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Students' Attitudes towards English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Jordan

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Abstract

The present study sheds light on the attitudes of University of Jordan students toward English and its importance in a time when numerous specialties are suffering serious stagnation in the local and international job markets. The study is of high importance since the demand for English proficiency has recently increased significantly in the local Jordanian job market, and there are general concerns among parents and students as to what the future holds for B.A. graduates. A random convenience sample of 165 students was selected from among the Language Center students at the University of Jordan to answer an itemized questionnaire. The descriptive and inferential statistics revealed that most students think that English is important in their university education and future job opportunities. Students in scientific faculties think that English is more important for their studies than students in the humanities faculties.

Keywords: University of Jordan, education, English, attitudes, students, EFL

Introduction:

About Jordan:

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan enjoys a central location in the heart of the Middle East. It is bordered by Syria to the north, Palestine to the west, Iraq to its east, and Saudi Arabia to its south-east and Egypt to its south-west. The country prides itself in its natural and ecological diversity. It is also rich in heritage, archaeological and historical sites, but has limited resources. Water resources are a main problem in the country especially with the impact of the crises in the neighboring countries and Jordan's hosting of the displaced millions as a consequence. The population of Jordan is currently 9,920,000 according to the latest estimates (http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/jordan-population/) including over 3 million guests. Jordan has a young population with over 56.4% under 25 years of age with the age group 15-24 representing 20.4% of the total population. (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/countryfiches_jordan_2017.pdf). This fact has encouraged the government to develop the education sector considering the Jordanian youth as a national and regional asset.

Since education is a core value in the Jordanian culture, most Jordanians are well-educated. The Department of Statistics (DoS) in Jordan announced that the illiteracy rate has dropped 4.2 % from 2000 to 2016. The Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for the kindergarten, primary, and secondary education in the country.

Even though Jordan has achieved milestones during the last few decades in providing education for its youth, educational attainment does not necessarily translate into better or higher employment

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opportunities. As to un- or underemployment, it is highest among the youth. According to a 2014 study conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in cooperation with the Department of Statistics, unemployment among the younger generation stood at 21.1 % and was particularly high among females with tertiary education (70.7%). The survey also revealed that only 11.2 % of the young female population in Jordan is working compared to 47.2 % of males (http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/unemployment-among-youths-jordan-almost-double-int%E2%80%99l-average-%E2%80%94-study). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2018, what causes in part high unemployment among university graduates is "*the mismatch between education outputs and the skills required by the labour market" and " the inability of both the private and public sector to absorb new market labour entrants and to create more decent jobs*" (http://www.oecd.org/countries/jordan/youth-issues-jordan.htm). These causes have a direct effect on university students' choices of majors. Some specialties are believed to be still in demand, so students are encouraged to enroll in them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many relevant studies have been conducted on attitudes of university students and how English affects their majors and future employment opportunities. Attitudes are defined as "an opinion or general feeling about something" (Encarta Dictionary, 2018). It consists of the individual's beliefs about outcomes or attributes of performing the behaviour (Montana & Kasprzyk, 2008). Positive attitudes and enjoyment of language learning will be achieved by the learners who are motivated to learn a foreign language Gardner, (2005). Intrinsic motivation consists of enjoyment and satisfaction while extrinsic motivation deals with fear of punishment or rewards. Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, (2001) Taking an art class and reading a book are examples of intrinsic motivation. Taking certain academic classes or workshops in order to get a better job and getting a higher degree to please your parents are examples of extrinsic motivation.

A study in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) analyzed the impact of teachers on creating positive attitudes about their English learning. Al Noursi,(2013) "Attitude towards Learning English: The case of the UAE Technological High School," studied 196 students over a two-year period at the Applied Technical High School (ATHS) in UAE for positive attitude towards English as a foreign language (EFL) and the influence of Native English Speaking Teachers (NEST) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNEST) on the positive attitudes of the students. Al Noursi's earlier work, " *Honey catches flies more than Ginger: Enhancing Arab students towards learning English"* (2012) found student attitudes towards the teacher and the target language were vital in determining students' success and/or failure in learning a foreign language.

The research used a close-ended questionnaire with specific statements rated on a 5 point Likert scale. The results found 51.5% with moderate positive attitudes and 48.5% with positive attitudes. No negative attitudes were found in the population sampled. The learning climate played a major role in building these positive attitudes. The learning environment of the ATHS was significant in that almost all courses were taught in English. In the UAE, English as a second language (ESL) is compulsory in the primary grades and is the main teaching language of courses in

Math and Science. This learning environment produced positive attitudes for learning English because it is seen as crucial for their academic and career futures (extrinsic motivation). Students are aware of the significance that English is the global means of communication. Proficiency in English becomes the key to success. The ATHS system of using English in teaching students in all classes, thus produces proficiency (intrinsic motivation).

The study also sought to determine if native English-speaking teacher (NEST) or non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST) teachers were significant in producing the positive attitudes. Moderate positive students favored NEST while positive students favored NNEST. The slight insignificant difference was NOT a causative factor in the positive attitudes and could be explained by the regional favoring of Western products and services. More importantly, Al Noursi found teaching behaviors were more important to motivate students' positive attitudes. Students appreciated teachers who were good at English, corrected mistakes without hurting egos, and made learning fun. Al Noursi concluded that effective language teaching strategies can encourage positive attitudes toward EFL.

Abu-Snoubar (2017) "An Evaluation of EFL Students' Attitudes Toward English Language Learning in Terms of Several Variables" studied a random sample of 176 students ages ranging 18-22 years old of Al-Balqa Applied University in Jordan. The sample of 68 males and 108 females enrolled in 38% in the sciences and 62% in the humanities. The study sought to measure the attitudes of students towards learning English to see if there are statistically significant differences in the attitudes due to gender or due to their academic field of study. Using a 55-item questionnaire as the instrument adapted from Gardner's Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), Abu-Snoubar administered the test to English 101 and English 102 students during the second semester of the academic year 2016-2017 using an Arabic version of the test. The results were then put through an Independent Samples T-Test to determine attitude differences for males and females. Females showed significantly more positive attitudes. The same method tested for field of study influences and found no significant difference between sciences and the humanities students. The study found overall positive attitudes of EFL students towards learning English. Abu-Snoubar found that teachers play an important role in improving learner attitudes by lessening anxiety and fear. Students wanting more productive skills had more positive attitudes. They wanted more reading in stories and poems and less listening and reading instructions in English. Students were aware of the importance to master English for their educational, technological and career goals as well as improved self-esteem. The gender differences may be due to the difference in teaching strategies and activities by teachers while instructing females.

Bani-Khaled (2013) "Learning English in Difficult Circumstances: The Case of North Badiah Disadvantaged Schools in Jordan" examines the perceptions of 10th grade male students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in disadvantaged Jordanian schools. The sample of 450 pupils represented 15% of the area schools. A free composition in Arabic allowed free expression due to their limited writing ability in English. The composition elicited perceptions about the student feelings or problems in their EFL learning. Despite the educational reforms and improvement of teacher education in Jordan, the process of learning English is still challenging. This

is made more difficult because spoken English is seldom used in daily life with the exception of areas in the capital Amman. This study focuses on the difficulties teaching English language learning in marginalized schools. The study analyzed attitudes towards their EFL learning, problems faced in the process, classification of the problems and possible solutions for these problems. The study found teacher role and practices accounted for 85.6% of the issues. Some students perceived their teacher experiences as "bitter" (277). Teachers' behaviors in the classroom received criticism for their roles as explainers and in their treatment of material and mistreatment of students. The second major theme was classroom-related characteristics such as class size, lack of physical resources, and disruptive students making learning difficult. The third theme was textbook-related noting materials as boring, difficult, and lacking skills practices. The final category was exams: too difficult, not enough time to complete, and difficult instructions or wording of questions. The results of the study showed the critical role of learning environment on student attitudes learning English. Teachers were a major source of the problem and could be a major source of solutions. Abilities and competencies of teachers can motivate students if properly trained (280). Jordan is still teacher-centered and experienced teachers do not go to disadvantaged areas to teach. Instruction remains traditional, and student-centered learning is not embraced. Given these problems in disadvantaged schools, it is expected the students will continue to lack motivation and positive attitudes for learning English (EFL) if conditions do not change.

Karatas (2016) "Examining University Students' Attitudes towards Learning English Using Different Variables," sought to ascertain, through a descriptive survey model, the attitudes about English language learning of English Preparatory students at Istanbul Technical University during 2015-2016. Using a student population of 488 students (320 male (65.6 %) and 168 female (34.4 %), the study examined several variables that might influence the attitudes towards learning English: gender, language level, high school from which the student graduated, and type of English preparatory training. Most major research has shown that the attitude of the learner is the most important factor of foreign language learning.

The survey design used Attitudes toward English Lesson Scale as the data collection tool. Originally developed by Aiken (1979) to assess Attitudes towards Mathematics and Physics Scale, the scale was later adapted by Tunc (2003) and administered in Turkish to determine the attitudes of students towards English. The survey had 24 items with respondents asked to rate themselves on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The study found the attitudes towards learning English are represented as 78.59%, which is above the medium level of positive attitude. Gender was not found to be a significant variable on students" attitudes towards learning English. Foreign language level (proficiency) did not significantly impact attitude scores. Likewise, having English preparatory training in school did not significantly influence attitudes. The type of high school from which the student graduated also had no impact on attitudes of students. ANOVA test demonstrated that high school differentiation did not significantly influence their attitudes.

The study concluded there is a need for further study using other forms of measurement and other populations since these were English Preparatory Students at the University.

Alhababha, Pandian and Mahfoodh (2016) "English language education in Jordan: Some recent trends and challenges" presented an overview of English language teaching in the Arab

world with an emphasis on Jordan. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (USAID, 2014) has supported Jordan's educational reforms to provide effective teaching and learning in public schools in the country. Questions remain about the effectiveness of these reforms and the impact on learners and educational groups in the Arab World. The paper begins with an overview showing the decline in achievement of Jordanian students in math. In Arabic and English, K-12 school performance declined financially, pedagogically, and politically. Tests of 1st through 3rd graders show 22% unable to read in Arabic and English. Global comparisons through international organizations show Jordan is deteriorating. "Education First English Proficiency Index1 (EF EPI) examines and ranks the average level of English skills in the Middle East and North African (MENA) youth (Education First English Proficiency Index, 2014). The most recent report of EFEPI indicates that MENA states scored lower than 70 countries around the world in English proficiency." (4) The Pearson Global English Business English Index report (2011) noted the lowest ranking average (3.5 of 10) of English competency for employees across Middle East companies. Students taking the English placement test for universities do not pass and have to enroll in developmental courses to meet the language requirements.

Although curricular reform has been attempted, the absence of national guidelines and standards in English language education and burnout among competent teachers still remains a problem being met with limited financial resources for English language education. Jordanian students are exams-oriented which means their learning is temporary and not intrinsic in their development. Memorization becomes the emphasis rather than understanding. Strategies of learning are not applied for students to develop skills to demonstrate knowledge and skills. Teacher preparation programs are lacking leading to the low achievement of EFL students in Arab countries. A graduate armed with a bachelor's degree in English can begin teaching without adequate onsite training in methodologies. The critique concludes that effective instruction at the classroom level is needed to improve student motivation to learn EFL.

Drbseh, (2013) "The spread of English language in Jordan" addressed both the increase in English departments in Jordan since 1962, the increase in the number of students registered in some English University departments and their attitude towards English being a language of wider communication. In 1961 there was only one English teacher, between 1976 and 1985 there was an increase to three English departments. After 1986 until 2013, the number reached thirty departments, and as a result, the number of English teachers increased as well. Statistics in this research include students studying English in five random universities in Jordan which include Jordan University, Irbid National, Gadara, Yarmuke and Al Il Beit. The rise in the number of students showed to be a drastic increase within the last seven years which lead to the increase in the number of English teachers and the spread of the English language. That being said, the students attitudes towards learning English reflected in many areas in ones' career and life development "There is no one that can deny that attitudes bear directly on motivation and achievement." Drbseh, (2013).

In a study from a secondary school, the students were asked on the language that they preferred to learn and 56 out of 70 students chose English because it was more exciting "more impressive, more developed and more technical." Drbseh, (2013). However, during a study on a university level, the attitudes and motivations towards learning English became more advanced and deeper in meaning. During a study on university students' attitudes and motives, a questionnaire sample was given and 35% chose English because it was the most significant

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language, 40% chose English because it will secure them a better job and 25% chose English because they were very interested in the language and literature. That being said, the majority of students (84%) "believe that the general attitude toward English in society at large is positive." Drbseh,(2013), making learning English a priority which enables them to "have a better and a good job."

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

A variety of politico-economic factors have led to prolonged periods of economic stagnation in Jordan accompanied by high unemployment. These recessions have been affecting the higher education sector as well as other sectors of the country's economy.

The purpose of this study is to determine current attitudes of students at the university level towards their specializations and the importance of English. It is aimed towards students at Jordan's well-known University of Jordan (UJ) which was the first established national university in the country. The study will also determine how these students' attitudes are impacted by the current market and economic situation. The setting for the research is the Language Center where all UJ students register for their English university requirements.

Study questions

This research attempted to answer the following questions based on the data which was collected from the study sample.

1. What are the attitudes of The University of Jordan students towards learning

English?

2. Are there any statistically significant differences in UJ students' attitudes towards learning English due to their academic field of study?

3. What are students' attitudes towards the significance of their university degree after graduation?

METHODS AND SAMPLING

The study used a mixed methods approach in analyzing the data collected from a detailed questionnaire and interviews. The instrument was a 50-item questionnaire with scaled and closed ended questions. The study population comprised first, second, third, and fourth year undergraduate students in the Language Center at UJ from different specializations. Jordan University was chosen as it has a good representation of undergraduate students in Amman, the capital of Jordan, where most graduates will compete for job opportunities.

A simple random sampling scheme was used to represent undergraduate students sample from UJ. Data for the study was collected through a structured questionnaire, comprised of a sample of 165 students. The five-point Likert scale was used to measure attitude towards English as their chosen specialization; the understanding risk variables being: "strongly agree," "agree," "no strong feelings," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." A higher mean score on a variable indicates a more positive attitude. For the other variables in the questionnaire, such as skills, job market, future aspirations, anxiety as to the future, two way closed-ended questions (yes/no styled questions) were asked to

arrive at conclusions quickly and efficiently. The questionnaire was subject to a pilot-test with a sample of 20 respondents. The survey instrument showed a reliability of 0.82, based on Cronbach's Alpha. The questionnaire results were further augmented with interviews with two teachers who were teaching at the Language Center to provide insights on English at UJ and its role in enhancing students' attitude towards their specialization and their opportunities after graduation.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample consisted of 165 students of which 23.2% were males and 78.8% were females. 44% of participants were majoring in scientific faculties and 66% were students in the humanities faculties. The ages of the sample members ranged between 18-23 years old, and they belonged to different social classes based on family income. 42 students were freshmen; 62 students were sophomores; 40 students were juniors, and 21 students were seniors in the university.

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of students who had registered for English 100 in 4 sections. Teachers were kind enough to cooperate in allowing students to take some class time to answer the questionnaire. The process took one class session. Some students needed help with understanding the questions in English. Explanations

were provided in Arabic. The data then underwent an SPSS analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to gain answers for the questions of the current study.

RESULTS

Table 1: Questionnaire and responses

		Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
1	My grades are very good because I love my major.	14	8.5	39	23.8	64	39.0	47	28.7
2	English has always been a problem for me.	57	34.8	59	36.0	33	20.1	15	9.1
3	My English has improved from studying English university requirements.	14	8.5	35	21.3	86	52.4	29	17.7
4	I have no desire to pursue graduate studies.	44	26.8	69	42.1	37	22.6	14	8.5
5	I will travel abroad for graduate studies.	23	14.0	46	28.0	59	36.0	36	22.0
6	I will study graduate studies in Jordan.	14	8.5	25	15.2	70	42.7	55	33.5

7	English is important for future job opportunities.	24	14.6	34	20.7	63	38.4	43	26.2
8	My English is excellent.	20	12.2	45	27.4	72	43.9	27	16.5
9	English is not important in most jobs.	72	43.9	48	29.3	32	19.5	12	7.3
10	My weak English will make my job search difficult.	59	36.0	43	26.2	43	26.2	19	11.6
11	English isn't important in university.	54	32.9	50	30.5	39	23.8	21	12.8
12	English helps students in the scientific faculties more than students in the humanities faculties.	6	3.7	25	15.2	75	45.7	58	35.4
13	English helps students in the humanities faculties more than students in the scientific faculties.	27	16.5	39	23.8	63	38.4	35	21.3

Table 1 displays the questions answered by the students using the Likert scale. Numbers of students and the percentages are shown for each question. The results show that 67.7% of students agree/strongly agree that their grades are very good because they love their major. Only 29.2% agreed/strongly agreed that English has always been a problem for them. 70.1% of students agreed/strongly agreed that their English has improved from studying English requirements. 68.9% disagree/strongly disagreed with the statement that they wouldn't pursue graduate studies. 58% of students agreed/strongly agreed that they would travel abroad for graduate studies while 76.2% agreed/strongly agreed that they would study in Jordan. As for the importance of English for future job opportunities, 64% agreed/strongly agreed. 60.4% of students believed that their English was excellent. 73.2% of students disagreed/strongly disagreed that English was not important in most jobs. Only 37.8% agreed/strongly agreed that their weak English would make job searching more difficult. 63.4% disagreed/strongly disagreed that English isn't important in the university. Students (81%) agreed/strongly agreed that English is more important in the scientific faculties while only 59.7% agreed/strongly agreed of its importance in the humanities faculties.

TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics for questionnaire and responses

	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	level
1	My grades are very good because I love my major.	2.88	.925	Moderate
2	English has always been a problem for me.	2.04	.959	Low
3	My English has improved from studying English university requirements.	2.79	.832	Moderate
4	I have no desire to pursue graduate studies.	2.13	.908	Low
5	I will travel abroad for graduate studies.	2.66	.975	Moderate
6	I will study graduate studies in Jordan.	3.01	.913	High

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7	English is important for future job opportunities.	2.76	1.002	Moderate
8	My English is excellent.	2.65	.898	Moderate
9	English is not important in most jobs.	1.90	.961	Low
10	My weak English will make my job search difficult.	2.13	1.036	Low
11	English isn't important in university.	2.16	1.029	Low
12	English helps students in the scientific faculties more than students in the humanities faculties.	3.13	.800	High
13	English helps students in the humanities faculties more than students in the scientific faculties.	2.65	.995	Moderate

Table 2 portrays the mean, standard deviation, and level for each questionnaire. This is based on 164 participants. One of the highest levels was achieved on question #6 (I will study graduate studies in Jordan). It had a 3.01 mean with a standard deviation(SD) of .913. Question #12(English helps students in the scientific faculties more than students in the humanities faculties.) had a 3.13 mean and a SD of .800. The lowest mean of 1.90 and SD of .961 was for question #9(English is not important for most jobs.). The highest mean of 3.13 and SD of .800 was for question #12(English helps students in the scientific faculties more than the humanities faculties.).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

1. What are the attitudes of The University of Jordan students towards learning English?

According to the results, only 29% of university students agreed/strongly agreed that English has always been a problem for them. Most students (70.1%) agreed/ strongly agreed that their English has improved from studying English language university requirements. 64% of the students agreed/strongly agreed that English was important for future job opportunities while 26.8% agreed/strongly agreed that English is not important in most jobs. 60.4% of all students agreed/strongly agreed that their English was excellent whereas 37.8% of students believed that their weak English would make their job search more difficult. Only 36.6% agreed/strongly agreed that English is not important in university. 81% of students agreed/strongly agreed that English was more important in the scientific faculties compared to 59.7% believing that it is more important in the humanities. Based on the statistics, University of Jordan students believe that English is important in university studies and future job endeavors. Most students are confident in their English proficiency. The surprise was that despite the fact that they found English to be of an utter importance to future job opportunities, few thought that their weak English would hurt their future job search.

2. Are there any statistically significant differences in UJ students' attitudes towards learning English due to their academic field of study?

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Most students concurred that English was more important in the scientific faculties probably due to the fact that the language of instruction is English. The importance of English in the humanities was seen as much less important probably due to the language of instruction in Arabic. Throughout the questionnaires, the humanities students stated that English has always been a problem for them, and that is a main factor in choosing their specializations. They were more comfortable studying in Arabic despite being aware of the difficulties they would have in future job opportunities. On the other hand, students with higher Tawjihi (high school averages) chose specializations in the scientific faculties knowing that they would study in English and have better job prospects. Overall, there is a significant difference in UJ students' attitudes towards learning English due to their field of study. Students in the scientific faculties had better attitudes towards learning English.

3. What are students' attitudes towards the significance of their university degree after graduation?

Of the students asked, 67.7% of the students agreed/strongly agreed that their grades were good because they loved their major. 29.1% agreed/strongly agreed that they had no desire to pursue graduate studies. Of those that wanted to study master's and doctoral degrees, 57% were interested in studying abroad while 76.2% stated that they would stay in Jordan. These were two separate questions, so students most likely answered that they were interested in studying abroad, but also realized that the reality was that they would study in Jordan. When asked about the importance of English for future job opportunities, 67% agreed/strongly agreed. Only 26.8% agreed/strongly agreed that they would not need good English in most jobs. Surprisingly, only 37.8% of students agreed/strongly agreed that their weak English would make searching for a job more difficult. Overall, the students in the scientific faculties were much more optimistic about future job endeavors. Most agreed that English was a significant part of their university education and future success. Most students were certain that a university degree would provide them with a better job and future.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the statistics, University of Jordan students of all faculties hold a favorable view on English and its importance in university learning. Students in scientific faculties stated its utmost significance more than students in the humanities. Most students planned on studying graduate studies knowing that they would be required to take an English proficiency exam. The search for employment after graduation was of the utmost importance, and they stated that their English proficiency (or lack of) was a significant factor in getting a good job. The researcher suggests future research on the needs of students in all faculties. Specialized English for various faculties should be offered as obligatory courses. The Jordanian job market should be studied, and the university should offer courses to prepare the students for various job positions. The humanities faculties should offer more English courses to improve the students' proficiencies in English. Job fairs should be conducted in the university in order for students to explore their future employment options and hear firsthand from employers about the importance of English competency.

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