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# Chilean 12<sup>th</sup> graders' attitudes towards English as a foreign language

## La actitud de estudiantes chilenos de 4° medio hacia el inglés como idioma extranjero

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### Abstract

A favourable attitude towards a language is a crucial factor in the process of learning a foreign language (Shams, 2008). In light of this premise, this article reports on a case study conducted in two subsidised secondary schools that involved 154 students from Puerto Montt, Chile. A questionnaire of five dimensions was given to the participants in order to identify their attitude towards teachers' methodology and language use in the English classroom, English as a subject at school, English as a global language, and learning EFL in Chile. Results indicated that the students' attitudes towards English are favourable; however, the dimensions related to attitudes towards learning English and English as a subject at school obtained unfavourable responses. These findings reassert the notion that students appreciate English as a global language, but they are not committed to learning it at school.

**Keywords:** attitudes, Chile, EFL, secondary learner, language learning

### Resumen

Una actitud favorable hacia un lenguaje es un factor crucial en el proceso de aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera (Shams, 2008). A la luz de esta premisa, este artículo reporta sobre un estudio de caso llevado a cabo con 154 estudiantes de dos liceos particular-subsencionados en Puerto Montt, Chile. Un cuestionario de cinco dimensiones se aplicó a los participantes con el fin de identificar su actitud hacia la metodología de enseñanza de los profesores y el uso del lenguaje en la clase de inglés, inglés como asignatura en la escuela, inglés como lenguaje global y el aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera en Chile. Los resultados indicaron que las actitudes de los estudiantes hacia el inglés son favorables; no obstante, las dimensiones relacionadas con las actitudes hacia el aprendizaje de inglés e inglés como asignatura en la escuela obtuvieron respuestas desfavorables; dichos hallazgos reafirman la noción de que los estudiantes aprecian el idioma inglés como un lenguaje global, pero ellos no se comprometen con su aprendizaje en la escuela.

**Palabras clave:** actitud, aprendizaje de un lenguaje, Chile, estudiante de secundaria, ILE

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## Introduction

Throughout the years, English has been used as a second language in many countries around the world and widely recognised as the international language of business, science, technology, and entertainment. Under this premise, many studies have stressed the importance of English in current times (Fandrych, 2009; Menon & Patel, 2012; Morris & Maxey, 2014) and have given the status of *lingua franca* (Harmer, 2003) since many people use English as a means of communication between speakers of other languages. For that reason, many countries have implemented educational policies to include English as a second or foreign language as part of their national curricula. Chile has not been the exception. The national curriculum includes English as the compulsory foreign language to be taught at school from 5<sup>th</sup> grade (primary education) to 12th grade (secondary education) with an average of three hours per week. The English programme is part of the Chilean national programme called English Opens Doors which was implemented by the Ministry of Education in 2004. This program has a variety of initiatives for both teachers and students; meanwhile, teachers have access to continuing education courses to enhance their teaching practices, students have extra-curricular activities such as inter-schools debates and spelling bee competitions. In addition to implementing the program across the country, the Ministry of Education has also called for review of the programs of study, and has presented a proposal to introduce English in the early stages. This last initiative reinforces the issue that English has a prominent status worldwide, that is why it is a cross-curricular subject in the national curriculum.

In spite of the national policies implemented in Chile with regard to the inclusion of English as a foreign language in the curriculum, the national and local results of English proficiency level are one of the lowest in Latin America. According to the last report given by Education First (2013), Chile was placed at number 44 of 60 participating countries, far from neighbouring countries like Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. The country was placed in the category 'very

low proficiency' which is the lowest level of achievement in language use. Similarly, with regard to national results, the last examination conducted by the Chilean Ministry of Education to students of 11th secondary education in 2012 showed that 18% of the students received the A2 certificate of proficiency in English, far from the expected results. Based on that, it is evidenced that Chilean students have a poor command of EFL when they finish their secondary education, as well as when they become adults.

On the basis of the contextual features explained above, it is proven that the Chilean government, through the Ministry of Education, has drawn up educational policies and special programs for improving English in the country, yet all of them have indicated little or no significant impact. Most of the efforts just cited highlight the government initiatives regarding how English could be improved in the country, but little attention has been paid to the students' attitudes toward learning English, particularly, the students' attitudes towards learning English as a subject at school, the teachers' methodology and how it is taught in the classroom, and, mainly, their attitudes towards learning English in Chile. Thus, obtaining information about students' attitudes towards English could provide clear insights into how to improve target-language acquisition in the classroom and how to achieve better results in the country, because students' attitudes towards the target language should be relevant and favourable so as to positively approach the new language since students' attitudes are widely recognised as primordial factors in the process of learning a language (Fakey, 2010).

taking into account the information presented above and the classical view that people show their attitudes towards different aspects of a language (Malallah, 2000; Marley, 2004), this research concentrates on investigating the attitudes of the students of 12th grade secondary education towards English, mainly their attitudes towards language use in the English classroom, teachers' methodologies, English as a subject at school, learning EFL in Chile and English as a global language.

## Understanding Attitude

There has been consensus among researchers when defining attitude as “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 6). Such a description of attitude, however, does not eliminate the existing disagreement among researchers. “A closer examination of the description reveals some of the underlying ambiguity” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 1). For instance, three basic notions of attitude can be identified: the view that attitude is learned, the belief that it predisposes action, and the notion that such actions are consistently favourable or unfavourable towards the object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

First studies in the field of attitudes were reported more than 80 years ago. Likert (1932) explained that the term attitude is “an inference which is made on the basis of a complex of beliefs about the attitude object” (p. 9), i.e. interference because it can be positive or negative and supported on the person's own beliefs, ideas, and perceptions. Similarly, Allport (1935) defined attitudes as mental processes where individuals organize their perceptions, beliefs and feelings towards a particular object which orientates their behaviour. These attitudes are based on past experience and previous information. According to this definition, attitudes have a cognitive component i.e. the individual's beliefs, ideas or opinions about the object of the attitude, an affective component, i.e. the individual's feeling and emotions towards an object, and a behavioural component, i.e. the individual's consisting actions or behavioural intentions towards an object (Wenden, 1991).

Attitudes cannot be observed directly but have to be inferred from observed consistency in behaviour. Thus a person holding a favourable attitude toward an object [for example a language] would be expected to perform favourable behaviours and not unfavourable ones towards the object. Therefore, the attitude towards a language “is a construct that explains linguistic behaviour in particular” (Mamun, Rahman, Rahman, & Hossain, 2012, p. 200) since it can be positive or negative and it influences our behaviour and the way we perform different activities using the target language.

In the last decade, different studies in this field have been carried out worldwide in order to identify the importance of investigating students' attitudes towards English. Some of the investigations concentrated on language attitude (Alhmali, 2007; Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy, & Jusoff, 2009); attitude towards different languages (Malallah, 2000; Marley, 2004); learners' attitudes (Karahana, 2007; Shams, 2008); attitude towards a second or foreign language (e.g. Lai, 2005; Al-Tamimi & Shuib 2009), to name a few. All of these studies have reported the importance of studying students' attitudes and their influence on language learning.

## Attitude and EFL

In the foreign language context, different cognitive, social, or affective factors can influence the process of learning a language, such as motivation, attitudes, aptitudes, intelligence, and age (Shams, 2008). All of these have been studied in different educational contexts and settings due to their interference in the process of learning and acquiring the target language as a crucial aspect in foreign language learning. Starks and Paltridge (1996) stated that the process of learning a language is linked to the attitudes towards the target language; consequently, attitudes are essential for learners' success or failure in the language.

Current research on students' attitudes towards foreign language learning has proliferated in the last decade. While some publications have appeared documenting studies about university students' attitudes towards EFL (Alkaff, 2013; Tahaineh & Danna, 2013; Mansoor, Yossatorn, & Yossiri, 2012; Hussein, Demirok, & Uzunboyulu, 2009), other publications have focused on studies concerning school students' attitudes towards EFL (Martínez, 2013; Zainol, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012). These studies have emphasized the primordial effect that attitudes have in the process of learning a foreign language, and how positive attitudes help learners to face the process of better learning a language. At the same time, students holding favourable attitudes are more motivated and engaged in the EFL class.

In the foreign language context, a positive or negative attitude could be influential at the moment

of learning a new language. This is particularly so if foreign language teaching and learning is recognised as a non-immersed process in the Chilean classrooms and, as can be expected, the use of the language in real and social contexts is probably a neglected area of development. Bearing in mind the previous notion, it is fundamental to consider students' attitudes towards English as "positive language attitudes let learners to have positive orientation towards learning English" (Karahana, 2007, p. 84), i.e., attitudes are a decisive factor in EFL learning because favourable attitudes towards English predispose the student confidently and the input given by teachers could be auspiciously transformed into more elaborated output. In light of the previous consideration, much emphasis should be given to the role of students' attitudes in foreign language context since learners need to feel attracted and get hooked on the target language, and attitudes show this predisposition.

## Method

The present study corresponds to a descriptive case study that aims to identify students' attitudes towards EFL. Quantitative methodology was used in this investigation by means of the collection and analysis of information given by a questionnaire which measured the range of the students' attitudes towards the target language.

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 154 students with the mean age of 17. All of the students attended two different secondary schools in Puerto Montt, Chile; the schools are subsidised, i.e., they are part of the schools in Chile that receive monetary compensation from the Ministry of Education because low and middle class students are their main population: 66 students were from school 1, and 88 students were from school 2. The participants had three hours of English instruction per week, and they were Spanish native speakers.

### *Instruments*

A questionnaire was chosen in order to measure the students' attitudes towards EFL in Chile. It was

developed from an analysis of other instruments related to attitudes towards EFL (see Uribe, Gutiérrez, & Madrid, 2008; Zainol, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012), and contextualised to the Chilean reality. The instrument was piloted with seven students in order to measure the reliability level of the questionnaire items. These students were randomly selected from the target population who did not take part in this study. At the same time, as a way of investigating the validity of the items of the questionnaire, it was given to two specialists, one on EFL and one on research methods; their comments were taken into account at the moment of modifying the instrument.

The first part of the instrument examined student demographic information: age, sex, grade, and school. The second part explored the five domains of the questionnaire as shown in Table 1 below. First, attitude towards language use in the English classroom was measured via eight statements on a Likert scale; second, attitude towards teachers' methodologies in the English classroom that consisted of seven statements; third, attitudes towards English as a subject at school that had eight statements; fourth, attitudes towards learning EFL in Chile that included four statements; fifth, attitudes towards English as a language that encompassed five statements. In all, the questionnaire contained 32 statements related to attitudes towards EFL in the Chilean context.

The format of the five-level Likert item is: 1. strongly disagree; 2. disagree; 3. neither agree or disagree; 4. agree, and 5. strongly agree.

### *Procedure*

The questionnaire was designed by a group of teachers based on the analysis of different questionnaires in the field (see Uribe, Gutiérrez, & Madrid, 2008; Zainol, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012). Once designed, it was given to two experts: one in English language teaching and another on research methods, and their comments were considered in the redesign phase of the instrument. Finally, a group of seven students were taken randomly to participate in a pilot study in order to

**Table 1.** Domain of the likert scale

N°	Domain	N° statements
I	Attitude towards language use in the English classroom	8
II	Attitude towards teachers' methodologies in the English classroom	7
III	Attitudes towards English as a subject at school	8
IV	Attitudes towards learning EFL in Chile	4
V	Attitudes towards English as a language	5
	TOTAL	32

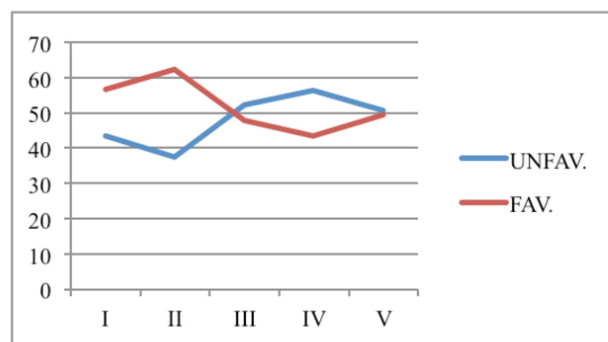
analyse the reliability of the instrument. The value of Cronbach's Alpha was 0.76 which shows an acceptable consistency of reliability. The research was conducted during the first semester of 2013 and the results were analysed in the first semester of 2014.

## Results

After the analysis of the participants' responses to the questionnaire, we found that students possess a favourable attitude towards English as a foreign language in general, since half of them

(54%) responded positively the statements in the questionnaire; however, there are some unfavourable attitudes regarding some specific dimensions. Both subsidised schools reported similar results in all of their answers as illustrated by Figure 1 below.

As mentioned earlier, the participants' responses towards EFL are favourable; however, the results by dimension illustrate negative responses to domains III and IV. The results show that dimension II obtained the highest favourable attitude (62%), while dimension IV had the lowest percentage. More detailed analysis is presented below.

**Figure 1.** Students' Attitudes towards EFL, Results by dimension

### ***Dimension I: Students' attitudes towards language use in the English classroom***

The first dimension in the questionnaire measured the students' attitude towards language use in the English lessons. Data revealed that students of both schools agreed on the use of L1 (Spanish) and the use of translation as positive strategies in the classroom. The results showed that teachers of English tend to translate instructions from English into Spanish and most students consider that the use of Spanish should be used or allowed when learning English as a foreign language.

As seen above, most of the students showed their agreement on statements 2 and 3 concerning the use of L1 and translation in the English class. Both statements represent the highest score. On the contrary, the statement about using English in the classroom is the least scored (32%).

### ***Dimension II: Students' attitudes towards teachers' methodologies in the English classroom***

The second domain in the questionnaire showed that participants' attitude towards dimension II is the most favourable of the five dimensions in the instrument. Participants expressed their agreement on the use of didactic resources in the English class. Statement 14 obtained 61% of preference and statement 15 got 63% of frequency, both statements represent the highest scored items in the questionnaire. At the same time, students manifested that their teachers perform different activities in the English class, such as reading and listening comprehension and incorporated cooperative work. The statement related to teaching grammar obtained 30% of preference which is the lowest score item in the dimension.

### ***Dimension 3: Students' attitudes towards English as a subject at school***

Regarding the students' responses to the statements about English as a subject at school, more than half of responders indicated a favourable attitude; however, some statements of the domain obtained negative frequency. For instance, for item 17, 56% of students agreed that English is

an unnecessary subject at school, and only 26% of them considered it the other way around. Similarly, students considered that the subject has too many class-hours per week. Even when they agreed that English is an important subject at school, they do not want to have more hours of instruction per week.

At the same time, Table 4 above reveals that English is a difficult subject for students since for item 18, half of the participants showed that English is not an easy subject at school. In spite of this, more than half of students manifested that they obtained good marks in the subject.

### ***Dimension IV: Students' attitudes towards learning EFL***

With regard to the fourth dimension, students' answers showed an unfavourable attitude towards learning EFL. Data revealed that out of the five dimensions, this domain was the lowest scored because the majority of the items in the dimension had negative responses. Based on the information illustrated in Table 5 below, students do not have study habits at home and they do not spend time studying English; they are only worried about the mark they are given in specific tests.

### ***Dimension V: Students' attitudes towards English as a global language***

Responses observed in the last statements in the questionnaire showed that participants had a favourable attitude toward English as a global language. Based on the data, students declared that English is a language that could be helpful for their future (53% of preference). They also thought that there must be more stimulation from the authorities not only in schools but also on television, internet, radio, and books. In that way, students would have more exposure to English and they would be able to learn the new language easily.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate 12<sup>th</sup> graders' attitudes towards English as a foreign language in

**Table 2.** Students' Attitudes towards EFL, dimension I

	Statement	Freq. / Perc.			Total
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
1	I understand when my teacher speaks in English in the classroom.	56 (36%)	51 (33%)	47 (31%)	154
2	It is easy for me when my teacher uses Spanish and English in the classroom.	84 (55%)	43 (28%)	27 (17%)	154
3	I prefer when my teacher translates all the instructions from English to Spanish.	93 (60%)	37 (24%)	24 (16%)	154
4	I prefer when my teacher talks to us the whole class in English.	49 (32%)	55 (36%)	50 (32%)	154
5	My teacher speaks almost the entire class in English.	65 (42%)	55 (36%)	34 (22%)	154
6	My teacher speaks almost the entire class in Spanish.	56 (37%)	65 (42%)	33 (21%)	154
7	My teacher gives us opportunities to speak English during the class.	67 (44%)	49 (32%)	38 (24%)	154
8	I think that English teachers should speak in Spanish most of the class.	61 (40%)	53 (34%)	40 (26%)	154
	TOTAL	531	408	293	1232
	%	43.1	33.1	23.8	100

**Table 3.** Students' Attitudes towards EFL, dimension II

	Statement	Freq /Perc.			Total
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
9	My teacher performs different activities in the English class.	85 (55%)	47 (31%)	22 (14%)	154
10	My teacher incorporates reading comprehension activities in the English class.	75 (49%)	45 (29%)	34 (22%)	154
11	My teacher only teaches us English grammar.	46 (30%)	67 (44%)	41 (26%)	154
12	My teacher gives lessons using audios in English.	76 (49%)	54 (35%)	24 (16%)	154
13	My teacher promotes teamwork.	74 (48%)	43 (28%)	37 (24%)	154
14	Classes with didactic materials are more entertaining.	94 (61%)	31 (20%)	29 (19%)	154
15	I prefer my teacher to use didactic materials in class (radios, data shows, worksheets)	97 (63%)	42 (27%)	15 (10%)	154
	TOTAL	547	329	202	1078
	%	50.7	30.5	18.7	100



**Table 4.** Students' Attitudes towards EFL, dimension III

	Statement	Freq /Perc.			Total
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
16	English is the most important subject at school.	50 (32%)	60 (39%)	44 (29%)	154
17	English is an unnecessary subject at school.	86 (56%)	40 (26%)	28 (18%)	154
18	English is an easy subject at school.	39 (25%)	77 (50%)	38 (25%)	154
19	English subject has many hours of classes.	56 (36%)	54 (35%)	44 (29%)	154
20	English classes are boring.	55 (30%)	46 (36%)	53 (34%)	154
21	English should have more class-hours.	47 (31%)	63 (41%)	44 (28%)	154
22	I always have good grades in English.	62 (40%)	46 (30%)	46 (30%)	154
23	The English lesson is my favorite	33 (21%)	82 (54%)	39 (25%)	154
	TOTAL	428	468	336	1232
	%	34.7	38.0	27.3	100

**Table 5.** Students' Attitudes towards EFL, dimension IV

	Statement	Freq /Perc.			Total
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
24	I always study English even when I do not have a test.	29 (19%)	93 (60%)	32 (21%)	154
25	I study for the English test only for the mark.	70 (45%)	35 (23%)	49 (32%)	154
26	Even when I study a lot, the results of the English tests are bad.	45 (29%)	80 (52%)	29 (19%)	154
27	My results in English depend on my teacher's performance.	55 (36%)	52 (34%)	47 (31%)	154
	TOTAL	199	260	157	616
	%	32.3	42.2	25.5	100

**Table 6.** Students' Attitudes towards Teaching EFL, dimension V

	Statement	Freq /Perc.			Total
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral	
28	It is good to hear music in English.	92 (60%)	35 (24%)	27 (18%)	154
29	I prefer to watch movies with English sound.	54 (35%)	52 (34%)	48 (31%)	154
30	English is irrelevant in my life.	52 (25%)	39 (34%)	63 (41%)	154
31	English is something important for my future.	81 (53%)	45 (29%)	28 (18%)	154
32	Everyone should be able to communicate in English.	77 (50%)	42 (27%)	35 (23%)	154
	TOTAL	259	171	166	596
	%	43.5	28.7	27.9	100

Chile. The results of the questionnaire showed that 12th graders hold a favourable attitude towards EFL in Chile with regard to the overall results shown by the responses in the instrument; however, different domains in the questionnaire scored different frequencies, therefore, some negative attitudes could be identified in some dimensions, and some important findings can be reported on language teaching.

In regard to students' attitudes towards using language in English class, data showed that students prefer to include translation from English into Spanish when the teacher gives the instructions in the classroom. However, "the issue of whether language teachers should use the students' first language in their second/foreign language classroom has always been a controversial one" (Sharma, 2006, p. 80) because there is no agreement on its inclusion or not. Our experience as teachers of English has shown us that the use of

the mother tongue can be a positive aspect in the English classroom when students make progress within the target language and when it can be a way of scaffolding students to learn English (Afzal, 2013); however, overuse of the mother tongue might be prejudicial as oral production in the target language is diminished.

Hence, even when students' responses illustrated that they prefer the use of their mother tongue in the classroom, strong attention has to be paid on the inclusion of the target language in consideration of the poor exposure Chilean learners have to the foreign language. Chilean teachers of English have to use English inside the classroom as much as possible because this practice stresses the use of the language and motivates the pupils to attempt to speak it in the classroom. However, the use of the L1 does not have to be forbidden; it can be a useful resource to explain more complex vocabulary or grammatical structures, etc.

In relation to students' attitudes towards learning English, this dimension scored the lowest, similar to what was reported by Zainol, Pour-Mohammadi, and Alzwari (2012) in a study where participants showed negative attitudes towards learning English. The findings presented above reassert that students do not invest time at home to study, which is imperative to success in mastering the language, and as observed in this study, students did not report to have study habits such as reading extensively or studying for the subject frequently. This aspect is similar to what research in the area has shown because students lack study habits (Escalante, Escalante, Linzaga, & Merlos, 2008), not only in EFL, but also in the subjects given in their mother tongue. The same situation is perceived in Chile, and as we see it, a common problem. Nonetheless, to our knowledge there is no research reported in the field.

The findings informed by this study in the previous dimension should be used to provide learners with more opportunities to use the language outside the classroom. Chilean teachers of English should help students to use the language out of school by giving them extra tasks related to their preferences, e.g. using movies, music, and or video-games, which could encourage students to feel engaged in their learning and strengthen the teachers' efforts. However, most teachers in Chile do not have time to prepare extensive material because of their extensive work load. Furthermore, educational policies should facilitate teacher training and better incentives for them in order to foster improvements in methodology to enhance students' practice of the target language in other contexts different from the English class.

In relation to students' attitudes towards English as a global language, the statistical data showed positive attitudes towards the statements in this domain. This is similar to studies reported in the field; for instance, Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009) discussed students' positive orientation towards English, and Mamun, Rahman, Rahman, and Hossain (2012) reported on the positive attitude towards the instrumental value of English. Another point to mention in this respect has to do with the notion that students' attitudes towards the

target language influences the students outside the classroom (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Consequently, the general results showed that students held favourable attitudes towards English at school; thus, their positive attitudes are switched to the notion of English as a global language. As such, English is positively evaluated by the participants of the study and they recognise the importance of mastering the language in current times; however, Chilean students seem to be passive learners who do not make any effort to study the language as explained previously. Results illustrated that they do not take advantage or create any instance to use the language in the classroom or in a different environment; therefore, it seems that students increase the responsibility of their teachers and schools in their own learning process.

Taking into account that the role of schools is not only having teachers who teach their subjects, but it is also having teachers who act as agents to motivate their students, stressing personal development or personal satisfaction could encourage students to improve their English after leaving school. Even when the results also showed that students were aware that knowing English offers advantages in this globalised world, our experience as learners and teachers of EFL in Chile has shown us that students are not well aware of the importance of the language at school and the reason why it is taught as a foreign language in the country. Thus, teaching practices should be related to their hopes, aspirations, and desire as people, even their expectations considering that they do not make any effort to improve their skills today. Under these circumstances schools should encourage students to study and advance in their skills. Consequently, students' motivation should be tested and fostered in order to enhance their levels of favourable attitude in all areas of teaching and learning EFL and further research needs to be done in EFL considering how content or textbooks are giving an openness to learn English with clear personal expectations for the future.

To conclude, it is important to emphasize the necessity of designing and implementing new policies concerning teaching EFL in Chile based on the students' needs. Admittedly, this last statement could be supported by two reasons: first, that

globalisation has supported the status of English as the lingua franca and the language of business and commerce, and second, that more than two decades ago, English as a foreign language was included as part of the curriculum in Chile. In spite of this fact, there is a need for research related to the new Chilean learner who is in the classroom because there is a lack of research in the area of affective factors that influence the learning of the target language, especially the role of positive or favourable attitudes that students hold in different classrooms. With regard to the findings reported in this study, it is necessary to highlight that students suggested positive attitudes towards the target language, i.e. students recognised that English is essential for their future; however, learners showed unfavourable attitudes towards learning the language because they do not want to devote any time to studying the language at school or at home. The findings, then, are a beginning to analyse future directions in EFL policies and research in Chile bearing in mind the students' attitudes towards the inclusion of different approaches to teach the target language in the country.

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