

Attitudes of Afghan Civil Servants Towards Learning English: A Case Study of Afghanistan

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Abstract

The present study attempts to investigate the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English in their work environment. It also studies the effects of English for the quality of their work and the tasks they do in their offices. Moreover, the study aims to determine the respondents' attitudes towards learning English by their gender, age, level of education, and the experience of using English at their work places. The data were collected from 508 Afghan civil servants who were working in different ministries through a questionnaire containing 20 items. For the data analysis, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 was used. Descriptive statistics, sample *T*-test, and a one-way ANOVA test were conducted to answer the questions. The findings of the study yielded that Afghan civil servants have positive attitudes towards learning English. The study also revealed that the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English are positive by their gender, age, level of education, and their experience of using English at their work places. Furthermore, the study reports that there is no any statistically significant difference in the attitudes of Afghan civil servants by their gender, age, level of education, and experience of using English at their work places.

1. Introduction

A wide range of studies have been conducted, but there is not a consensus on the definition of the word attitude in literature (Ajzen, 1988; Ryan & Giles, 1982). Baker (1992) believed that the word attitude is originally different from its meaning. That is, the word attitude means a posture in a picture. Eiser (1986) stated that if a person has attitude towards something, it means he or she likes or dislikes something, or showing approval or disapproval and so on. Moreover, Orfan (2020) defined the word attitude as a person's feeling about an item. He believed that if a person has positive or negative feeling towards a particular item, he or she gives favorable or unfavorable preferences to that item.

In Afghanistan, attitudes towards learning English are increasing. Learners' needs, their interests, attitudes and motivation are the main factors for learning English (Mohammad, 2015; Orfan, 2020). English is now extensively used in media, business, government offices, and organizations (Orfan, 2021). It is much welcomed by Afghans in schools, universities and in other educational centers. They think English can pave the path of learning and providing adequate opportunities inside and outside Afghanistan. Furthermore, although English is learned as a foreign language here in Afghanistan, it is widely accepted as a prominent medium not only in educational contexts, but it is also used in media. While learning English, Afghan students use a wide range of English textbooks, (i.e., Headways, American Files, Let's Go, Interchange, and so on). The reason for this is to better speak, write, and read English in a particular context (Orfan, 2020; Orfan, 2021).

In addition, the findings of some studies show that there are a wide range of factors that affect the language learning process such as motivation, attitudes, anxiety, learning achievements, aptitudes, intelligence, personality, and age (Padwick, 2010; Gardner, 1985; Shams, 2008). Showing more positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language is much emphasized as a crucial factor (Fakeye, 2010).

Furthermore, a study conducted by Kara (2009) who reported the behavior of the students is affected through performances they show in language classroom. That is, those learners who hold more positive beliefs about language learning will show tendency of increasing their attitudes and perceptions towards learning a foreign language. Unlike the above ideas, having negative thoughts and beliefs may result in feeling more anxiety, low level of aptitude, motivation, and negative attitudes towards learning English (Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Akramy, 2020).

A study conducted by Choy and Troudi (2006) in Malaysia who reported the attitudes of secondary school students towards learning English. The findings of his study revealed that students reflected a mixture of both positive and negative attitudes towards learning English. The study further illustrated that English plays a vital role in lives of Malaysian citizens. For example, English is used on billboards as advertisement, public signboards on major roads where a large number of people are walking, and it is also used as medium of instruction in most of educational centers. Similarly, Yunus (2011) pointed out in his study that students from different cultures tend to show positive attitudes and better motivation while they want to learn English. Their language learning process is mostly related to some supportive environmental factors, (i.e., parents, teachers, and peers) to better interact, participate in language classroom activities, and even learn the language in a smooth manner. The study also showed that students have to have intrinsic motivation to better learn a language. What is more, when the students create an internal motivation in them, they may have full support from the community as well. Their active participation is pertaining to their full tendency towards learning a language. Furthermore, another study conducted by Fakeye (2010) about having positive feelings about learning a foreign language and it showed that applying and using a wide range of activities in language classroom can cause the students, staff, and any other individuals who are keen to learn a foreign language will increase their positive preferences to the language. They get enthusiastic when they are given full support in their learning environment. The participants of the study emphasized that whole-class discussion, role plays, games, poster presentation, and group work activities not only improve their motivation in language learning, but they also change their behaviors about learning a language (Akramy, 2020; McCallum, 1980; Rajendran, 2019).

English is also an important foreign language in an Afghan educational setting. Afghans consider this language a necessary tool in finding jobs and dealing with their daily affairs. Pertaining to the issue, a couple of studies conducted to explore the attitudes of Afghan undergraduate students towards learning English, EGP, ESP, and EAP. For example, Orfan (2020) carried out a study to determine the attitudes of university undergraduate students towards learning English in terms of cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. The findings of his study revealed that the students had positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes towards learning English. Moreover, Orfan and Noori (2021) carried out another research to study the attitudes of Afghan religious scholars towards learning English. The results of the study showed that the religious scholars had positive attitudes towards learning English and they emphasized that they sometimes encouraged their children to study English language to improve their information about Islam religion. Another study conducted by Manap et al. (2018) who studied the motivation of Afghan students regarding learning English while another one (Siddiq et al., 2019) explored

the attitudes and motivation of Afghan students towards ESP, EGP, and EAP. However, the studies conducted in Afghanistan did not address the attitudes of Afghans towards learning English in terms of their work environment, use of English in the workplace, and as a medium for hunting jobs. Unlike having positive attitudes towards learning English, a study conducted by Miri (2019) who attempted to study the consequences and effects of English from his own perspectives. He finally came up with a result that English caused him to decline his first language and focus more on English. He also found in his study that studying English not only made him knowledgeable, but it also helped him to travel to many countries of the world and took his master's degree in an American university.

In addition to showing attitudes towards learning English, a couple of studies carried out recently to feature some teaching approaches for delivering English training to language learners. For example, Orfan et al. (2021) conducted a study about English instructors' use of teaching methods in an EFL setting. They found out in their study that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an effective teaching approach in delivering English lessons to learners because this approach focuses on interaction which is the ultimate goal of studying a language. Moreover, another study conducted by Akramy et al. (2021) who reported that student-centered method is the prime goal in language learning context which consisting of the production of students rather than being careful about their input. Moreover, it is considered a crucial approach to open a friendly learning atmosphere for a big number of language learners in the class (Akramy, 2021).

To fill the gap in the literature, the role of Afghan civil servants' attitudes towards learning English has received less attention in the context of Afghanistan. They work in different governmental offices and their attitudes towards learning English and the impact of English on their work environment were not studied by any researchers. The current study tries to eliminate this gap in the literature. Conducting this study is also a contribution to a deep understanding and learning English in Afghanistan. For this reason, the present study attempts to investigate the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English in their work environment. It also studies the effects of English for the quality of their work and the tasks they do in their offices. Moreover, the study aims to determine the respondents' attitudes towards learning English by their gender, age, level of education, and the experience of using English in the work environment.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

Different types of statistics were employed (i.e., descriptive statistics, independent sample *T*-test, and a one-way ANOVA test) to analyze the data. The measuring instrument use in the study was a questionnaire consisting of 20 items which seeks to explore the attitudes of Afghan civil servants who are working in different governmental sectors towards Learning English.

2.2. Participants

The study recruited 508 participants who are currently working as civil servants in different ministries of Afghanistan. The levels of their education are college, bachelor, and masters' degrees. Moreover, the participants were both female and male staff. That is, 69 (13.6%) female participants and 439 (86.4%) of participants are males who were selected randomly for the study. The participants' first languages were Dari, Pashto, and Uzbek. Two hundred forty-nine (49%) of the participants were Dari speakers while one hundred ninety-nine (39.2%) of them were Pashto speakers. Only sixty (11.8) of the participants were Uzbek. The participants of the study have had English learning experiences as well.

2.3. Data collection instrument

Ten items from the questionnaire in the study were adapted after the authors went through a wide range of studies conducted by Mohammad (2015), Kara (2009), and Orfan (2020). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part attempted to inquire the demographic information of the participants (i.e., gender, age, education level, first language, and the experience of using English in the work environment). The second part of the questionnaire consisting of 10 items which sought to explore the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English while the last part containing other 10 items that seeking to determine the effects of English learning on Afghan staff's work environment. The questionnaire expected to inquire the participants to what extent they agreed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = undecided, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree). Moreover, the authors translated the English questionnaire into Dari. It is because Dari is spoken a lingua franca among the people of Afghanistan and it is the medium of communication in governmental offices. To avoid the misunderstanding, errors, and misspelling, the authors sent the questionnaire to the Dari Department of Language and Literature Faculty for revision. The questionnaire was presented in Dari to let the participants make sense of the items and language of the presentation may influence their responses.

2.4. Data collection procedure

The researchers collected the data from 508 staff in seven ministries. The data collection procedure was arranged in 14 weeks (three months and fourteen days). Before collecting the data, the researchers sent consent letters to have the participants' willingness take part in the study and share their responses. The aim of the study was also explained in the consent letter to let the participants know more about the scope of the study. They were expected to read each statement in the questionnaire very carefully and apply what makes sense to them. The time for filling the questionnaire was only 10–15 mins.

2.5. Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version (26) was employed to analyze the data for this study. The frequency, the mean, and the standard deviation of the data were investigated through applying the descriptive statistics. Furthermore, an independent sample *T*-test and a one-way ANOVA test were also used to clarify the differences between groups of the participants in terms of demographic information, e.g., gender, age, and some few other variables like the experience of using English in the work environment, and education level of the participants.

3. Results

3.1 Participants' attitudes towards learning English

The first ten items of the questionnaire elicited the staff's attitudes towards learning English. As Table 1 shows, over 70% of the respondents have strongly agreed and agreed with the six positive statements which elicited how learning English is much significant in sending emails to colleagues, reading general materials in English, using English while talking to international partners through phone calls, and taking part in conferences, seminars, and works in which English is the medium of instruction and communication. On the other hand, about 45% of the respondents have strongly disagreed and disagreed with the four statements which explored information regarding using English in a wide range of purposes like reading technical materials in English, using English in conducting research studies on a couple of social issues, applying English through face to face modality with international partners and colleagues, and attending training and seminars where English is widely dominated as medium of instruction. However, the participants expressed their agreement and disagreement with the statements which sought to explore their attitudes towards learning English. Therefore, it can be concluded from Table 1 that the participants hold a favorable preference to learning English.

3.2 Participants' attitudes of effect of English language on their work

The second 10 items of the questionnaire aimed to elicit the respondents' perceptions in terms of the effects of English language on their work. As shown in Table 2, more than 70% of the participants have strongly agreed and agreed with the seven statements that attempted to explore information about using English for the purpose of getting involved with international organizations, feeling that English has positive impact on the quality of having partnership with international colleagues, using the skills of English in the recruitment process while getting jobs, making the staff outstanding by knowing English among colleagues, feeling that English helps individuals to run the office comfortably, knowing English can help the staff to seek for more information about their job, and role of English in promoting in the workplace. In addition, 47% of the participants have strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statements shown in Table 2 that English does not give the staff more proud, not improving their personality by learning English, and feeling unembarrassed by lack of English skills and speaking English. In the long run, it can be concluded from Table 2 that participants expressed a strongly feeling that English can help them have access to a couple of important issues like getting involved in international organizations, getting promotion on the job, and standing out among colleagues while speaking and knowing English.

3.3 Attitudes and the participants' demographic profile

The researchers give lights on the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English by the participants' demographic factors. The factors which are discussed here are gender, age, first language of the participants, level of education, and the experience of using English in the work environment.

3.3.1. Participants' language attitudes and gender

To describe the effect of the participants' gender on their attitudes towards learning English, a descriptive statistics was conducted. Table 3 shows that the overall mean score of female participants' attitudes is 2.8098 (SD = 0.28587) while the overall mean score of the male participants is 2.8183 (SD = 0.34607). The difference between the two groups in the mean score is only 0.0085 which indicates a very less significant difference. Moreover, in Table 4 an independent sample *T-test* was conducted and it shows that the p-value in both Leven's test (.648) and *t*-test (.224) is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Consequently, it can be concluded that there is not an important difference between female and male participants' attitudes towards learning English.

3.3.2. Participants language attitudes, age, and education level

Descriptive statistics and a one-way ANOVA test were conducted to describe whether the participants' age, and their education level influenced their attitudes towards learning English. The highest mean score of age, and education level of the participants in Tables 5 and 7 are respectively 3.0250 (SD = 0.23106), and 3.2500 (SD = 0.0021). The tables further indicate that the participants have a favorable preference to learning English in terms of age and education levels. These variables in the tables described that the participants show positive attitudes towards learning English by their age and education level. Moreover, ANOVA tests were also conducted to clarify the differences between groups of the variables in the study. The Tables 6 and 8 show that the p-values of four groups in Table 6 and three groups in Table 8 are respectively 0.409 (F = 0.432) and 0.190 (F = 0.823), which are greater than the alpha level (0.05). As a result, there are no statically significant differences between groups of the variables described above.

3.3.3. Language attitudes and experience of using English in the work environment

A descriptive statistics was conducted to describe whether using English in the work environment influenced the participants' attitudes towards learning English. Table 9 shows that the mean score of the participants who use English at their work places is 2.8328 (SD = 0.28177) while the mean score of the participants who do not use English in their work places is 2.7414 (SD = 0.34089). The difference in the mean scores of the participants is only 0.0914. Moreover, the independent sample *T-test* shows in Table 10 that the p-value is 0.008 ($t = 2.654$), which indicates a very less statistically important difference. Finally, it can be inferred that the participants of the study show positive attitudes towards learning English by using it in their work environment.

4. Discussion

The main goal of the present study was to investigate the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English in their work environment. It also studied the effects of English for the quality of their work and the tasks they do in their offices. Moreover, the study aimed to determine the respondents' attitudes towards learning English by their gender, age, level of education, and the experience of using English in the work environment. To reveal the findings of the study, the participants expressed their

strong and favorable feelings towards learning English and they thought that English can help them promote in their offices as staff very well. The finding is in support of a wide range of other studies conducted in different settings by Fakeye (2010), Manap et al. (2018), Miri (2019), Rajendran (2019), Siddiq et al. (2019), Orfan (2020), and Orfan and Noori (2021) who found out in their studies that the participants held positive attitudes towards learning English and believed English plays a vital role in their lives.

Additionally, the findings of the study yielded that the respondents' attitudes towards learning English in terms of its effect on their work environment were positive. The participants further reported that English as medium of communication helps them to easily get involved with international organizations while they are working in their offices. The finding is in line with the results of a study conducted by Khan and Asif (2017) who studied the effects of English language on hospital staff's work. The participants also reported that English has a fundamental role in undergoing professional training for continuous development in addition to the current work they have in hospital. According to their views, by learning and knowing English they can improve in their jobs very well. They can also take part in national and international assemblies, conferences, seminars, and any other occasions very comfortably where the medium of instruction is English.

The results of the study also revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English by their gender, age, and the experience of using English at their work places. The finding is corroborated with the results of the study conducted by Orfan (2020) who studied the attitudes of Afghan undergraduate students towards learning English by their gender, age, and English learning experiences in different language centers. However, the study carried out by Orfan (2020) showed that there is a fundamental difference in the attitudes of Afghan undergraduate students by their English learning and using experience. The overall participants' attitudes towards learning English were positive and believed English as language of business, communication, organizations, and media may have to be considered crucial.

Finally, the results of the study showed that Afghan civil servants had positive attitudes towards learning English by their level of education. The finding supports the study carried out by Orfan (2020) and Manap et al. (2018) who studied the attitudes of undergraduate students towards learning English by their level of education and fields of study. The studies further elaborated on the impact of English on students' educational goals that English can help them have access to remarkable achievements.

5. Conclusion

The study's main purpose was to investigate the attitudes of Afghan civil servants towards learning English in their work environment. It also studied the effects of English for the quality of their work and the tasks they do in their offices. Moreover, the study aimed to determine the respondents' attitudes towards learning English by their gender, age, level of education, and the experience of using English in the work environment. The findings of the study reveal that Afghan civil servants who work in different

ministries of Afghanistan have strong and positive attitudes towards learning English. The participants also report English is an important language which helps people to improve their personal and professional goals in their lives. It also enables the individuals to take part in the community and paly their roles properly.

Moreover, the study proposed a number of implications for the high ranking authorities of Afghanistan and the related offices. As the study report English is a crucial medium in business, study, job market, and media, Afghan civil servants (government employees) who work in different offices in Afghan government, may have to be given some English training as to enable them to promote in their jobs well. The study also shows that participants, irrespective of the challenges, have already taken some English courses outside their offices for the purpose of getting promotion, studying, and taking part in capacity development workshops being held outside Afghanistan. The study also proposed that every ministry in which a big number of employees are busy working need to open a center for learning foreign languages as to give the chance of learning English to all staff in each ministry. It is because there are a large number of employees who are learning English in some language centers which are far from their offices. Having English skills can also help them to be good at technology like working on computers and getting acquainted with different technological devices.

6. Abbreviations

- a. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)
- b. M. Ed. TESOL (Master of Education in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)
- c. EGP (English for General Purposes)
- d. ESP (English for Specific Purposes)
- e. EAP (English for Academic Purposes)
- f. CLT (Communicative Language Teaching)
- g. SD (Standard Deviation)
- h. SD (Strongly Disagree)
- i. D (Disagree)
- j. U (Undecided)
- k. A (Agree)
- l. SA (Strongly Agree)

7. Declarations

7.1 Availability of data and material

The authors do not wish to share the data of the study because in the consent letters the authors promised to the participants that their ideas are only used for the purpose of the research and kept

confidential. Their demographic information and the perceptions they shared will not be given to second or third parties.

7.2 Funding

Authors received no direct funding for this research.

7.3 Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

7.4 Authors' contributions

Both authors designed the questionnaire of the study and gave to four experts for revision. SAA wrote the introduction of the study and some related studies conducted around the world and in particular Afghan context. RRJ spread the questionnaire to offices through both online form and papers to let the participants participate in the study and share their ideas. SAA participated in the design of the study and performed the statistical analysis. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

7.5 Acknowledgements

Not applicable

7.6 Authors' information

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Tables

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Supplementary Files

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