



# Attitude towards learning English as a foreign language

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**Abstract:** *Attitude of students towards learning and learning outcomes is one of the main predictors on the basis of which teachers can establish a productive and successful learning environment. This study aims to investigate the negative attitudes that students may have towards language learning in high school. This is a descriptive study with a quantitative approach. The data has been collected from 160 high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) using a questionnaire adapted by researchers.*

*The data analysis encompasses means, standard deviations, frequency, multiple comparisons, Pearson correlation coefficient, t-test and One-way ANOVA. We looked into the frequency of reported attitude towards English language learning, the differences between positive and negative attitude, as well as the differences between genders and grades in terms of the representation of reported attitudes. The results show that our participants report more negative than positive attitudes towards language learning and that the factors which influence their negative attitudes are school policy, learning environment and teaching methodology. The results also indicate that there exists no statistically significant difference between genders, as well as between four high school grades in terms of their interpretation on positive and negative attitude towards English language learning.*

**Keywords:** *Negative attitude, language learning, learning environment.*

## Article History

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Students' attitudes towards language learning as well as the factors that influence them have been studied by various researchers using different methods. According to one definition, attitudes are beliefs or opinions about a certain issue, in this particular case, the language (Gardner, 1985), and Wenden (1991) classifies the term "attitude" into three interrelated components: cognitive (beliefs, thoughts or viewpoints), affective (an individual's feelings and emotions), and behavioral (the tendency to adopt particular learning behaviors). Among authors, Gardner (1985), Dörnyei (2001) and Allport (1935), to name a few, serve as pioneers in this scientific field. Since the school represents the environment of community and education there are, according to Gardner (1985), educational and social types of attitudes, the first observing teachers, materials and the language, and the latter concerned more with cultural and environmental aspect of the school. Students' attitude towards a language, whether positive or negative, represents impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity (Dervić & Bećirović, 2019), i.e. ease or difficulty of learning. They can also shape an image about the speakers of that language. Language attitudes may have an effect on second language or foreign language learning. The measurement of language attitudes provides information which is useful in language teaching and language learning.

However, the negative attitudes of students, as predictors of possible failure to succeed in the process of second language (L2) learning (possible failure to learn a second language), have not been extensively studied. As such, the concept was adopted and research has been conducted by Ghaedsharafi et al. (2019), whose questionnaire was used in this research. Successful teachers lead their students towards the goals of education (Delić & Bećirović, 2016) and creating positive attitudes about learning. This study looks into the concept of attitude, focusing on its negative aspects as one of the major affective factors for failure in learning a foreign language. More specifically, it investigates Bosnian high school students' negative attitudes towards learning English language. Additionally, it attempts to determine the influence of students' demographic profile i.e. gender, class and English language final grade on their negative attitudes towards learning English. Thus, the current research may serve as a pioneer project in the context of Bosnian high school students' language learning and may, together with the research on motivation, gender, and age (Ahmetović, Bećirović, & Dubravac, 2020; Bećirović et al., 2018; Dubravac & Latić, 2019; Kovačević & Akbarov, 2015; Latić & Dubravac, 2019; Mašić et al., 2020) contribute to the improvements in the L2 learning processes in general.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. RESEARCH ON ATTITUDES

Attitude has been regarded as an important factor of academic success. Attitude as a concept is as important as cognitive behaviors (Bloom, 1995). Gardner (1985) sees attitude as a component of motivation, while the existence of motivation depends on three elements: effort, desire to attain and favorable attitudes. Among the factors that influence students' attitude towards language learning are teacher's pedagogical approach, family expectations, parents' socioeconomic status, gender, age, etc. (Abolfazli & Sadeghi, 2018). Based on their investigation, Abolfazli and Sadeghi (2018) have concluded that "gender and age range do not contribute significantly to the differentiation of participants according to their attitudes towards English, even though males had a slightly higher mean score than females and elder students had more positive attitude than younger students" (p. 14). Other authors, such as Lasagabaster (2005), investigated whether language competence, the socio-linguistic context and the knowledge of the second/foreign language play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes towards a language.

Attitude towards language learning can be both negative and positive. The positive attitude enhances learning, since the willingness to be able to communicate with native speakers of the language they are learning motivates learners to learn more and the process is therefore more likely to succeed (Noels et al., 2003, p. 36). On the contrary, negative attitude can hinder or slow down language learning because those attitudes emerge when learners are not motivated, not interested or have difficulties with the teacher (Ellis, 1994, p. 197-201). Negative attitudes, even though producing negative effect on learners, may also have a positive effect. This may happen if the learners have a strong will to learn a language (Ellis, 1994, p. 200), or when students are persistent and struggle hard and fight those negative attitudes. The willingness to achieve a good grade or language fluency may turn negative attitudes into positive ones (Lennartsson, 2008). Another characteristic of students' attitudes is that they can change. They may have negative attitudes at the beginning of the language learning process and later on they may get used to it and acquire positive attitudes, or their positive attitudes may change into negative ones due to low grades, failure to lead a fluent conversation, and the like. Dewaele (in Wei & Cook, 2009) states that attitudes "shift as a consequence of political circumstances (war), or migration patterns, when a new language suddenly emerges in the local linguistic landscape and becomes associated with a particular style of music or activity" (p. 172). He mentions other works on this issue (such as Dörnyei & Clément, 2001), and provides results which say that attitudes vary within a particular country and even between regions. He also concludes that "macro contextual, geopolitical factors significantly affect people's language attitudes" (p. 173). These factors, along with age and gender, are likely to affect the attitudes towards EFL learning.

## **2.2. NEGATIVE ATTITUDES**

Attitudes towards language learning, since they represent reactions to objects and environmental factors in the learning process that can be evaluated, can be positive and negative. Certain factors contribute to each type. Zainol Abidin et al. (2012) state that “negative beliefs may lead to class anxiety, low cognitive achievement, and negative attitudes” (p. 120).

Aliakbari & Gheitasi (2017) researched the connection between attitudes towards foreign language learning and test anxiety and they found that there was a relationship between test anxiety and attitude and that females showed more optimistic attitudes towards English language learning (ELL).

Shvidko (2013), presenting the results of the findings of students' attitude towards English-only environments in school reports that their expressed negative attitude is due to forcing students to speak English, and punishments, teachers' reactions to students speaking L1 (p. 2). Negative attitudes have a detrimental effect on learners' motivation (Bratož et al., 2019, p. 3). Gömleksiz (2010) concludes that, in order to understand how negative attitudes can be changed into positive ones, “teachers should be aware of the factors affecting students negatively and should take the needs of students into consideration” (p. 917).

Rahimi & Hassani (2012) investigated the role of learning materials in learners' attitude shaping and they found correlation between them. They conclude that “it is evident that students often develop negative attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language due to the lack of stimulating and authentic learning material and tasks” (p. 71). The analysis of predictors of negative attitudes towards language learning can be found in Ghaedsharafi et al.'s paper “Investigating Predictors of High School Students' Negative Attitudes Towards Learning English by Developing, Validating, and Running a Questionnaire” (2019). There, the authors have reported that the materials that students use for English language learning are “the best predictor of negative attitudes that can be considered as the most practical and key finding of the present study” (p. 147). Materials, they conclude, can have an effect on other teaching and learning factors and contribute to inappropriate learning environments. Moreover, they found that the learning environment and difficulty to learn English contribute to the development of negative attitudes as well.

## **2.3. ATTITUDES AND GENDER, CLASS AND SUCCESS**

The overall findings of a great deal of research on the attitudes' role in second language learning show that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning (Gardner, 1985). Among the factors that affect attitudes are gender differences, education level, socio-economic status, grade level, GPA and proficiency level, etc.

Investigating 1275 students, Gömleksiz (2010) found out that there exists a statistically significant difference between gender, grade level and department variables. In his research, female students obtained more positive attitudes than males, and in terms of grade level sophomores demonstrated more positive attitudes than freshmen. Bećirović (2017) found that females are significantly more motivated to learn English as a second language than males are. Pourfeiz (2014) conducted similar research on 157 students learning English language in the Turkish context. The findings of his research reveal that 75% of Turkish EFL students have positive attitudes toward FLL.

In terms of the BiH educational context, there are various research papers that took into consideration language acquisition processes. Latić and Brdarević-Čeljo (2018) investigated the differences in language use by men and women and found no significant differences between genders regarding their beliefs about communication.

According to Bratož et al. (2019), to define language attitudes one needs to include various concepts such as “attitudes towards language variety or dialect, attitudes towards speakers of a specific language or variety, attitudes towards language learning, attitudes towards the learning situation, and attitudes towards language related behaviors, such as language use and language maintenance” (p. 3). Despite the importance of students’ attitude in the language learning process and its impact on their achievement, the role of L2 students’ attitude towards English has not met sufficient observation in the context of B&H, and thus the importance of this study is a try to bridge such a gap.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In this research a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis was employed. For the purpose of the research a questionnaire was used. Questionnaires in general, and in this particular case a questionnaire distributed online, are easy to construct and allow researchers to gather data practically, economically, and in a short period of time. By using the questionnaire researchers can easily collect information about students’ habits, preferences and backgrounds.

#### **3.1. DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT**

The instrument used for this research was developed and validated by Ghaedsharafi et al. (2019) and was used in this research with the authors’ permission. The questionnaire was translated into Bosnian language and as such delivered to students so that its administration to the Bosnian students at different levels of language proficiency would be easier. It was delivered to students in online form (using *surveyplanet* platform). It contains 30 questions with response options on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5 (1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree). Following the

explanation of the nature and purpose of the study, students were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously and without time limit. It contains statements of attitudes towards language learning which were later grouped into six groups, namely teaching methodology, difficulty to learn English, learning environment, materials, affective factors and school policy. Cronbach's alpha was employed to assess the reliability of the instrument and the coefficient amounted to 0.86, which is an acceptable index. Each set of questions was assessed for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Reliability Indices**

	N of items	Cronbach's alpha
<b>Affective Factors</b>	4	.81
<b>Teaching Methodology</b>	4	.71
<b>School Policy</b>	4	.63
<b>Learning Environment</b>	4	.50
<b>Materials</b>	9	.84
<b>Difficulty of Learning English</b>	5	.81

### 3.2. PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this research were 160 high school students, both males and females, studying at four different grade levels in a public high school in Visoko, Bosnia and Herzegovina. There were 47 girls (47.5%) and 52 boys (52.5%). As for the grade level, there were 30 first grade students (30.3%), 24 second grade students (24.2%), 26 third grade students (26.3%) and 19 fourth grade students (19.2%). Almost half of the participants, precisely 45.6 %, indicated that they had an excellent average grade in English language course. Table 2 summarizes participant information.

**Table 2 Gender, grade, and average course grade of participants**

		Frequency	Percent			Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>	Male	74	46.3	<b>Mark</b>	1	4	2.5
	Female	86	53.8		2	16	10.0
<b>Class</b>	First	39	24.4	3	29	18.1	
	Second	54	33.8	4	38	23.8	
	Third	37	23.1	5	73	45.6	
	Fourth	30	18.8				
<b>Total</b>		<b>160</b>			<b>160</b>		

### 3.3. DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, v. 26). Frequencies and means were computed to ascertain the types and frequencies of the students' attitudes towards language learning. Firstly,

descriptive analysis including mean, standard deviation (SD) and frequencies was employed. An independent samples t-test and a one-way ANOVA were used to show the differences between the grade levels.

### 3.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Will Bosnian EFL learners report more negative than positive attitude towards foreign language learning?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference between positive and negative attitude towards foreign language learning and gender?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference between positive and negative attitude towards foreign language learning and different grade levels of students?

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses have been tested:

1. Bosnian EFL learners will not report more negative than positive attitude towards foreign language learning.
2. There is no statistically significant difference between positive and negative attitude towards foreign language learning and gender.
3. There is no statistically significant difference between positive and negative attitude towards foreign language learning and different grade levels of students.

## 4. RESULTS

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the grouped variables of different types of students' attitudes. There is a strong positive correlation between the affective factors and the variable "difficulty to learn English",  $r = .681$ ,  $n = 160$ ,  $p < .001$ , between affective factors and "materials" variable,  $r = .768$ ,  $n = 160$ ,  $p < .001$ , and between "difficulty to learn English" and "materials" variables,  $r = .827$ ,  $n = 160$ ,  $p < .001$ . The correlation between other subscales is low and even insignificant, such as between the variables "materials" and "school policy",  $r = .035$ ,  $n = 160$ ,  $p < .001$ . Table 3 below represents grouped variables correlation and descriptive statistics.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlation for grouped variables**

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<b>(1) Affective factors</b>	2.28	.94	1	-.255**	.011	.027	.681**	.768**
<b>(2) Teaching methodology</b>	3.44	.71	-.255**	1	.291**	.368**	-.258**	-.169*
<b>(3) School policy</b>	3.62	.70	.011	.291**	1	.364**	-.055	.035
<b>(4) Learning environment</b>	3.44	.58	.027	.368**	.364**	1	.038	.132
<b>(5) Difficulty to learn English</b>	2.31	.90	.681**	-.258**	-.055	.038	1	.827**
<b>(6) Materials</b>	2.37	.77	.768**	-.169*	.035	.132	.827**	1

- \*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
- \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

After dividing the questions on attitudes into 6 groups or subscales and analyzing them separately, a general distinction was made between positive and negative attitudes to check whether students experience more positive or negative attitudes towards language learning, as well as to be able to conduct an independent t-test and a one-way ANOVA test on the overall students' attitude. To do so, the median of the scores was considered as the measure of central tendency; the scores equal or higher than the median were considered to reflect negative attitudes and those lower than the median were interpreted as positive attitudes. This is due to the fact that responses in the questionnaire are marked on a Likert scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree) Table 4 given below presents descriptive statistics of scores from the questionnaire.

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Scores from the Questionnaire Investigating Attitudes**

		Affective factors	Teaching methodology	School policy	Learning environment	Difficulty to learn English	Materials
N	Valid	160	160	160	160	160	160
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Median</b>		2.00	3.50	3.75	3.50	2.20	2.22

After conducting descriptive analysis of the median score of 6 grouped variables, the teaching methodology, school policy, and learning environment variables were categorized into negative attitudes group, and affective factors, difficulty to learn English, and materials variables were categorized into positive attitudes group. Having determined positive and negative attitudes that the participants reported, conditions were created to answer the second research question which aims to determine which attitudes are more reported by the participants. As presented in Table 5 below, the participants reported more negative attitudes towards language learning ( $M = 3.49, SD = .78$ ) than positive ones ( $M = 2.22, SD = .50$ ).

**Table 5. Descriptive statistics of overall attitudes scores**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Positive attitudes	160	2.33	.78
Negative attitudes	160	3.49	.50
Valid N (listwise)	160		

The next research question aimed at investigating whether there exists a statistically significant difference between positive and negative attitudes toward foreign language learning in case of different genders. An independent samples t-test was conducted to investigate this. The results show that there exists no statistically significant difference between positive attitudes in the scores for



males ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) and females ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = .81$ );  $t(158) = -1.27$ ,  $p = 0.20$ . Also, scores on negative attitudes for males ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .58$ ) and females ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .41$ );  $t(158) = -1.51$ ,  $p = 0.13$  were statistically insignificant. Thus, gender does have an effect on neither positive nor negative attitude towards language learning (see Table 6).

**Table 6. Independent samples t-test**

	Gender	N	M	SD	F	t	Sig.
<b>Positive attitudes</b>	Male	74	2.25	.75	.801	-1.27	.205
	Female	86	2.40	.81			
<b>Negative attitudes</b>	Male	74	3.43	.58	2.56	-1.51	.132
	Female	86	3.55	.41			

A one-way ANOVA between subjects was conducted to compare the effect of positive and negative attitudes towards language learning on four different high school grades. Conditions of four different grades did not have significant effect on positive attitudes on language learning at the  $p < .05$   $F(3, 156) = .958$ ,  $p = .414$ . Insignificant difference was also found between negative attitudes and four grades at the  $p < .05$  level,  $F(3, 156) = .071$ ,  $p = .976$  (see Table 7).

**Table 7. A one-way ANOVA between subjects**

Class		Negative attitudes	Positive attitudes
<b>First</b>	M	3.40	2.57
	SD	.57	.82
<b>Second</b>	M	3.76	2.03
	SD	.36	.67
<b>Third</b>	M	3.61	2.50
	SD	.43	.80
<b>Fourth</b>	M	3.57	2.52
	SD	.37	.69
<b>F</b>		.071	.958
<b>Sig.</b>		.976	.414

## 5. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

As mentioned earlier in this work, English language plays an important role in the Bosnian educational system (Dubravac, Brdarević-Čeljo & Bećirović, 2018). Given that it is a mandatory foreign language in all primary and high schools its importance, the need to learn it and use it, is growing and developing (Kovačević, Brdarević-Čeljo & Bećirović, 2018). Numerous researchers have conducted investigations of English language acquisition among Bosnian primary school, high school and university students so far, thereby investigating processes, implications, similarities and differences among procedures, approaches, and methods of language acquisition, taking into consideration participants' age,

gender, grade level, socio-economic status and other social, cognitive, or affective differences (Bećirović et al. 2018; Brdarević-Čeljo & Asotić, 2017; Dubravac & Latić 2019; Kovačević & Akbarov 2015; Mašić et al. 2020; Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017). However, this particular research aimed to investigate what kind of attitudes, positive or negative, towards language learning will Bosnian high school students demonstrate while learning English language in a school setting. Based on the results of the questionnaire items' analysis, variables that are reported as negative predictors are teaching methodology, school policy and learning environment, where the items investigating the school policy variable show the highest score, i.e. school policy is the strongest cause of negative attitudes. These results, particularly school policy as the main cause of students' negative attitudes, do not support the results reported by Ghaedsharafi et al. (2019) where this type of variable is not among negative ones. The items referring to school policy in the questionnaire used in this research were mainly concerned with the way of teaching English language in schools, the ways of distributing and covering materials during lessons and the time English language enters the school curriculum. Based on the reported results, students seem to have negative attitude towards language learning if these conditions are not met in the school. The next predictor of students' negative attitudes as reported by the participants is the learning environment variable. Ghaedsharafi et al. (2019) have reported that learning environment and teaching methodology, which are relatively close issues in the language learning process, are among the sources of negative attitudes. Learning environment has been extensively observed in the classroom management procedures (Jones & Jones, 2007; Delić, Bećirović & Brdarević-Čeljo, 2018) where the positive atmosphere in the classroom has been determined as one of the main predictors to a learning process success. Moreover, Tsuda (2003) points out that an unpleasant environment cannot offer students, as well as teachers, a place to successfully apply English language in learning and communication.

The statistical analysis displayed in the previous section confirms the last two hypotheses of this investigation. Gender and grade level did not significantly differ in reporting the types of attitudes asked in the questionnaire. Interestingly, at each point of research questions they obtained almost identical mean scores. The concept of gender in Bosnian EFL context has been studied. Dubravac and Latić (2019), for example, researching students' language learning beliefs, insignificant main effect of gender and grade on students' learning beliefs. Thus, it appears that gender and grade level do not play a key role in modifying students' attitudes in this case, as both male and female participants, across all four grade levels, shared more or less the same attitudes towards the English language learning experience.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to determine the presence and the nature of high school students' attitude towards English language learning.

The results show that participants express more negative attitudes and that school policies are the factor that contributes to this type of attitude the most. Other factors that also contribute to negative attitudes towards L2 learning are learning environment and difficulty to learn English language. Moreover, a conclusion was reached that gender and grade level differences play no significant role in rendering these types of attitudes.

A suggestion for further study of this concept would be the inclusion of other educational contexts (primary schools, universities), since the data collected and analyzed in this research do not provide a strong basis for generalization due to narrow research context. Furthermore, the concept of (negative) attitude can be investigated in combination with motivation, learning styles and strategies, and gender and grade level differences between students.

## LIMITATIONS

This study is limited to one public high school in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, therefore, provides only a partial representation of students' attitudes towards learning English.

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