

Attitudes Towards the Teacher As a Factor in Foreign Language Learning

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The article deals with an investigation of the attitudes of learners of English as a foreign language towards their teacher of English. The attitudes are analysed with respect to age, sex and achievement. A connection between almost all the measures of attitudes included in the investigation and learning achievement is established on the basis of the results obtained.

Introduction

It has been pointed out by many that foreign and second language learning, though similar in many respects, may imply two processes which do not always share the same variables or in which the variables do not have the same importance. Stern gives a very comprehensive definition of the two:

In contrasting 'second' and 'foreign' language there is today consensus that a necessary distinction is to be made between a non-native language learnt and used *within* one country to which the term 'second language' has been applied, and a non-native language learnt and used with reference to a speech community *outside* national or territorial boundaries to which the term 'foreign language' is commonly given. A 'second language' usually has official status or a recognized function within a country which a foreign language has not.

(Stern, 1983:16)

Second language learning is, among other things, characterized by more environmental support because it is used within the country of the learner, while foreign language learning implies various compensating measures for the lack of this support. A second language often implies informal learning whereas foreign language learning is characterized by formal instruction. Because of the different levels of exposure to the target language even when a second language is learnt through formal instruction the factors comprising the instruction have a different bearing on the process of learning.

Since foreign language learning may be considered to be taking place in non-supportive low-exposure environments, instruction is likely to play a very important

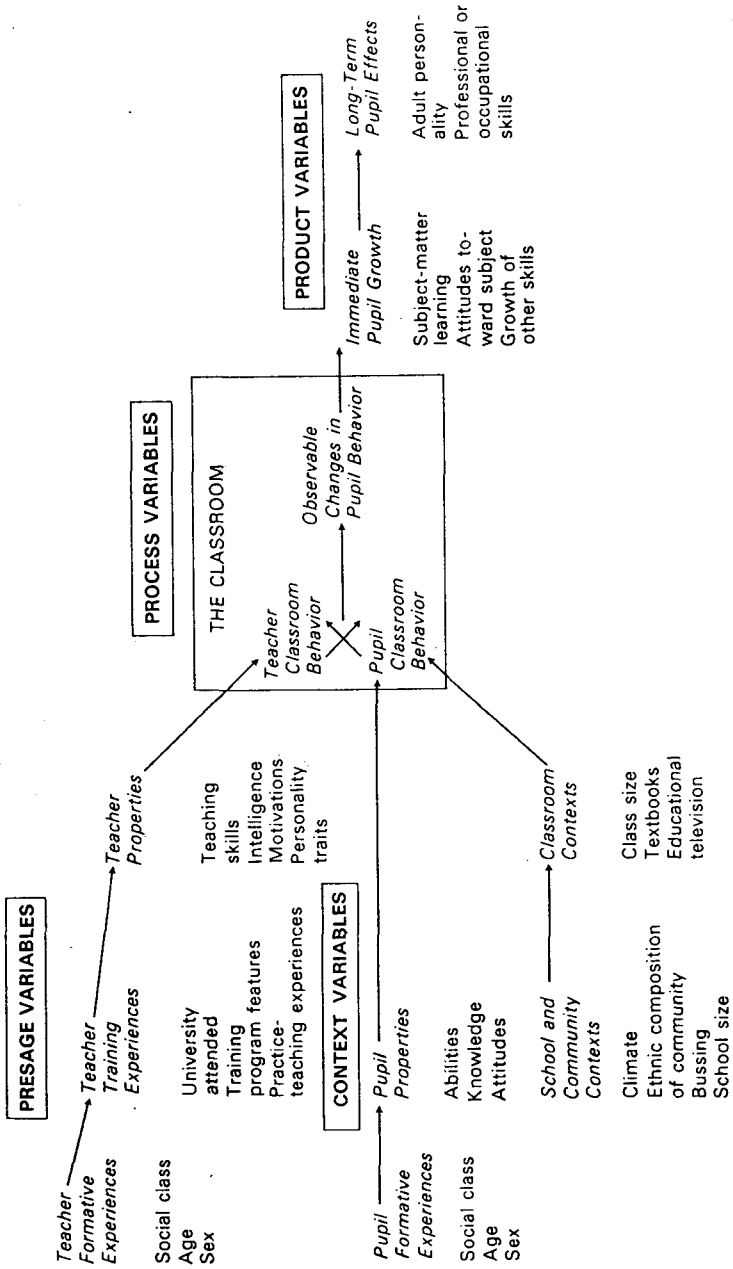


Figure 1 Dunkin and Biddle's model for the study of classroom teaching

role since the language class is the major, sometimes the only, source of target language input. This is why the elements of classroom teaching should be studied and considered in the light of their effect on foreign language learning achievement.

Some essential relationships operating in classroom teaching are presented very well in a model of teaching developed by Dunkin and Biddle (1974:38).

This study is concerned with the teacher as an element of the teaching setting. As can be seen in Figure 1, the characteristics that the teacher as an individual brings to teaching, his own formative experiences, his training and personal qualities are part of the “presage variables”, which act on process variables resulting in long-term and immediate product variables.

This study will focus on one aspect of “Teacher Properties”, namely personality traits. Since we are interested in the effects of teacher personality traits in the light of foreign language learners’ achievement these traits will be considered from the point of view of the learner. This means that the traits will be studied from the learner’s subjective estimations. Such an approach has been adopted because it is the learner’s subjective impression of the teacher’s traits that acts on the learner’s attitudes and motivation for learning the foreign language, not the ones we might come up with through studying the teacher’s personality traits objectively.

Instruments

An assessment of the learner’s attitudes towards the teacher was carried out by means of semantic differential scales developed by Gardner, Smythe & Smythe (1974). Since the original scales were partly adapted a short overview of the measures derived is presented here.

The following semantic differential ratings of the concept My English Teacher were used to estimate four measures:

1. *Evaluation of the English teacher*: unfriendly-friendly, unreliable-reliable, inconsiderate-considerate, bad-good, unpleasant-pleasant, impolite-polite, insincere-sincere, cheerless-cheerful.

2. *Rapport*: suspicious-trusting, insensitive-sensitive, unapproachable-approachable, impatient-patient.

3. *Competence*: disorganized-organized, unindustrious-industrious, unintelligent-intelligent, incapable-capable, incompetent-competent.

4. *Inspiration*: colourless-colourful, unimaginative-imaginative, dull-exciting, boring-interesting.

The seven-point differential scales were used in such a way that a higher score (maximum = 70) indicated a more positive reaction of the subjects.

The scales were arranged in a way that made sure the subjects would not answer automatically without considering their real feelings.

The subjects were instructed to go through the questionnaire quickly and react to their first impression, without dwelling on a scale for too long.

The subjects were also asked to write down their age, sex and the grade they were given in English at the end of the previous semester.

Sample

The sample (N = 340) included three age groups: primary school pupils (111), secondary school pupils (113) and university students (116). The age groups correspond to the stages of learning English as a foreign language with the primary school subjects having learnt English the least number of years and university students the most number of years. All the subjects were attending language classes in Zagreb. English was for all of them an obligatory subject in school.

As far as the grades in English are concerned, the majority of the subjects had the highest grade (grade 5) (33.5%) and the least number of subjects had the lowest grade (grade 1) (.3%). For easier handling of the achievement variable in the statistical analyses performed on the data the subjects were divided into two groups: low grade (including grades 1, 2, 3) and high grade (including grades 4, 5). There were 35.3% low grade subjects and 61.4% high grade subjects, while some 5% of the subjects failed to indicate their grades in English.

Results and discussion

The data were analyzed by means of a three-factor analysis of variance, with the factors being defined as SEX, AGE and GRADES in English. This analysis was performed on each of the four measures of the concept 'My English Teacher'.

The results are presented in Table 1 (p. 147).

Evaluation of the English teacher

Significant effects were obtained for all the three factors of SEX, AGE and GRADES, while none of the interactions were significant. Cell inspection shows that female subjects evaluated their English teacher higher than male subjects did, thus perhaps pointing out a connection between evaluation of the teacher and an affective relationship towards the language, which is also stronger in female learners.

Subjects with higher grades in English evaluated their teacher higher than the low grade subjects indicating, perhaps, a tendency to evaluate more highly people we connect with our own success. A completely opposite direction might also be plausible: the learner's high evaluation of the teacher might be a motivator making the learner work harder.

Table 1: Analysis of variance in four measures of attitudes towards the English teacher

	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	F	Signif. of F
Evaluation	Main effects				
	Sex	300.961	1	7.279	.007**
	Age	700.640	2	8.472	.000**
	Grades	483.340	1	11.689	.001**
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age	123.939	2	1.499	.225
	Sex x Grades	34.263	1	.829	.363
	Age x Grades	196.358	2	2.374	.095
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age x Grades	144.765	2	1.751	.175
Report	Main effects				
	Sex	34.868	1	1.907	.168
	Age	109.536	2	2.996	.051
	Grades	92.699	1	5.071	.025*
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age	117.174	2	3.205	.041*
	Sex x Grades	13.789	1	.754	.386
	Age x Grades	14.136	2	.387	.680
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age x Grades	16.454	2	.450	.638
Competence	Main effects				
	Sex	.668	1	.036	.849
	Age	464.667	2	12.594	.000**
	Grades	1.200.533	1	6.534	.011*
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age	91.175	2	2.471	.086
	Sex x Grades	.701	1	.038	.846
	Age x Grades	75.660	2	2.051	.130
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age x Grades	53.127	2	1.440	.239
Impression	Main effects				
	Sex	1.531	1	.069	.794
	Age	338.960	2	7.566	.001**
	Grades	69.708	1	3.112	.079
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age	302.636	2	6.756	.001**
	Sex x Grades	2.898	1	.129	.719
	Age x Grades	95.402	2	2.130	.121
	Interaction				
	Sex x Age x Grades	61.732	2	1.378	.254

** p < .01

* p < .05

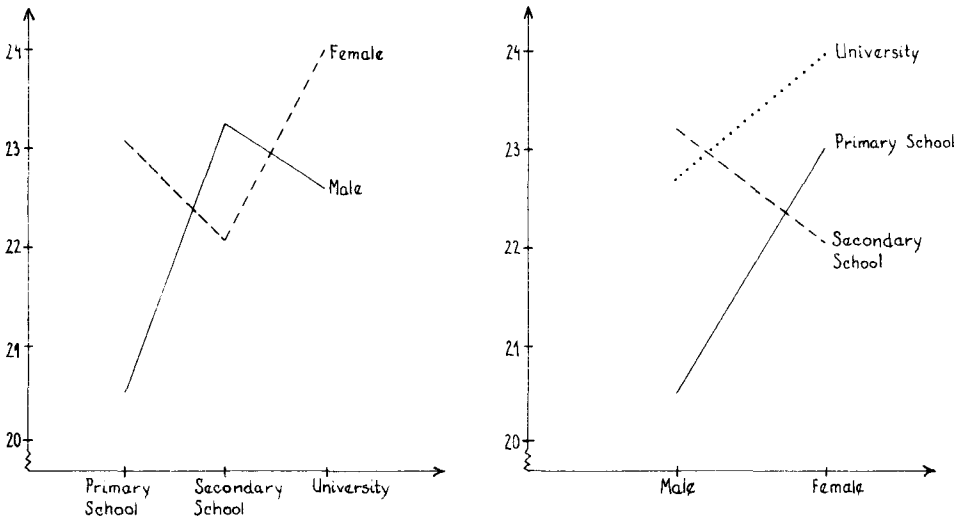
University students had the highest scores on the evaluation scales. This group of subjects may be taken as representing the adult age group: adults may be considered to be more tolerant and less critical of teachers than the two other age groups.

Rapport

Significant effects were obtained for only the GRADES, while the effects for SEX and AGE were not significant. The interaction between SEX and AGE was also statistically significant.

High grade subjects perceived the teacher's rapport to be greater than the low grade subjects did. This could be attributed to the fact that, generally speaking, teachers show more interest in better pupils, who symbolize their own success; they have been shown to be more patient with the successful students, thus having a more personal and a warmer relationship with good learners.

The interaction between AGE and SEX is presented graphically in Figures 1 and 2.



Figures 2 & 3: Two-way interaction between age and sex for Rapport

As can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, among male subjects teacher's rapport is perceived highest by the secondary school subjects and lowest by the primary school subjects. With female subjects the lowest rapport is perceived by the teenagers, while adult female subjects rate the teacher's rapport the highest. It can also be seen that the difference between the male and female subjects is the greatest with the primary school

age group, with the female subjects having higher scores. With secondary school subjects it was the male subjects who had higher scores on the rapport scales.

These results may point to some crucial changes in the affective relationships towards the learning situation that occurs in female learners at secondary school age level.

Competence

Significant effects were obtained for AGE and GRADES, while the effect for SEX was not statistically significant. None of the interactions examined were significant.

Cell inspection points to a significant difference between primary and secondary school subjects, with the primary school subjects having higher scores on the competence scales. This result may be interpretable in the light of the fact that people tend to overestimate the competence of those who know more about a subject than they themselves do.

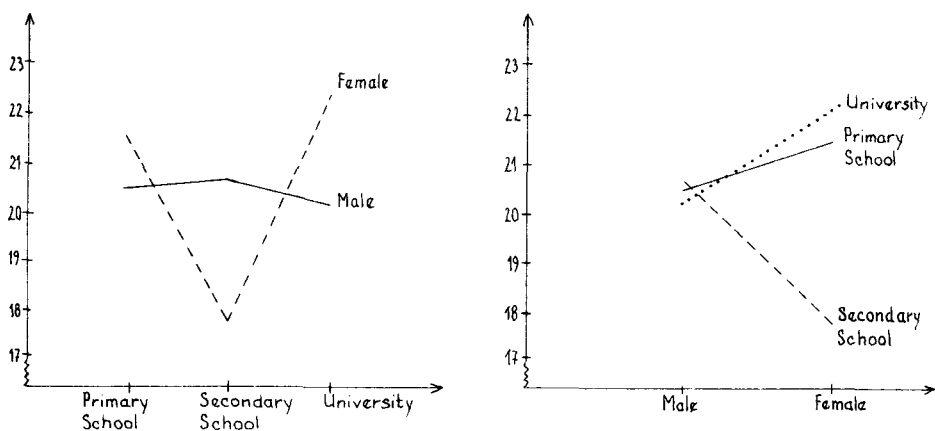
High grade subjects rate their teacher more competent than the low grade subjects. It is plausible that if a teacher is perceived competent the learners would be more motivated to learn and thus get higher grades. This result may also be attributed to the possibility that by rating his teacher as more competent, the learner actually adds weight to his grades.

Inspiration

A significant effect was obtained for AGE, while the effects for SEX and English GRADES were not significant. Secondary school pupils rated their teacher the least inspirational, and university students perceived their teacher's inspiration highest. Teenage pupils are little impressed by their teacher because they are critical about adults in general.

The interaction between SEX and AGE is also significant, while none of the other interactions is statistically significant. Figures 4 and 5 show graphically the significant interaction.

As can be seen in Figures 4 and 5, in the male sample the differences between age groups are rather small, while the female sample shows significant differences between the secondary school subjects on the one hand (the lowest scores) and the other two groups (with approximately similar scores) on the other. From the point of view of the age of the subjects the greatest difference between male and female subjects exists in the secondary school age group, with the male subjects having significantly higher scores than female subjects, in contrast to the other two groups. The interaction is caused by very high scores in the male secondary school age group. It seems that, generally speaking, male teenage learners do not live through the "sensitive" period as drastically as their female peers. Male scores on inspiration scales remain rather stable. One possible explanation may be that teachers take girls' interest in foreign language learning



Figures 4 & 5: Two-way interaction between age and sex for Inspiration

for granted and concentrate more on the materials and teaching techniques that would appeal to boys who, as a result, rate the teacher's inspiration higher. Another explanation, a more plausible one perhaps, is that for female learners this period of life is characterized by complex psychological changes which affect their attitudes towards language learning.

Conclusion

The results obtained in this study throw light on some aspects of teacher effects on the foreign language learning process. It should be noted that significant effects for grades in English were obtained on all four measures, though there was a marginally significant ($p.10$) effect for Inspiration. This points to a connection between achievement and attitudes towards the teacher. There are two possible ways of interpreting this connection. One is that through perceiving his teacher's qualities, rapport, competence and inspiration as very high, the learner perceives his language classes as meaningful, important and of high quality and this enhances his motivation to learn. The result are high grades in English. The other possible interpretation is that because the learner is successful in his learning he perceives his teacher as competent, inspiring, good, etc. A different kind of study should be undertaken to show which of the two interpretations is the more realistic one. Significant interactions between sex and age on the measures for teacher rapport and inspiration are not only of great interest but may also be very instructive. The very low scores on these scales obtained for female secondary school subjects indicate that some crucial changes may be taking place in teenage female

learners of the foreign language which affect their attitudes towards foreign language learning.

Significant effects for age on the evaluation and inspiration scales might be taken to reflect the current conditions in classroom teaching in this country. In secondary schools the classes are very large and these schools are, on the whole, not very well equipped. It is extremely difficult for a teacher working under such conditions to be “inspirational”, particularly with teenagers. Classroom teaching conditions are not any better in university settings but university students have different expectations from their teacher. While secondary school pupils often expect to be entertained (Chastain, 1976) and actually expect the teacher to motivate them for learning (Mihaljević, 1990), adult learners’ motives generally come from outside the classroom and are not dependent upon teacher behaviour to that extent. That, and the fact that people become less critical of others with age, may explain why university subjects evaluated their teacher significantly higher and rated their inspiration higher than the other two age groups.

Like some other studies in this field (Greenwood et al., 1973; Field, 1973; Walker, 1973, etc.), the results of the present study show that learners are aware of teacher qualities, be they personal, social or cognitive. In addition, this study points to a connection between the learners’ perception of teacher qualities and achievement.

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