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Emotional Intelligence and Attitudes Towards Foreign Language Learning: Pursuit of Relevance and Implications

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Abstract

Research into second language acquisition (SLA) has confirmed the inadequacy of Intelligent Quotient (IQ) in accounting for success in second or foreign language learning (L2). Many studies conducted on the role of intelligence in successful learning, especially in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom settings in different contexts, have shown that there are other areas of intelligence that contribute to quality learning. Thus, the present study investigated the possible relationship between perceptions of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and attitudes towards foreign language learning among university students majoring in English as a foreign language in a Turkish context. A total of 159 EFL learners participated in the study. The Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) and the Attitudes towards Foreign Language Learning (A-FLL) Scale were used to collect data. The findings revealed high levels of overall EI (95%). There was a statistically positive correlation between components of EI and A-FLL. Perception of emotion was found to be the strongest predictor of cognitive and behavioral/personality, and utilizing emotions the strongest predictor of affective/evaluative components of attitudes toward foreign language learning. The magnitude of mean differences between male and female participants reached a significant difference between male and female students only in teacher influence and exhibition subcomponents of A-FLL, with females scoring higher than males. It is concluded that an awareness of the importance of students' emotional intelligence and its role in shaping their attitudes towards learning an L2 will yield more insightful implications regarding quality language learning and better educational outcomes.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; inhibition; tolerance of ambiguity; foreign language learning

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1. Introduction

The focus of prior research and educational system in the past was mainly on cognitive aspects of individuals such as memory and problem solving. Individuals with higher intelligent Quotient (IQ) were regarded as intelligent. Over the past few decades, however, there has been an increasing interest in the emotional aspects of people in both scientific literature and second or foreign language (L2) research. Regarded as a subset of social intelligence, emotional intelligence (EI) is thought to affect various areas of human life including language achievement. There is a significant body of research (Alavinia & Agha Alikhani, 2014; Fahim & Pishghadam, 2007; López, 2011; Pishghadam, 2009) which supports the centrality of an individual's emotional intelligence to various areas of language achievement. This being the case, it can be concluded that higher levels of emotional intelligence can serve as a driving force and motivation for language achievement. In other words, individuals' with higher levels of emotional intelligence are expected to express more positive attitudes toward learning an L2. Alavinia, Bonyadi, and Razavi (2012) found that there is a statistically positive correlation between emotional intelligence and motivation to learn an L2. Similarly, Fahim and Pishghadam (2007) also found a positive significant relationship between emotional intelligence, skills and academic success.

Most scholars in the field of L2 learning (MacIntyre, MacKinnon, & Clément, 2009; Dörnyei, 2005; Imai, 2010; López, 2011) assert that foreign language learning is emotionally driven. That is to say, EFL learners are prone to experience an array of emotions and feelings during the challenging and often tedious process of learning an L2. López (2011) argues that cultivating emotions can help overcome problems of demotivation created by fear or anger which can potentially endanger foreign language achievement. She further asserts that evoking emotions enhances learners' self-esteem and empathy which, in turn, greatly contribute to students' attitudes and motivation and facilitate language learning. Likewise, Imai (2010) maintains that emotions not only facilitate, filter, or hinder an individual's inner cognitive functioning; they can also mediate development, more specifically, when learning is based on interpersonal transaction. MacIntyre (2002, p.45) asserts that emotions "just might be the fundamental basis of motivation, one deserving far greater attention in the language learning domain". That said, the literature on the relationship between EI and attitudes toward foreign language is scarce. The present study, therefore, is an attempt to fill in this research gap and shed more light on the interplay of the two construct in learning an L2.

2. Literature review

Emotional intelligence concerns the process of one's appraisal of his own and others' emotions, expressing feelings appropriately, processing emotional information and regulation of emotions to make the life better (Bown, & White, 2010; Ghanadi & Ketabi, 2014; Razavi, 2014; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Sucaromana, 2012). Goleman (1995, p.28) defines emotional intelligence as abilities "which include self-control, zeal and persistence, and the ability to motivate oneself". He further asserts that emotional intelligence can serve as a more powerful factor than IQ in various walks of life (Goleman, 1995). In line with these conceptualizations of the construct, it can be assumed that integration of human's reasoning of emotions and cognition, i.e. emotional intelligence and cognitive intelligence, might provide positive outcomes in intellectual and emotional development of language learners.

Attitudes towards second language (L2) learning as an individual difference variable and motivation have been shown to influence second language achievement (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013). Attitudes, in L2 research, encompass attitudes toward the language learning, language learning situation, language learning experience (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009, 2012; Dörnyei & Ushioda,2011), native speakers of the language or target language community, international posture (Yashima, 2012), international or intercultural speakers, and international citizenship (Byram,2013). In other words, attitudes are multifaceted and, thus, various educational, social, psychological, cultural, cognitive, affective, and behavioral variables may influence ones' attitudes toward the language. Positive attitudes and motivation can produce successful language learners.

The mainstream literature on L2 motivation and attitudes is based on Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of L2 acquisition. This model consists of two basic attitudes, i.e. integrativeness and attitudes toward the learning situations, which are deeply rooted in learners' sociocultural milieu. Both concepts are central to learners' level of motivation to learn and communicate in an L2. Integrativeness is defined as an individual's "desire to learn a second language to meet and communicate with members of the target language community" (McIntyre and Charos, 1996,

p. 4). Put another way, it shows the extent to which an individual, as a result of contact with another L2 community, tends to acculturate to the cultural traits of that community.

The basic tenet of integrativeness is that "students' attitudes toward the specific language group are bound to influence how successful they will be in incorporating aspects of that language" (Gardner, 1985, p. 6). Yashima et al. (2004) argue that the degree of integrativeness correlates with successful L2 learning. That is, the higher the level of integrativeness, the more readily the L2 learners will interact with the target language group. Attitudes toward the learning situation concern an individual's evaluation of both language teacher and the course. These two correlated variables support the individual's motivation, often called integrative motivation, to learn an L2. However, they indirectly affect language achievement through motivation (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Indeed, motivation subsumes integrativeness and attitudes toward learning situation and is a significant factor which creates individual differences in various L2 leaning domains.

Following Gardner's (1985, 2001) socio-educational model, other motivational models emerged which has prevailed L2 motivation research during the past few decades. The emergence of recent process-oriented paradigms including the possible self which is based on discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1998), L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2005) and teacher-controlled motivational strategies (Dörnyei, 2005) have taken the research on L2 motivation construct on a new turn. Challenging Gardner's socioeducational model of L2 acquisition, Dörnyei's (2005, 2009, 2014) motivational self-system postulates that possible selves, the idealized L2 self and one's future self guides, may serve as strong motivational factors to learn an L2. Put another way, a person's efforts to overcome the discrepancy between his actual self, i.e. present state of L2 learning, and his ideal L2 self- ideal L2 speaker- motivates him/her to learn an L2.

Despite different views on attitudes and motivation to learn an L2, most researchers agree that affective factors such as attitudes and motivation produce individual differences in various forms of language achievement. Research into L2 learning field supports the impact of attitudes on language achievement (Dörnyei, 2010, 2014; Gardner, 1985; MacIntyre et al., 1996; Rahimi and Yadollahi, 2011). Masgoret and Gardner (2003), for instance, found that affective factors such as attitudes towards learning situation, integrativeness, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation positively correlate with L2 achievement.

Even though the literature abounds on the relationship between affective aspects of individuals and second language (L2) learning, not enough study has been done on the correlation between EI and attitudes towards foreign language learning and, presently, it has been overlooked in L2 research. Scholars suggest that learners' motivational system and his/her emotions are fundamentally important motivators without which future possible selves and the ideal L2 self would lack motivational potency (McIntyre & MacKinnon, & Clément, 2009). With this in mind, and given the centrality of emotions to success in learning an L2, the current study sought to examine the relationship between EFL learners' emotional intelligence profiles and attitudes toward foreign language learning. The main objective was to investigate the relationship between EI and A-FLL in order to see whether EI plays a role as the potential underlying mechanism of attitudes towards foreign language learning. To this end, the following research questions were formulated to guide the present study:

1. What are Turkish freshman EFL students' attitudes towards FLL?
2. What are the Turkish freshman EFL students' EI profiles?
3. Is there any relationship between emotional intelligence profile and attitudes toward FLL?
4. How well can the variance in attitudes towards FLL be predicted by EI?
5. Do demographic factors such as gender, age and GPA moderate on EI and attitudes toward FLL?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants for the present study were recruited from English language teaching (ELT) department at a state university in Ankara, Turkey. A total of 159 EFL students were selected by using random sampling. The participants' mean age was 19.87 years with standard deviation of .95 years, ranging from 18 to 22 years old. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent form before filling questionnaires.

3.2. Instruments

Schutte et al.'s (2009) Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) was used to collect data about students EI profiles. It is a 33-item measure of emotional intelligence which represents four inter-related dimensions: (a) perceptions of emotions (PE), (b) managing one's own emotions (ME), (c) managing others' emotions (MOE), and (c) utilizing emotions (UE). The participants were required to rate the statements on a 5-point (ranging from *1. strongly disagree* to *2. strongly agree*) Likert scale. The internal consistency of SEIS in this study was α = .91 for the entire scale. In addition, the Attitudes towards Foreign Language Learning (A-FLL) Scale (Vandewaetere & Desmet, 2009) was used to measure students' attitudes towards foreign language learning. The A-FLL consists of 31 statements which participants rate on a 7-point (ranging from *1. totally disagree"* to *7. totally agree*) Likert scale. It has three major components: *cognitive* component*, affective/evaluative* and *behavioral/ personality* component with four subscales of *exhibition, inhibition, tolerance of ambiguity*, and *learning effort*. The internal consistency of A-FLL was α = .83 for the entire scale in this study.

3.3. Procedures

This study was conducted in an undergraduate EFL teacher training program at a major state university in Ankara, Turkey in April 2014. It took participants around twenty minutes on average to complete the surveys. Data analysis was carried out in order to address the research questions formulated for the present study. The statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. In order to characterize the scores of the participants' attitudes and for the ease of interpretation of results, the perfect scores were computed and mean values were obtained. Students who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean score were respectively identified as having "high" and "low" emotional intelligence. Students whose scores fell between the extremes were regarded as having "moderate". Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means were used to characterize the collected data. Inferential statistics including Pearson product-moment correlation test, independent-samples t-test, and regression analysis were used to examine the probable relationship between the two variables and the effect of EI profiles on attitudes towards foreign language learning. Statistical tests conducted for this study were assessed at the 0.05 level of significance.

4. Results

When the participants were asked to rate their attitudes towards foreign language learning, 74% of the participants agreed with cognitive component. The perfect scores of the respondents for affective/evaluative component, i.e. the cumulative scores of its three components, revealed an 81% agreement with this component, and, by the same token, 66% of them agreed with behavioral component of A-FLL. Overall, 74% of the participants expressed positive attitudes towards foreign language learning with higher mean score ($M = 72.85$, $SD = 9.09$) ascribed to affective/evaluative component. However, the participants scored almost equally in extrinsic and teacher influence subcomponents ($M = 17.00$, $SD = 3.70$). Furthermore, the highest mean score ($M = 38.47$, $SD = 5.66$) was observed in intrinsic motivation subcomponent of affective /evaluate component, while the highest mean score ($M = 18.23$, $SD = 2.70$) was ascribed to exhibition subcomponent of behavioral component. The participants also had the lowest mean score in inhibition subcomponent ($M = 7.72$, $SD = 2.60$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for attitudes toward foreign language learning.

Variables	N	%	Mean	SD
Cognition	159	74	25.38	4.69
Extrinsic	159	81	17.05	3.75
Intrinsic	159	79	38.47	5.66
Teacher influence	159	82	17.03	3.70

Inhibition	159	55	7.72	2.55
Exhibition	159	87	18.23	2.69
Tolerance	159	71	14.78	3.51
Effort	159	52	17.88	4.92

With regard to the importance of emotional intelligence in motivation to learn an L2, Table 2 indicates that 96% of the participants fell within the high category of EI, while the rest were in moderate category. Strange as it may seem, no participants' EI profile fell under low category. This suggests that the participants are very intelligent emotionally.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for EI.

Variables	High	Moderate	Low	Mean	SD
Perception of emotions (PE)	93%	7%	-	37.30	4.90
Managing own emotions (ME)	95%	5%	-	34.55	4.73
Managing others' emotions (MOE)	92%	8%	-	29.74	4.43
Utilizing emotions (UE)	96%	4%	-	24.30	3.44
Overall EI	96%	4%	-	125.87	14.33

The Pearson product-moment correlation test revealed a statistically strong positive correlation between EI and A-FLL, r (159) = .531, p < .01. Overall, EI also correlated significantly with three components of A-FLL. Additionally, strong significant correlations were found between four components of EI. Finally, as shown in Table 3, managing one's own emotions and others' emotions significantly correlated with all the components of A-FLL. However, perceptions of emotions and utilizing emotions did not correlate with behavioral component of A-FLL. The careful scrutiny of results indicated that the correlation between overall EI and overall A-FLL was also significant in relation to gender differences. That is, the correlation between emotional intelligence and A-FLL was statistically significant both in females, r (159) = .331, p < .01, with moderate effect size, r < .49, and in males, r (159) = .549, p < .01, with strong effect size, r >. 49. Finally, the results of regression analysis indicated that EI explains 28.20% of the variance in A-FLL (R^2. .282, F (1,157) = 36.70, p< .05). Perception of emotions came out to be the strongest predictor of cognitive (β = .30, p <.05) and behavioral (β = .20, p <.05) components of A-FLL, while utilizing emotions emerged as the strongest predictor of affective component (β = .23, p <.05).

Table 3. Correlation matrix for the relationship between EI and A-FLL.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1- Cognitive	1								
2- Affective/ evaluative	.253**	1							
3- Behavioral	.367**	.323**	1						
4- Overall attitudes	.610**	.787**	.782**	1					
5- Perception of emotions	.272**	.372**	.130	.349**	1				
6- Managing own emotions	.246**	.414**	.231**	.415**	.551**	1			
7- Managing others' emotions	.247**	.317**	.165*	.329**	.509**	.558**	1		
8- Utilizing emotions	.204**	.377**	.103	.319**	.620**	.595**	.519**	1	
9- Overall EI	.295**	.458**	.195*	.531**	.837**	.839**	.773**	.790**	1

Gender differences were also found to moderate on EI and A-FLL. Male and female participants differed significantly in their attitudes toward FLL in affective component, t (154) = 2.40, p < .05, its teacher influence subcomponent, t (154) = 2.09, p <.05, and exhibition subcomponent of behavioral component, t (154) = 2.09, p < .05. Surprisingly, females scored higher than males in all significant variables. Moreover, females had higher mean

scores in cognitive and affective/evaluative components, while males scored higher than females in behavioral component.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The present study set out to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and attitudes towards foreign language learning (A-FLL) in order to find out whether EI plays a role as the potential underlying mechanism of attitudes towards foreign language learning. The results of the present study indicated that EFL students in Turkey portray a strongly high level of EI and a satisfactory level of A-FLL. This suggests that they are able to control and regulate their emotions and are less influenced by negative factors such as frustration, anxiety, anger, worry, sadness, insecurity, nervousness and boredom in their attitudes toward learning an L2. The findings also revealed that EI significantly correlates with all the components of A-FLL and that as emotions are very important for individuals' well-being and success in life, thus, it is expected that high levels of EI and its strong correlation with A-ELL might contribute to success in language achievement. Some other studies published in international literature (Abdullah et al., 2004; Ghanadi & Ketabi; López, 2011; Zarezadeh, 2013) have found a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and language achievement. López (2011), for instance, found that students portrayed both negative and positive emotions to FLL and that their negative emotions at times decreased classroom participation. She further argues, however, that their negative emotions did not deter their motivation to accomplish the course.

Findings of the current study also indicated that emotional intelligence is a predictor of attitudes toward foreign language learning. Additionally, perception of emotion was found to be the strongest predictor of cognitive and behavioral/personality and utilizing emotions the strongest predictor of affective/evaluative components of attitudes towards foreign language learning. Similar results were obtained by Ghanadi and Ketabi (2014) who reported a positive and significant relationship between Iranian undergraduate EFL students' ($N = 138$) emotional intelligence and their beliefs about language learning. Their findings also revealed that emotional intelligence is a powerful predictor of learners' beliefs about language learning. These findings demonstrate the interplay of emotional intelligence and attitudes toward language learning. Teachers and instructors, therefore, should recognize and support their students' emotions in L2 learning process. This can help learners to cope with feelings that are inherent to language learning classroom and develop positive attitudes toward themselves as language learners (López, 2011).

One of the most significant findings of this study was the positive correlation between managing emotions, both in self and others, and A-FLL among participants. This puts emphasis on the significant role of self-awareness and establishing good interpersonal relations in shaping a person's attitudes to FLL and success in learning an L2, more specifically, in developing speaking skills and L2 communication. In other words, personal intelligences, i.e. intra- and interpersonal intelligences, as the basic underlying mechanisms of emotional intelligence, are central to L2 communication. Tabatabei and Jamshidifar (2013), for instance, found a positive correlation between the EI profile of Iranian students and their willingness to participate in L2 communication. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating emotional instruction in the curriculum. Therefore, L2 teachers should adopt approaches, strategies, and classroom activities contributing to the enhancement of emotional intelligence among students with low levels of EI.

The findings of the study reported the great impact which the EI has on students' A-FLL. It is recommended, therefore, that foreign language teachers cater to students' emotional experiences and feelings in classrooms. Students' self-report revealed the importance of affective needs and emotional aspect of human mind in shaping their attitudes toward foreign language learning. The relationship between EI and A-FLL is an important issue in L2 research. However, it is an under-researched issue, and, to date, the potential effects of emotions on A-FLL have not been explored adequately in L2 research even though there is a significant body of research which indicates that EI and emotions have bearings on second language achievement. Further research, therefore, should pay more attention to the impact of feelings and emotions that students bring with or may originate during L2 learning process. Otherwise, we may fail to appreciate the significance of a strong motivational energy and a 'critical force' which can assure better educational outcomes and successful L2 learning among students. It should be kept in mind that the present study only focused on the relationship between EI and AFLL among EFL students, and the role of

gender differences in this respect. Therefore, further research should approach the issue from new perspectives, e.g. interaction effect of students and teachers' emotional intelligences on A-FLL, using other variables such as age, academic achievement, and affective negatives.

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