

PERCEPTIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS TOWARDS IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A CASE OF VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY OF PAKISTAN

Dr. Saghir Ahmad Ch.

Department of Education, Hazara University Mansehra, Pakistan, saghir.edu786@gmail.com

Dr. Ayesha Batool

Assistant Professor, Lahore College for Women University Lahore, Pakistan
Corresponding Author E-mail: drayesharana19@gmail.com

Dr. Nauman Ahmed Abdullah

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Virtual University of Pakistan, nauman.abdullah@vu.edu.pk

Dr. Yousef Almoslamni

Assistant Professor of Instructional Technology, College of Education, University of Ha'il Saudi Arabia,
Y.almslmeny@uoh.edu.sa

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Abstract - The English language has its importance in different perspectives globally. English is pertinent and significant in developing interaction and collaboration in humans of different societies. It is also an academic language in many countries. The focus of this study was to investigate the distance learners' perceptions towards the importance of the English language in an online university in Pakistan and to develop the structural equation model of the distance learners' perceptions towards English importance. This study was a descriptive correlational survey type research. The population of the study was all the students of the online university. The total sample was three hundred university students selected by random sampling technique. The questionnaire was developed concerning the importance of the English language on a five-point likert type scale. It was validated by field experts and checked for internal consistency of items. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques including path analysis and structural equation modeling. It was found that the learners were well aware of the importance of English language and

they were highly motivated to learn it. It is recommended that universities emphasize the use of English language as it is productive to interact with foreign communities and professional advancements.

Keywords: English language, perceptions, and distance learners.

INTRODUCTION

It is broadly acknowledged that frame of mind and principles regarding knowing an unknown language, particularly English, are deciding components that may impact learners' performance in language classes. Thus, the teachers and instructors ought to be cautious in considering these elements (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). As indicated by Latchanna and Dagnew (2009) frame of mind is recognized as a huge plan to understand the human attitude and is portrayed as a mental expression that joins feelings and notions. Concerning language, Bain et al. (2010) contended that behavior can play an essential inspiring variable job in objective fulfillment for students. These mentalities appear to be commonly good for unknown dialect learning, except for two elements. They are: (1) the solid dependence on

jargon retaining as a method for figuring out how to understand language, and (2) the inability to get a handle on the significance of linguistic structure in the perception of language. In English as an unknown setting, students who think about learning English as a positive and rephrasing practice are more averse to experience the negative effects of unknown dialect tension. On the other hand, they ordinarily have more elevated levels of inspiration and the ability to take interest (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010).

A mentality to learning a different and unknown language is regularly associated with inspiration, which is some sort of interior drive that urges someone to seek after a course or activity. Commonly, firmly inspired learners with objectives are presumably simpler to instruct despite the individuals who have momentary objectives and in this manner no genuine drive. They have intrinsic and extrinsic inspiration into primary classifications: extrinsic inspiration is related to environmental and intrinsic inspiration is related to internal matter and feelings (Harmer, 2002). There are numerous purposes behind considering an unknown language. Likely significant many students on the planet do it since it is on the educational program. A few people need to examine English or another unknown dialect since learners consider it deals with the possibility in the profession. They are in a position to get a good job with a foreign language, especially which languages are popular internationally.

A frame of mind incorporates a few angles, for example, social, psychological, and passionate. It impacts unknown language students' practices, for example, demonstrating more energy to take care of issues, to procure what is valuable for daily routine. For psychological parts of demeanor, it includes convictions of language students about information that they get and their comprehension of the procedure of language learning. As far as the full of feeling or passionate part of the disposition, the learning procedure offers the instructor and learners' opportunity to take part in different exercises, and fluctuated consequences of feelings are uncovered (Eshghinejad, 2016; Feng & Chen, 2009).

The diversified cultural background point of view is a methodology that investigates issues in second language learning as well as educating (Hawkins, 2008). This methodology is essential to some unknown dialect students since it is regularly related to accepting why the public carries on how they do. It tries to comprehend behavior and character advancement by analyzing standards of culture and norms of a society where different peoples live together (Mckay, 2018). In such a manner, it means by the different ethnic methodology degree where learners respect the foreign language because of adoration of general public and values of people who speak a foreign language. Numerous researches directed related to learners' frames of mind to considering English as a specialty in various instructing settings in universities.

Significance of the Study

Distance education is an emerging competitive market in the academic world. This current study has a dynamically

significant contribution in a distance learning context. This study is worthwhile to explore the distance learners' perceptions towards the importance of the English language. People intend to increase virtual learning day by day because it provides easiness and accessibility to their homes. They can learn and get a degree along performing their domestic duties. Thus, the drive of the study is to explore the intensity of learners about foreign language. This study provides the level of virtual learners that how much they give importance to the English language. It is also helpful to highlights the perceptions of students towards English. This study determines the motivation level of students about the second language. The results of the particular study are fruitful for the administration and management of the virtual university. A complete picture in the form of this study would be available for relevant higher authorities to take solid steps to inculcate English curiosity among distance learners so that they can get awareness and realize the importance of the English language in their lives at the national and international level. Distance teachers may utilize the findings of the study properly and develop English interest among learners. However, this study has significant importance itself in the field of distance learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intensity of online and the web system in the present period empowers all students to learn at their home without going to a customary eye-to-eye course or school. At the end of the day, ongoing advancements in the virtual environment have realized different enhancements encouraging individuals' lives. Students who cannot go to classes for some explanation can learn at their own pace free from time and spot. They have opportunities to enroll in different programs of distance education in an increasingly adaptable and intuitive environment. There is no uncertainty that these improvements in instructive innovations have spread to on the web or separation language learning and educating field. Chances to learn dialects through on the web or distance training are exhibited each spending day by private courses, establishments, reading material organizations, and universities. An extraordinary number of learners are showing their interest to get enrollment in distance learning programs. During the time spent in virtual instruction in various projects, they take different courses relying on their majors. Their musings and recognitions about these courses and whether these courses address their issues or not are critical for the achievement and inspiration of the learners (Isik et al., 2010; Rashid et al., 2013; White, 2006).

Countless studies on EFL students' frames of mind with different measurements, perspectives, and factors were led through the span of years. A portion of these was done on behavior toward learning English as far as the enthusiastic, subjective, and conduct perspectives (Eze, 2015). Learners' inspiration, frames of mind towards English, and manners to get knowledge of foreign language were highly outstanding (Abdullah, 2020; Coskun & Tasgin, 2018; Drbsen, 2015).

To enthusiastic, subjective, behavior perspectives that typically influence pupils' tendency to examine an unknown dialect, Jafre (2012) researched 180 learners' dispositions to gain English knowledge as far as different angles in Libya. The findings demonstrated undesirable frames of mind related to a foreign language as rule angles specifically. They likewise uncovered measurable huge attitudinal contrasts in regards to sexual orientation to concentrate. Eshghinejad (2016) investigated scholars' demeanors to seeking English in Iran. The researcher observed an inspirational confident mentality of students to learn a foreign language.

Different researches were conducted to explore behaviors and inspiration or on frames of mind, inspiration, and uneasiness of students about English. Shams (2008) led a study on learners' enthusiasm, nervousness, and dispositions related to foreign language. The results emphasized they had positive thoughts and the excitement level was amazing. Their daily lives are also influenced. Lim (2012) examined the inspiration level of English language learners and the conceivable relationship between persuasive direction and language capability.

Findings indicated inspiration seen as a fundamental explanation behind the learners' seek English knowledge. They additionally indicated that it was considered to guarantee its students down to earth, utilitarian advantages or rewards. Comparable discoveries were gotten by Fadlalla's research (2017), which researched the inspiration and frames of mind of 65 college graduates to learn the language. These results showed students were internally motivated to seek a foreign language. They conceded to knowing English because their folks accepted that learning English is significant for them. At last, the discoveries uncovered that the majority of them had inspirational approaches to the social worth and instructive prestige of English.

Research about language instruction courses when all is said in spotlights for the most part on the adequacy of showing language aptitudes, innovative angles in language educating, and independent learning. For example, Sole and Hopkins (2007) differentiate two ways to deal with distance learning based on giving practice in four language aptitudes, structuring fitting appraisal procedures, and students' commitment to the instructive setting. They break down distance instructive ways of thinking of two universities explaining a few likenesses and contrasts. They infer that every furnish students with great quality language courses, in any case, the scholars call attention to those universities wishing to do separate language courses need to reevaluate their medium and long haul results about innovation. The absence of imaginative advancement in language courses and expresses that individual language adapting needs remain neglected. He keeps up that to make up for these inconveniences, upper-level aptitude guidance ought to be connected significance, increasingly adaptable modules must be created, and less ordinarily encouraged courses must be remembered for the separation training programs.

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The Virtual University of Pakistan is the first and only university that is completely online in Pakistan. The university started operating in 2002 and since then has evolved drastically. The online satellite technology and a comprehensive learning management system helps the students across boundaries to study quality education (Abdullah & Mirza, 2020).

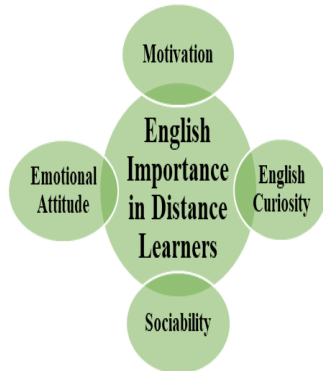
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Individuals incline toward distance learning for "the accommodation, adaptability, and flexibility of this method of training to suit singular learners' needs". Online learning shows up in the instructive field as another strategy in light of the expanding interest for these adaptable and advantageous perspectives. Indeed, the purpose is identified with advancement in education. Distance learning for the most part ascends because of students' requirements for long-lasting learning. The quick spread of distance learning on the planet offers students and instructors extraordinary open doors as well as brings a ton of difficulties. Students are solo, self-coordinated, free, and expected to be progressively self-sufficient. It appears to keep on grabbing the eye of instructors, educators, and students towards distance education more in the future.

English as the language for development has administered the academic, political, and authority talk in Pakistan as in other immature countries for a long time now. The discussion of "Education for All" and the extension in the usage of English in the overall market have added a universalistic estimation to the educating learning of English in Pakistan. Right now, it is a complicated course of action issue particularly for resource flow and achieving quality in English language guidance. It is the modest mindset that English is the visa to advance and upward social adaptability and English is the best approach to national progress are some ordinary aphorisms that are sprinkled in the discussion of planning and approach get-togethers. Even more, altogether, these trivialities reflect the perspective on various people both rich and poor in looking at future life observing for their children.

Right now, English is considered by supporter workplaces as the genuine language for development in underdeveloped countries. Usually, a lot of money is expended on developing the English capacity of people and systems in the recipient nation-states beforehand or close by other improvement work, particularly in the field of education. The aim is to improve the practicality of teaching-learning and right now broad nature of preparing in non-native English-speaking surroundings. In Pakistan, English is seen generally as the language for progression at both the individual and national levels. As a general rule, the race for solitary achievement and money-related improvement seem to have outperformed issues of class, character, and fear of social assault from an ongoing common or nearby language.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework regarding English importance



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives were achieved in this study.

1. To investigate the distance learners’ perceptions towards the importance of the English language in terms of sub-scales as motivation, emotional attitude, English curiosity and sociability.
2. To explore correlation among the sub-scales motivation, emotional attitude, English curiosity and sociability.
3. To develop Structural equation modeling of the distance learners’ perceptions towards English importance.
4. To assess qualification differences among distance learners regarding English importance.

METHODOLOGY

The approach of the study was quantitative. This study was descriptive correlational research in nature.

Population

The population of the study was all students enrolled in the Virtual University of Pakistan in the session 2020-2021. There are five faculties at VU namely Arts, Science & Technology, Education, CS & IT, and Management.

Sampling design

A random sampling technique was used to select three out of the five faculties at VU. Through lottery method Education, Management, and computer science and information technology faculties were selected. Under each faculty, one hundred students were selected. Thus, the total sample was 300 university students of different departments.

Instrument of the Study

A close-ended questionnaire was developed on a five-point likert type scale, to measure the importance of English with four factors taken as sub-scales: Motivation, Emotional

Attitude, Sociability, and English curiosity. The questionnaire comprised of twenty-eight statements, it was validated by field experts through their expert opinions on the content validity of the questionnaire. After incorporating the changes suggested by the experts, the revised questionnaire had 24 items, eight items each in motivation and English curiosity factor and four items each in sociability and emotional attitude factor. The questionnaire was administered to 33 students other than the actual sample to check its reliability. The internal consistency reliability was calculated on the coefficient of Cronbach's Alpha and the reported value for the overall questionnaire was 0.89 and above 0.8 for each of the factors which are considered reliable in a survey type study.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviations of Items

Items	M	SD
Career	4.28	.716
Interaction	4.46	.653
Educated	4.17	.765
getting job	4.37	.624
Influence salary	3.87	.997
Behavior understanding	4.38	.739
Learn culture	4.03	.870
parents helped in English	4.23	.772
Feel pride	4.17	.807
More confident	4.27	.665
Feel calm	4.36	.720
Feel pleasant	4.40	.799
Dynamic and communicate	4.13	.730
Sociable and kind	4.28	.816
Friendly language	4.36	.585
Stability	4.36	.689
Strong desire	4.32	.725
Allow to be more with people	4.25	.750
Beneficial	4.38	.709
Prefer English reading	4.48	.703
Pay attention	4.36	.673
Interest in English	3.90	.771
Life improvement	4.22	.590
Love English	4.43	.651

Table 1 displays item-wise descriptive statistics. The mean and standard deviations values depict that all items reported mean score of above 3.0 which is considered as a cut point for agreement in a likert type scale. The item with the highest mean score ($M= 4.48, SD= .703$) was related to the preference for English reading. The second highest mean score ($M= 4.46, SD= .653$) was for the item related to interaction. However, the lowest reported mean score ($M=$

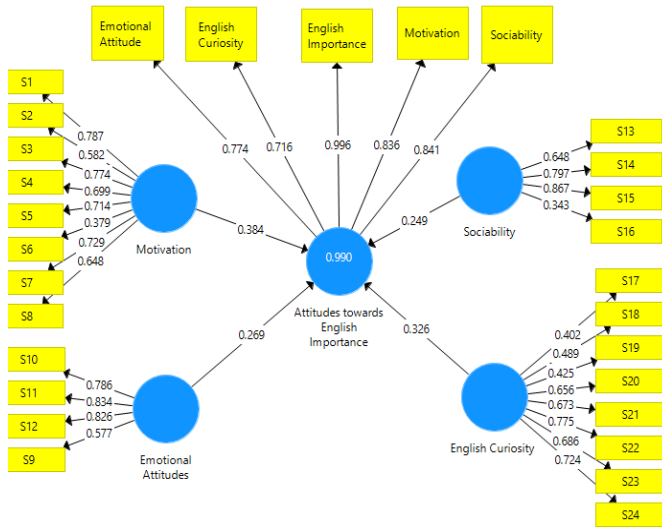
3.87, $SD= .997$) was on the item related to perception about the influence on salary.

Table 2
Correlation among Dimensions of English Language Importance

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Motivation	1	.529**	.661**	.392**	.853**
Emotional attitude		1	.534**	.426**	.745**
Sociability			1	.481**	.805**
English Curiosity				1	.745**
English Importance					1

Table 2 shows the relationship among dimensions of English language importance. There were mainly four factors to ensure the importance of a foreign language. There was a positive relationship among all dimensions. The strong association showed two factors motivation $r = .853^{**}$ and sociability $r = .805^{**}$. The other factors also showed correlation values above 0.70 which is considered as a strong correlation. It means all factors are crucial to measuring the importance of a foreign language.

Figure 2. Structural Equation Modeling of attitudes towards English importance



The above figure is concerned with structural equation modeling of students' attitudes towards the importance of the English language in online university students. There were four sub-factors of perceptions towards English importance namely; motivation, emotional attitude, sociability, and curiosity of the English language. The main variable is in the middle and four sub-dimensions around it. Items of all dimensions were loaded in yellow color. It shows that there was strong path correlation of dimensions with variable; motivation $r = .83$, emotional attitude $r = .77$, sociability $r = .84$, curiosity $r = .72$, and English importance

$r = .99$. All statements of sub-factors in yellow boxes almost had a range from value .5 to above .9. A cut-off point was 0.5 and above was set to maintain the statement. It means items were interrelated and highly significant. It also shows all statements are necessary to measure the variable perceptions of students towards English importance in universities. Students were highly motivated to learn a foreign language. They had curiosity and emotional attachment with English due to a lot of reasons that were helpful in personal academic life and social circle of humans.

Figure 3. Latent variables

Latent Variable	Attitudes towards English Importance	Emotional Attitudes	English Curiosity	Motivation	Sociability
Attitudes towards English...	1.000	0.785	0.751	0.842	0.846
Emotional Attitudes	0.785	1.000	0.479	0.556	0.590
English Curiosity	0.751	0.479	1.000	0.423	0.536
Motivation	0.842	0.556	0.423	1.000	0.686
Sociability	0.846	0.590	0.536	0.686	1.000

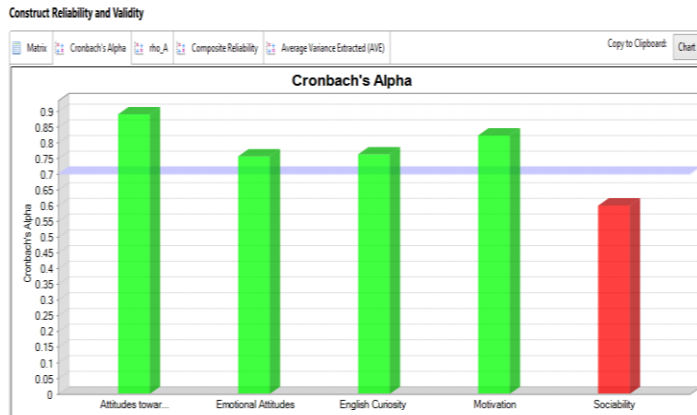
Figure 3 is related to latent variables of online students' attitudes towards English importance. It shows that there was a strong association of dimensions with variables; motivation, emotional attitude, sociability, curiosity, and English importance.

Figure 4. Construct reliability and validity

Construct Reliability and Validity	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Attitudes towards English...	0.890	0.906	0.921	0.702
Emotional Attitudes	0.756	0.786	0.845	0.582
English Curiosity	0.762	0.791	0.825	0.383
Motivation	0.822	0.843	0.866	0.456
Sociability	0.599	0.687	0.773	0.481

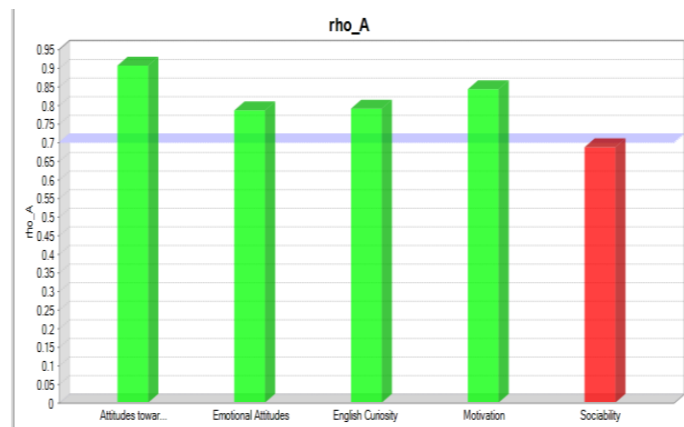
A questionnaire is considered accurate and valid when both its validity and reliability both are confirmed. In path analysis, structural equation modeling measured construct reliability and validity in the above figure. Reliability and validity were calculated by four different tests Cronbach's Alpha, rho_A, Composite reliability, and average variance extracted. Reliability values in green color are showing strong validness and highly significant consistent and reliable scales of knowledge economy concepts and roles. All values are competing with the threshold in this figure.

Thus, these values are above than marginal line due to which these numbers are in green color.
 Figure 5. Construct reliability and validity



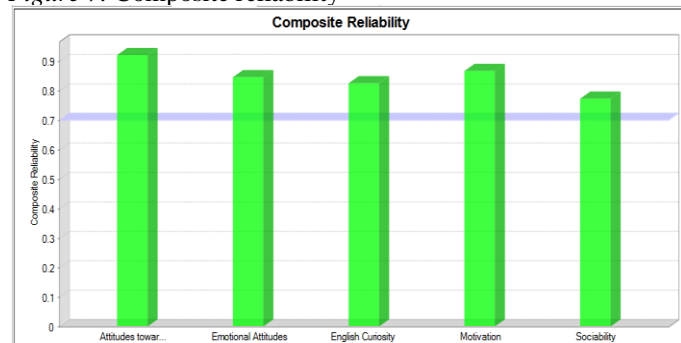
The reliability of constructs is in red and green color in the above figure. It shows that four constructs: motivation, emotional attitude, curiosity, and English importance are above the cut point .7 and sociability in red color is below the standard line.

Figure 6. rho_A values of variables



The reliability of constructs is in red and green color in the above figure. It shows that four constructs: motivation, emotional attitude, curiosity, and English importance are above the cut point .7 and sociability in red color is also near the standard line.

Figure 7. Composite reliability



The composite reliability of constructs is in green color in the above figure. It shows that all constructs: motivation, emotional attitude, curiosity, sociability, and English importance are above the cut point .7 which shows the validity of dimensions.

Figure 8. Discriminant validity

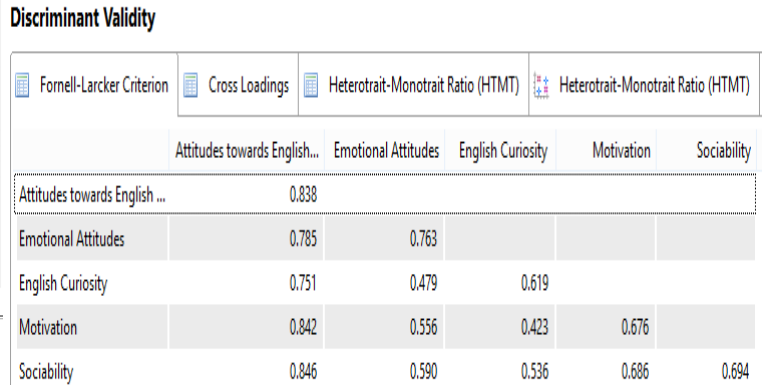
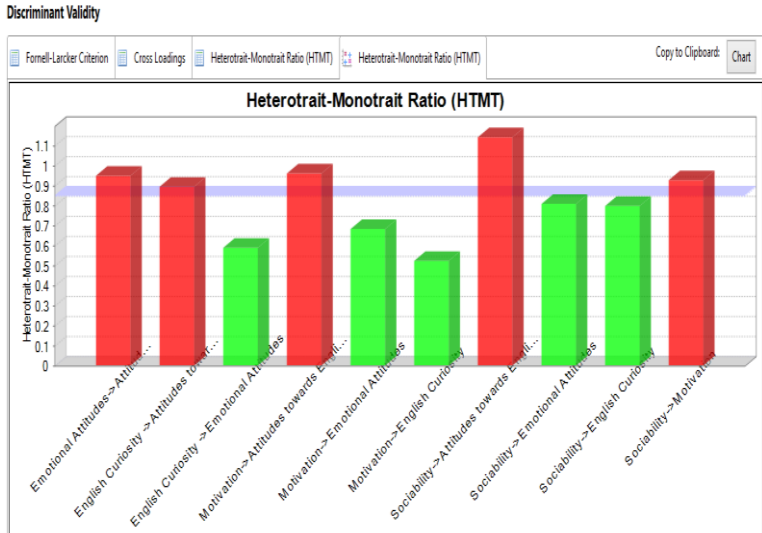


Figure 8 is related to the discriminant validity of variables of online students' attitudes towards English importance. It shows that there was discrimination among dimensions of each other.

Figure 9. Discriminant validity



The discriminant validity of constructs is in red and green color in the above figure. It shows that five constructs are above the cut point .9 and others are below the standard line.

Table 3
 Qualification Difference among Students Regarding English Importance

Variable	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	p
Motivation	66.751	22.250	1.328	.27
Emotional	1474.325	16.754		
	1541.076			
Emotional	20.881	6.960	1.373	.25

Attitude	446.195 467.076	5.070		
Sociability	6.272 320.163 326.435	2.091 3.638	.575	.63
English Curiosity	16.037 1044.517 1060.554	5.346 11.870	.450	.72
English Importance	202.103 7612.799 7814.902	67.368 86.509	.779	.51

In Table 3 One-way ANOVA was used to check qualification differences in students' perceptions about the importance of foreign language importance. There was no qualification difference in their opinions about language at significance level $p > .05$. It seems they acknowledge foreign language and its importance at the same level irrespective of degree difference.

Discussion

This study investigated the perceptions of distance learners towards the importance of the English language. The students of the virtual university showed a positive inclination towards learning a foreign language (English) and its importance. One reason for the response of the virtual university students might be the mode of instruction that is heavily driven towards the English language. The record lectures are preferably in English, and the communication between course instructors and students is in the English language through moderated discussion boards (MDBs) on the Learning Management System. They pondered this language was helpful in the accomplishment of job and success. The English language facilitates learning dynamic cultures and understands the behaviors of others. These results are supporting the research findings of past studies which were conducted in different countries of the world. Different studies were conducted on foreign language learners' behaviors and inspiration or frames of mind, inspiration, and uneasiness. Shams (2008) led a study on scholars' inspiration, nervousness, and dispositions to know English. The results emphasized they were positive in thoughts and showed excitement in English since it is significant in daily routine. Lim (2012) examined instrumental and integrative inspiration of Cambodian language learners and the conceivable relationship between persuasive direction and English capability. Fadlalla (2017) researched the inspiration and frames of mind of college graduates to learn English. These results showed the Sudanese learners were instrumentally persuaded towards English. At last, the findings uncovered that the majority of them had inspirational behavior of communal worth and instructive prestige of English.

Conclusion

Academic attitude towards learning a different and unknown language is regularly associated with inspiration, which is some sort of interior drive that urges someone to seek after a course or activity. The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of distance learners towards the importance of the English language at the Virtual University of Pakistan. It was also explored the correlation among dimensions of English language importance. The beauty of the study was to develop structural equation modeling of the distance learners' attitudes towards English importance. The approach of the study was quantitative. The perceptions of students towards the importance of English were measured by five factors; Motivation, Emotional attitude, Sociability, English curiosity, and its importance. It was validated by field experts and then checked internal consistency among items.

It is concluded that the English language is important for interaction globally and career development. It facilitates learning dynamic cultures and understand the behaviors of others. They feel pride and more confidence in learning English. They usually prefer readings in English. They have an interest in a foreign language because it helps in life advancement. It was also observed that there was a positive relationship among all dimensions to measure the importance of a foreign language. For structural equation modeling there were four sub-factors of perceptions towards English importance namely; motivation, emotional attitude, sociability, and curiosity of the English language. The main factor was in the middle and four sub-dimensions around it. It showed that there was strong path relationship of dimensions with variable; motivation $r = .83$, emotional attitude $r = .77$, sociability $r = .84$, curiosity $r = .72$, and English importance $r = .99$. Therefore, it is concluded that students were highly motivated to learn a foreign language. They had curiosity and emotional attachment with English due to a lot of reasons that were helpful in personal academic life and social circle of humans.

Recommendations

Distance learners should concentrate and develop an interest to learn a foreign language because it is productive to interact with foreign communities and career progression. Parents may develop an interest in children from childhood and motivate them to speak a foreign language at home. Childhood habits influence the academic career and life later on. Thus, there should be such kind of environment in home and school where children share their ideas and communicate in the English language. It should be a friendly language and students may prefer a foreign language in a formal and informal gathering. The command over English language is helpful to interact and grasp opportunities across borders.

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