

Afghan Islamic Religious Scholars' Attitudes and Motivations Towards Learning English

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Abstract

The study investigated the Afghan religious scholars' attitudes and motivations towards learning English. It also examined the impact of their country of religious education, place of residence and ethnicity on their responses. The authors collected data from 46 religious scholars who were living in Taliqan, the capital city of Takhar, a northeastern province of Afghanistan. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. More specifically, the authors determined the frequency, mean and standard deviation of the data and they used Independent Samples T-test and One-Way ANOVA test to examine the impact of the participants' country of education, place of residence and ethnicity on their responses. The findings revealed that the Afghan religious scholars had positive attitudes towards learning English and that they were interested in learning English. Furthermore, they wanted to learn English for various reasons, e.g., traveling abroad, promoting Islam, and obtaining their higher education. The study disproved the perception that the Afghan religious scholars had negative attitudes towards learning English. The religious scholars' country of education, place of residence and ethnicity did not have any significant influence on their responses.

Keywords: Afghan religious scholars, English education, motivation, attitude, EFL

1. Introduction

English plays a crucial role in Afghan society and it has been one of the major courses in Afghan schools and universities for years. Many Afghans including girls and women were learning English in the 1980s and the number was on the rise in the early 1990s. However, English education was banned during the Taliban Regime who prevented girls and women from attending schools and universities as well (Orfan, 2021a; Noori et al., 2020). The use of English has been on the rapid rise since 2001 when the international community especially the USA arrived in Afghanistan. A large number of people including women and girls rushed to learn English and many private English language centers were established throughout Afghanistan, which played a crucial role in spreading English in the country (Orfan, 2020a).

Currently, English is used in many areas in the country. It is extensively used in education, business, economy, government, and media (e.g., social networking sites) (Coleman, 2019; Akramy, 2020; Hashemi and Kew, 2020). English education starts from grade four in governmental schools and from grade one in almost all private schools. It is also taught as one of the required courses in government-run madrassas (Islamic schools). It is also one of the required courses in all majors at undergraduate and graduate studies including undergraduate studies in Sharia faculties (Islamic studies) (Orfan, 2021b). English is one of the major requirements for almost all overseas educational programs. Individuals with better English proficiency are preferred for overseas educational fellowships and scholarships.

In addition, English is important in Afghan economy. English has become one of the major requirements for almost all types of jobs. Afghans with better proficiency in English receive a monthly salary, which is 10 to 15 times higher than that of those with no English proficiency. In employment, individuals with English proficiency are preferred to those with no English proficiency even though the latter possess the expertise. English is considered one of the major requirements for academic jobs and promotion in public higher education institutes. Applicants of instructorship and professorship are required to pass an English proficiency test before taking specialized test. Public university Lecturers have to publish at least an article in international journals in order to promote from one academic rank to another one. Most of the lecturers prefer to publish in English though many of them lack English proficiency required for article publication in English.

English plays a vital role in social media use in Afghanistan. Afghan politicians and journalists widely use English on social networking sites mainly on twitter. GIZ-Afghanistan (2014) studied the use of social media in Afghanistan. they collected data from 1184 individuals who were living in Kabul and six northern provinces of Afghanistan. The results of the study revealed that English was widely used in social media. Over 60% of the respondents stated that they used English to access to the social networking sites.

A number of studies have investigated the attitudes and motivations of students towards learning English in Afghanistan. Orfan (2020a) studied the attitudes of Afghan undergraduate students' attitudes towards learning English. He examined three aspects of attitudes: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Using a survey questionnaire, he collected data from 210 randomly selected students who were majoring in different fields at Takhar University. The author used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The results of the study revealed that Afghan undergraduate students had positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes towards learning English, and they were very interested in learning English since they believed that English proficiency skill was very important for their employment and attaining further education in the future. Similarly, Alimyar (2020) studied Afghan students' attitudes and motivation towards learning English at six public universities in Afghanistan. The author collected data from 457 students and 12 university lecturers through survey questionnaire and interviews. He used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The findings showed that students held positive attitudes towards learning English and their attitudes were

influenced by instrumental, integrative, and intrinsic motivations. Moreover, the researcher concluded that some students were demotivated to learn English since they assumed that English would go out of use after the withdrawal of the international community especially the US forces from Afghanistan.

Daqiq (2021) studied the attitudes of Tajik, Uzbek and Pashtun parents towards their daughters' learning English. He collected data from 160 parents living in Takhar, a northeastern province of Afghanistan. He used both descriptive and inferential statistics for data analysis. The results of the study showed that parents had positive attitudes towards their daughters' learning English. Likewise, Zafary (2021) studied Afghan EFL students' perception of English pronunciation. The researcher collected data from 100 EFL students of the Department of English of Takhar University. He used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The findings revealed that EFL students had positive perceptions about learning English pronunciation and that they were very interested in pronunciation-related tasks in their English classes.

A large number of other studies explored EFL students' attitudes towards different aspects of learning English in Islamic countries and the vast majority of them have revealed that students had positive attitudes towards learning English, and they were interested in learning English. For instance, Abu-Snoubar (2017) studied the attitudes of students of Al-Balqa Applied University towards learning English as a foreign language. The author collected data from 176 randomly selected students. The results of the descriptive and inferential statistics revealed that students held positive attitudes towards learning English. Other studies such as Eshghinejad (2016), Alkaff (2013), Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009), Malekmahmudi and Malekmahmudi (2019), Almahmoud (2012), Al Noursi (2013), Ahmed (2015) and Ababneh (2016) found that EFL students had positive attitudes towards learning English in various Islamic countries.

Due to the restriction on English education during the Taliban Regime, there is a misperception that Afghan religious scholars have negative attitudes towards English learning and that they discourage people particularly the youth to learn English. The current study examines the Afghan religious scholars' attitudes and motivations towards learning English. It also determines the impact of their demographic profile, i.e., country of education, place of residence and ethnicity on their responses.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 46 religious scholars who were living in Taliqan City, the capital city of Takhar, a northeastern province of Afghanistan. All the participants were male. Most of the participants (74%) completed their religious studies in Pakistan while 26% of them obtained their religious studies in Afghanistan. Around 85% of them were living in the city while 15% were living in the rural areas at the time of the study. Tajik religious scholars

made up over half of the participants (56%) followed by Uzbek religious scholars (35%) and around 9% of them were Pashtuns.

2.2. Instrument

A thorough literature review was carried out to identify questionnaire items. The authors adapted 18 questionnaire items from various studies (i.e., Abidin et al., 2012; Abofazli and Sadeghi, 2019; Ahmed, 2015; Al-Tamimi and Shuib, 2009; Al-Zahrani, 2008; Choy and Troudi, 2006; Goktepe, 2014). The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part sought the participants' demographic information. The second part composed of 18 items that aimed to elicit the participants' response about their attitudes and motivations towards learning English. The participants were required to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree).

The authors gave the questionnaire to three of their colleagues in the English Department to read for revision and improvement. After receiving their feedback on the questionnaire, the problematic items were recognized and edited. The questionnaire was translated into Dari (the lingua franca of Afghanistan) since English is a foreign language and the vast majority of people particularly religious scholars cannot speak English (Orfan, 2020b). The Dari questionnaire was given to two colleagues in the Dari Department to ensure its clarity and comprehensibility. The wording of the questionnaire items is of significance in successful conduct of the study (Cohen et al., 2000). Therefore, the authors conducted a pilot test with five religious scholars to measure the reliability of the 18 questionnaire items. They were required to respond to 18 items on a 5-point Likert Scale. Using SPSS version 26.0, the authors conducted the reliability analysis of the items. The results of the analysis showed that the value of Cronbach's alpha was 0.787 (Table 1). The questionnaire items were appropriate for the research.

Table 1. Reliability value of questionnaire items

N. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
18	0.787

2.3. Procedure and Analysis

The researchers collected the data from 46 religious scholars who were living in Taliqan City, the capital city of Takhar, a northeastern province of Afghanistan. The authors explained the research and its purpose to the participants and asked them if they were willing to take part in the research. They were required to express their agreement to participate in the research by reading and signing the consent form attached to the questionnaire. They were made sure of the confidentiality of their responses. The participants were asked to read the instructions and complete the questionnaire. The researchers informed that there were no true or false responses, what mattered was their response to each given statement. They also encouraged the participants to ask about any instruction or item that seemed unclear or ambiguous to them. It took the respondents 10–15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. The authors used Statistical

Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 26.0 to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were employed to determine the frequency, the mean, and the standard deviation of the data. The independent sample *T*-test and the One-Way ANOVA test were carried out to explore the differences between different groups of the participants, e.g., country of religious education, ethnicity.

3. Results

3.1. Attitudes

The authors reversed the negative items into positive ones and conducted descriptive statistics to determine religious scholars' attitudes towards learning English. As table 2 shows, the overall mean score for attitude is 3.63, which indicates that religious scholars have positive attitudes towards learning English. Furthermore, over 90% of the participants stated that they were interested in learning English and wished they could speak English. Over 76% of them stated that they would encourage their children to learn English and that they would learn more about Islam through English. Moreover, over 60% believed that individuals with English proficiency were more educated and that English makes a person more open-minded. Around 84% believed that learning English is enjoyable. On the other hand, none of the participants believed that Muslims who learned English were bad Muslims. Over 20% believed that English was the language of occupation and colonization.

Table 2. Religious scholars' attitudes towards learning English

No	Statement	Mean	% A & SA
1	I am interested in learning English.	4.24	91.7
2	I wish I could speak English fluently.	4.17	91.3
3	I encourage my children and other young people to learn English.	3.98	76.71
4	I can learn more about Islam through English language.	4.02	78.3
5	People who can speak more than one language especially English are more educated.	3.87	67.4
6	Learning English makes a person more open-minded.	3.59	60.9
7	Studying a foreign language like English is enjoyable.	3.83	63.83
8	Muslims who learn English are not good Muslims.	2.43	0
9	English is the language of occupation.	1.59	21.7
10	English is the language of colonization and exploitation	4.61	30.4
Overall attitude		3.63	

A = Agree

SA = strongly agree

3.2. Motivations for Learning English

Descriptive statistics was run to explore the religious scholars' reasons for learning English. As table 3 shows, over 90% of the participants stated that they would learn English to travel overseas and to promote Islam in Anglophone countries. Over 80% wanted to learn English for pursuing their higher education, learning about Muslims from all around the world

and reading English books. Furthermore, over 75% of the participants stated that they wanted to learn English to attend the international Islamic conferences and to learn more about their religion. Interestingly, only 30% wanted to learn English to get a better job.

Table 3. Afghan religious scholars' motivations for learning English

No	Statement	Mean	% A & SA
1	I want to learn English because I want to travel abroad.	4.26	93.5
2	I want to learn English because I want to promote Islam in English speaking-countries.	4.46	91.3
3	I want to learn English because I want to pursue my higher education.	3.96	82.6
4	I want to learn English because it helps me learn more about Muslims all around the world.	4.37	89.1
5	I want to learn English because I want to read English books.	3.98	87
6	I want to learn English because I want to attend Islamic conferences in other countries.	3.74	78.3
7	I want to learn English because it helps me learn more about my religion, Islam.	3.93	76.1
8	I want to learn English because I want to get a good job.	2.50	30.4

3.3. Participants' Demographic Variables

The researchers conducted Independent Samples T-test and One-Way ANOVA test to determine the differences between the participants' responses by their country of religious education and place of residence. As table 4 shows, the p-values for country of education and residence (0.533, 0.443) are greater than the alpha level (0.05). Furthermore, One-Way ANOVA test was conducted to examine the impact of the participants' ethnicity on their responses. As table 4 demonstrates, the p-value for the ethnicity (0.499) is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Thus, it is concluded that the participants' country of education, place of residence and ethnicity did not have a significant impact on their responses.

Table 4. Participants' attitudes by their country of education, residence, and ethnicity

Variables		N	Mean	SD	P-value
Country of Education	Afghanistan	12	3.7005	0.62446	0.533
	Pakistan	34	3.8280	0.53946	
Place of Residence	City	39	3.7629	0.62011	0.443
	Rural	7	3.5714	0.48023	
Ethnicity	Tajik	26	3.7528	0.54060	0.499
	Pashtun	2	3.2727	0.12856	
	Uzbek	16	3.8125	0.68713	

4. Discussion

The study investigated the Afghan religious scholars' attitudes and motivations towards learning English. It also examined the impact of the participants' country of religious education, place of residence and ethnicity on their responses. The results revealed that the Afghan religious scholars had positive attitudes towards learning English, and they were very interested in learning English. It is consistent with the results of the study by Orfan (2020a) who reported that the Afghan undergraduate students had positive attitudes towards learning English. It is also in line with the finding of the study by Daqiq (2021) who concluded that Afghan parents had positive attitudes towards their daughters' learning English. The finding disproved the misperception that the Afghan religious scholars had negative attitudes towards learning English and that they were discouraging people to learn English. The findings indicate that the Afghan religious scholars can realize the importance of learning English for themselves and for their religious duties and responsibilities.

In addition, the results showed that the Afghan religious scholars wanted to learn English for various reasons. The vast majority of the Afghan religious scholars wanted to learn English because they wanted to travel abroad, promote Islam in Anglophone countries, pursue their higher education, and learn about Muslims from all around the world. Moreover, most of religious scholars wanted to learn English in order to read English books, attend international Islamic conferences and learn more about Islam through English. On the other hand, a small number of religious scholars wanted to learn English in order to get a good job. In addition, the results showed that the participants' country of education, place of residence and ethnicity did not have a significant impact on their responses. That is, the religious scholars who obtained their religious education in Afghanistan and Pakistan had the same degree of attitude towards learning English. Likewise, the Afghan religious scholars who were living in rural and urban areas were of the same attitudes towards learning English. Moreover, Pashtun, Tajik and Uzbek religious scholars held the same positive attitudes towards English.

5. Conclusion

The research investigated the Afghan religious scholars' attitudes and their motivations towards learning English. The results of the study showed that Afghan religious scholars had positive attitudes towards learning English and that they were interested in learning English. Furthermore, they wanted to learn English for various reasons such as traveling abroad, promoting Islam and pursuing their higher education. The findings also showed that religious scholars' country of religious education, place of residence and ethnicity did not have a significant impact on their responses.

The study is limited in several ways. All the participants of the study were living in government-controlled areas and the findings cannot be generalized to religious scholars who were living in Taliban-controlled areas. The sample comes from a small city in Northeastern Afghanistan and its findings cannot be generalized to other cities particularly more conservative ones for the results. Therefore, the authors recommend for further investigations. They need to

have a larger sample from different cities and use various data collection methods, i.e., interviews.

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