



Moroccan High-school Students' Attitudes towards Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: *The process of learning a language is influenced by a number of factors. One of the most significant factors that has an influence on learning a language is attitude. Research in this area has demonstrated that learners' attitudes are a constituent and crucial part of the learning process. As such, learners' attitudes towards language should be dealt with as a critical component of second and foreign language learning pedagogy. Accordingly, the current study addresses the attitudes of Moroccan high-school students towards learning English as a foreign language. Specifically, the study aims to investigate Moroccan high-school students' attitudes towards English, the reasons behind their attitudes and the impacts that such attitudes might potentially have. Generally speaking, the study found that the participants have highly favourable attitudes towards learning English for different reasons, a fact that results in positive impacts on students' willingness to learn the language.*

Keywords: *Attitudes; Language; EFL context*

INTRODUCTION

The significance of attitudes in the field of foreign and second language learning has received considerable attention from educationists, social psychologists and sociolinguists. It has influenced many linguists and sociolinguists to devote a wide range of writing to the issue of language attitude. Despite the fact that much has been achieved in this field, it is still difficult to study attitudes, due to the lack of unanimous agreement on both definition and methods of measuring attitude. More particularly, attitudes are not independent. Rather, they are found to interact with other variables in a complex way (Fasold, 1984).

Studying learners' attitudes towards language learning is important for several reasons. First, it is believed that attitudes towards learning have an effect on behaviour, such as choosing and reading books, listening to songs and speaking in a foreign language (Weinburgh, 1998). Second, research stresses the existence of a strong link between attitude and achievement. Several researchers have reached the conclusion that affective factors have an important impact on language success. For example, Schibeci and Riley (1986, cited in Weinburgh, 1998) argue that there exists striking evidence that attitudes have an influence on achievement, rather than achievement influencing attitudes. The reason is that attitudes influence one's behaviour and mood, and hence learning. Therefore, it is evident that attitudes, both positive and negative, have a strong influence on the success of language learning. This idea is further stressed by Chamber (1999), who argues that when the learner has a favourable attitude towards the language he or she is learning, learning

happens in a smooth manner. In their extensive studies on attitudes, Gardner and Lambert (1968) assert that positive attitudes towards language improve learners' proficiency. Thus, investigating learners' attitudes towards language is beneficial for both teachers and students.

Accordingly, the current study looks into the concept of learners' attitudes as one of the main affective factors for successful foreign language learning. The study seeks to investigate Moroccan high-school students' attitudes towards learning the English language, the reasons behind their attitudes, and the influence of students' attitudes on their achievement. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of students towards learning English as a foreign language?
2. What are the reasons behind students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language?
3. What are the impacts of students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Attitudes

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, an attitude is "a way of feeling or thinking about someone or something, especially as this influences one's behaviour". Language attitudes, however, are different from other general attitudes in the sense that they are specifically about language. It is believed that language attitudes are related strictly to attitudes regarding the language itself, its variety, its sound system, and its semantic quality. As a matter of fact, the concept of language attitudes as sociolinguists use it nowadays includes also the attitude one holds towards speakers of a certain language. In this respect, Fasold (1984) argues that attitudes towards a language are more likely to reflect attitudes towards members of different ethnic groups.

Generally speaking, research on language attitudes has been dominated by two views. The first is the mentalist view. In defining attitudes from a mentalist perspective, Williams (1974) states that an "attitude is considered as an internal state aroused by stimulation of some type and which may mediate the organism's subsequent response" (p. 21). The mentalist view then, considers attitudes as being purely internal, and that this internal state could result in certain types of behaviour. This is further confirmed by Fasold (1984, p. 147), who describes an attitude as "an intervening variable between a stimulus affecting a person and that person's response".

Although the mentalist view is the basis of most work on language attitudes, it still has its drawbacks. Fasold (1984) warns that if we accept that attitudes are "an internal state of readiness, rather than an observable response" (p.145), then attitudes are to be elicited directly from people, or they are behavioural patterns inferred indirectly. This leads to concerns about validity and reliability.

The second view of attitudes is the behaviourist view. According to this view, attitudes are 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).

Therefore, people’s reactions and responses to certain social situations reveal their attitudes, and neither indirect inferences nor direct self-reports are required. Clearly, research on attitudes conducted under the behaviourist approach is less difficult and more reliable (Fasold, 1984).

Attitudes and Second/Foreign Language Learning

The importance of attitudes lies in that they are regarded as a significant factor influencing performance in second and foreign language learning. Therefore, achievement in a target language relies not only on the intellectual abilities of the learners, but also on their attitudes towards language learning.

Ellis (2000) believes that favourable attitudes towards a second/foreign language and towards its speakers are likely to improve learning. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, are expected to lie as a hindrance to learning. As such, a learner’s attitude towards the language being learned might affect that learner’s proficiency level. Thus, learners who hold positive attitudes would have such attitudes reinforced if they experience success. Likewise, a lack of success in learning a language might strengthen the learners’ negative attitudes.

Another study that stresses the importance of attitudes in language learning is that conducted by Merisuo-Storm (2007). In this study, the researcher examined Finnish bilingual as well as monolingual students’ attitudes towards language learning. Through questionnaires completed by a group of fourth-grade students, the researcher proved that students’ positive attitudes towards language contribute significantly to excellence in learning. As for negative attitudes, they were found to hamper and halt language learning.

Attitudes are found to be significant not only for learners, but for teachers as well. Merisuo-Storm (2007, p. 228) argues that a “student’s attitude is a central element that has to be identified”. Therefore, if language teachers are aware, beforehand, of the attitudes of their students towards the target language, they may be more effective in their teaching. To put this another way, by knowing the attitudes of their students, teachers will be in a better position to intervene and implement efficient methods and strategies to help students change their attitudes to positive ones, or even to form new attitudes before the learning experience commences.

Huguet (2007) is in favour of this point, as he asserts that “initial attitudes towards a language are as important as keeping these attitudes through the whole

process of teaching and learning” (p. 34). He adds that emphasis should be placed primarily on students’ attitudes rather than on when a language should be introduced. In other words, age does not influence attitudes or language learning as much as attitudes. Baker (1992), on the other hand, argues that “the older a language learner is, the less favorable his/her attitudes are likely to be” (p. 41). This follows the same line of reasoning as the “critical period hypothesis”, which suggests that the older a learner is, the lower his or her learning abilities turn out to be.

Therefore, attitudes are a crucial factor in language learning. They help in increasing students’ motivation to learn, facilitate the learning process, and enhance students’ school achievement.

RESEARCH METHOD

Sample Population

The participants in this study are Moroccan high-school students in the provincial directorate of Sefrou. The number of participants targeted is 100, and they belong to different classes at three different levels: common core, first year baccalaureate, and second year baccalaureate. Their majors vary from sciences to letters. Concerning students’ gender, the sample was aimed at representing males and females equally. As far as the participants’ L1 is concerned, a considerable number are speakers of the Amazigh language, while all are fluent speakers of Moroccan Arabic. Table 1 provides more details about the sample.

Table 1. *Sample population of the study*

	Questionnaires	Interviews
Targeted population	EFL high-school students	EFL high-school students
Number of participants	100	10
Gender	Females (60%) Males (40%)	Females (50%) Males (50%)
Level	1st year Bac. (36/67%) 2nd year Bac. (63/33%)	1st year Bac. (23/90%) 2nd year Bac. (76/10%)
Stream	Letters (33/33%) Sciences (66/67%)	Letters 26/13%) Sciences (74/87%)
L1	Amazigh (60%) Moroccan Arabic (40%)	Amazigh (61%) Moroccan Arabic (39%)

Instruments

The measuring instrument was an attitude questionnaire which focused on attitudes towards learning English. The items were partly adopted from the attitude questionnaire test employed in a study by Boonrangsri et al. (2004). Other items were taken from the attitude and motivation test battery (AMTB) designed by Gardner (1988). The technique used in selecting a representative sample of students is random sampling.

The questionnaire is divided into four parts. Part one is about demographics. Part two is on attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language. Part three

is about the reasons behind students' attitudes. The last part is about the impact of students' attitudes on their learning. In part one, students were asked to give their gender, their major, and their year of study. In part two, students were asked about their favourite school subject. They were also required to rank languages from the most to the least important. As for part three and four, students were given a number of statements, and were asked to show their agreement or disagreement with them.

Semi-structured interviews were also used as data collection instruments, with ten students interviewed to elicit direct answers about their attitudes, the possible reasons behind them, and their potential impacts. To analyse the data gathered by the interviews, the researcher employed the narrative analysis method, which is a type of inductive qualitative analysis. The researcher started with a manual transcription of the interviews. The next step was the identification of codes. Generally, there are two types of coding: deductive coding and inductive coding. While inductive coding requires the researcher to identify general patterns or themes, deductive coding is employed when the researcher has a "well-specified or pre-defined set of interests" (Sheppard, 2020, p. 257). In other words, this type of coding requires the researcher to use the pre-defined and specified interests that they have in order to identify and highlight relevant quotes or passages from the transcribed data. In this study, the researcher opted for deductive coding to make sense of the respondents' individual responses, highlight important points in their answers, and provide interpretations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Attitudes

The results of the study suggest that English is the students' favourite school subject, as the figure below illustrates.

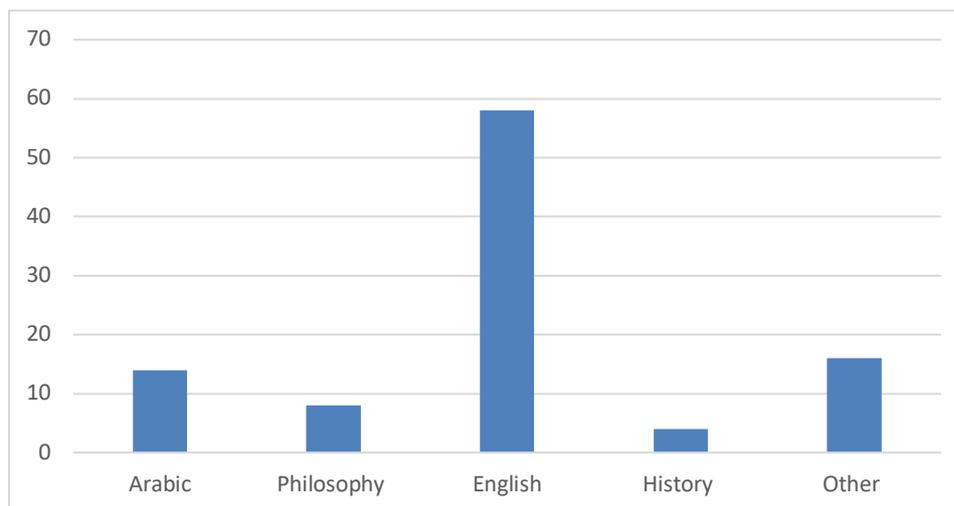


Figure 1. *Students' favourite school subjects*

The figure shows that English was chosen by 57% of the participants as their favourite school subject. This result reveals that the participants have a positive attitude towards learning English. While this result is in contrast to those yielded by studies such as that by Abidin et al. (2012), which found that Libyan secondary

school students have negative attitudes towards learning English, it is in line with studies such as those by Ming, Ling and Jaafar (2011), Savaedi and Vahdat (2017), Zayed and Razeq (2021), etc.

Students' favourable attitudes towards English can be explained by these students' growing awareness of the importance of English as an international language. Moreover, the way English is taught, compared to other subjects, is innovative and enjoyable to students. That is to say, the use of materials such as videos, songs, games, etc. increases students' motivation and active involvement in the learning process. This is due to the fact that such materials expose students to authentic language and enhance their motivation. Interviewee 1 confirms this by saying "I enjoy to study English because there is much fun, we use songs and games not like in other subjects where we study just in books". This finding is consistent with the findings of Kırkıç (2019), who investigated the impact of an innovative technique of teaching (Boray technique) on the success and attitudes of Turkish secondary school students of English. The results of this study showed an improvement in students' attitudes towards learning English after the use of the innovative teaching technique. This is also stressed by Zayed and Razeq (2021), who show that the method of instruction is one of the basic contributors to forming positive attitudes towards English learning among Palestinian high-school students.

The figure below shows the results of the ranking question, where students were required to rate languages from the most to the least important.

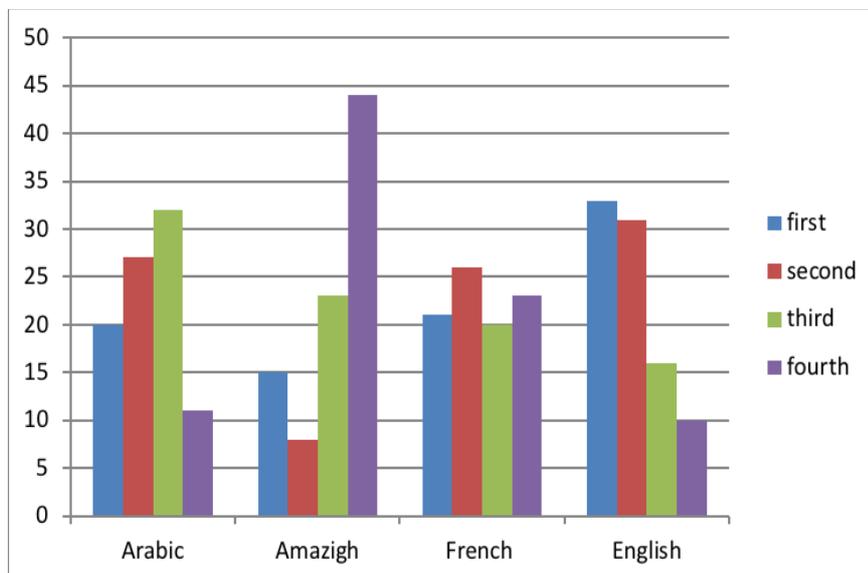


Figure 2. *The most important language*

The figure reveals that, in terms of importance, English was ranked first by 33%. This means that students are highly interested in learning English. A possible reason for this is that English is the language of the internet, with many websites written in English. Therefore, learning English means being able to understand those websites, carry out research, and take part in forums and discussions. Additionally, English is the most commonly used language among foreign language speakers. Throughout the world, when people with different languages come

together they commonly use English to communicate. Then, if students are interested in having friends from different countries, their main medium of communication would be English. Moreover, since English is spoken in so many different countries, there are thousands of schools around the world that offer programmes in English. Therefore, if students have a good command of English, they will have a high chance of finding an appropriate school and course to suit their academic needs. As interviewee 3 says, “it (English) is important for me because if I want to continue my education in anywhere in the world I need English and also I can make friends from all countries with English”.

Another possible reason why English is so important for students is that it is the language of science. Given the fact that the majority of the participants study sciences, learning English is, then, an asset in their excelling in science in future studies. This is in line with the study conducted by Bouziane (2020) who concludes that high-school science students value English “because they know they will need it for further studies or to consult references in their scientific or technical university streams” (p. 308). English is also the language of the media industries. Hence, for students, learning English means that they no longer have to struggle with translations and subtitles to enjoy their favourite books, songs, films and TV shows.

French was ranked as the second most important language by 26% of the participants. This finding can be interpreted as French as a school subject having a high coefficient, and therefore, students give it high importance. Furthermore, Moroccans perceive French as a prestigious language and as a “key to the modern western civilization” as stated by Ennaji (2005). Additionally, French is strongly present in different domains in Morocco, such as administration, banking, commerce and technology.

Standard Arabic was ranked third by 32% of respondents. This might be explained by the fact that the majority of participants are science students, so that Arabic as a school subject does not have a high coefficient. As a result, students perceive it as less important. Besides, standard Arabic is not spoken in public spaces; it is more of a writing medium. Added to that, Arabic is usually associated with arts rather than sciences – the major of most of the students, as mentioned before. As interviewee 5 says: “Arabic is important for students who study letters but for scientific students foreign languages are more important”.

The fourth language in terms of importance is Amazigh, ranked so by 44% of respondents, so it is considered less important than the languages mentioned above. A possible reason behind this is that the Amazigh language has a limited utility, which means that it is not a language of wider communication. Another reason would be that there is a gap between the officialisation of the Amazigh language and its promotion. In other words, although Amazigh is officialised, its use is limited to only socio-cultural domains at the national level, and it is not used in other fields, such as technology, science and commerce. This finding is similar to that of Bouziane (2020), who reports that in terms of importance, Amazigh was scored the lowest by the Moroccan secondary and tertiary level students who participated in the study. It is also worth mentioning that although the majority of the participants are native speakers of Amazigh, it is perceived as less important

than Arabic. One possible explanation for this is that standard Arabic is associated with Islam, and is the official language of Morocco, as confirmed by Reino (2007, p. 14), who attributes the prestigious status of standard Arabic among Moroccans to “its association with the Koran and with Arab nationalism”. Zouhir (2013) confirms this finding by stating that “the religious link between Arabic and Islam renders the Berbers admit the superiority of Arabic and have a positive attitude towards it” (p. 272).

Reasons behind Students’ Attitudes

The figure below demonstrates the reasons behind high-school students’ positive attitudes towards learning English.

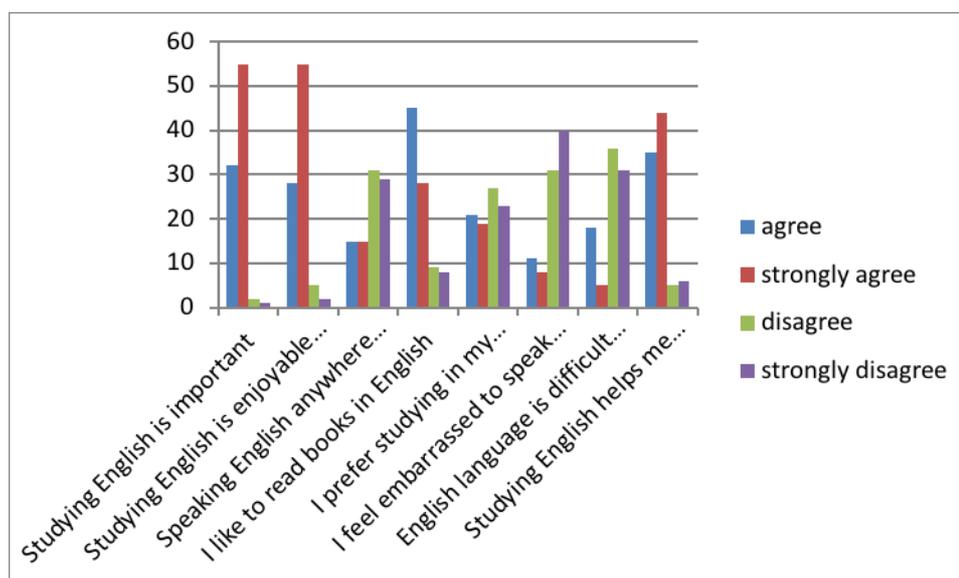


Figure 3. *Reasons behind students’ positive attitudes*

The two items “studying English is important” and “I look forward to studying more English in the future” were strongly agreed on by 55% of the students as the principal reason why they like learning English. This means that the respondents are fully aware of the current status that English has gained. They realise that they need English and that they will need it more in the future. These findings are similar to those of Alkaff (2013), who states that students realise that English is important for their future, and is necessary when one wants to travel abroad or seek better job opportunities. This finding is further confirmed by Dako and Quarcoo (2017), who conclude that Ghanaians’ positive attitudes towards English are primarily attributed to the fact that English is “the sole language that can enhance their chances of moving up the educational ladder and thus ensuring that they get secure and well-paid jobs” (p. 28).

The item “Studying English helps me improve my personality” obtained second rank. This was strongly agreed on by 44% of the respondents. This reveals that through studying the English language, students develop their self-confidence. In other words, when students are encouraged to interact with each other and discuss different issues in the classroom using the target language, they gain self-esteem

and, as a result, their personality grows stronger. Interviewee 2 says in this regard, “I feel proud of myself when I speak in English and when I understand people in films and songs”.

The results of the current study disclose that 45% of the participants chose “I like reading English books” as their third reason. This could be due to the fact that one of the best ways to improve one’s language is reading. Therefore, students are interested in learning English so as to be able to read English books and improve their overall proficiency in the language.

The findings indicate that 40% of the participants strongly disagree with the item “I feel embarrassed to speak English”, 31% disagree with the item “speaking English anywhere makes me feel worried”, and 36% disagree with the claim “English is difficult and complicated to learn”. This suggests that students have positive attitudes towards English in the sense that they perceive it as an easy language to learn. Moreover, although they have not yet reached full mastery of the language, they are willing to use it. Added to that, 27% of respondents disagree with the item “I prefer studying in my mother tongue rather than any other foreign language”. A possible explanation for this is that the subjects are aware of the limited utility of their mother tongue compared to English.

The Impacts of Student’s Attitudes

The results of the current study disclose that the main impact of students’ positive attitudes towards learning English is their eagerness to be fluent speakers of the language. This is illustrated in figure 4.

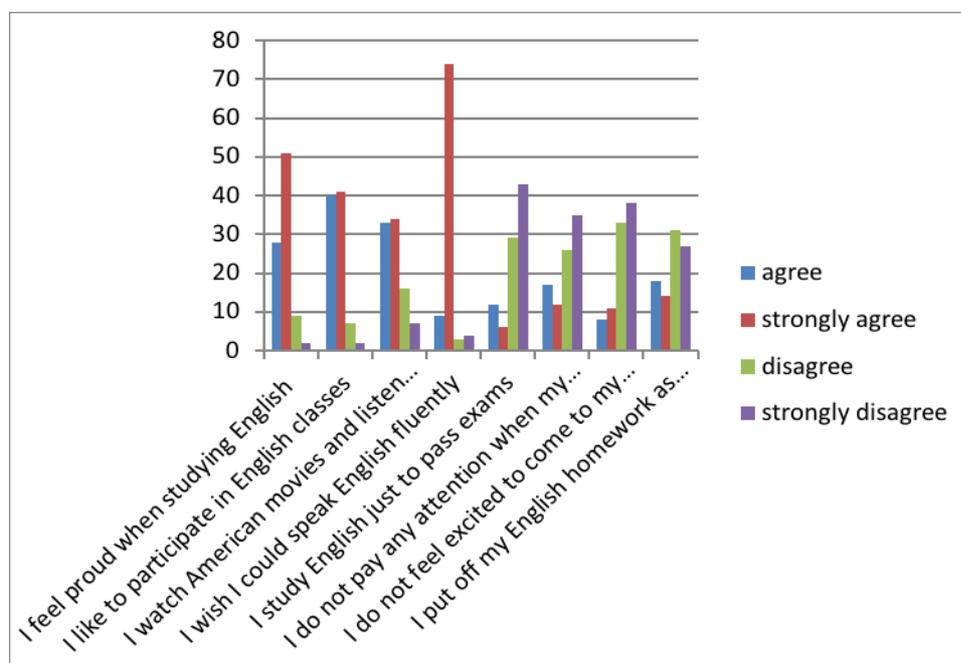


Figure 3. The impacts of students’ positive attitudes

The figure shows that 74% of respondents expressed their wish to speak English fluently by strongly agreeing with “I wish I could speak English fluently”. This indicates that the students are aware that the main objective of learning a language is to be able to use that language in meaningful interactions. So, their positive attitudes towards the language enhance their willingness to use the language more. As confirmed by Weinburgh (1998), learners’ attitudes towards a language influence such behaviours as choosing and reading books, listening to songs and speaking in that language. Moreover, being fluent speakers of English enables students to establish social relationships with people from all over the world.

The second impact of students’ positive attitudes is reflected in the item “I feel proud when studying English”, which is strongly agreed on by 51% of the participants. This means that since English is considered to be the most useful language worldwide, studying it gives students a sense of pride.

Students’ positive attitudes increase their motivation to try to use the language in the classroom. Hence, 41% of the participants strongly agreed with the item “I like to participate in English classes”. In other words, having positive attitudes towards English helps students feel comfortable in class. Only in this way are they willing to be involved in the learning process.

A total of 34% of the respondents strongly agree with the item “I like to watch American movies and listen to English songs”. Having positive attitudes towards English leads students to look for ways to improve their level in the language. In other words, students start creating opportunities for learning even outside the classroom. In this respect, one of the interviewees says “I always look for exercises on internet to practise even if the teacher doesn’t give us homework”.

Another impact of students’ positive attitudes is that they are interested more in learning the language. That is to say, their motivation towards learning English is ‘intrinsic’ rather than ‘extrinsic’. This is confirmed by the fact that 43% of the respondents strongly disagree with the item “I study English just to pass exams”. This is in contrast to the results of Alkaff (2013), who found that “students’ positive attitude towards learning English is mainly instrumental” (p. 115).

“I do not feel excited to come to my English class” was strongly disagreed on by 38%. This means that students enjoy learning English, and they get enthusiastic when they have an English class. They also become interested in their lessons and pay close attention to understanding them. Hence, 35% of participants strongly disagree with the statement “I don’t pay attention when my teacher of English is explaining the lesson”. Furthermore, holding a positive attitude towards learning English makes students eager to work on their assignments. Consequently, the statement “I put off my English homework as much as possible” is disagreed on by 31% of participants.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is an attempt to investigate Moroccan high-school students’ attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language, the possible reasons

behind their attitudes, and the potential impacts of these attitudes. The participants' obvious positive attitudes towards English may lead one to conclude that these students are fully aware of the importance of English and are motivated to learn it as a school subject. Therefore, English curricula and classroom activities in high school should involve affective aims according to the students' needs and their individual differences in order to build up more positive attitudes towards English. It is also important to study learners' personalities because effective learning and improved performance can be achieved if the EFL learners possess positive attitudes and enjoy acquiring the target language. Accordingly, this study is meant to act as a catalyst for more attention to be directed towards the importance of affective factors, especially attitudes, in the field of language teaching and learning. All parties involved in the field of second/foreign language teaching and learning should place more emphasis on studying learners' attitudes and working towards helping learners hold favourable attitudes towards the target language, in an attempt to increase their motivation and consequently improve learning.

The main limitation of this study is related to the sample chosen. Specifically, the sample size is relatively small, and is drawn from only one provincial directorate in Morocco. A larger sample of students from different Moroccan regions could have provided more representative and also more generalisable results. Therefore, further research is needed in order to cover a larger sample of Moroccan high-school students of English. Future research can also be conducted to investigate the attitudes of junior high-school students, given that it is at this level that students are introduced to English in Moroccan public schools.

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