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# The Role of Personality Characteristics in Forming EFL University Students' Attitudes towards Learning English as a Foreign Language: A Case Study

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**ABSTRACT**

The role of attitude as a crucial factor that impacts learners' management and performance of all language skills and activities has formed a focal point of study and interest on the part of the majority of scholars specialized in language teaching, learning, and acquisition. This is so because attitude' through its main three components, namely cognitive, affective and behavioural, uncovers the ways that learners think of the new language, feel of it and behave in doing all its relevancies. The present study is intended to investigate the attitudes of EFL university students towards English language learning. It hypothesizes that there are no differences between the attitudes of male and female university students towards learning English. To bring about the aims and test the hypothesis, a questionnaire has been administered to a randomly selected sample of 96 EFL 2nd year students at the Dept. of English Language, College of Humanities, University of Zakho, Kurdistan Region, Iraq during the second term of the academic year 2016-2017. The quantitative and qualitative data collected by means of the questionnaire reveal that **(1)** students in the sample have positive attitudes, in terms of the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects, towards learning English, and **(2)** there is a statistically significant differences between the male and female students on the basis of gender.

## 1. Introduction

Learning a new language forms an inseparable aspect of every body's life. This is because language is the best means of communication as it can help in expressing opinions, hopes, and even our dreams (Tavil, 2009, p. 338). As such, there are constant attempts, through investigation, study, analysis, research, laboratory work, etc., to improve language learning and increase human abilities to retain what is already learned. Such endeavours would remain ineffective unless the plethora of factors, namely age, personality, attitude, intelligence, aptitude, motivation, anxiety, etc. (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), that influences the process of language learning is accounted for and closely looked into.



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Attitude, due to the wide range of the secondary factors represented by its already referred to components, is viewed as the prime factor that influences the language learning process either positively or negatively. "Attitudes towards learning besides opinions and beliefs have an obvious influence on students' behaviors and consequently on their performance" (Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012, p. 119). In other words, learners who have positive beliefs about other languages usually tend to boost further positive attitudes towards learning the language; just opposite to the learners who have negative beliefs and would duly experience anxiety, demotivation and boredom (Victori & Lockhart, 1995). Such viewpoints have led to is a general consensus that the most effective way to get insight into the learning process is to study the learners' attitude towards learning the language (Tahaineh & Daana, 2013, p. 160). As such, the present study seeks to shed more light on the role of attitude in learning EFL by exploring the attitudes of Kurdish EFL University students towards English learning, duly specifying which component, namely cognitive, affective and/or behavioural, is mostly dominant or prevalent among the sample under study, and designating the existence of any statistical difference in the sample's attitudes according to gender.

To evaluate the role of attitude, as one of the most crucial psychological variables, that affects the process of FL learning, educationalist have sought to put forward a definition of attitude that might work as an all-embracing definition that accounts for the varied and wide aspects of the concept. This is on one hand. On the other hand, the bulk of literature on attitude works as a source for suggesting many definitions of attitude throughout decades. Green stated that "this fact is largely a consequence of the broadness of the concept, which permits various definitions reflecting the theoretical point of view of the individual student of attitudes" (Green, 1977, p. 111). Ahmed (1989, p. 87) stated that "among the most agreed-upon points in the early" and, likewise, updated definitions of the concept of "attitude" is the reference made to a "specified topic" or an "object" to denote the direction of behaviour. Such a definition finds a solid ground in what is stated by Gardner (1985) who remarked out that attitude is but an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, usually concluded or determined on the basis of individual's beliefs. Concerning the nature of "attitude" and its main components, Montano and Kasprzyk stated that

attitude is determined by the individual's beliefs about outcomes or attributes of performing the behavior (behavioral beliefs), weighted by evaluations of those outcomes or attributes. Thus, a person who holds strong beliefs that positively valued outcomes will result from performing the behavior will have a positive attitude toward the behavior. Conversely, a person who holds strong beliefs that negatively valued outcomes will result from the behavior will have a negative attitude. (Montano & Kasprzyk, 2008, p. 71)

Attitudes are said to have three interconnected aspects or components, viz. cognitive, affective and behavioral. Such a nature of attitudes definitely applies to FL learning settings and as follows: The cognitive aspect accounts for the beliefs, opinions and points of view FL learners have or hold towards whatever is related to the teaching-learning process of the language with main focus on teachers' and teaching materials as these last two elements in addition to learners form the corner stones of the whole process. The affective aspect attends to learners' feelings in terms of what they like or/and dislike of the process a whole and its subsidiaries. H. D. Brown (2001, p. 127) stated that "attitude is characterized by a large proportion of emotional involvement such as feelings, self, relationships in the community". Finally, the behavioural aspect or component outlines learners' inclination to adopt or discard certain behaviours or actions pertinent to the process of language learning (Wenden, 1991).

The preceding aspects of attitudes are covertly as far as the cognitive and affective aspects of attitudes are concerned, and overtly in terms of the behaviours/actions that FL learners undertake form the bases of learners either positive or negative attitudes towards the foreign language and its relevancies. Learners' positive

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attitudes are indispensable for the successful learning of the FL, while failure in performing or managing the varied FL tasks is ascribed to learners negative attitudes; a point that is heavily heeded by the people concerned and has simultaneously made scholars think that attitudes as one of the learners' personality characteristics and in order to prove their positivity or negativity should be measured by means of efficient tools (Ajzen, 2005). Accordingly, the present study has been launched to examine the attitudes, as a main personality factors of a sample of EFL university learners towards English with focus on first on the attitudes three components, cognitive, affective and behavioral, and second on the impact that the learners' gender, male and/or female, on the formation of such attitudes, whether positive or negative.

### *1.1. Rational of the Study*

It is believed that this study will be beneficial to the researchers interested in the study of FL learners demographic variables and the adopted educational policies concerning FL teaching. It is expected that this study would shed light on the process of English language teaching and learning as it accounts for the attitudes that a sample of Kurdish EFL university students have towards EFL and the benefits that learning English would entail. Additionally, it is expected to provide insights for research on attitudes towards language at large and the role of learners gender in forming such attitudes especially within a foreign context of learning English. Finally, it is thought that no sufficient investigation of Kurdish EFL university attitudes, in terms of attitudes components that are reflected in learners' personality characteristics, towards EFL has been conducted. Accordingly, the current study may be interesting to teachers of English through the presentation of a set of learners personality characteristics, namely needs, interests, inclinations, opinions, etc., all of which are expected to assist teachers in setting more appropriate programs and activities so as to make learners develop more positive attitudes towards learning EFL.

### *1.2. Study Objectives*

The present study is set to investigate EFL university learners' attitudes towards learning English. It further aims at specifying the role that learners' gender plays by highlighting the type of attitudes, i.e. positive or negative, that male and/or female learners have toward learning EFL. The study also seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What role is played by the cognitive, affective and behavioural components in determining the attitudes of EFL learners at University of Zakho towards learning EFL?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences between the EFL university learners' attitudes according to gender?

## 2. Literature Review

Attitudes, as focal and important affective and psychological factor, play a vital role in the process of FL teaching and learning. Hence, the growing relation between the learners' nature and the importance of language use (Saidat, 2010) has led to the carrying out of a bulk of studies during the past 60 years in different parts of the world in an attempt to identify and highlight the role that attitudes play in FL learning.

### *2.1. The Importance of Attitude*

The indispensable role of attitude in language learning has been closely studied worldwide. The prevalent belief is that learners' performance of the different aspect of the language they are learning is noticeably affected by the attitudes they hold, positive or negative and that "attitudes are important to us because they cannot be neatly separated from study"(Reid (2003, p. 33). As such, it can be deduced that intellectual capacity does not suffice to achieve success in language learning and that learners' personality, through its varied affective and



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behvaioural elements, contribute to the process of language learning in one way or another. In other words, the process of FL learning should not be viewed as purely academic approach, but rather psychological and social as well. This is so because many studies, of which Kiptui and Mbugu's study (2009 as cited in Abidin et al., 2012) is an example, have proved that attitudes when negative lead to poor performance in EFL. Such a claim finds a solid ground in Gardner and Lambert (1972, p. 216) who stated that "the ability of the students to master a second language is not only influenced by the mental competence or, language skills, but also on the students' attitudes and perceptions towards the target language", and that attitudes boost the learning process, influence learners' beliefs and behaviors towards the new language, its community and culture, and finally identify learners' inclination to learn the language. Added to that, Baker (1992, p. 9) stated that "in the life of a language, attitudes to that language appear to be in language restoration, preservation, decay or death." In a study conducted by De Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2005), they claimed that "language teachers, researchers and students should acknowledge that high motivation and positive attitude of students facilitate second language learning" (p. 15). Hence, uninterested learners with no tendency to engage in learning the FL. Therefore, if learners are not interested and do not have tendency in the learning of the FL would definitely have negative attitudes. They will also be demotivated and feel noticeable levels of anxiety in learning it.

### *2.3 Attitude Formation*

The well-known scholar Brown (1994) pointed out that "attitudes, like all aspects of the development of cognition and affect in human beings, develop early in childhood and are the result of parents and peers' attitudes, contact with people who are different in any number of ways, and interacting affective factors in the human experience" (p. 168). As such, it is evident that attitudes are developed or formed due to the positive or negative impact of a number of stimulants. To be more specific, the process of learning an FL is expected to be a positive change in the learner's personality with regard to its cognitive, affective and behavioural domains. This is so due to the fact that on learning a specific subject, a learner is supposed to think and behave in a different manner and have distinguished beliefs (Kara, 2009, p. 17).

### *2.4 Components of Attitude*

As already mentioned, attitudes are structured from cognitive, affective and behavioural components, each of which has been approached, studied and analyzed on the basis of the perceptions, feelings and behaviours displayed by human beings at large and FL learners in particular.

#### *2.3.1 Cognitive Component of Attitude*

The cognitive component of attitude includes the way that learners think of the knowledge about the FL they are receiving and the way the perceive the process of learning the FL in general. The cognitive component of attitude is reflected in the four steps of "connecting the previous knowledge and the new one, creating new knowledge, checking the knowledge, and applying the new knowledge in many situations" (Abidin et al., 2012, p. 122).

#### *2.3.2 Affective Component of Attitude*

With regard to the affective component of attitude, Feng and Chen (2009, p. 94) pointed out that the "learning process is an emotional process, and it is affected by different emotional factors, the teacher and his students engage in various emotional activities in it and varied fruits of emotions are yield." In other words, FL learners' attitude reflect or rather express their interest and inclination to the objects and situations surrounding them, and hence influence their perspectives of learning the language (Choy & Troudi, 2006).

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### *2.3.3 Behavioral Component of Attitude*

The behavioral component of attitude outlines the learners' ways of behaviour and reactions to specific situations. Kara (2009, p. 102) found out that "positive attitudes lead to the exhibition of positive behaviors toward courses of study, with participants absorbing themselves in courses and striving to learn more. Such students are also observed to be more eager to solve problems, to acquire the information and skills useful for daily life and to engage themselves emotionally".

## 3. Related Studies

Many studies have been conducted to investigate learners' attitudes towards FL learning. Al Mamun, Rahman, Rahman, and Hossaim (2012) investigated the attitudes of undergraduate students of Life Science School of Khulna University towards English language, and found out that the respondents have positive attitudes towards English language. Likewise, the investigation of the attitudes of High School students towards learning English and their success in reading comprehension, Momani (2009) found out that the students have positive attitudes towards learning EFL. There had been also s strong correlation between learners' attitudes towards English learning and their reading comprehension performance. Such results had also been arrived at by a plethora of studies that indicated students' positive attitudes. Example are (Al-Magid & Al-Mamun, 2009; Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009; Hashwani, 2008; Kara, 2009; Momani, 2009).

As for gender variable, Ahmed (1989) investigated Preparatory School students' motivation and attitudes towards learning EFL and if there were any differences in the attitudes of male and female students in this respect. It was found out that the participants had positive attitudes towards learning English. The finding also indicated a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of male and female students.

Abidin et al. (2012) investigated the three attitudinal components, namely cognitive, affective and behavioural, of Libyan Secondary School students towards learning English and whether there was any significant difference in the attitudes of male and female students towards learning English. The participants showed positive attitudes students towards English learning. Besides, data analysis showed a statistically significant difference in the attitudes according to gender..

Just in line with the outcomes of the two preceding studies, Eshghinejad (2016) studies leaners' attitudes towards learning English and whether there was a significant difference in the attitudes of male and female students. The findings underlined learners' interest in, high enthusiasm to, and positive attitudes towards learning English. There was also a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of male and female university students towards learning English in favour of females.

The current study is intended to follow suit as far as its objectives, in comparison to those of the previous studies, are concerned. The choice of the topic, the purposeful selection of the sample of the study and that of the object, namely learning EFL, are all intended to fill a gap and to contribute even partially, through the results arrived at, to the process of English language teaching and learning in Kurdistan region, Iraq.

## 4. Methodology

### *4.1. Participants*

A sample of 96 2nd year EFL students, 37 male ( 38.5 %) and 59 ( 61.4 %) female, were , randomly selected from among a population representing the 4 study stages at the Dept. of English language, University of Zakho, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

### *4.2. Research Design*

The design of the present study is of quantitative nature, i.e. inferential and descriptive. Hence, the only

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measuring instrument was an adapted questionnaire. The participants were asked to be attentive and honestly answer the items of the questionnaire. They were required to give their responses to a set of items concerning the ways they think and feel about the three aspects of attitude, namely cognitive, affective and behavioural. The demographic profile with focus on gender was a further point that participants were asked to heed.

### *4.3. Research Instrument*

A questionnaire for investigating "attitudes" was the only instrument used to collect the data for the current study. The items were partly adapted from different resources, viz. Boonrangsri, Chuaymankhong, Rermyindee, and Vongchittpinyo (2004) and (Gardner (1985). Based on the researchers' experience and to bring about the aims of the research, some items were added. As such, the items became 30 in number and were all selected and set to address the three attitudinal aspects and as follows: Items 1-10 (behavioral aspect), items 11-20 (cognitive aspect), and 21-30 (affective aspect). It is worthy to note that for proper research investigation and to minimize the effect of intentional ignorance and improper responding on the part of the participants, the items of the questionnaire were distributed to be 19 positive items and 11 negative ones. Finally, the participants were supposed to give responses according to Likert's 5-point scale that rangers from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

### *4.4. Reliability and Validity*

To ensure the validity of the research instrument, i.e. the questionnaire, it was given in the first place to a panel of juries, of the teaching faculty of University of Duhok, specialized in psychology and teaching EFL. Their suggestions in terms of adding, deleting or modifying the items of the questionnaire were taken into account and hence the questionnaire was approved for administration.

To prove the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on a randomly selected sample of 25 students. The collected data were analyzed by using Social Science Program (SPSS) version 20.0. The reliability coefficient test indicated a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.963 which indicated that the questionnaire was highly reliable and that the items were absolutely suitable to bring about the aims of the study.

### *4.5. Data Collection and Analysis*

The data were collected by means of the adapted questionnaire which was a administered to a randomly selected sample of 96 male and female sophomore EFL students at the Dept. of English Language, University of Zakho. SPSS program was used to analyze the data quantitatively aiming so as to get accurate answers for the two research questions. Besides, the T-test was applied to find out if there were any statistically significant differences between the attitudes of the male and female participants towards the three attitudinal aspects, namely cognitive, affective and behavioural.

## 5. Discussion of Results

Concerning the first research question which states "What role is played by the cognitive, affective and behavioural components in determining the attitudes of EFL learners at University of Zakho towards learning EFL?", the descriptive analysis of the result demonstrates that participants scored a mean value 41.143 (SD = 4.6177. This outlines that the participants had a positive attitude towards English language learning. This is supported by the mean values scored for the cognitive 39.9753 (SD = 4.01254), affective 41.3571 (SD = 4.52584) and behavioral 36.2141(SD=4.65841) aspects of attitudes (See Table 1).

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**Table 1. T-test: Gender and Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Aspects of Attitudes**

| | Gender | N | Mean | Std. deviation | Std.Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cognitive Aspect | Fem | 59 | 41.02 | 4.21734 | 0.92557 |
| | Male | 37 | 37.98 | 4.32541 | 0.95437 |
| Affective Aspect | Fem | 59 | 43.21 | 4.91241 | 0.97674 |
| | Male | 37 | 39.02 | 4.98989 | 1.49352 |
| Behavioral Aspect | Fem | 59 | 36.16 | 4.37451 | 1.01010 |
| | Male | 37 | 36.47 | 5.33178 | 1.42141 |

### *5.1. Data Analysis and Discussion of the results Related to the Cognitive Aspect*

Analysis of the responses to items 1-10 revealed both negative and positive attitudes towards English learning English as far as the cognitive aspect is concerned. When asked that "they are learning English just because it is enjoyable for them", 75.5% of the participants strongly disagreed and only 2.3% agreed. It is evident that the sample's orientation is not limited to short-term objectives such as passing the exam. In other words, the participants had integrative rather than instrumental objectives behind learning EFL. This is enhanced by their "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" responses to the items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 which indicated that learning EFL would help them gain more information, be more knowledgeable, and understand other subjects, and enable them to communicate efficiently. It can be concluded that the participants had positive attitudes towards learning EFL in terms of the cognitive aspect.

### *5.2. Data Analysis and Discussion of the results Related to the Emotion Aspect*

Analysis of the data obtained via participants' responses to both positive and negative items 11-20 showed participants' attitudes towards learning EFL in terms of the cognitive aspect. Since having good feelings, being in a good emotional state, highly significant, proud, and highly confident are all signs of enjoyment and settlement, analysis of the data revealed that more than half of the participants 66.1% strongly agree and only 7.3% disagree that learning EFL and attending English classes are amusing, enjoyable and interesting things for them. Added to that, high percentages of the respondents 80% and 88% have positive attitudes in terms of choosing EFL to learn and having good feelings towards the process. As far as interest in learning EFL is concerned, the results revealed that participants have positive attitude. The high percentages, namely 85.1% and 75.0%, of responses to the negative items once again highlight participants' paramount interest in and favour of learning the language..

### *5.3. Data Analysis and Discussion of the results Related to the Behavioral Aspect*

Through the analysis of the last 10 items on the behavioral aspect of attitude, some surprising results were arrived at: A number of negative items scored 55.6% strongly disagree and 2.9% strongly agree, which indicates participants positive attitudes since on scoring negative items, values are reversed, i.e. 5 becomes for "strongly disagree" and 1 for "strongly agree". As for the positive items got 61.1% "strongly agree" and 4.1 "strongly disagree". Participants' responses on both sets of positive and negative items highlighted their interests in learning English language. Accordingly, the participants had positive behavioral attitudes towards learning English.

### *5.4. Data Analysis and Discussion of the Results Gender and Attitudes towards Language Learning*

Generally speaking, concerning gender as a crucial factor that affects attitudes towards learning EFL, analysis of the data revealed that mean scores were 40.1208 (SD = 4.50142) for female participants and 37.8312 (SD=4.8823) for male students. This means that females, compared to males, have more positive attitudes towards learning EFL. This is on one hand. On the other hand, using the T-test to identify any differences

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between female and male participants in terms of their responses to the items belonging each one of the three attitude aspects revealed the following: On the cognitive aspect, female participants scored a mean value of 41.0237 higher than that scored by male participants 37.987. The same applies to the affective aspect as female participants also scored a mean value of 43.2157 again higher than that scored by the male participants 39.027. Accordingly, it can be deduced that there are significant differences between male and female participants' attitudes, in terms of the cognitive and affective aspects, towards learning EFL in favour of female participants. Finally, both male and female participants scored mean values of 36.4781 and 36.1342 respectively as far as the behavioural aspect of their attitudes towards learning EFL is concerned. Such similar values, and through the application of the T-test, did not indicate any significant difference in terms of the behavioural aspect and according to gender.

### 7. Comparison between the Findings of the Current Study and Other Studies

The findings of this study are in line with a number of previous studies conducted on attitudes toward learning EFL in general and the cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of attitudes in particular. Yu (2010) who investigated Chinese undergraduate students' attitude toward English language and concluded that participants, regardless gender, showed positive attitudes towards English language learning, **(2)** Al Mamun et al. (2012) who found out that the respondents had positive attitude towards learning English by reporting that they liked both the speakers of English and English language. They further believed that speaking English made the community members have a good impression of them, and Abidin et al. (2012) who investigated the attitudes of female and male students towards learning English and found out that female students had attitudes that are slightly more positive than those of the male students. On the contrary, our findings are not in line with those by Fakeye (2010) who reported that there was no significant difference between female and male students attitudes towards learning English in terms of gender. In terms of the comparison between male and female students' attitudes towards learning English,

As for attitude aspects, again our findings agree with those arrived at by Eshghinejad (2016) who found out that both male and female students had positive attitudes in terms of the cognitive, affective and behavioral, aspects, towards learning English. Contrariwise, the findings of the current study do not agree with those arrived at by Abidin et al. (2012) who investigated the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of attitudes of High School Students toward English learning as a foreign language and found out that the respondents had possess negative attitudes in terms of the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of attitude toward learning foreign language,

### 8. Conclusion

As it has been reported in the literature, various factors such as gender, years of study, specialization, learning environment and the surrounding community influence the learning process and lead to the formation of attitudes towards it. The current study aimed at investigating Kurdish EFL University students' attitudes towards learning EFL. As such, theoretically speaking, the present study has tackled the concept of attitude as a key factor in the process of FL learning, with much focus on the three main aspects (components) of attitude, namely cognitive, affective and behavioural.

Practically speaking, it was hypothesized that there was a significant difference between attitudes towards learning English in terms of gender variable. Analysis of the collected data had provided satisfactory answers to the research questions. The results showed that Kurdsih EFL University students University of Zakho had positive attitudes, in terms of the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects (components), towards English

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language learning. It has also been found out that female students had attitudes that are significantly different in terms of the cognitive and affective aspects, but slightly different regarding the behavioural aspect. Such results indicates participants' realization of the importance of learning English and that a successful process of language learning is usually based on the way it is perceived by the learners and on the interaction that takes place between the learners and the teacher.

It is believed that the findings of the current study have implications for different parties represented by curriculum designers, education policy-makers in Kurdistan region of Iraq, FL/SL learners, and researchers. For instance, a perception has been provided regarding the way Kurdish EFL learners comprehend the varied aspects of the process of learning EFL. Added to that, this study puts forward some new valuable perceptive insights into Kurdsih EFL students' attitudes towards the status of English language, the educational system policy, and their goals behind learning the language. Finally, the findings of the present study are expected to add to a growing body of literature on the attitudes of EFL learners towards English language and people

In the light of the results arrived at and since learners' personal characteristics and the ways they think a and feel of learning EFL play a vital role in bringing about success, it is recommended that helpful studying and learning environments should be provided in the educational setting and language classes. Added to that, education-policy makers should always attend to learners' needs as far as the provision of effective and balanced curricula, effective educational technology and teaching activities is concerned. Finally, EFL teachers, on their part are required to show respect to all learners, guide them, cooperate with them, put them back on the right track when lost, and encourage them so as to boost their attitudes towards learning EFL.

It is worthy to note that this study is limited to one state university in Kurdistan Region of Iraq and that the participants do not represent all EFL learners in the Region. Hence, it puts forward a mini picture of the ways that Kurdish EFL university students think, feel and behave with regard to EFL. On this basis, the arrived at results can be generalized only in case similar studies are conducted in other universities.

Finally, this study leaves the door open for the carrying out of further studies on other topics relevant to attitude, particularly attitude change with focus on the factors that cause changes in attitudes at large and in those of EFL students towards leaning English in particular.

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