Turkey in light of the historical and socio-political developments, and how English was perceived in the society as a result of these developments. She argued that the unplanned

and educationally unmediated spread of English in Turkey make people believe that English is a highly regarded language to learn in today's world in order to gain personal prestige. The researcher warned against the increasing penetration of English in Turkish language, and suggested that effective measures and realistic solutions should be taken to prevent the spread of English into Turkish. Different than these studies conducted in the context of Turkey, the present study specifically focused on the attitudes of a group of Turkish students toward the English language as they learned and spoke this language in the U.S.

Methodology

Participants

The study included eight student participants who were attending a university in a northeastern city in the U.S. Equal gender division was ensured by including four female and four male students. All of the participants were born in Turkey and self-reported Turkish as being their native language. At the time of the study, they were all learning English in the *English Language Institute* of their university. Except one of the participants who was fluent in Russian as well, they did not report knowledge of any other languages. They had started to take courses in their programs simultaneously with their English language courses. Their length of stay in the U.S. ranged from 4 months to 3 years. While three of the participants had been in the U.S. for more than two and a half years, three of them had been there less than two years. The rest had only been in the U.S. for less than a year. Six of the participants self-identified themselves as “partially proficient” in English, meaning they felt proficient in writing and reading skills but not as much in speaking and listening. Two of the participants did not consider themselves proficient in English yet. As they indicated, they were struggling with improving their speaking skills.

Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study with an exclusive focus on their attitudes, assessing or interpreting language skills of the participants were not within the scope and focus of the study. Therefore, no questionnaires or assessments were administered to identify their level of English proficiency. Participants' contact information was provided by the president of the *Turkish Student Association*—a student group at the

university where the study was conducted. Upon initial contact with the students, 4 male and 4 female students were recruited in the study¹.

Data Collection

Data were collected through conducting personal interviews with the participants. Interviews were extended over a two-month period, and each was carried out individually. The number of the interviews varied depending on the relevance and the depth of the data gathered from the initial interview. In total, two personal interviews were conducted with participants. Each interview lasted about 50 to 60 minutes and included pre-determined questions prepared by the researcher. However, given then spontaneous nature of the interviews, many specific conversations and questions emerged that were not pre-determined, but added more layers into the depth of the data. Interviews were carried out either in Turkish or English depending on participants' preference. While 6 of them (4 female and 2 male) preferred to conduct the interviews in English, two remaining participants (2 male) preferred Turkish. However, despite the initial preference of the former to conduct the interviews in English, they switched to Turkish frequently since they were more at ease communicating their thoughts in Turkish. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher, and those conducted in Turkish were subsequently translated to English.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included two phases. The first phase included intensive re-readings of interview transcriptions, and identifying the themes and the patterns of language attitudes for each individual participant through emergent coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the second phase, themes and patterns that were scrutinized in the first phase for each participant were gathered and interpreted all together. The connections between themes and patterns and the extent to which they were consistently shared across all participants were identified through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Coded dataset was then interpreted in its entirety.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper in order to maintain participants' anonymity.

On a related note, the process of data analysis did not seek to identify any particular or pre-determined themes. Rather, analysis strived to confront all the themes that the review of literature presented. The themes and patterns of language attitudes presented in the next section were included in the study after ensuring that each of them occurred recursively across all transcriptions. Themes and patterns that did not consistently occur in the data were omitted from the findings. Thus, each attitudinal theme presented in the findings section along with its respective patterns was identified in the data collected from the majority of the participants, and analyzed accordingly.

Findings

This exploratory study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding into the attitudes of Turkish students toward the English language as they learned this language in the U.S. Rigorous analyses demonstrated three attitudinal themes that emerged from the data: (1) English as a *beautiful* language, (2) English as a threat to cultural identity, and (3) English as an instrumental and survival language. These were the consistent themes shared among the participants. The next section details and discusses these attitudinal themes along with their patterns by presenting interview excerpts from the data.

English as a *Beautiful* Language

Across the interview data, the most common perception shared among the participants was English as a *beautiful* language. Yet, the attributions of participants to English as being a *beautiful* language varied based on different considerations. Three of them stated that English sounds euphonic thus *beautiful*, and therefore, they enjoyed hearing this language.

Excerpt 1 (interview with Türkü).

“It sounds cool and I enjoy listening people speaking in English. They rise up and lower their voices; they can express their ideas through the sounds of this language. So it doesn’t only have to be the sentences and words only but the sound of the language, its voices make it sound beautiful. I don’t know but in my language sounds are harsh but English have polite sounds. Even if I knew French I would prefer listening English songs than in French because it sounds musical, and kind of gentle and soft to ear...”

The participant here attributes the beauty of the English language to its sound and phonetic system. She favors English over French and concludes that the former sounds more gentle and musical thus *beautiful*. Other participants also expressed similar perceptions and thought that English is pleasant to hear, and they described it as a language that sounds soft and comforting, not as raspy or discordant.

In addition to attributing the *beauty* of English to its sound system, some of the participants mentioned that the rich repertoire of words in English for naming and describing things in a variety of ways makes it a *beautiful* language. They stated that English offers its speakers a lot of different words for labeling and naming things, whose translation-equivalents or corresponding words, participants thought, did not necessarily exist in their native language, Turkish. Thus, the fact that English offers a more comprehensive lexicon to define and name things in a myriad of ways, as opposed to Turkish, led the participants consider English as a *beautiful* language.

Excerpt 2 (interview with Seçil).

“Since I started to learn English, my vocabulary has been improving. It has lots of words and I can’t even find the direct Turkish meanings for these words. For example *cool* or *appreciate*. And I learned the word *spiffy* recently. I can’t translate them in Turkish because Turkish does not have these meanings directly. Like this, here I learned many words and sometimes I think my vocabulary knowledge here is bigger than Turkish.”

As Seçil’s quote suggests, a common pattern shared among the participants was that they felt the English language allowed them the freedom and flexibility to express their ideas more fluently thanks to its lexical richness. That is, being able to use a variety of words and phrases to express themselves was something they appreciated about the *beauty* of the English language. Yet, this pattern of perception was mostly common among the participants who had been in the U.S. for over two years and self-reported to have developed a rich vocabulary repertoire. The analyses did not identify similar perceptions among participants who had been in the U.S. for less than two years. In fact, those who had been in the U.S. for less than two years acknowledged their limited competence in vocabulary and indicated that learning new words and using them in academic work and

daily life was an area they were struggling to improve. This attitudinal pattern suggests that those who had relatively longer exposure to the English language were aware that their relatively richer vocabulary knowledge afforded them with the opportunity to verbalize their ideas using a variety of words, which, consequently, led them to view English as a *beautiful* language.

Some of the participants also attributed the beauty of the English language to its accessibility, prestige, and dominant use in different discourses, such as academia, media, or corporate business world. Participants appreciated the accessibility of English and indicated that its increasing use around the world connects people in specific spaces in which they can communicate in English regardless of their varied linguistic backgrounds. For instance, one of the participants thought that English creates a venue for him to communicate with people of his major in different parts of the world, thereby adding on to his expertise and enriching his knowledge through these exchanges.

Excerpt 3 (interview with Baran).

“When I do research and publish them I write in English. I have to do it only in English. Because it is the global language of publishing. It’s amazing that even I can read and listen to academicians from China, Japan talking about their studies in English. You know this is very beautiful. People all around the world, speaking different languages but they get together and communicate under in one language when they want their articles or research to be heard and understood by other colleagues who may be at the other side of the world. It connects these people to me...It’s like a bridge where we meet. This also helps me to improve my knowledge”.

Baran views English as a language that bridges the gaps and affords him a common space to get together with people from different language backgrounds in order to exchange information on content-specific topics, which he found particularly impressive thus, *beautiful*. Other participants also mentioned how English helped them broaden their perspectives and build on their world knowledge given that it is an international lingua franca now shared by a mass of people in academia, media, and the business world. Aligned with this, they mentioned how English was emerging as the language of pop

culture entertaining a generation of youth. For some of the participants, movies, either in subtitles or not, and songs in English gave them the feeling of connecting with people around the world who would watch the same movie and listen to the same song in the same language, which they found particularly intriguing and “cool”. Such dialogic and communicative uses of English led the participants to develop positive attitudes, and consequently, they considered English as a *beautiful* language.

English as a Threat to Linguistic and Cultural Identities

Analysis of the data also pointed to an interesting attitudinal pattern shared among the participants. They tended to perceive English as a threat to linguistic and cultural identities of language-minority groups when the native language is neglected and/or devalued against English. Such attitude is clearly counterintuitive in light of their positive and favorable perceptions of English as a *beautiful* language; yet, many of them were critical of how English is increasingly becoming a powerful tool of assimilation. Some of the participants shared that immersing in the American culture and using only English in their everyday lives made them feel that they were being too “Americanized”. Participants who expressed this attitude viewed language and culture as being intertwined with one another and that the practice of language infuses its culture. Aligned with this perception, Kramsch (1998) states: “language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality” (p. 3). Likewise, participants thought that when native language use diminishes, or is devalued, English then becomes a powerful means of acculturation. Therefore, the fact that they had to use English in every aspect of daily lives in the U.S. evoked the feeling of detraction from their linguistic and cultural roots. Yet, participants who expressed a perception of such did not necessarily ascribe negative sentiments or attitudes to the English language. Rather, they enjoyed speaking and using English to the extent that this language was not assimilating or reshaping their cultural identities and turning them into “Americanized” Turks.

Interestingly, this pattern of attitude was only identified among male participants, especially those who had been living in the U.S. relatively longer than the others. None of the female participants expressed any opinion that viewed English as an assimilative language or a potential danger to their cultural and linguistic identities. Thus, the perception

of English as a cultural and linguistic threat and that it would detract language-minorities from their cultural and linguistic identities, varied based on the gender of the participants.

Excerpt 4 (interview with Buğra).

“I speak so little Turkish here that English is as if becoming my native language and I don’t want that. And you know sometimes speaking so much English I seem like an American or the way I behave. When I go back to Turkey my friends sometimes say “Why do you speak Turkish like English” or “You’ve changed into exactly like those stupid American guys on MTV”. I don’t like these things and I don’t want this happen to myself”.

Being exposed to the American culture and speaking only in English in the U.S. makes Buğra question how his native language accent and behaviors, which might have been slightly influenced by the American culture and the English language, were criticized and ridiculed by his friends in Turkey. Apparently, he did not want to be stereotyped as an *Americanized Turk* with an assimilated linguistic and cultural identity, which he presumed could happen if he were to immerse more into the American culture using the English language. As a result, the lack of opportunities to speak in his native language in the U.S. led the participant think that speaking only in English can be a threat in maintaining his linguistic and cultural bonds with his native roots.

Some of the male participants also perceived the use of English language based on nationalistic ideas and even patriotic feelings. They thought using too much English might disrupt and deteriorate individuals’ proud feelings for their country, culture, and native language. This pattern of attitude alluded to the common perception that “Turks are patriotic for their countries and culture” (Canefe, 2002). Even though they were aware that they had to use English in order to survive and pursue their academic endeavors, they thought favoring English over their native language would undermine the pride they held for their cultural and national identities. However, this pattern of attitude did not necessarily bespeak negative connotations of English. Participants were aware of the necessity of speaking in English for their survival needs and academic pursuits. Yet, they stated that perceiving English as if more significant and prestigious than their native language and devaluing Turkish would mean denying their national identities. Hence, some

of the participants were critical of and not tolerant with their Turkish friends speaking English among themselves or inserting English words to their conversations in Turkish.

Excerpt 5 (interview with Burçak).

“There are some Turkish guys here just speak English between themselves. This is so strange and I don’t know, wrong. Why speaking in English? Because Turkish is their native language! I am not saying I don’t like English. I just don’t use it when I speak to my Turkish friends. If I did that, I don’t like my country or my own language. Those guys won’t even tell strangers they are Turkish! It is annoying and I can never be like them and I don’t want to!”

One of the male participants emphasized how English imposed its culture in everyday life of Turkey. He complained about the cultural products English brought along, and how people were led to favor and consume those products. He stated that the increasing popularity of English use in Turkey is infusing its own values into the society and causing a clash between the two cultures. Interviews with this participant elicited striking statements, such as “I want to learn English, not its cultural imperialism” and “I was brought up in Turkish culture and I don’t want English to have a right to influence my culture”. Given the increasing dominance of English across the world, including Turkey, the participant thought that English had the potential to have significant impacts on cultural identities of nations.

Some of the participants also raised the issue of how the new generation Turkish youth has developed a tendency to insert English-origin words into their conversations. They interpreted this societal linguistic pattern as a tool to show off, and at the same time, a detriment to cultural identities of the upcoming generation. Participants emphasized their discomfort with the recent phenomenon of the penetration of the English language in Turkish society through advertisements or store signs being written in English or embellished with English words, radio stations playing more songs in English than Turkish, and the reality shows and TV series that originated from the U.S. and were cultured with American values being aired in Turkish. Considering these, male participants perceived English as an “insidious” language that tends to instill its culture and values into the societies where it is learned and spoken popularly. Nevertheless, they recognized it as a

language they needed to use for their academic pursuits and survival needs in everyday life of the U.S.

English as an Instrumental and Survival Language

It has been argued that minority languages evoke more positive, personal, and affective feelings whereas the majority languages evoke more instrumental values (Wölck, 2005). Analysis of the interviews alluded to a similar pattern among the participants when they discussed about the functional and emotional values English evoked for them, as well as in how they perceived their native language, Turkish, as a minority language in the U.S. context. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the participants acknowledged the importance of English language to have better jobs and become more accomplished in their careers. Thus, they perceived English as an instrumental language in which they had to be proficient in order to accomplish their objectives.

Excerpt 6 (interview with Seçil).

“English is a big concern for me. Finally, I’ll be working as an engineer Turkey. All jobs require to know English very well. I’ll not definitely be offered a job if I don’t know English. So I have to work hard to return to Turkey with a good level of English knowledge. But I also like it. If I was still in Turkey and had a job and if that job did not have language requirements, I would still learn English. To some people language learning is an enjoyable thing. And I am one of those like that”.

Most of the participants’ thoughts cohered with Seçil’s statement above on the necessity to learn and fluently speak in English in order to meet their career and job requirements. Thus, they demonstrated more instrumental orientations toward learning and using the language. That is, English language served as an instrument in accomplishing career-oriented objectives. This pattern of attitude reflects participants’ utilitarian motives in attaining English language proficiency in order to gain social recognition and economic advantage in the workplace (Baker, 1992).

Aside from the instrumental values attached to English, some of the participants stated that they needed to learn English to survive in the U.S., not necessarily to achieve a higher economic or social status. Such perceptions were especially common among the

participants who reported their future jobs did not require English language proficiency and those who were planning to pursue careers in the U.S. Attaining communicative competence in the English language was essential to fully function in the society. Therefore, it was crucial for them to learn this language thoroughly and use it fluently in the contexts of academic and daily life, if they were to survive and pursue a career in the U.S. For some of the participants, English was of vital survival importance in the sense that if they did not have the English language proficiency to make progress in their academic work and communicate in daily life, then they would be forced to go back home. For these participants, English language was perceived as the primary tool to survive in the U.S., not necessarily a language that helped them gain higher economic and social status in the society.

In light of this attitudinal pattern among the participants, it may be argued that having a survival-oriented attitude toward the majority language still expresses the instrumental values that its non-native speakers perceive toward that language. Baker (1992) states: “instrumental attitudes to learning a second language, or persevering a minority language might be, for example, for vocational reasons, status, achievement, personal success, self enhancement, self actualization, or basic security and survival” (p. 32). Whether their purpose of learning English was to secure better jobs, attain a social status, or survive in the U.S., participants demonstrated instrumental attitudes toward learning English.

At the micro-level of their interpersonal survival needs, some of the participants mentioned that they felt restricted with English language when they wanted to express their feelings, whereas they felt flexible and confident expressing those feelings in their native language. They were at ease discussing emotional and personal topics in Turkish; yet, using English in similar circumstances was challenging and restricting. At the same time, trying to articulate their feelings in English did not evoke the feeling of sincerity and closeness with interlocutors when they were engaged in affective conversational discourses. Therefore, using the English language to open up to the native speakers of English and articulating their feelings in personal discourses was a challenge for the participants.

Excerpt 7 (interview with Türkü).

“It is difficult to talk to my American friends when I want to express my feelings to their achievements or to their bad situations. I can’t make good sentences then. I say to my friends I wouldn’t want to have a relationship with an American boyfriend because I cannot make beautiful sentences for my feelings. It is difficult, I don’t know why. What I say to them is not always what I felt and how I wanted to say my feelings.”

Similar to how Türkü perceived English and Turkish at the level of personal and emotional conversation, four other participants concurred that they had the same feelings. While they were able to use English in academic settings and formal daily conversations, they did not feel comfortable expressing their feelings and emotions in English when they had to. One of the participants found it particularly difficult to read texts or watch movies that involved articulation of highly interpersonal feelings. She speculated that this pattern of difficulty might be due to her limited exposure to such affective and highly personal discourses in English, rather than her lack of vocabulary. As he participant indicated, she was accustomed to engage in personal and emotional conversations in Turkish, more so than English.

The perception of English as a restricting language for emotional and personal expression was identified among the female participants. While the interviews with male participants did not hint at similar and/or opposite patterns, the female participants emphasized that their native language, Turkish, rendered personal conversations more expressive and meaningful. They felt they were able to better empathize with each other when such personal and emotional topics were discussed in Turkish. Thus, being able to articulate and get across their feelings in English was a challenge for the participants and created a bottleneck for their interpersonal interactions within their circle of friends.

Discussion

Participants of this study were Turkish students pursuing their university degrees and learning English as a second language in the United States. Thus, it was not surprising to find that most of them demonstrated positive attitudes toward English. Participants described English as a *beautiful* language; yet, their attributions to *beautiful* concerned

different aspects of the language. Some of the recursive adjectives they used to describe the *beauty* of English included *exotic*, *cool*, *melodic*, and *musical*. They liked the flow of English in conversation, and they enjoyed listening to and speaking in it. Thus, when alluding to the *beauty* of this language, participants focused more on the phonetic aspects of English and how soft and euphonic it sounded to them. In addition, the *beauty* of English associated with its flexibility in offering numerous words, phrases, and expressions to name and articulate things in a lot of different ways. Participants acknowledged English as a lexically rich language that allowed them the opportunity to name and express things in a variety of creative ways. They also perceived English valuable for being the language of connection to people in different parts of the world in order to receive and disseminate knowledge and exchange content-specific information related to their area of study. Being able to globally communicate in English with people from varied linguistic backgrounds within the discourses of academia, media and business world added to the *beauty* of English language.

The study documented interesting findings regarding the ways in which male participants perceived English as a threat to cultural and linguistic identities. Living in the U.S. and immersing in this culture led the participants to feel that using English the entire time and favoring it over their native language would Americanize their selves. They were critical of the English language imposing its culture and values in subtle ways at individual and societal levels, which, according to them, could undermine the cultural and linguistic identities of people. Participants' opinion that getting overly immersed in the American culture through speaking and thinking in English gave rise to their patriotic feelings and surfaced their nationalistic ties with their culture and linguistic identities. Their concern about the cultural values of the U.S. prevailing in Turkish society through the English language as well as their worries about the lexical penetration of English into Turkish demonstrated participants' discomfort with this current situation. This discomfort also spoke to their protective stances of their native language and culture against the emerging popularity of English in Turkey. Nevertheless, these patterns of attitudes did not generate animosity or any negative perceptions of the language. Rather, participants recognized the significance of English in fulfilling their goals. Hence, they developed positive attitudes

toward learning and speaking it; yet, they were critical of and opposed to English language acculturating the society and engendering degraded perceptions of Turkish against itself.

Findings also suggest that the English language carried instrumental and survival values for the participants. For those who were planning to go back and start working in Turkey, attaining proficiency in English was essential in order to gain economic advantage and social status in the workplace. On the other hand, participants who expressed an interest in staying in the U.S. to pursue a career were concerned about English more for their professional development and survival needs. Developing full proficiency in English was an objective they strived to accomplish since they had to stand out competitive with their language skills in the U.S. job market as a non-native speaker. In the immediate context, developing communicative competence in English was an indispensable component of their everyday lives to fulfill survival needs while they stayed in the U.S. However, the value of English at the level of interpersonal interactions was contradicted when participants thought that it did not feel genuine to articulate their feelings in English, and that it restricted them from fully communicating their emotions. Turkish was therefore the language of emotional expression for them.

These attitudinal dispositions demonstrated certain patterns in light of the gender of the participants. While the males perceived English as a potential threat to cultural and linguistic identities, the females did not express an attitude of such. The perception that getting immersed in the American culture *too much* through English language may undermine one's cultural and linguistic values, originated from the male participants. Female participants did not state any similar or opposing perceptions, and they did not express their stances toward the current situation of the English language in Turkey. Therefore, their perceptions of English language and its use in Turkey did not allude to patriotic (or non-patriotic) feelings of any sort toward their native language and culture as most of the male participants' did. In addition, only the female participants mentioned the challenges of articulating their feelings in English.

Findings of attitudinal patterns in which gender differences were observed should be interpreted cautiously. It should *not* be assumed that the female participants did not perceive English as a potential cultural and linguistic threat, or that they would not take any nationalistic stances on the emerging dominance of the English language in Turkish

society, or vice-versa respectively. Similarly, findings do not assume whether or not the male participants found the English language challenging to express their feelings. The study did not include any leading questions that compared thoughts of the participants with each other across interviews, and they were not prompted to share their take on these particular issues as well. Therefore, aside from elucidating these patterns identified across genders, it would be misleading to conjecture or conclude on behalf of the participants who did not express any thoughts on these issues.

Overall, student participants reported to have positive attitudes toward English, and they acknowledged the importance of learning and developing proficiency in this language. The patterns in their varying attitudes toward English demonstrate the points in which participants tended to become more sensitive and critical of, such as the penetration of English vocabulary in Turkish and the infusion of its cultural values in societies where it has become trendy to learn and use it. Nevertheless, these concerns did not precipitate any negative or hostile attitudes toward English. Rather, the majority of the participants enjoyed using and speaking in this language.

Given that the participants were all university students in the U.S. learning English language and taking courses in their areas of study, it is not surprising that they had developed positive attitudes toward the language. They all preferred to come to the U.S. in order to pursue their professional goals. Therefore, it would be counterintuitive to hear negative attitudes toward learning and using English. Likewise, since some of the participants needed to learn and develop proficiency in English for their future professional occupations in Turkey, it is not surprising to see them attaching more instrumental values to this language. Also, associating the value of English with survival needs is also anticipated given that they had to survive in the society where English is spoken as the first language. These findings are predictable considering the background of the participants, their future professional aspirations, and the context in which they were situated then. Nevertheless, the study offers interesting insights about the perceptions of participants as to the ways in which they perceived English as a threat to cultural and linguistic identities, how they thought the abundance of lexical items and euphonic sound system made the language beautiful, and how at the same time, English restricted them from expressing their feelings genuinely. From these vantage points, the present study adds new perspectives to the

existing literature about the sociolinguistic and sociocultural patterns of perceptions that may shape the attitudes of learners toward the English language.

Conclusion

This was an in-depth exploratory study that examined the attitudes of eight Turkish students toward the English language as they attended a university in the U.S. Findings describe the patterns of attitudinal dispositions shared among the participants based on sociolinguistic and sociocultural considerations. The positive attitudes participants demonstrated also cohere with their success in learning the language, as the majority considered themselves “successful” learners of English. It is possible that their positive attitudes toward English might have provided them with the motivation and orientation to learn and master the language. As the research suggests, when learners develop positive attitudes toward a language, their language skills become less prone to attrition, which, at the same time, makes it less likely for them to lose their overall language proficiency, unless they continue to use it (Gardner, Lalonde & MacPherson, 1985).

The study contributes to the limited body of research that focuses on the attitudinal dispositions of Turkish speakers toward the English language as well as the attitudes of students toward learning and speaking English. Future research can expand this study to include students in Turkey in order to make comparative analyses of language attitudes between the U.S. and Turkish contexts. This will be an important piece of research in illuminating the ways in which the perceptions of students in Turkey about English differ from those who are learning and using it in a foreign context. The present study was qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive in nature. A similar but quantitative study with a more narrowed focus can investigate the links between language attitudes of students and their attainment levels. This will shed light on the intricacies of language attitudes in relation to language proficiency, and how these two constructs influence each other. Lastly, research can also examine the relationship between students’ motivation to learn a language and their language attitudes. This will help understand how attitudes developed toward a language impact learners’ motivation to learn the language, or how being motivated or demotivated to learn a language shapes the attitudes of learners toward that language.

At the pedagogical level, empirical knowledge garnered through these future studies will be useful to draw conclusions and suggest implications for language teaching. At the

same time, it will help educators understand how language teachers can support the development of positive attitudes toward a language and learning of that language. Eventually, robust empirical evidence in these areas will lend impetus to thinking about the practical ways in which second or foreign language learning processes can be scaffolded and enhanced through manifestations of students' attitudinal dispositions toward the target language.

References

- Baker, C. (1992). *Attitudes and language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Büyükkantarcıoğlu, N. (2004). A sociolinguistic analysis of the present dimensions of English as a foreign language in Turkey. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 165, 33-58.
- Canefe, N. (2002). Turkish nationalism and ethno-symbolic analysis: The rules of exception. *Nations and Nationalism*, 8(2), 133-155.
- El-Dash, L. G., & Busnardo, J. (2001). Brazilian attitudes toward English: Dimensions of status and solidarity. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(1), 57-74.
- Flowerdew, J., Li, D., & Miller, L. (1998). Attitudes towards English and Cantonese among Hong Kong Chinese university lecturers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(2), 201-231.
- Gardner, R. C., Lalonde, R. N., & MacPherson, J. (1985). Social factors in second language attrition. *Language Learning*, 35, 519-540.
- Graham, S. J. (2004). Giving up on modern foreign languages? Students' perceptions of learning French. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88, 171-191.
- Karahan, F. (2007). Language attitudes of Turkish students towards the English language and its use in Turkish context. *Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 7, 73-87.
- Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Marley, D. (2004). Language attitudes in Morocco following recent changes in language policy. *Language Policy*, 3, 25-46.
- Starks, D. & Paltridge, B. (1996). A note on using sociolinguistics methods to study non-native attitudes towards English. *World Englishes*, 15(2), 217-224.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Villa, D. J. (2002). The sanitizing of U.S. Spanish in academia. *Foreign Language Annals*, 35(2), 222-230.
- White, C. M. (2002). Language authenticity and identity: Indigenous Fijian students and language use in schools. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(1), 16-29.
- Williams, M., Burden, R., & Lanvers, U. (2002). "French is the language of love and stuff": Student perceptions of issues related to motivation in learning a foreign language. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(4), 503-28.

Wölck, W. (2005). Attitudinal contrasts between minority and majority languages in contact. In R. Muhr, R. Schrodts (Eds). *Standard variations and language ideologies in different language cultures around the world* (pp.111-120). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Ersoy Erdemir is a Ph.D. candidate from State University of New York at Buffalo. He is studying Early Childhood Education with a concentration in Second/Foreign Language Education. He is currently the director of a large-scale cluster-randomized intervention project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. He is also teaching graduate and undergraduate courses as an adjunct instructor. His area of expertise focuses on (1) early bilingualism/biliteracy development in young children, (2) early childhood/second language education, and (3) sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects of second and foreign language learning. Specifically, he has been investigating vocabulary development and emergent literacy skills of culturally and linguistically diverse children in early childhood classrooms.

Öğrencilerin İngilizce Diline Yönelik Tutumsal Eğilimleri: Toplumdilbilimsel ve Sosyokültürel Değerlendirmeler

Öz

Problem Beyanı: Bir dilin statüsü, değeri, ve önemi çoğunlukla o dile yönelik tutumlar ile ölçülür. İkinci veya yabancı bir dil öğrenmek ve bu dilde yeterlilik kazanmak öğrencilerin o dile yönelik tutumları ile yakından ilgilidir. Türkiye’de yaşayan ve ana dili Türkçe olan öğrencilerin İngilizce diline yönelik tutumları literatürdeki bir kaç çalışma içerisinde incelenmiştir. Fakat aynı konu İngilizceyi bu dilin ilk dil olarak konuşulduğu bir ülkede öğrenen ve kullanan Türk öğrencileri arasında incelenmemiştir.

Amaç: Bu keşifsel çalışma Amerika’nın kuzeydoğu bölgesindeki bir şehirde yaşayıp burada üniversite eğitimi gören Türk öğrencilerin İngilizce dilini öğrenme ve kullanmaya yönelik olan tutumlarını incelemiştir. Çalışma, öğrencilerin İngilizceye yönelik tutumsal eğilimlerini toplumdilbilimsel ve sosyokültürel açılardan değerlendirmiştir.

Yöntem: Bu çalışma Türkiye’de doğup Türkçe’yi ana dilleri olarak konuşan 8 öğrenci katılımcı (4 erkek ve 4 bayan) ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Katılımcılar bir eyalet üniversitesinde öğrenci olup Mühendislik Bilimleri ve Sosyal Bilimler alanlarında farklı programlarda tahsil görmekteydiler. Araştırma verileri, öğrencilerle iki aylık bir süreyi kapsayan zaman dilimi içerisinde derinlemesine yapılan röportajlar ile toplandı. Katılımcılarla birseysel olarak iki kez röportaj yapıldı. Toplamda on altı röportaj gerçekleştirildi. Her bir röportaj 50 ila 60 dakika sürüp araştırmacı tarafından ses kaydından yazıya çevrildi. Veri analizi iki aşamada gerçekleştirildi: (1) Röportajların yazıya çevirilmiş hali yoğun bir şekilde tekrar tekrar okunup yorumlanarak verilerde ortaya çıkan temalar ve tutum motifleri kodlandı; ve (2) eksenel kodlama yöntemi ile temalar ve tutum motifleri arasındaki tutarlılık nitel bağlantılarla belirlendi. Kodlanan veriler betimleyici bir yöntemle kendi bütünlüğü içerisinde yorumlandı.

Bulgular: Katılımcılar çoğunlukla İngilizce dilini öğrenme ve kullanmaya yönelik olumlu eğilimler sergilediler; ancak, tutumsal davranış motifleri toplumdilbilimsel ve sosyokültürel değerlendirmeler ışığında farklılıklar gösterdi. Katılımcılar İngilizceyi “güzel” bir dil olarak tanımlarken, dile yönelik güzellik algıları İngilizcenin dilbilimsel ve toplumdilbilimsel yönlerine göre, kulağa hoş gelen bir ses sistemi, kelimesel zenginliği, ve farklı ortamlarda (akademi, medya, kurumsal iş alanları gibi) dünya çapında bağlantı sağlayan bir dil olması

gibi farklı yorumlamalar ile bağdaştı. Öte yandan, katılımcılar İngilizceyi bireysel ve toplumsal seviyelerde kültürel ve dilsel kimliklere karşı bir tehdit unsuru olarak gördü. Ana dile İngilizceye göre daha az değer verilmesi ve son zamanlarda ortaya çıkan İngilizce kelimelerin Türkçeye'ye girmesi gibi konular katılımcıların ana dillerine yönelik vatansever duygularını tetikleyerek, kültürleri ve dilsel kimliklerine olan milliyetçi bağlarını ortaya çıkardı. Son olarak, katılımcılar İngilizce diline bir çok işlevsel ve yaşamsal değerler yüklediler. Katılımcılar, ana dili İngilizce olan insanlar ile kişisel ve duygusal konuşma ortamlarına girdikleri koşullarda, duygularını İngilizce ifade etmekte kısıtlanmış hissettiklerini belirttiler. Katılımcıların tutumları, ve bu tutumları sergilerken gösterdikleri davranış motifleri, cinsiyetler arasında önemli derecede farklılık gösterdi.

Sonuçlar ve Öneriler: Türkiye'de İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin tutumlarını inceleyen bir kaç çalışmadan farklı olarak, bu araştırma konuyu Amerika'da İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerinin perspektifi dahilinde inceleyip bu doğrultuda yeni kavrayışlar öne sürmektedir. Tutumsal çalışmalar dile yönelik tutum ve algıların, öğrencilerin o dili öğrenmesi ve dilde yeterlilik geliştirme isteklerini nasıl etkileyebileceği gibi konulara ışık tutup, öğrencilerin dile yönelik kritik duruşlarını toplumdilbilimsel ve sosyokültürel değerlendirmeler neticesinde ortaya çıkarabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil tutumları, Dil algıları, Toplumdilbilim, Sosyokültürel, İngilizce dili, Türkçe, Yabancı öğrenciler