# ATTITUDES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TOWARDS NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING PROFESSORS

**UULZHAN KUBANYCHBEKOVA**

Foundation Course Science (Psychology), University of Pisa, Italy
E-mail: uulzhan.kubanychbekova@gmail.com

**Abstract -** The study investigates the difference in attitudes that university students in Pisahave towards native and non-native English-speaking professors. A total of 54 students recruited from the University of Pisa participated in the experiment. A quasi-experimental design was implemented to study the difference between perception of materials presented by native English-speaking professors (NESP) and non-native English-speaking professors (NNESP). The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between experimental and control groups in the level of attitude towards NESP or NNESP. Findings and the limitations are discussed.

**Keywords -** Attitudes towards Professors, Native and Non-Native English Speaking Professors, Competence

## I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship that students develop with their teacher has almost a similar effect on identity development and internalization of values that students have with their parents (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Just as children obtain their values and beliefs from their parents, so teachers are able to have the same amount of influence. If the students have a positive relationship with their teachers they will also start to absorb values and beliefs from their teachers (Hughes, 2011). Other than influencing a student's inner world, teachers also influence the way that students interact with their environment. A positive interaction with a teacher leads students to become more persistent, goal-oriented and self-regulatory (Wentzel, 2009). Also, a strong correlation is found between positive teacher-student relationship and academic success of students (Deci & Ryan, 2012). If however, the relationship is negative and the pupil does not feel comfortable with the teacher, problem behavior arises. Students start to be more aggressive with peers and act problematically such as being inattentive in class. It must be noted that positive relationships not only affect students, but teachers as well. Teachers are also motivated to put more effort into their work if they see positive responses from their pupils.

The current study focuses on whether students in Pisa see NSEP more competent than NNESP due to their accent and English proficiency. The rationale for this study is that there are limited studies conducted to measure the attitudes of students towards their instructors in Europe. By conducting a study that focuses on the perception of students towards their instructors, we will be able to get an idea of how to make the student-teacher relationship more effective. The results of the paper will allow local professors and institutions to have an understanding of student perceptions that are based on empirical research rather than rumors from the student body. The goal of the study is to find out the attitudes of students towards professors see whether English proficiency of an instructor is important for students.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides the research that was used to formulate the goals and hypotheses of this paper. The review starts with an overview of the student-teacher relationship and gives a short definition and conceptualization of this term. It then goes to describe the attitudes students have towards instructors of which competence will be the most discussed. The review narrows its focus on an aspect of competence, which is English proficiency of teachers and how this quality is used to judge the capability of professors. The last part describes the student-teacher relationship in Europe and Central Asia and concludes with the arguments of the study.

## III. STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

Teachers are crucial agents in students development, emotionally, socially and academically (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Students internalize the values of their teacher, such as morale values and standards of honesty, and accept them as their own (Martin & Dowson, 2009, Soroya, Hashmi & Soroya, 2014). They come to see their teachers as protective figures who motivate them to do better and to aim for success (Resnick et al., 1998). Researchers have tried to conceptualize the teacher-student relationship and have come up with a few ways that it can be described. Developmental psychology has described this relationship in a form of a binary partnership where both sides equally share in the advantages of their bond. In this definition, both teacher and student gain something from each other by transferring something of value. The teacher transfers experience and knowledge to the student and gains self-fulfillment or career development; in the case of the student's successful academic achievements (Sameroff, 1995). Other researchers have analyzed

this relationship from the attachment perspective where the student has more to gain. A healthy teacher-student relationship allows students to have increased feelings of security, develop an ability to create stronger emotional connections and to be more academically successful. This perspective also states that the valence of the relationship depends on the perception students have about their teachers (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012, Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

A healthy teacher-student relationship improves level of self-esteem and leads to active peer interactions. Students who have a positive relationship with their teacher will be able to form friendships better, be popular with fellow classmates and tend to be more friendly. If children view their teachers more positively and are securely attached they will have a better opinion of themselves and will be more sociable with their fellow peers. They will also be less nasty and aggressive and express more positive feelings rather than negative ones (Verschueren, Marcoen, & Schoefs, 1996).

However, when the teacher-student relationship is negative and conflict is present, student's problem behavior becomes more frequent and academic successes decrease. The student becomes less socially active and starts to portray aggressive and hostile behavior toward peers (Birch & Ladd, 1998). In addition, students who are said to have negative relationships with their teachers show lower levels of belongingness (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brian, & Leaf, 2010; Irvine, 1986). It must be noted that the relationship keeps changing as a student moves from being a pupil in high school to a student in a university. The relationship matures into an interaction that is less authoritative and constricted to become more mature and individualistic with the role of the teacher changing to be more like a guide (Chan, Tong & Henderson, 2017).

## IV. THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the study is to find out the attitudes university students in Pisa have towards NESP and NNESP. The attitudes of students will allow the faculty and staff of the universities to improve student-teacher relationships which will lead to the increased academic success of students.

The following hypotheses guided the present study:

**a)** Students in the NESP group will have a higher difference in means between pretest and posttests scores of the ATC scale compared to the NNESP group. Students in English-teaching environments prefer NESP because English proficiency is perceived as an indicator of competence (Clayton, 2000) and students will be more attentive to competent professors because they think this will increase their chances of finding a good job (Case, & Fraser, 2005).

**b)** Students in the NESP group will have better test results compared to the NNESP group. Students will remember more because of the belief that NESP are more competent and thus information provided by them is more important (Clayton, 2000).

## V. METHOD

**Participants:** A total of 54 participants took part in the study. The participants were students from the University of Pisa, included into experimental and control groups. The students were Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors from the abovementioned universities and were from the departments of Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and European Studies.

**Materials:** The speech was 500 words long and consisted of information based on the University of Pisa Handbook for Students about academic honesty. The structure of the information was kept the same as in the handbook while everything then was paraphrased and divided altered into a speech with an introduction, body and conclusion. The terminology was kept the same as it was in the handbook with the only alteration being in simplification of words so when students would hear the speech, it would be easier to understand.

The video recording shows the chosen professors reading the Academic Honesty speech. The duration of the videos are almost the same with the difference being only 30 seconds. The reason for the difference was the difference in pauses the professors had and also their reading pace. Their reading pace was instructed to be steady without any acceleration or deceleration in any part of the video.

**Attitudes Towards Cheating (ATC):**This scale was developed by Gardner and Melvin in 1988 to develop a measuring tool that would be able to assess the attitudes students have towards cheating. The scale consists of 34 questions and are answered using the Liker scale. Fourteen of the statements were supposed to criticize students while the rest were only supposed to measure the tolerance of a student towards cheating. Some of the questions would portray hypothetical situations and ways that students should react to cheating. Also, hypothetical situations were given where students would have to judge whether it was cheating or not; other questions focused on whether cheating was good or bad; and on the behavior of teachers, e.g. "If a teacher leaves the room during a test, that teacher is in effect okaying cheating". The item analysis of the test revealed correlations ranging from +.10 to +.58 (N=92) and internal consistency was shown to be r = .83 ($p$<.01). The maximum score for this scale is 170 which indicates negative attitudes to cheating and the lowest score possible is 34 which indicates positive attitudes towards cheating. The scores of the participants of

this study showed: *M*= 103;*SD*=14.20 (*N*=54) which means they have moderate negative attitudes towards cheating.

**General Attitudes to Institutional Authority Scale (GAIAS):** This scale was developed by. The version that was used is a shorter version and consists of only 32 questions out of the original 112. The items are answered using the Likert with options ranging from strongly agree and strongly disagree to the available questions. 16 statements are reversed and a high score indicates a pro-authority attitude. The wording of one of the questions was restructured from "The police in the United States are pretty trustworthy" to "The police are pretty trustworthy". The reason for this is that the original question does not suit the current region and needed to be changed for reasons of understandability. The questions focus on three areas of authority; government authority (e.g. "The law rightly claims the allegiance of every citizen at all times"), military/police authority (e.g. "The Police have a hard job which they carry out well ") and teacher authority (e.g. "A teacher is a somewhat ridiculous figure, posing as an authority on the important things in life, when, in fact, he is often ignorant and immature himself"). The Cronbach Alpha result of the test reveals correlations ranging from +.91 to +.94 (N=200) and internal consistency was shown to be r = .76 ($p$<.05). The maximum score for this scale is 160 which indicates positive attitudes to authority and the lowest score possible is 32 which indicates negative attitudes towards authority. The scores of the participants of this study showed: *M*= 120.89;*SD*=10.47 (*N*=54) which means that they have positive attitudes towards authority.

**Test on Content of Speech:**This short test was built by researchers for this study and was made of questions based on the information in the speech. There are 15 items ranging from multiple choice and true/false questions. The questions are focused on eliciting what the student remembers from the video. The questions focus on definitions of terms (e.g. "What is self-plagiarism?"), defining definitions (e.g. "What is buying, selling, or stealing exam answers called?") and hypothetical situations (e.g. "Is giving false information for missing a class considered lying?")

**Procedure:** The students followed the link to the survey, the first page of the survey explained the procedure and the amount of time it will take them to complete it. The first section was the ATC scale which acted as a pretest. After completing the ATC scale they moved to the section with the recording of the professors reading the speech on academic honesty. They were asked to finish watching the video completely and only then move to the next section. The next section was the ATC scale again which acted as a posttest. After completing it the second time they fill out the GAIAS and then move to the test on the content of the speech. After they completed all the questions they came to the next and last section which was a short text that served as a debriefing. They were apologized to, and explained the survey had nothing to do with academic honesty but tried to measure their attitudes towards NESP and NNESP. They were provided with contacts of researchers.

**Research Design**: This research is a quasi-experimental design with a combination of a non-equivalent group and pretest-posttest design. The respondents were not randomly chosen to separate groups but the data was collected by randomly sending the links of the two groups of students from different departments. A parametric test, specifically an independent sample t-test analysis, was used to analyze the gathered data to find out whether there is statistical evidence for the difference in the means of the groups.

## VI. RESULTS

A preliminary analysis, which was conducted to check for miscoded scores or any missing values, using SPSS 24 showed no unclear data. All questions were properly reversed using the SPSS program. Results of the cheating scale showed that participants had moderate levels of negative attitudes towards cheating. In other words, respondents were more inclined to view cheating as unacceptable behavior rather than viewing it in a positive manner. The results of the test on academic honesty showed that on average participants received a score of 73%.

A correlational analysis was conducted to determine whether there is a relationship between the results of the posttests of the cheating scale with the participants of the NESP and NNESP groups. The analysis showed that there is not a significant relationship between the factors ($r$(22) = -.19, $p$<.37). Another correlational analysis was conducted to see whether a relationship existed between the results of the test on academic honesty and the participants from the NESP and NNESP groups. Similarly, no significant relationship was found ( $r$(22) = .08, $p$<.71).

**Testing Hypothesis I: Change in attitudes towards cheating as an indicator of attitudes towards professors:** An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare attitudes towards cheating in NESP and NNESP conditions (Table 1). There was no significant difference in scores for NESP (M=109.501, SD=16.325) and NNESP (M=102.333, SD=14.639) conditions (t(52)=1.651, p=0.105).

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| PreTest | Equal variances assumed | ,604 | ,441 | ,704 | 52 | ,485 | 2,75000 | 3,90719 | -5,09034 | 10,59034 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | ,703 | 49,247 | ,485 | 2,75000 | 3,91093 | -5,10831 | 10,60831 |
| PostTest | Equal variances assumed | ,036 | ,851 | 1,651 | 52 | ,105 | 6,96667 | 4,21971 | -1,50080 | 15,43414 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 1,631 | 46,763 | ,110 | 6,96667 | 4,27192 | -1,62848 | 15,56181 |

***Table 1*. Differences of means in pretest and posttest levels of attitudes towards cheating**

**Testing Hypothesis II: Difference in test results as indicators of attitudes towards professors**: To test the second hypothesis, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare results from the test on the content of the academic honesty speech in NESP and NNESP conditions (Table 2). There was no significant difference in scores for NESP (M=11.333, SD=2.943) and NNESP (M=11.067, SD=2.864) Conditions; t(52)=0.965, p=0.339.

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Test | Equal variances assumed | ,062 | ,804 | ,965 | 52 | ,339 | ,76667 | ,79409 | -,82679 | 2,36012 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | ,962 | 48,818 | ,341 | ,76667 | ,79657 | -,83425 | 2,36758 |

***Table 2*. Mean results from the test on academic honesty**

## VII. DISCUSSION

The results of this study did not support the results obtained by previous studies on the topic. There are a number of divergences between the present study and similar studies on the topic, which might explain the discrepancy in the results. First, a separate bulk of research shows that there exist several more variables related to professors' use of English language, which might be important in understanding students' attitudes. One of those is the ability of students to tell apart accents of professors. Even though students state the accent of an instructor to be important, research has revealed that students in reality have difficulty differentiating accents and do not base their appraisals of professors solely on their accents. A major factor that is taken into account when assessing an instructor is nationality (Hu &Lindeman 2009). Even when educational institutions are hiring faculty members, individuals from Anglophone countries are labeled as more qualified compared to individuals who are not even if their skill set and experience is similar. Even if the instructor has a preferred accent, be it American or British, competency is fully

evaluated only after knowing the nationality of the professor. In other words, if a student listens to two people with similar accents but knows that one of them is not American or British, that person will be rated lower than the person who is American or British (Yook and Lindeman 2013). Since no information was available about the professors who were reading the speeches, there is a possibility that this could have left the respondents with ambivalent attitudes towards professors. If they were told the nationalities of the professors, the results of the study might have been different.

Additionally, there is a difference between voluntary spoken American and British accents and the audio recordings that English learners listen to when learning English. Yook and Lindeman (2013) argue that there is a sort of "messiness" to speech that is voluntary. The scripted and clear accents that students learn from are far from the everyday English spoken by natives. They also state that another variable that could mitigate attitudes is the various dialects and accents that English is spoken in. The fact that the NESP was speaking in an American accent with her own pace and manner could have introduced a sort of "messiness" into her speech. Her accent could have also been different from the "correct" American accent that students could have been used to. Because of these factors, that the respondents would have been unfamiliar with, there is a possibility that her accent could be assessed similar to the NNESP accent.

In addition, there is an interesting feature of evaluating accents. Even though students state the accent of an instructor to be important, research has revealed that students in reality have difficulty differentiating accents and don't base their appraisals of professors solely on their accents. English learners are actually unable to differentiate accents of native English speakers or non-native English speakers (Kelch and Santana-Williamson 2002). So even if the native speaker in the video was the person whose voice is used in audio files that English learners use to learn English, there is no indication that they are able to differentiate between different accents of spoken English. Based on this study, it can be presumed that respondents were not able to understand or differentiate between the accents of the professors. Even though it has been mentioned that students prefer to have NESP, little research has been conducted to measure the abilities of students in differentiating the pronunciation of English words by NESP and NNESP ( Al-Issa and Dahan 2011). It cannot be assumed that students who want native speakers as teachers actually would know the difference. There is a chance that if students were not told that a certain accent was American and another was not, they would not be able to differentiate the valence. Maybe if the respondents were told that this accent was a native speaker and the other was a non-native speaker a significant result would have been observed.

A controversial study by Samimy & Brutt-Griffler (1999) conducted a questionnaire and interview with students, from China, Japan, Turkey, Korea, Togo, Burkina Faso, Russia and Surinam. Their results showed that students did not evaluate NESP or NNESP as less or more competent than the other. However, they did assess that both sides had their advantages and disadvantages. Native speakers were described as informal, using different techniques, methods and approaches, fluent, accurate, using English that was conversational, flexible, giving positive feedback, using authentic English and the goal for their teaching was communication. Non-native speakers were described as using textbooks more often, aware of psychological traits of learning, being sensitive to the needs of pupils, exam preparation as goal of teaching, more efficient and understood the background of students better. All of the respondents were non-native speakers and learnt their English from non-native English speaking teachers (Zhang, & Du, 2018). There is a likelihood that because of their experience with teachers who were not native speakers, they would not view NESPs or NNESPs unequally. They could have similar attitudes towards both types of instructors and understand the advantages and disadvantages of both each case.

The difference between the English proficiency levels of professors and students in universities here could explain the results of the study. Based on the study by Kelch and Santana-Williamson (2002) which states that non-native speakers usually are not able to differentiate NESP from NNESP, students might be unable to differentiate English-speaking abilities of their professors which consequently leads to the inability to form attitudes on competence. Professors in the universities here, whether NESP or NNESP, generally have better command of the English language than their students. This gap between English proficiency then would not categorize professors into NESP or NNESP groups.

The method used in this study was completely different from the previous studies discussed in the literature review. The majority of the studies used surveys which usually asked participants about…. (Callahan, 2006, Kelch and Williamson, 2002, Hughes, 2011, Kirkpatrick, 2007). So typically previous studies explored the attitudes only, not the behavior of the participants. Our study, however, was quasi-experimental. Participants were deceived and their attitudes were inferred from a test on the content of the speech and their changes in attitudes towards cheating. Control of mediators was limited and the risk of other variables was high. The results might have been different if participants were asked to fill out a survey which directly asked them their attitudes towards NESPs and NNESPs.

**Future Research**: Future research should focus on conducting the study in the format of a classroom rather than online. This will allow the respondents to

be observed in a natural environment and will allow for control of variables such as listening to the speech till the end and listening to a professor that is physically present. This will ensure that students have for sure paid attention to the person speaking. Also, future studies should focus on finding alternative methods of measuring attitudes towards instructors. The gender and ethnicity of speakers should be also taken into account to see whether gender influences students' attitudes. Also, the sample size should be increased to rule out false negative results.

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