

Palestinian High School Students' Attitudes towards Studying English Language and Culture

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Abstract: *The following study aimed at investigating Palestinian high School students' attitudes towards learning English and its culture, and the reasons behind these attitudes in the Palestinian educational context. The study sample consisted of 24 (12 males and 12 females) 9th grade EFL learners. The study followed a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were the primary research instrument used to collect data, which was analyzed thematically. The results showed that the social context a learner thrives in partially shapes his/her attitudes and motivation. Even with ideal environments, learners' differences and personalities are what either keep them motivated or force them to withdraw from the learning process. The results also revealed that learners believe in the importance of learning the English language and its culture. The learners' level was found to impact their motivation and attitude and a conflict was found between their native culture and the target culture. Moreover, the students expressed their desire to have more exposure to the target culture. Further, as the results showed, parents' engagement and support, teachers' support and personality, peer pressure, motivation and anxiety and the status of English as a lingua franca are some of the reasons behind learners' beliefs and attitudes. The researchers discussed these results and their implications for EFL teachers, EFL curriculum developers, and EFL teacher trainers.*

Keywords: Attitudes, culture, foreign Language

1. Introduction

English language teaching in Palestine begins in Kindergarten. English is the main foreign language that is being taught in the Palestinian public schools education system. It is considered one of the main subjects that students are required to study. The Palestinian context is unique as far as teaching the English language and culture is concerned. Its uniqueness stems mainly from the political situation and the British government involvement in Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel based on the British Balfour promise dated November 2, 1917. In other Arab countries, such as Lebanon and Morocco, French is the main foreign language that Lebanese and Moroccan students learn. This is a result of the French colonial conditions of educational language policies (Abderrahman, 2017). A recurring issue for language learners regardless of what country they reside in is their attitude towards a foreign language and culture. As such, this study focuses on Palestinian high school students' attitudes towards studying the English language and culture and the reasons behind such attitudes. The current

study focused on students studying English language and culture at schools taking into consideration learners' attitudes towards studying English at schools, their views of the English language and culture, and the challenges that they face while learning English. It does not deal with the significance of learning English as an international language. It is worth noting that Palestinian students learn British English. Textbooks and other learning materials are written in British English. The British Council in Palestine is very active in promoting English learning and EFL teachers' training.

Attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives start taking shape at a young age. Societal experience with a subject matter tends to be reflected in children simply because the children feel the experience through their parents and society (Wainwright 2011). The aim of the current study is to identify the Palestinian high school learners' attitudes toward learning the English language and culture and the reasons behind such attitudes. In particular, the study aims at answering the following two research questions:

- 1) What are high school Palestinian students' attitudes and beliefs towards studying the English language and culture?
- 2) What are the reasons behind student's attitudes and beliefs towards studying English as a foreign language and culture?

2. English Language Status in Palestine

English language learning in Palestine is of paramount significance. There are so many private schools that teach several subjects in both English and Arabic. Furthermore, English is the only foreign language that is considered as one of the main subjects taught in the Palestinian curriculum. Although English is being taught from Kindergarten to the twelfth level (K-12) and at the university level, Palestinian students' English language proficiency needs great improvement. Therefore, several initiatives had been implemented to improve its status quo. Such initiatives include training English teachers on the state of the art teaching methodology, improving teacher education preparation programs, and cooperating with Nongovernmental Organizations such as the British Council in conducting professional development workshops for English teachers and conducting research on English language teaching at Palestinian schools and universities.

K-12 & university Palestinian students' English achievement might be improved drastically by understanding their attitudes and the challenges that they encounter. To understand Palestinian students' attitudes towards studying the English language, a very limited number of studies had been conducted. To be precise the researchers found only three studies. Two of these studies (Tanni, 2015 & Shakfa, & Kabilan, 2017) investigated university students' attitudes towards learning English and one (Musleh, 2011) investigated Palestinian grade 6th – 12th students, at both public and private schools. Tanni concluded that in general Palestinian university students hold a positive attitude towards the English language. Female students had a better positive attitude than their male counterparts did. Shakfa and Kanilan found that 70% of the participants had low

motivation towards learning English due to political, religious, and business purposes. Musleh (2011) found out that the context in which Palestinian students live and the Palestinian culture greatly influenced their attitude and motivation to study English. Palestinian students are instrumentally driven and motivated to learn English because of their awareness of the vitality of English for future university learning and career growth and development. Due to the limited number of studies conducted, this study is expected to enrich the literature on this topic by providing a qualitative deep understanding and analysis of high school students' attitudes towards studying the English language and culture.

3. Literature review

3.1 Attitudes, success, and context

There are two main variables of attitudes that could influence learners' language experience. These are attitudes towards learning language and attitudes towards the target language community. Attitudes towards language learning are impactful in that if the learner views learning a foreign language positively then learning would take place. In terms of attitudes towards the target language community, "learners who have favorable attitudes towards a language, its speakers and their culture tend to be more successful in their learning than those who have negative attitudes" (Fatiha, et al., 2014: 118).

Attitudes are influenced by the social context in which learners live in a way that in turn shapes their views and how they feel about learning (Cansler, 2008; Alseweed, 2009). Context is important since behavior differs from culture to culture, context to context (Al-Saraj, 2011). Attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions fit together shaping experiences that are observable and can be experienced by the learner to alter their views and feelings about things (Cansler, 2008). However, one aspect of attitudes not investigated in depth or frequently enough is what or who influences attitudes and what forms them in the learner's mind.

Learners' attitudes may be positive or negative based on their personal experience with the language or the experience of those close to them (Horner et al., 2008; Sinno, 2008; Lastra, 2009; Juhana, 2012; Fatiha et al., 2014). "The overall cultural context within which we live can provide a set of assumptions and salient facts which determine the attitudes we will develop" (Bartram, 2005: 1). Another aspect to consider is the context in which learners and their peers are learning the target language. The perceived usefulness of the language such as advancement in academics or for use within their social context also would impact learner attitudes (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Bartram, 2005; Wadho, Memon, & Memon, 2016).

Cultural context (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011; Tanni, 2015; Wadho et al., 2016), and portrayal of language in the media (Bartram, 2005) play a profound role in shaping English language learners' attitudes. According to Musleh's (2011) findings, demographic location (context) and culture impact learner's attitudes and reasons (motivations) for learning English. Further, learner attitudes are highly influenced by teachers' behavior within the classroom in terms of meeting teaching goals, good classroom

management, and providing a safe learning environment (Kitano, 2001; Hashwani, 2008; Lastra, 2009; Musleh, 2011; Juhana, 2012; Sabah 2013; Fatiha 2014; Tanni 2015; Wadho et al., 2016; Shakfa & Kabilan, 2017).

3.2. Attitude, proficiency level, gender and age

Some studies investigated the relationship between English learners' attitudes and level of proficiency. For instance, Bagheri and Andi (2015) found a positive correlation between positive attitudes and level of proficiency achieved. Furthermore, several studies investigated English language learners' attitudes toward the English language and culture and found that majority of learners hold a positive attitude towards studying English (Ahmed, 2015; Muthanna & Miao, 2015; Khalid, 2016; and Siddiq et al., 2019).

Do age and gender play a role in developing English learners' attitudes? Some studies investigated such an issue with conflicting results. Some of them found females enjoy a more positive attitude towards studying the English language and culture (Kesgin and Mehmet, 2015; Eshghinejad, 2016; Abu-Snobar, 2017; & Paradowari and Mbato, 2018). Others such as Taghi (2015), Ababneh (2016), Bagheri, Malekmahmudi & Malekmahmudi (2019), and Nduwimana (2019) concluded that gender did not affect learners' attitudes toward studying English. Saranraj et al. (2016) study found that males were more instrumentally motivated than girls were. The effect of learners' age on learners' attitudes was also investigated. For instance, Akay & Toraman (2015) and Elkilic (2016) found out that age did not have any impact on students' attitudes. Similarly, learners' field of study at the university level was found not to affect learners' attitudes whatsoever towards studying the English language and culture (Nduwimana, 2019). Moreover, Preveen and Awan (2018) found that learners' native language did affect their attitudes towards learning English and other foreign languages.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design which allows for exploring the data from various aspects. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions allowing the researchers to gather more data and to explore deeper issues and topics that participants shared. Questions were sorted to ensure that they would contribute to answering the study's research questions. The open-ended questions were used only as a guide allowing for further exploration and exploratory questions were used when needed to inquire more about a particular issue or shared experience. The direct interaction with participants helped in viewing issues from different angles. Further, in conducting the study, the researchers took into consideration the ethical research guidelines to ensure the privacy of the participants. These guidelines included minimizing the risk of harm, obtaining informed consent, protecting autonomy and confidentiality, avoiding deceptive practices, and providing the right to withdraw.

4.1. Study sample

Since it was challenging to select students from all Public schools in the metropolitan Ramallah Area due to military checkpoints and hardship of travel, a convenience sample was drawn from 12 schools consisting of 24 students (12 males and 12 females). The researchers selected two schools in the suburbs of Ramallah city. The other ten schools were selected from villages, and towns around Ramallah. The schools were chosen from villages and towns that the researchers were able to travel to due to the Israeli roadblocks. Participating students were chosen from each school based on their academic achievement. The researchers asked schools to select two students; one with high academic achievement in English and one with the low achievement. Student achievement levels were based on their academic performance and report cards.

4.2. Instruments of the study

The researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the participants. Interview questions were checked to ensure that they: did not give way to one-word responses, but rather guide subjects to share experiences; assisted participants in reflecting and describing their experiences (Rudestam & Newton, 2007); and not prying in nature, in that they did not intrude on participants' privacy. Finally, they were reviewed very carefully to ensure that they are in line with the study objectives.

Interviews provided this study with a more in-depth understanding of not only participant perceptions but also the reasons behind them. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with a list of guiding questions prepared to keep the interview conversational in nature and relaxed to help participants feel more at ease. The semi-structured nature was to encourage the flow of conversation and allow for flexibility in adding follow-up questions as needed. The interview model and question sets were developed based on pilot interviews to help formulate appropriate questions that best guide the interviews in the right direction. Participants were asked for elaboration on responses when needed. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and were later transcribed ensuring that nothing participants conveyed was misconstrued. After completion of transcriptions, participants were contacted to confirm that what was understood aligned with what they intended.

4.3. Instruments' validity and reliability

The interview questions were shared with specialists (faculty members at the Faculty of Education at *Birzeit* University and a professor of Linguistics at an American university in the US) who have rich experience in the field of education, research, and linguistics. This was to ensure that the data collected was valid and to assist in answering the research questions. As well as ensuring questions were not judgmental in nature, leading, or overly repetitive without intention. Based on the comments of the reviewers, modifications to the interview questions were made in terms of wording or the adding or removal of questions.

The semi-structured interview was cross-validated against the research study questions and the purpose of the study. To ensure interrater reliability of the results achieved through the interviews, in analyzing the data the researcher worked with a colleague to analyze the data thematically ensuring consistent results. This was done by comparing codes and themes drawn from randomly selected interviews leading to high reliability. Collected findings were re-visited with participants for verification (respondent validation) confirmed the validity of the data collected through the interview instrument.

4.4. Data analysis

The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and were later transcribed ensuring that nothing participants conveyed was misconstrued. After completion of transcriptions, participants were contacted to confirm that what was understood aligned with what they intended. Thus, as a result of the interviews, the authors collected a huge amount of data. The transcribed data were thematically analyzed. The researcher analyzed the data using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase model as a working outline for the thematic analysis process. In Phase One, the researchers familiarized themselves with the transcribed data by reading and rereading the data several times to become familiar with all aspects of the data. During this process, notes were taken and some ideas were underlined throughout the reading and rereading process in the coding phase. In Phase Two, the researcher organized the data and coded them using different highlighter colours. In Phase Three the researcher searched for themes by putting the gathered codes into themes. In Phase Four, the researcher reviewed the themes and made some adjustments, and edited them. In Phase Five, the researcher defined and named the themes. Finally, in Phase Six a list of final themes was selected. These themes will be presented in the results section below and supported with evidence.

5. Results

5.1. Learners' attitudes towards learning English language and culture

Data thematic analysis revealed five main themes. The themes will be presented below.

Theme #1: English is essential to learn despite challenges

Overall students had positive attitudes towards studying the English language regardless of the challenges encountered. However, the motivation of students to learn is what ultimately guides learners either to push forward or to give up altogether. In the words of one of the students who struggled with English (Nora)

I love English class because it is an important language and I like it. I love it because it [English] started to be used more than Arabic these days.

Most students shared several positive opinions on learning English even though they struggle with learning it. When asked if when having difficulties with learning they received tutoring or other additional forms of help the response was

no. They reported that there was difficulty in obtaining additional assistance in part due to financial reasons or lack of access to resources such as those available on the internet.

Having positive experiences in learning English particularly in early grades (Kindergarten – grade 4) and supporting and caring teachers gave students a morale boost and made them feel excited about learning English. One of the students (Ahmad) who was a high achieving student reported that:

The way the teacher treats you and his method attracts a student and make learning enjoyable. The teacher was fun and his way of teaching and dealing with us was good. If he were in a bad mood one would hate the class and does not want to participate.

Further, learners expressed admiration for the English culture and showed a positive attitude towards the language and target culture. They admired aspects of English society such as the status of modernity and social issues that could be classified as human rights such as gender equality. Nora stated:

Their culture is lovely and beautiful. They are self-confident, understanding, and modern people with traditions that are more beautiful than the past. [...] they treat women in the society like males not like where the male is better than the girl [...] they have equality between males and females.

Another challenge learners had to overcome in the classroom environment was the way their teacher handles certain situations. Teachers as will be seen in the following sections, according to students, played a vital role in learners' inclination to learn the language or to withdraw from the process.

Theme #2: Learner's level in English plays a vital role in studying the language

Some students showed a negative attitude towards studying English. As participants reported such a negative attitude is due to several factors. The primary issue is that students (particularly low achieving students) were struggling with the class and did not enjoy it. Therefore, they avoided it. The most prevalent complaint was vocabulary as a source of weakness. This leads to the root of the issue for most participants. Those that had negative attitudes lacked the base knowledge to be able to comprehend the material and subject matter presented to them in class. Even high achieving learners shared this viewpoint, in that they like studying English because it is easy and they understand it. Ahmad illustrated this point rather clearly:

Like other subjects, sometimes I am bored sometimes I enjoy it. It depends if the lesson is difficult or not. It depends on the way the teacher explains.

The student here stated that lesson's difficulty and the teacher as well play a role in how attentive he is to the lesson and whether he enjoys the class. This was similar for the most part for the majority of participants. The same student also brought up something that also could contribute to the lack of interest in studying English as a foreign language in Palestine and that is the disconnection between the subject that is studied in the classroom and the students' lives. He stated, "If the lesson is connected to real situations, it (the information) reaches us easily". Even students that had some negative perceptions towards language learning also liked studying English but faced some form of difficulty with the subject.

Theme #3: Conflict between learners' native culture and target culture

The majority of participants have some negative views towards the target culture viewing individuals as dishonest, trouble makers, and most notably not family-centered by not taking care of the elderly are to leaving the family home at the age of eighteen. These perceptions towards the target culture are drawn from what limited exposure students have from films, games, YouTube, and other media. Those that were exposed to more forms of media had detailed ideas on culture and more rounded perceptions. However, the caveat remained that the target culture contrasted with their views of right and wrong. On this issue Sameera, a high achiever reported

Things (from the target culture) that would never be appropriate for our culture (Palestinian Arab culture) like being an open society. Some things are contradictory between us and them. They do not respect their family and once the person becomes 18 years old they don't acknowledge their parents.

Overall students shared the same views towards the importance of learning the English language regardless of educational background and learner achievement level. The prevalent common view of participants was that much of American/British culture contradicts religious and cultural beliefs/norms of Muslim Palestinians. Participants supported learning about the target culture if it did not conflict with their own.

Theme #4: Lack of exposure and deep accurate understanding of the target culture

For the majority of participants, there was confusion as to what was meant by the term 'culture' even with direct translation and definition. To ensure participants understood what the researcher intended by the term culture an example of a mainstream television series in Palestine to explain the difference in cultural norms of that time in Arab society compared to now. This seemingly helped participants better understand what 'culture' meant and helped them articulate better. For a few participants, further inquiry on what they liked or disliked of the target culture, after initially providing vague or unrelated

responses, admitted having insufficient knowledge about it . The primary source of exposure to the target language's culture, as reported by the participants was through representations in the media that students consume. In particular movies, YouTube, games, music, reading (ordered in terms of what the majority of students have access to).

Action movies were the popular genre of choice for learners. Participants who reported that they watched comedies, cartoons alongside other sources such as music tended to have a broader and more in-depth view of the target culture. For example, Sameera shared that her exposure to the target culture was from movies, cartoons, music, YouTube, stories, and talking to native speaking family members in America. This was her insight as to why some Palestinians may view the target culture as better than their own culture. When asked if media and other sources influence her perceptions about the target culture she stated

Yes, it has an impact. Look at the impression that foreign music gives. You find differences between them and Arabic music in the meanings they carry. Most of it is about hope and things like that.

When asked if they would feel differently about studying English if they lived in an English-speaking country overall both high and low achievement learners agreed that they would be more motivated to study. The motivation would stem from being immersed in the language of the society and would need to learn to integrate and communicate with those around them. In the words of one of the participants (Ahmad):

If I were in an English speaking country, I would be forced to learn it. My direction would be to learn English the way I learn the Arabic language. If you go to a shop you don't speak another language, no you speak the language of the country.

All students viewed American/British cultures far removed from their own. Participants saw no fault in learning about the culture as long as it was not imitated, applied in their own lives, or clashed with their own cultural and religious traditions. In general, English native speakers' culture (American/British) was viewed negatively in terms of there being a strong contradiction with their faith, cultural and societal values.

Theme #5: Learner's inability to find information about the target culture

The lack of reliable access to the internet for students to seek out information, and the inability of parents to help their language learners dampens or reduces learner motivation. This deficit in access to help whether within the home environment or outside in turn impacts learner confidence in some cases breeding anxiety and in some cases a breakdown in communication. When comparing the number of students that share or discuss things related to their English learning; both language and culture; with their parents, it was with high

achievement learners that numbers were higher, particularly female students. Having positive attitudes, higher confidence, and rapport with parents together have an impact on learners. Parents are the first resource of knowledge and assistance for their learners. One of the high achieving students (Nehal) reported that she shares everything with her parents and they are like a source for her for studying English.

Learners with positive attitudes are more likely to be much more motivated to learn, take risks, and be much more confident in their ability to learn. This confidence boost can be drawn from their array of access to the target language from a variety of sources in particular books, individuals that they can converse in English with, and videos (movies or YouTube clips) alongside access to resources when needing assistance such as their parents for example. Overall parents of both low and high achievement learners reported their desire for their sons and daughters to be better than them and to achieve what they were unable to accomplish. Positive attitudes alongside supportive environmental factors boost learner confidence and motivation. Negative attitudes towards learning English could have the opposite effect on the desire to learn sapping the motivation to learn and leave students feeling discouraged resulting in learners withdrawing from the learning process in one way or another.

4.3 Reasons behind students' attitudes

Data Analysis revealed several themes about the reasons behind students' attitudes toward learning the English language and culture. These themes will be presented below.

Theme #1: Parents' support and engagement

Parents who have more education and higher household income have higher levels of involvement and support than parents in a lower income bracket and less education. The majority of high achievement students had at least one parent that was educated past the 11th-grade level. Some students spoke of the father being a teacher or some other profession that required a degree. Parents' education alongside economic status (inability to send to a tutor or enroll in supplementary courses) do affect student achievement and motivation in that they know how to help their learners. This is reflected by the fact that the majority of high achievement learners both male and female reported they get help at home, and do not receive help from tutors or otherwise receive alternative supplemental support. Except for two participants, one grew up in the USA and the other was enrolled in a private school.

Finances and distance are other aspects that both high and low achievement learners discussed. They wished that courses and tutors were a lot more easily accessible and affordable. The majority of participating students felt that they lack the proper core knowledge of the English language. Many low-achieving participants shared that their primary weakness is the inability to read and vocabulary. To fill this gap many try to enroll in supplementary courses. However, this proves to be problematic for some as (Fatema) best articulated her concerns as follows:

The courses are in Ramallah (Main City in Palestine) and expensive. I went for a month to the British Council. I paid 600 Shekels (monthly) plus 50 Shekel for transportation. This is a big amount.

Socio-economic status and parents' education level seemed to be a common shared attribute overall for lower-achieving students. The lack of availability of classes within the visited areas further provided difficulty. Much of the population in these areas were families that lived abroad in English speaking countries and moved back to Palestine. Mothers of some of the low achieving students voiced this as a possible reason that weaker students were ignored since they were the minority. The one-dual edge constant that seemed to be a barrier was the economic state and educational level of learners' parents as it pertains to their home environment. In the words of one of the students that struggled with English (Khaled)

I used to take courses a while ago. Mom can't help because she didn't learn English. She left school in the 9th grade. I go to my aunt. She teaches me English and math.

Another participant who also struggled with the subject (Saif) reported

In the past, I used to take lessons but I stopped because of the financial situation ... [M]y sister used to teach me but she has university studies and can't.

Some families have limited or no access to electronic devices or the internet. Resulting in independent student learning being severely impaired if not impossible for some. In the absence of supplementary courses, internet access, and tutors ... the family was a source many students sought out. At times, the ability to go and request help was not always an option for family members.

Theme #2: Parents' expectations

Parental expectations served as a source of positive reinforcement for students for the most part. That was shown in students' anxiety that was associated with their wish to please their parents and their desire to do better to meet these expectations. However, some low achieving learners were aware of low expectations. In the words of Saif who struggled with English commented on his parents' expectations "even if they nagged at me a lot it isn't stressful. They do not expect a lot of me. Little hope but not a lot".

Students mostly had a clear understanding of what their parents expected of them. The difference could be seen more along the lines of what students felt the benefits of learning English were and what they said their mothers thought. Parent's expectations and thoughts on language were understood by their children. However, the influence of these expectations was not prevalent that for a few low

achieving learners. In some cases, they were overpowered by experiences within the classroom.

Theme #3: Teacher Support and Personality

Participants made connections between their like or dislike of English and their teachers. Be it the way a teacher taught or the teacher's personality and treatment of students. They made statements of how a teacher influenced their views on language learning. For some individuals, teachers sparked initial interest and for others, teachers were associated with their dislike of the subject. About this issue one of the participants (Sarah) stated:

I feel depressed (when having an English class). I do not understand it because it is all English (the teacher talks in English). I do not understand a thing and there are many words and I find it difficult. For me, English class is one of the classes that I hate the most and don't like at all. Honestly, I used to like it a little but now because of the teacher that gives it to us I do not like her. My not liking her reflected on the subject. There was a teacher that used to give it to us. I liked her a lot loved her and used to be excited about her class.

All participants shared memorable things in their learning experiences. Overwhelmingly it came down to two main experiences: memories of parents' involvement (or lack) and largely teachers. The most positive memories were connected to a time where English learning was fun and when the teacher used games or stories. When asked about their current English learning experience, low achieving learners shared negative perceptions of their teachers in terms of class management, personality (temperament), method of instruction, and classroom environment. If students do not feel safe or lack an environment conducive to learning this will negatively influence learners. Sarah shared one of her experiences in the class on how her English teacher reacted to her when she made a mistake while reading:

When I was reading, the other day there was a word I said wrong. She started screaming at me and told me the correct word [...]. She started to scream at me and say repeat it. I am of the type that I do not like someone to be controlling or yelling at me. I mean I made a mistake and she is a teacher and it is her duty to be patient with us.

The student spoke of her frustration and anxiety about class with regards to her teacher's method of addressing classroom issues. The student continued in the interview about how these interactions resulted in her hating the subject and English class. Resulting in the student avoiding the subject of study when

possible. Another participant (Raghad) responded as follows when asked about how she feels when she has an English class:

I love it. Sometimes the behavior of the students might make the teacher easily angry. In our school now the students focus on the method of the teacher because the teacher is what makes students love the subject that she teaches. Because of this, we love the English teacher. I love to take her classes because most of the time she is cool-tempered. But, sometimes she has a bad mood and gets angry with the girls that agitate her. She gets angry a lot and I get scared when she does. But, I focus on the book only and forget what happens in class.

Both girls come from different schools but show different reactions to the stress caused by the classroom environment. Sarah who had low achievement levels in the subject and Raghad who had high achievement levels both experienced a similar situation. Both students became anxious, however, one of them has withdrawn completely from putting any effort while the other focuses on her book and tries to ignore what is going on and waits for the situation to resolve itself. This comes down to individual differences amongst students in terms of how they perceive and deal with stressful situations.

The majority of students stated almost consistently that their teacher helped shape their feelings towards English learning. The method of instruction, classroom environment, teacher's personality, and teacher's temperament were the most recurring particulars identified. Even when asked about their earliest memories regarding learning English the overwhelming majority recalled situations connected to their teacher. Samer shared the following situation that made him like/dislike English:

At first, I used to hate English because there was a teacher that would come and I used to personally hate her. Honestly, between her and me there were always problems. The teacher used to say shut up to me. I would talk back. There were problems between us. One year a teacher came. He until now is the teacher. The teacher made me like English in a big way. I mean he used to explain English in an excellent way. I mean he used to love me as a student. He would tell me come answer this and made me feel like I was smart.

Theme #4: Peer pressure and anxiety

Students that have low confidence in their language skills withdraw from participation due to the anxiety that comes with being judged by their peers for their difficulties. This added to stressors relating to the classroom environment

further reduces motivation to participate. Some students felt support from their classmates rather than stress or judgment. While others felt judged for knowing English and disliked participating for that reason. The following three students had low achievement results. When students were asked about anxiety as pertains to participating in class, Farah answered “yes, a lot when I mess up during reading [...] and when I read in a bad way the girls mock or make fun of me”.

Anxiety was most prevalently discussed by participants in the context of speaking outside of the classroom with foreigners or family members in particular because they were afraid of making a mistake in front of them. Nadeen stated:

I feel anxious when I will be speaking with someone foreign or a stranger but if I am speaking and it is with a friend no it is normal. I worry about saying something wrong.

Further, Rami reported:

Sometimes I would be a bit (anxious) if speaking to someone strong with language or a native because I am afraid I will make mistakes and they will make fun of me.

Other participants primarily spoke of the more day to day aspect of anxiety relating to speaking in the classroom and participation. This could be attributed in part to a lack of confidence in their responses and ability, more so with an audience of those who are more proficient. Reporting on her experience participating in class activities Sarah stated:

When I raise my hand and the teacher picks me I get nervous. I start saying wrong things even when I know the right answer and everything is right. When I say the wrong things and the teacher starts to yell at me, I get even more nervous.

Theme #5 Motivation to learn

There was a clear divide in learner's motivation to learn based on their perceived importance or utility of the language. Lower achieving students tended to focus on far off or rare instances of use such as travel and communicating with foreigners/tourists with few students mentioning English use for higher education or employment. Whereas high achieving learners predominantly had a more targeted and feasible view of using English in their daily life and future within the scope of employment, university studies, daily life uses, and even family-oriented (teaching their children). For instance, Mousa, one of the high-achieving participants, is trying to learn English because in his own words:

it (English) is a link to communicate and connect with others and it will be beneficial in university

since I will study medicine. It is the language the field depends on.

Overall student motivation is more of an instrumental force, rather than an integrative one. Simply due to the fact that in Palestine students do not feel the need to integrate into English speaking society, since it is so far removed from their own. This was a recurring theme among the student participants regardless of gender or level of academic achievement. "It doesn't have a lot of importance outside of school. "There is not anyone that speaks English" in Kamal's words, emphasizing the point that students learn English here in Palestine for instrumental purposes.

6. Discussion

This section provides a summary of the results of the study showing trends in the data, explanation, the inferences, insights, and implications of the current study focusing on learners' attitudes and motivation on practices and policies related to English language teaching. Further, current findings of the study are related to other research findings particularly linked to the Palestinian context. Recommendations for further research on different aspects of this topic will be suggested.

Palestinian EFL students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language were overwhelmingly positive except for a few learners. Those that had negative attitudes either deemed the language not useful to them in Palestine or had strong negative attitudes towards learning English due to their classroom environment. American or British culture was seen as contradictory to their Muslim faith and Palestinian culture. Participants overall articulated that if they were to learn the target culture they would focus on what they considered to be positive characteristics of the culture and step away from what was deemed inappropriate by their standards or those of their parents.

Insights about the importance of not only the home environment but also the educational environment on learners have been made evident concerning learners' attitudes and motivation to learn the English language and culture. The results of the study showed the importance of not only the home environment but also the students' environment that encompasses their community, school, and home. As was seen in the work of Horner et al (2008) and Cansler (2008) the society or more specifically the environment that a learner is a part of shapes their mental development.

Such results led to major inferences, insights, and implications to educators of English as a foreign language in Palestine and other similar contexts. First, providing a nurturing environment for (k-12) students is vital for keeping and improving learners' English language proficiency. Second, higher education institutions need to consider their teacher training programs and focus on major issues that affect students' learning such as emotional and physical abuse to which some students are exposed during the learning process. Third, educational policymakers need to review their educational policies on providing safe, secure, and nurturing environments in classrooms and schools. As it has been found in the

study the majority of students reported verbal and emotional abuse that impeded their participating in English classes and even led them to dislike learning English. For the English curriculum developers including authentic aspects of the English culture in textbooks and enriched material is also critical to make students aware of the true English culture. Making EFL teachers aware of the English culture and training them on how to integrate that in their daily English lessons is very necessary for demystifying myths and stereotypes about the English native speakers and their culture.

The results of the current study could be attributed to a myriad of reasons specific to the Palestinian context. Before discussing the reasons behind the results of the study it is worth mentioning that the political situation and the heavy involvement of the British government in the creation of the present Israeli occupation of Palestine did not at all influence Palestinian learners' attitude towards learning English language and culture. The vast majority of students hold a positive attitude towards the English language and culture and are motivated to learn English and some aspects of its culture. Such a positive attitude and motivation could be attributed to the status of the English language today being the first international language. Palestinian learners believe learning English could open many doors for them academically and economically. There are many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Palestine due to occupation and poverty. Getting a job with such organizations that pay much higher salaries requires high proficiency in the English language. Further, pursuing higher education in most disciplines such as sciences, business, computer engineering ...etc. requires a good command of English. Speaking English particularly among female university students is a sign of high prestige and sophistication.

Learning a foreign language without its culture is insufficient if learners are aspiring to achieve a high proficiency level in English and plan to communicate successfully with native speakers. Focusing on how native speakers use English appropriately in various contexts is expected to deepen Palestinian learners' understanding of the target culture. Further, integrating positive elements of the target culture particularly those that do not contradict with learners' cultural values will assist in strengthening learners' awareness of the English culture. Making students aware of the target cultural aspects that conflict with learners' native culture is critical. To eliminate resentment and negative attitudes toward the target culture as a result of such conflicts, EFL teachers, could emphasize respecting other people's culture even though we disagree or do not like such practices. This might minimize EFL learner's negative attitudes toward some of the target culture's un-preferable aspects.

According to the Theory of Overlapping Spheres (Epstein 2010), it is necessary to bring these realms together to help learners reach their full potential as well as overcome any difficulties in a specific area. Low achieving learners either shared that they felt anxious participating in class afraid to be mocked; or disliked their language teacher and how perceived issues were handled by the teacher. Another facet that emerged was that learners that perceived the subject as difficult usually struggled with an essential skill such as reading or vocabulary

that impeded their ability to comprehend classroom tasks or exams. Using student-centered and interesting activities in the classroom was found to improve students' attitudes that are directly correlated with their communicative competence (Jarad, 2009). Learners associated positive attitudes with the difficulty or ease of the class. Essentially the reasons behind students' attitudes towards learning English came down to learner experiences, difficulties within the classroom, their family, and their teacher.

The importance of those who surround the learner was not only seen in this study but also in Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres. This theory places value on not only the society in which the learner lives but also the benefit of how the learner is viewed and or treated by those that surround him or her. This showed not only the learner must be treated like an individual, a human, at home but also within the classroom (Epstein 2006; 2010). It is the most beneficial for students if all facets of society work together with the aim of the betterment of the learner.

Finally, in conducting the current study the researchers faced some obstacles that put limits on generalizing the results of the study. Some villages and cities were omitted from this study due to accessibility concerns and limitations on mobility within certain areas. Also, the time and cost needed to travel to certain locations limited the researcher to travel to remote villages and towns. Ideally, teachers would have been interviewed to substantiate learners' claims and to get the whole picture so to speak. However, time constraints would not allow this with the number of interviews that were scheduled to take place. Consequently, the authors advise educators to be cautious in generalizing the results of the study to all schools in Palestine and other similar educational contexts due to the differences among learners, schools, and contexts.

Future research could investigate the role of both teachers and parents in influencing the attitudes of English language learners and what role they play in learner motivation and attitudes. Distance from the school is something of notable importance. This is something worth considering in future studies since the emotional and physical state of a student may impact a learner's willingness to learn. Further research into the effects of at-home involvement on children's academic achievement is thus warranted. Lastly, a study investigating the role of teachers particularly teachers' treatment of learners, error correction, and overall classroom environment is warranted in light of some of these results. Student and teacher interviews alongside classroom observation would be beneficial to gain a solid grasp of what both students and teachers experience and the impact on learner motivation and attitudes towards learning English.

7. Conclusion

In summary, the current study found out that Palestinian high school students enjoy a positive attitude towards the English language and culture and are instrumentally motivated to study them. This is despite the challenge in learning English, the conflict between their native culture and the target culture, their lack of deep and accurate understanding of the target culture and lack of exposure to

English culture. The reasons behind such results included parental engagement, support and expectations, teachers' support and personality, peer pressure and anxiety, and the motivation to learn the language. Such results have vital implications, as mentioned above in the discussion, for curriculum developers, teachers' preparation and training programs, and family and school partnerships. Researchers need to conduct more research on the topic in different contexts in Palestine and others worldwide. Learners' attitude, motivation, teachers' role in shaping them, and parents' expectations and influence on their children are some areas that could be investigated.

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