

# **Attitudes Toward Humanities and Social Sciences and Their Relationship With English Competence**

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**Abstract.** Humanities and social sciences are mostly regarded as "soft sciences". Females have greater interest in them compared to males. Because linguistic (in this paper, English language studies) belongs to both humanities and social sciences, the present study aims to examine the relationship of students' estimates of English competence and their attitudes toward humanities and social sciences. The sample consists of 157 participants (88 females and 69 males). Who are at tertiary level in Turkey. The obtained results reflect no gender differences in students' attitudes toward English and Turkish language; however, significant gender differences were found in their attitudes toward literature, psychology, sociology and pedagogy. Participants' attitudes toward humanities and social sciences were in significant relationships with all aspects of self-reported English competence. In addition, self-reported grammar skills were the best predictor of attitudes towards the English language.

**Keywords:** English competence, humanities, social sciences, gender differences.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Humanities and social sciences differ from the group of natural science in terms of their inputs and outputs. Humanities and social sciences study human phenomena and social interactions while natural sciences study natural objects/processes (Huang & Chang, 2008). The first group of disciplines sometimes use statistical procedures borrowed from natural sciences. In this way; they become more reliable, objective and valid. Jones, Champman and Woods (1972) stated that natural sciences can be classified as "hard science", whereas humanities and social sciences are in fact "soft sciences".

There are some gender differences in interest in social sciences and humanities. A meta-analytic study conducted by Su, Rounds and Armstrong (2009) showed that female students have more interest in arts and social sciences in relation to male students. On the other hand, males like engineering, mathematics and science. Females want to help other people and like

to work with people instead of things (Jones, Howe, & Rua, 2000). Hence, women have more positive attitudes toward humanities and social sciences compared to men.

Humanities include languages, literature, arts, etc. Social sciences include: psychology, sociology, pedagogy, economics, anthropology and similar disciplines. English language belongs to both humanities and social sciences (because some topics covered by linguistics can be examined quantitatively). Thus, it is important to examine students' attitudes toward humanities and social sciences and their relationship with English proficiency. However, there are only few studies and discussions that dealt with this kind of relationship.

Aydođan and Gupta (2014) carried out a study on the impact of humanities and social sciences on foreign language learning and self-reported oral intelligence. The results of this study indicated a high level of appreciation for humanities and social sciences among students and a high level of self-reported English proficiency as well as oral intelligence.

Akay and Toraman (2015) examined attitudes toward the English language and they found that, in general, students of humanities and social sciences had very positive attitudes toward this language. In addition, their study did not reveal statistically significant gender differences in this kind of attitudes.

Liking literature facilitates the process of learning foreign language (such as English). In other words, reading stories and novels, analyzing main points of their authors helps students think in English and expresses their own thoughts in this language. Therefore, literature is related to a pragmatic aspect of language (Bataineh, 2014). Ariogul (2011) and Lázár (2003) stressed the importance of intercultural topics and communicative competence related to the interaction with people who have distinct cultural backgrounds in learning English. Thus, there should be positive attitude toward sociology and psychology in order to like, understand and respect different cultures.

As for the aspects of the English language, TOEFL (this acronym stands for "Test of English as a foreign language"), for instance, takes into account reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. Additionally, there are vocabulary and grammar items that are believed to be adequately covered within the TOEFL examination. However, traditional pedagogies usually focus on teaching grammar (Sawir, 2005). Hence, students' perceptions and estimates of their grammar skills can be crucial to their attitudes toward the English language.

This study is devoted to the exploration of relationships of students' attitudes toward social sciences and humanities with their English competence. This is, thus, the aim of our study.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Based on the previous research and the aim of the present study, the following research questions were posed:

1. Do students' attitudes toward humanities and social sciences correlate with their subjective estimates of English competence?
2. Are there any gender differences in these attitudes?
3. What is the best predictor of positive attitudes toward the English language?

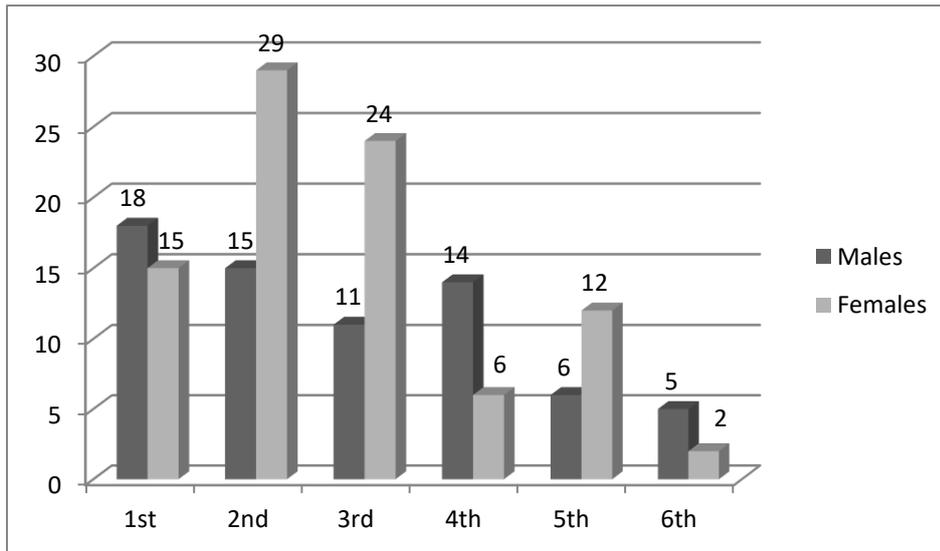
Likewise, the subsequent hypotheses were defined:

1. Students' attitudes toward humanities (literature as well as English and Turkish language) and social sciences (psychology, sociology, and pedagogy) are in positive and statistically significant correlations with subjective estimates of different elements of English competence (reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary).
2. Gender differences in attitudes toward humanities and social sciences are statistically significant, in favor of female students.
3. The best predictor of attitudes toward the English language is students' estimate of their grammar competence/skills.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

the present study was carried out on a sample of 157 students who attend to a State university in Turkey. Their mean age was calculated as  $M = 21.92$  ( $SD = 2.73$ ). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years of age. Information on students' gender and year of study is shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Participants' gender and year of study*

Figure 1 shows that the subsample of females ( $N = 88$ , 56.05% of the whole sample) outnumbers the subsample of males ( $N = 69$ , i.e. 43.95%). Most of the participants were at the second year of study ( $N = 44$ , 28.03% of the total number of participants). The least number of participants was at the sixth year of study ( $N = 7$ , i.e. 4.46%).

### **Instruments**

For the purpose of this study, three instruments were administered among students. The first one ('demographics') included three questions on participants' gender, age and year of study. The second and the third one were made in order to answer research questions of the present study:

*Attitudes toward humanities and social science's scale (ATHSS)* are comprised of six items (see Appendix 1 at the end of this article). The first three items are: English language, Turkish language, and literature. Actually, they represent humanities. The last three items are: psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. They belong to social sciences. In fact, the ATHSS measures affective component of attitudes to humanities and social sciences. Students decided to what extent, they like each of these six academic disciplines. Each item includes a five-point Likert scale (1 – 'completely dislike' to 5 – 'like very much'). Internal consistency of this instrument, expressed as Cronbach's alpha coefficient, is calculated as  $\alpha = .842$ . Hence, the ATHSS is a reliable measure of this kind of attitudes.

*Self-reported English competence scale (SRECS)* is a scale consisted of six items as well (please, look at the Appendix 2). The items are, in fact, the English skills that are regularly assessed by TOEFL (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), with the addition of grammar and vocabulary. Participants are expected to provide estimates of their competence related to these aspects of the English language. As before, there is a five-point Likert scale (1 – 'insufficient', 2 – 'sufficient', 3 – 'good', 4 – 'very good', and 5 – 'excellent'). Cronbach's alpha coefficient, as a measure of the SRECS' reliability (internal consistency), is  $\alpha = .835$ . Therefore, the SRECS has a very good internal consistency.

### **Procedure and data processing**

The instruments described above were administered to students at tertiary level in Turkey. It took them 8-10 minutes to fill in their data and to express their attitudes toward the aforementioned scientific disciplines as well as estimates of English competence. The data were collected along with the protection of confidentiality and anonymity related to participants' identity as well as the answers they provided.

Later, data were entered into SPSS 17.0 for Win where the database was created. Three statistical procedures were used in order to examine data: Pearson's coefficient of correlation ( $r$ ), independent-samples t test, and multiple regression analysis (MRA). Before these procedures, the main descriptive statistical values were calculated.

## **RESULTS**

Participants' maximum and minimum scores along with mean values and standard deviations were shown in the following two tables.

Table 1

*Descriptive statistical values of attitudes towards humanities and social sciences*

Humanities and social science	N	Min	Max	M	SD
English language	157	1	5	3.81	0.82
Turkish language	157	2	5	3.99	0.78
Literature	157	1	5	3.85	0.88
Psychology	157	1	5	3.87	0.86
Sociology	157	2	5	3.90	0.88
Pedagogy	157	1	5	3.84	0.90

The theoretical mean of the five-point Likert scale is 3. As shown in Table 1, mean values of all variables were above 3 (attitudes toward the English language:  $M = 3.81$  to attitudes toward the Turkish language:  $M = 3.99$ ). Participants' scores ranged from 1 to 5 in four variables; on the other hand, from 2 to 5 in the attitudes toward the Turkish language and sociology. In general, participants' attitudes (in particular, their affective component) toward humanities and social sciences are positive.

Table 2

*Descriptive statistical values of self-reported English competence*

Components of English competence	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Reading	157	1	5	3.85	0.83
Writing	157	2	5	3.84	0.88
Listening	157	2	5	3.91	0.78
Speaking	157	2	5	3.89	0.86
Grammar	157	1	5	3.73	0.89
Vocabulary	157	2	5	3.85	0.72

It is clear (Table 2) that students estimated their English skills/competence as above the average:  $M = 3.91$  (listening),  $M = 3.89$  (speaking),  $M = 3.85$  (reading and vocabulary),  $M = 3.84$  (writing), and  $M = 3.73$  (grammar). The range of participants' scores with regard to reading and grammar is 1 to 5 and in all other cases, it is 2 to 5.

Table 3

*Correlations of attitudes toward humanities with self-reported English competence*

	English language	Turkish language	Literature
Reading	.421*	.483*	.314*
Writing	.518*	.446*	.377*
Listening	.365*	.558*	.403*
Speaking	.505*	.390*	.334*
Grammar	.552*	.494*	.564*
Vocabulary	.462*	.487*	.431*

*Note.* All coefficients of correlation are significant at the level .001

The figures in Table 3 indicate moderate, positive and statistically significant correlations of attitudes toward humanities with self-reported English competence/skills. Attitudes toward the English language had the strongest relationship with subjective estimates of grammar skills ( $r(155) = .552, p < .001$ ). Attitudes toward the Turkish language were in the strongest correlation with students' estimates of their listening skills ( $r(155) = .558, p < .001$ ). At last, the correlation coefficient of students' attitudes towards literature and their estimates of grammar was the highest in the last column of the Table 3 ( $r(155) = .564, p < .001$ ). Hence, attitudes toward humanities and self-reported English competence are significantly correlated to each other.

Table 4

*Correlations of attitudes towards social sciences with self-reported English competence*

	Psychology	Sociology	Pedagogy
Reading	.568***	.368***	.287***
Writing	.439***	.429***	.203*
Listening	.338***	.260**	.347***
Speaking	.405***	.512***	.284***
Grammar	.498***	.450***	.307***
Vocabulary	.403***	.453***	.320***

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

By examining Table 4, favourable, low to moderate and statistically important coefficients of correlation can be noticed. Attitudes toward psychology were in the strongest correlation with self-reported reading skills ( $r(155) = .568, p < .001$ ), whereas attitudes toward sociology correlated the most with self-reported speaking skills ( $r(155) = .512, p < .001$ ). Finally, students' attitudes to pedagogy were in the strongest correlation with their estimates of listening skills ( $r(155) = .347, p < .001$ ).

Gender differences in attitudes to both humanities and social sciences were examined by independent-samples t - test and shown in tables 5 and 6 below.

Looking at the Table 5, the significant gender differences can be noticed only in attitudes towards literature ( $t(155) = -2.40, p < .05$ ). Females' mean value was higher ( $M = 4.00$ ) in relation to males' mean value ( $M = 3.67$ ).

Table 5

*Gender differences in attitudes toward humanities*

Humanities	Gender	N	M	SD	t
English language	Males	69	3.71	0.86	-1.34
	Females	88	3.89	0.78	
Turkish language	Males	69	3.87	0.89	-1.78
	Females	88	4.09	0.67	
Literature	Males	69	3.67	0.85	-2.40*
	Females	88	4.00	0.87	

Note. \*  $p < .05$

However, female students had higher mean values for the English ( $M = 3.89$ ) and Turkish language ( $M = 4.09$ ), compared to male students ( $M = 3.71$  and  $M = 3.87$ , respectively). Notwithstanding, differences between them were not statistically significant.

Table 6

*Gender differences in attitudes toward social sciences*

Humanities	Gender	N	M	SD	t
Psychology	Males	69	3.65	0.94	-2.84*
	Females	88	4.03	0.75	
Sociology	Males	69	3.61	0.89	-3.92**
	Females	88	4.14	0.79	
Pedagogy	Males	69	3.59	0.83	-3.14*
	Females	88	4.03	0.90	

Note. \*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$

It was found that all gender differences in attitudes toward social sciences were statistically significant, in favor of females (Table 6):  $M = 4.03$  vs.  $M = 3.65$ ,  $t(155) = -2.84$ ,  $p < .01$  (psychology),  $M = 4.14$  vs.  $M = 3.61$ ,  $t(155) = -3.92$ ,  $p < .001$  (sociology), and  $M = 4.03$  vs.  $M = 3.59$ ,  $t(155) = -3.14$ ,  $p < .01$  (pedagogy).

All components of English competence were entered into multiple regression analysis in order to examine their predictive validity related to attitudes toward the English language, that were the criterion variable (Table 7).

Table 7

*Six components of English competence as predictors of attitudes toward the English language*

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	
	B	Std.Error	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t
<i>Constant</i>	.661	.333		1.98*
Reading	.019	.079	.019	0.24
Writing	.172	.081	.185	2.12*
Listening	.087	.079	.083	1.11
Speaking	.210	.074	.222	2.86**
Grammar	.218	.079	.238	2.75**
Vocabulary	.116	.102	.102	1.14
R = .652		R <sup>2</sup> = .425		F(6, 150) = 18.48***

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Referring to Table 7, it can be said that the regression model with six predictors was statistically significant ( $F(6, 150) = 18.48, p < .001$ ). The coefficient of multiple correlations is  $R = .652$  and the coefficient of multiple determinations is  $R^2 = .425$ . Therefore, these predictors account for 42.5% of criterion's variance. In other words, self-reported reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar and vocabulary competence (taken together) explain 42.5% of students' attitudes towards the English language.

Additionally, it appears that there are three statistically significant predictors: grammar ( $\beta = .238, t = 2.75, p < .01$ ), speaking ( $\beta = .222, t = 2.86, p < .01$ ), and writing ( $\beta = .185, t = 2.12, p < .05$ ). As expected before, self-reported grammar skills were the best predictor of students' attitudes toward the English language.

## DISCUSSION

The first part of our findings reflect students' positive attitudes towards humanities and social sciences. This result is in accordance with that of Aydođan and Gupta (2014). Humanities and social sciences are not as difficult as natural sciences and this finding can be explained by this notion.

The second part of our results includes moderate, positive, and statistically significant correlations between students' attitudes towards humanities/social sciences and their self-reported English competence (reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary and grammar

skills). Akay and Torman (2015) found more positive attitudes towards English and higher competence in English among students of humanities and social sciences compared to those who studied engineering and architecture. Hence, our results overlapped with theirs. Therefore, the first hypothesis was confirmed.

The present study did not yield statistically significant gender differences in attitudes toward English and Turkish language. Neither Akay and Toraman (2015) get significant gender differences in attitudes toward the English language. One of the possible explanations is the following one: learning English is important for both males and females because the English language is the lingua franca of the 21st-century society. Their similar results with regard to the Turkish language were presumably influenced by students' nationality and tight connection to their country (i.e. Turkey). However, there were statistically significant differences favoring females in their attitudes toward literature, psychology, pedagogy and sociology. This part of findings can be explained by empirically-based conclusions provided by Su, Rounds and Armstrong (2009) as well as Jones, Howe and Rua (2000): females are more interested in social sciences and working with people rather than in natural sciences and working with things (objects). Thus, the second hypothesis was partially confirmed.

In the end, students' estimates of six elements of their English competence significantly contribute to the explanation of their attitudes toward the English language. The best predictor was the estimate of their grammar skills. Because this aspect (component) of English language is in the limelight of traditional pedagogies (Sawir, 2005), this finding is not surprising. Hence, the third hypothesis was confirmed.

The implications rose from this research are the following:

1. Students should use their knowledge of humanities and social sciences while reading stories, passages, movies and other learning materials in English classes that are related to introducing various cultures, customs and nations.
2. It seems that gender stereotypes still influence gender differences in attitudes towards humanities and social science (with the exception for English and Turkish language).
3. Difficulties with regard to English grammar apprehension affect students' general attitudes toward the English language.

Some strengths of this research are linked to the examination of a topic that was rarely investigated before. The prime limitation of this study is the nature of self-reported

measures of English competence. Objective tests of English knowledge and skills (for each of its components separately) should be used thereafter. This is, at the same time, the most important recommendation for future research on this topic.

## CONCLUSION

If these results can be appropriately generalized, Turkish students like humanities (literature, as well as English and Turkish language) and social sciences (psychology, pedagogy, and sociology). Participants who have very positive attitudes towards these scientific disciplines estimate their English competence (reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar and vocabulary) as pretty high, and vice versa. There were some gender differences, as well. Female students have more positive attitudes to literature, sociology, psychology and pedagogy in relation to male students.

Finally, there were three significant predictors for participants' attitudes toward the English language: self-reported writing, speaking, and grammar skills. Their estimates of grammar skills were the best predictor. Further studies will shed light on other impacts on students' attitudes toward the English language (e.g. academic self-efficacy, previous knowledge, students' previous experience with native English speakers, etc.).

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## APPENDIX 1

### Attitudes toward humanities and social sciences scale (ATHSS)

*Instructions for participants:*

Please indicate to which extent you like the following academic disciplines/subjects (1 – completely dislike, 2 – dislike, 3 – neither like nor dislike, 4 – like, 5 – like very much):

English language	1	2	3	4	5
Turkish language	1	2	3	4	5
Literature	1	2	3	4	5
Psychology	1	2	3	4	5
Sociology	1	2	3	4	5
Pedagogy	1	2	3	4	5

## APPENDIX 2

### Self-reported English competence scale (SRECS)

*Instructions for participants:*

Please indicate the level of your competence, knowledge and skills in the following categories related to the **English language** (1 – insufficient, 2 – sufficient, 3 – good, 4 – very good, 5 – excellent):

Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	1	2	3	4	5
Listening	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5