

Youth and the Study of Foreign Language: An Investigation of Attitudes

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Abstract: This study was undertaken to assess the attitudes of elementary and middle school students toward foreign language (FL) study. A questionnaire, designed to measure student attitudes toward FL study and perceived parental support, was administered to 209 youth in grades three through eight, in two different school populations within the San Francisco Bay Area. The results of t-tests show that students with home languages other than English demonstrated more positive attitudes toward FL and a higher degree of perceived parental support for their FL program than did students whose home language was English. There were no gender differences found on the total attitude score. However, a difference between the two school populations emerged, with students at School 1 scoring significantly higher on the attitude scale and reporting more parent support than students at School 2. The implications of the study are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

Background

Because language is a social event, and because an individual is profoundly shaped by the language he or she speaks, social considerations — such as the setting in which we learn language — are instrumental in explaining how people come to acquire a new language. According to Bialystok and Hakuta (1994), we express our response to these social considerations in the attitudes that we form toward the foreign language (FL) and in the extent to which we are motivated to learn a second language (L2).

Attitudes, in relation to FL learning, have been a popular subject of research in the past four decades, as attitudes are “both central to the understanding of human behavior and are capable of explication and measurement” (Baker, 1992, p. 20). Over the years, several definitions have been given to the term *attitude*. Its root meaning (derived from the Latin word ‘aptus’) is ‘aptitude for action,’ or having a tendency towards certain actions. Gardner and Lambert (1959), among the first language researchers to partake in such study, defined attitudes as major integrative forces in the development of personality that give consistency to an individual’s behavior. As such, “our attitudes and motivation reflect how we view a situation and how much we would like to be a part of it” (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994, p. 34). In L2 research, “attitudes are a convenient and efficient way of explaining consistent patterns in behavior” (Baker, 1992, p. 11).

As is commonly known in the L2 field, Gardner and Lambert (1959; 1972) found that motivations to learn an L2 could be divided into two distinct categories. The first, *instrumental* motivation, focuses on an end goal. This type of motivation has been associated with practical benefits such as economic advances and personal achievement (e.g., graduation requirements, getting a job, earning more money, etc.). The second category, namely *integrative* motivation, drives the student to study an L2 to learn more about culture, to meet new people, or to become a

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