



## **Iranian University Students' Attitudes toward the US Government and the English Language in the Trump Era**

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### **ARTICLE HISTORY:**

Received June 2022  
Received in Revised form August 2022  
Accepted August 2022  
Available online September 2022

### **KEYWORDS:**

Attitudes  
The US government  
The English language  
Language learning  
The Trump era

### **Abstract**

The purpose of the present study was to examine Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era. For this purpose, 359 Iranian university students who were taking general English courses took part in the study and completed two questionnaires measuring their attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era. The results of the study indicated that Iranian university students did not have favorable attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, while their attitudes toward the English language were more positive. Furthermore, we found that demographic information, including gender, field of study, educational level, and economic status could affect the attitudes toward the US government and the English language. We also found that participants with higher English language proficiency levels had more positive attitudes toward the English language. Finally, findings were discussed, and directions for future research were recommended.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.22034/ijsc.2022.548713.2539>

## 1. Introduction

According to the socio-educational model of second language acquisition (Gardner, 2020), attitudes toward the second/foreign language (L2) and the L2 community can be influential factors in the L2 motivational process. In the context of Iran, the English language (EL) was the main L2 taught at schools, institutes, and universities before the Revolution (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015; Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019). However, with the advent of the Revolution, the first foreign language learning plan was formulated (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015), and English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian were introduced as equal options. However, since there were few teachers for these languages, their status was not comparable to the EL in the current educational system (Farhady et al., 2010). Previous research has shown that Iranian political attitudes toward English were negative in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, though this negative attitude changed a few years later when Imam Khomeini emphasized the significance of learning foreign languages (Borjian, 2013; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015).

Given the importance of students' attitudes toward the L2 language and L2 community (Gardner, 2020), it is crucial to understand the Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language and the English language community. Research has shown that EL is considered to be parallel to the US and UK, and people's attitudes toward these communities affect their language learning motivation and attainment (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015). Moreover, we specifically focused on the US government and Trump because he pulled the US out of the nuclear deal in May 2018 and reimposed the sanctions, which could have resulted in more negative attitudes toward the US government. For these reasons, we decided to examine Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era. Furthermore, to have a deeper understanding of the students' attitudes, we examined the subgroups and demographic information within the students, including gender, field of study, level of study, economic status, and living place (district quota) that might be related to these factors.

This can help us to interpret the findings of the study in more detail.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Attitude and L2 Learning

Gardner and Lambert (1972) initiated research on how L2 attitudes toward a culture affect the learners' motivation to learn that culture's language. According to Gardner (1982, 1985), an L2 learner's attitude toward the target language community is a predictor of his or her desire to learn that language. Based on Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of Second Language Acquisition, a positive attitude is important because it increases motivation; therefore, an L2 learner with a favorable attitude toward the target culture is more successful in learning the target language than a learner who has an unfavorable attitude. Previous research has shown that attitudes can be influential in the process of language learning (e.g., Chmarkh, 2021; Keshavarz & Amro, 2015).

Like many personality traits, attitude is a construct that cannot be directly observed. It must be operationally defined to be measurable. Fakeye (2010) refers to attitude as one of the main factors affecting a learner's language achievement. Although attitudes can include different aspects, such as attitudes toward the L2 community, language, and L2 teacher, in the present study, it refers to the predisposition or tendency of Iranian university students (in three aspects of political, social, and economic) to think and feel positively or negatively about the US government and the EL in the Trump era.

### 2.2. Political Issues and Language Policy

There have been ups and downs in tensions between the US and Iran on numerous occasions in the last four decades. Relations improved slightly under the Barak Obama administration when the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal was signed between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK, the US- plus Germany. Based on the agreement, nuclear-related sanctions on Iran were removed in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear program. However, the negative attitude seems to have culminated again since the US President, Donald Trump, pulled the US out of the deal in May 2018 and reimposed the

sanctions, which could have resulted in more negative attitudes toward the US government.

The results of a survey regarding Iranians' political attitudes by WorldPublicOpinion.org at the University of Maryland in October 2019 (Gallagher et al., 2019) indicated that since Trump became the president of the US, the unfavourability of the US among Iranians gradually increased from 71% in January 2016 to 86% in August 2019. Based on a systematic review by Shahghasemi et al. (2011) regarding Iranians' and US citizens' perceptions of each other, Iranians had more positive perceptions of Americans than US citizens had of their Iranian counterparts.

Ardavani and Durrant (2015) studied the effect of political and socio-economic status on Iranian university students' motivation to learn English. They found that the current Iranian political and socio-economic context has motivated students to improve their English proficiency so that they can go overseas and join the international community, enhance their socio-economic status, increase their job opportunities, and play a positive role in the development of their country.

As pointed out by Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015), the EL cannot be detached from the US and the UK. A change in people's attitudes toward these countries would probably mean a change in their attitudes toward the EL. Research has shown that attitude and motivation are closely related (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). They are the driving force that gives impetus to effective and efficient foreign language learning. A student's negative attitude is an obstacle to learning a language, but a positive attitude can facilitate it and lead to favorable results. That is why it is necessary to track what politicians and policymakers are saying about languages.

The leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran has also criticized the spread and continuous increase in the use of only EL in Iran and emphasized that other languages such as Spanish, French, German, and Eastern languages should also be taught. What can be inferred is that learning foreign languages, not the EL alone, was emphasized.

### 2.3. The English Language as Soft Power

Today, English is considered a tool for globalization and economic development in

many countries (British Council, 2016). However, this can lead to western cultural hegemony. This can probably be justified in terms of what Nye (2004) coined as "soft power".

According to Nye (2004, p. 11), "soft power means getting others to want the same outcomes you want, and that requires an understanding of how they are hearing your messages and fine-tuning it accordingly". He contends that this power is even more significant than hard power (money and guns) because it is both financially and politically less costly (Nye, 2004). He also argues that the US is benefiting from the growing use of English in non-Anglophone countries (Nye, 2004). Interest in English as a medium of instruction throughout the world is one of the assets by which the US can extend its influence (US congress, 1959).

In the context of Iran, although students study English at schools, they cannot communicate in English effectively because the focus is mostly on grammar, translation, and reading. However, many students attend private language institutes to improve their English proficiency (Taguchi et al., 2009). This shows that Iranian students are interested in learning and mastering English though they do not learn it effectively at school.

As mentioned by Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015), recent political and cultural documents show that the Iranian government's orientation to English is still inconsistent. For example, in 2004, English and French were both introduced as necessary global languages in the *Comprehensive Policies* of Iran regarding Globalization. In this document, the emphasis on English as a necessary skill and not as a language that threatens Iranian cultural identity reveals the state's hesitation and concern toward English. In addition, the Ministry of Education approved the *Fundamental Transformation of Education* in 2010. In this document, the term "English" has been replaced by "foreign language" and its instruction is subject to certain ideological conditions which boost the Islamic and Iranian identity (see Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015).

While Donald John Trump, the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, in his campaign speech in Alabama – Friday, September 22, 2017 – claimed that "the world is starting to respect the United States of America again.", a report by

the Pew Global Attitudes Project (2017), which has been tracking world opinion of the US and its presidents since 2002, shows a sharp decline in both. Since the EL is deemed to be parallel to the US and UK (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015), this study was an attempt to find out what Iranians (not the Iranian government) think of the US government (not the US citizens) and the EL.

In light of these challenges, this study was an attempt to explore the Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language after Trump took office by answering the following research questions.

1. What are the Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era?
2. Is there any relationship between the Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era?
3. What is the role of gender, field of study, level of study, economic status, and living place in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era?
4. What is the role of English proficiency level in the Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

A total number of 359 university students (64.3% male, 34.5% female, and 1.1% unknown) who were taking a general English course at the University of Bojnord, a university in North-East of Iran, took part in this study. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 47 ( $M = 22.22$ ,  $SD = 4.54$ ). The quantitative design was used to collect the perspectives of Iranian university students through survey questionnaires. Stratified random sampling was used to proportionately select a representative sample from the accessible population in the university from the faculties of Humanities, Engineering, and Science.

#### 3.2. Instrumentation

We developed a questionnaire consisting of 40 items showing political, social, and economic

aspects of attitude toward the US government and the EL. For this purpose, 20 items measured students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era (sample item: "The overall picture of the US government is positive"), and 20 items measured students' attitudes toward the EL in the Trump era (sample item: "The English language is beneficial for continuing education").

Based on the objectives of the study, review of the related literature, and modification of some previously developed questionnaires (British Council, 2016; Eshghinejad, 2016; Hovhannisyan, 2014; Khalid, 2016), we developed the survey questionnaire items by employing practical strategies and guidelines suggested by Ary et al. (2010) and Creswell (2012). The survey questionnaire items are short, simple, clear, direct, comprehensible, and positively worded. Bias and double-barreled items were avoided. All of the questionnaire items, except for the demographic or personal questions, were measured on a six-point Likert-type scale.

Five experts reviewed and assessed the questionnaire to determine its content and face validity. Four of them were assistant professors in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and the fifth one was an assistant professor in Measurement and Evaluation. For the field test, four undergraduates and one graduate student reviewed the items and helped the authors to improve the overall instrument quality. For the pilot test, a group of students answered the items and helped the authors to establish the reliability of the survey questionnaire. The coefficient of internal consistency based on the implementation of Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the scores obtained from the students. To examine the reliability of the scales, we used Cronbach's alpha in the present study. Cronbach's alpha was .95 for students' attitudes toward the US government and .93 for students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era, indicating that the scales were highly reliable.

#### 3.3. Data Collection

After initial arrangements and securing permissions, the authors began data collection. The researcher followed the five interrelated steps recommended by Creswell (2012) in the process of quantitative data collection. First, the population, sample selection procedures, and

appropriate sample size were specified. Second, the permissions needed for the study were identified and obtained. Third, the types of data collection and the variables in the research questions and hypotheses were decided, and the specified variables were operationally defined. Fourth, instruments were developed, and their validity and reliability were established. And fifth, the questionnaires were manually administered to the respondents. The completed questionnaires were collected in the same session.

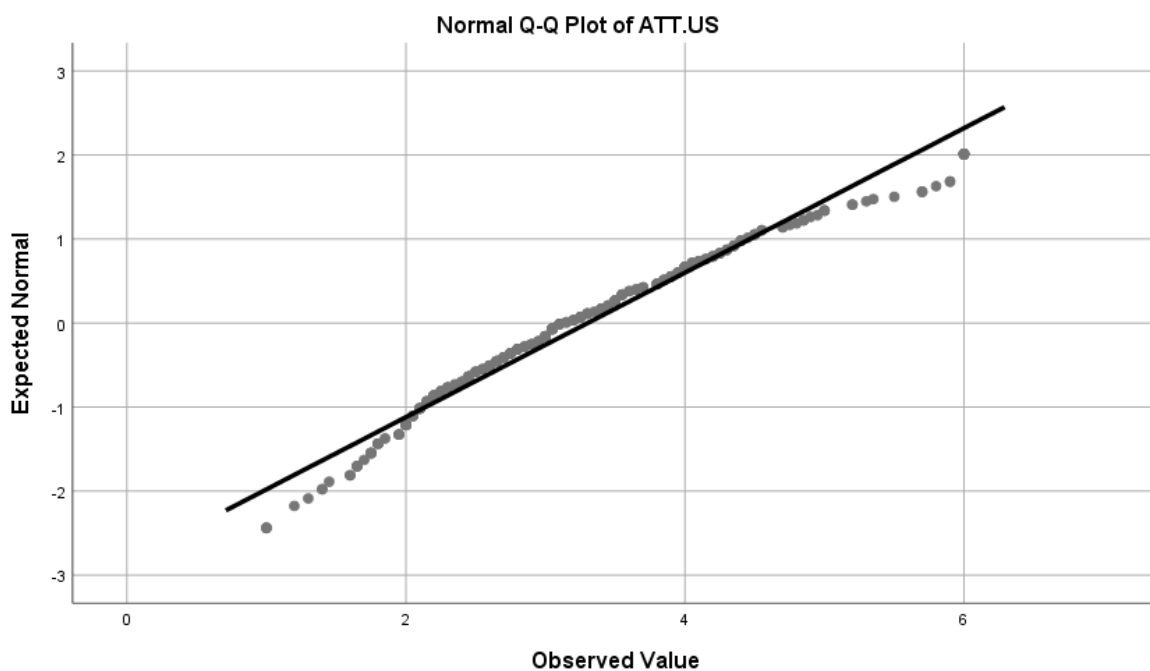
### 3.4. Data Analysis

After data collection, the raw scores taken from the survey questionnaires were submitted to the computer software Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS version 22). The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to calculate the relationship between the two continuous dependent variables. T-test and ANOVA were conducted to compare the possible differences between the means of the groups to whom the questionnaires were administered.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Preliminary Analyses

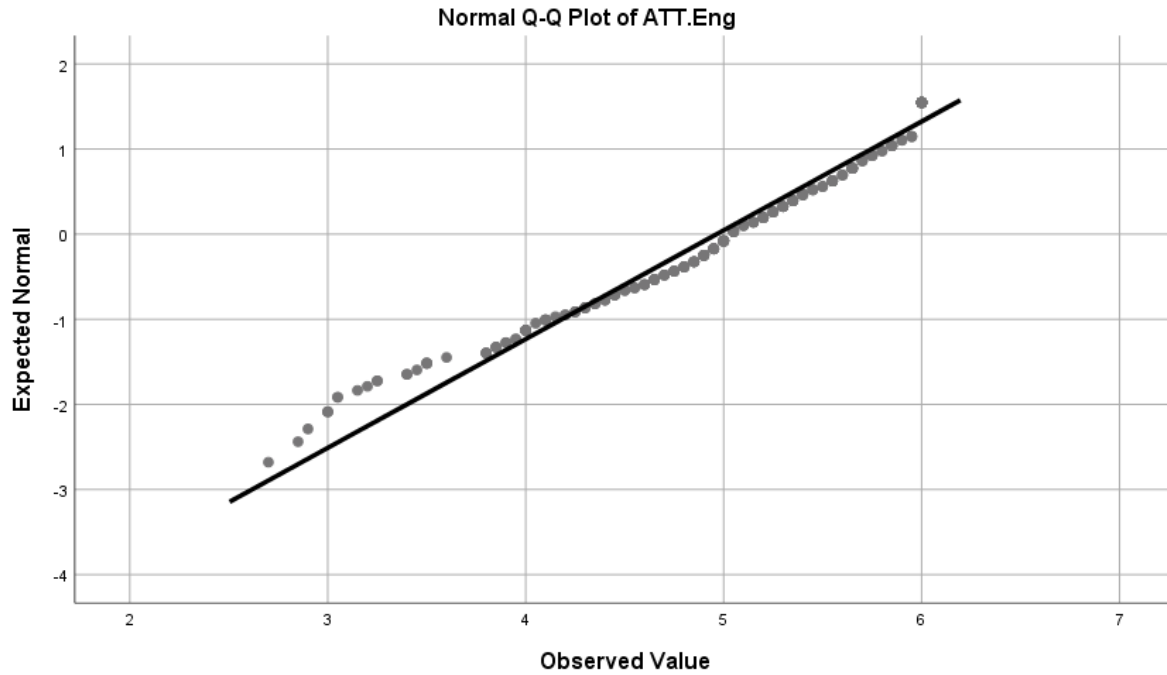
Before answering the main research questions, we checked the outliers and normality of the data. To check outliers, we used standard scores (Z-score). Having Z-scores outside the range of -3 to +3 would be a sign of outliers in data and should be omitted. We found four outliers for attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era scale, which were subsequently removed from the data. Then, we checked normality using both Q-Q plots as well as skewness and kurtosis values. A Q-Q plot that shows points on a straight line confirms the normality of the data. Q-Q plots for both questionnaires can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. As Figures 1 and 2 indicate, points are located on a straight line confirming the normality of the data. Moreover, skewness and kurtosis values which are within the range of -2 to +2 are indicators of normality. As Table 1 indicates, skewness and kurtosis values were within the range of -2 to +2 for both scales.



**Figure 1**

*Q-Q Plot for University Students' Attitudes toward the US Government*





**Figure 2**

*Q-Q Plot for Students' Attitudes toward the English Language in the Trump Era*

#### 4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including minimum,

maximum, mean, and standard deviation, are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for the Two Variables*

	Possible range	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Attitudes toward the US government	1-6	1	6	3.26	1.15	.53	-.21
Attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era	1-6	2.70	6	4.96	.76	-.69	-.03

To answer the first research question regarding Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era and their attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era, we examined the mean of this variable. As Table 1 indicates, the mean of attitudes toward the US government is 3.26. Given the possible range (1-6) and the midpoint of the scale (3.5), it can be said that Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era were not favorable. Regarding attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era, the mean of the variable is 4.96. Given the possible range (1-6) and the midpoint of the scale (3.5), it can be said that Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era were positive. We performed a paired-samples t-test to see whether these

differences were statistically significant. Results showed that there is a significant difference between Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era and their attitudes toward the English language  $t(269) = 23.32, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 4.36$ .

#### 4.3. Correlation

To see whether there is a relationship between the Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the English language in the Trump era, we examined the correlation between these two variables. Results showed a small positive correlation between these two variables ( $r = .32, p < .001$ ), meaning that the higher the students' positive attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, the higher

their positive attitudes toward the English language.

#### 4.4. Gender Differences

In order to examine the role of gender in Iranian

university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, independent samples t-test was run. Descriptive statistics for both groups (male and female) can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Male's and Female's Attitudes toward the US Government and the English Language in the Trump Era*

	Attitudes Toward the US Government		Attitudes Toward the EL in the Trump Era	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Male	3.36	1.20	4.90	.78
Female	3.06	1.02	5.10	.70

For all independent-samples t-tests, we first checked Levene's test for equality of variances. Results of independent-samples t-test indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between males' and females' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era  $t(214.73) = 2.21, p = .02$ , Cohen's  $d = .27$ . Given the males' higher mean, it can be said that males have more positive attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era.

Then, the role of gender in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era was examined using independent-samples t-test. Descriptive statistics for both groups (male and female) can be seen in Table 2. Levene's test for equality of variances found that variances were equal ( $F =$

$2.21, p = .13$ ). Results of independent-samples t-test indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between males' and females' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era  $t(311) = 2.26, p = .02$ , Cohens'  $d = .27$ . Given the females' higher mean, it can be said that females have more positive attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era.

#### 4.5. The Role of the Field of Study

In order to examine the role of the field of study (Engineering, Science, and Humanities) in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, one-way ANOVA was run. Descriptive statistics for all three fields of study can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Attitudes toward the US Government and the English Language in the Trump Era Based on the Fields of Study*

	Attitudes Toward the US Government		Attitudes Toward the EL in the Trump Era	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Engineering	3.24	1.18	4.85	.82
Science	3.35	1.12	4.90	.79
Humanities	3.15	1.03	5.09	.64

Before reporting one-way ANOVA, we checked the homogeneity of variances, and the results supported equal variances among the three groups (Levene statistic =  $.77, p = .46$ ). No statistically significant difference was found among the three groups of fields of study based on their attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era  $F(2, 276) = .43, p = .65$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ .

Then, the role of the field of study in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era was

examined using one-way ANOVA. Descriptive statistics for the three groups can be seen in Table 3. The homogeneity of variances test did not support equal variances among the three groups (Levene statistic =  $4.62, p = .01$ ). Therefore, we reported the Welch statistic. There was a statistically significant difference among the three groups with regard to their attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era (Welch statistic ( $2, 82.95$ ) =  $3.81, p = .03$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .023$ ). To see the exact differences among groups, post-hoc test using Games-Howell was applied.

There was only one significant difference between Engineering and Humanities with regard to their attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era ( $p = .03$ ). As Humanities students had a higher mean than Engineering students, it can be said that Humanities students had more positive attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era.

**Table 4**

*Attitudes toward the US Government and the English Language in the Trump Era Based on the Educational Level*

	Attitudes Toward the US Government		Attitudes Toward the EL in the Trump Era	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Undergraduate	3.31	1.15	4.95	.73
Graduate	3.14	1.15	4.99	.83

Levene's test for equality of variances was checked ( $F = 1.66$ ,  $p = .19$ ) and it was found that variances were equal. Results of independent-samples t-test indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between undergraduates' and graduates' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era  $t(279) = 2.19$ ,  $p = .02$ , Cohen's  $d = .15$ . Given the undergraduates' higher mean, it can be said that undergraduates had more positive attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era.

Then, the role of the level of study in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era was examined using independent-samples t-test. Descriptive statistics for both groups can be seen in Table 4. Levene's test for equality of

#### 4.6. The Role of the Educational Level of the Study

In order to examine the role of the level of study (Undergraduate and Graduate) in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, an independent-samples t-test was run. Descriptive statistics for all three fields of study can be seen in Table 4.

variances was checked ( $F = 3.11$ ,  $p = .07$ ), and it was found that variances were equal. Results of independent-samples t-test indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between undergraduate and graduate students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era  $t(305) = .14$ ,  $p = .88$ , Cohen's  $d = .05$ .

#### 4.7. The Role of Economic Status

In order to examine the role of economic status (low income, lower-middle income, upper-middle income, high income) in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, one-way ANOVA was run. Descriptive statistics for all four economic groups can be seen in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Attitudes toward the US Government and the English Language in the Trump Era Based on the Economic Status*

	Attitudes Toward the US Government		Attitudes Toward the EL in the Trump Era	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Low	3.09	.98	4.86	.73
Lower-middle	3.18	1.18	4.91	.76
Upper-middle	3.47	1.10	5.22	.74
High	4.47	1.46	5.28	.86

Homogeneity of variances was examined, and the results supported equal variances among the three groups (Levene statistic = 2.51,  $p = .06$ ). Results of ANOVA indicated that there is a statistically significant difference among the four economic groups  $F(3, 274) = 7.08$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .072$ . To see the exact

differences among groups, post-hoc test using the Tukey test was applied.

According to Tukey results, there was a statistically significant difference between Low income and High income ( $p < .001$ ), Lower-middle and High income ( $p < .001$ ), and Upper-middle and High income ( $p = .01$ ) students with



regard to their Attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era. As the mean of High-income group is higher than that of all other groups, it can be said that high-income students had more positive attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era than Lower, Lower-middle, and Upper-middle income students. No other significant differences were found in the data.

Then, the role of economic status in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era was examined using one-way ANOVA. Descriptive statistics for the four economic groups can be seen in Table 5. The homogeneity of variances test supported equal variances among the three groups (Levene statistic = .16,  $p = .91$ ). Results of ANOVA indicated that there is a statistically significant difference among the four economic groups  $F(3, 298) = 3.50$ ,  $p = .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .034$ . To see the exact differences among groups, post-hoc test using Tukey test was applied.

**Table 6**

*Attitudes toward the US Government and the English Language in the Trump Era Based on the District Quota*

	Attitudes Toward the US Government		Attitudes Toward the EL in the Trump Era	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Quota 1	3.34	1.25	5.01	.81
Quota 2	3.26	1.09	4.97	.75
Quota 3	3.32	1.18	4.98	.75

The homogeneity of variances test supported equal variances among the three groups (Levene statistic = .73,  $p = .48$ ). Results of ANOVA indicated that there is no statistically significant difference among the three groups with regard to their attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era  $F(2, 273) = .15$ ,  $p = .85$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ .

Then, the role of district quota in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era was examined using one-way ANOVA. Descriptive statistics for the three quota groups can be seen in Table 6. The homogeneity of variances test supported equal variances among the three groups (Levene statistic = .47,  $p = .62$ ). Results of ANOVA indicated that there is no statistically significant difference among the

three groups with regard to their attitudes toward the English language in Trump era  $F(2, 297) = .08$ ,  $p = .91$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ .

#### 4.8. The Role of District Quota

According to Tukey results, there was a statistically significant difference between Low income and Upper-middle income ( $p = .040$ ) students with regard to their attitudes toward English in the Trump era. As Upper-income students had a higher mean, it can be concluded that they have more positive attitudes toward the English language than low-income students.

In order to examine the role of district quota in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, a one-way ANOVA was run. District quota is a policy to provide equal opportunities for less developed and underprivileged districts of the country. These district quotas are divided into three parts, with district quota 1 being the most privileged district and quota 3 being the most underprivileged district. Descriptive statistics for all three district quota groups can be seen in Table 6.

#### 4.9. The Role of English Proficiency

In order to examine the role of English proficiency in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, a one-way ANOVA was run. The four groups were formed based on participants' percentage of correct responses to the English section of the university entrance exam: beginner (less than 20%), intermediate (between 20% and 40%), upper-intermediate (between 40% and 60%), and advanced (more than 60%). Descriptive statistics for all four proficiency groups can be seen in Table 7.

**Table 7***Attitudes toward US Government and the English Language in the Trump Era Based on the Proficiency Levels*

	Attitudes Toward the US Government		Attitudes Toward the EL in the Trump Era	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Beginner	3.05	1.06	4.74	.77
Intermediate	3.25	1.19	4.97	.78
Upper-intermediate	3.46	1.20	5.07	.76
Advanced	3.46	1.17	5.26	.55

The homogeneity of variances test supported equal variances among the three groups (Levene statistic = .58,  $p = .62$ ). Results of ANOVA indicated that there is no statistically significant difference among the four proficiency groups with regard to their attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era  $F(3, 282) = 2.15$ ,  $p = .09$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .022$ .

Then, the role of proficiency in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era was examined using one-way ANOVA. Descriptive statistics for the four proficiency groups can be seen in Table 7. The homogeneity of variances test did not support equal variances among the four groups (Levene statistic = 3.12,  $p = .02$ ). Therefore, we reported the Welch statistic. There was a statistically significant difference among the four proficiency groups with regard to their attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era (Welch statistic (3, 156.37) = 8.44,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .062$ ). To see the exact differences among groups, post-hoc test using Games-Howell was applied.

According to Games-Howell test results, there was a significant difference between Beginner and Upper-intermediate ( $p = .043$ ), Beginner and Advanced ( $p < .001$ ), and Intermediate and Advanced ( $p = .04$ ) students with regard to their attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era. As Advanced students had a higher mean than Beginner and Intermediate students, and Upper-intermediate students had a higher mean than Beginner students, it can be said that more proficient learners had more positive attitudes toward learning English in the Trump era.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government (not the US citizens) and the EL. For this purpose, first, two scales were developed, one to measure Iranian university

students' attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era and one to measure their attitudes toward the English language in the Trump era.

To answer the first research question, we found that Iranian university students did not have much positive attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era. The reason for this finding can be related to the history of US-Iran relations, which have been mostly controversial, and this could have affected Iranian university students' perceptions of the US government. In contrast to unfavorable attitudes toward the US government, Iranian university students had positive attitudes toward the EL. The reason for more positive attitudes toward the EL can be explained based on the status of English as an important tool for success in future jobs and studies among Iranian university students (Taguchi et al., 2009). It can be said that although Iranian university students did not have positive attitudes toward the US government, their attitudes toward the EL were positive.

To answer the second research question, we further found that the relationship between the Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and the EL in the Trump era was positive. This shows that students' attitudes toward the governments of a country are not irrelevant to the attitudes students have toward the language of that country. When positive attitudes toward a government are shaped among the students, they would have more positive attitudes toward the language linked to that country and government. Previous research has shown that more positive attitudes toward the L2 community are related to more positive attitudes toward learning English (e.g., Islam et al., 2013). It should be noted although in this study we examined attitudes toward the L2 government, which might be different from attitudes toward the L2 community, our results can support the idea that positive attitudes

toward the government and L2 community can both have positive links with positive attitudes toward learning English. It is also worth mentioning that future research can examine how attitudes toward the L2 community can be related to attitudes toward the L2 government.

To address the third research question, we investigated the role of several demographic information, including gender, field of study, level of study, economic status, and living place, in Iranian university students' attitudes toward the US government and their attitudes toward the EL in the Trump era. With regard to gender, we found that while males had more positive attitudes toward the US government in the Trump era, females had more positive attitudes toward the EL in the Trump era. This finding is in line with previous research that females had more positive attitudes and interest toward language learning in comparison with males (Abidin et al., 2012; Shoaib & Dorney, 2005). One reason for such a finding is that English is usually considered a feminized subject (Kobayashi, 2002). This is evident in Iranian universities as the number of females studying English as an academic subject outnumbers that of males. Concerning females' less positive attitudes toward the Trump government, it can be explained based on Trump's history of offensive behavior and "demeaning comments about female opponents" (Setzler & Yanus, 2018, p. 523). This can negatively affect females' attitudes toward him and his government.

Moreover, we found that students' field of study does not affect their attitudes toward the US government. However, among our three groups of fields of study (i.e., Humanities, Engineering, and Science), Humanities students had more positive attitudes toward the EL. This finding is in line with Abidin et al. (2012), who found similar findings. One reason for such a finding might be that Humanities students read more materials that are related to cultural and social factors, and this might make them more open to other cultures and, consequently, to have more positive attitudes toward other languages. Concerning the level of study, the findings indicated that undergraduate students had more positive attitudes toward the US government than graduate students. However, there were no differences between the two groups in terms of their attitudes toward

English. One reason that undergraduate students had more favorite attitudes toward the US government than graduate students might be related to political knowledge. Previous research has shown that people with higher levels of education have higher political knowledge (e.g., Rasmussen, 2016). This higher political knowledge can further provide individuals with a more critical evaluation and interpretation of the political issues, which in turn decreases their positive attitudes toward the governments.

The findings of the study also showed that students with higher economic status had more positive attitudes toward the US government as well as the EL. This finding supports Gayton (2010), who stated that there is a relationship between students' attitudes toward learning English and their socio-economic status. He further explained that one aspect of higher economic status is trips to foreign countries and the possibility of using English as an international language during interactions with people from other countries. This might affect individuals' perceptions regarding the importance of a language and shape positive attitudes toward that language, community, and government.

Furthermore, we found no relationship between students' district quota in the university entrance exam and their attitudes toward the US government and the EL. As mentioned earlier, in Iran, students' district quota is categorized into three quotas based on the living place as bigger and more advanced cities are considered quota 1, smaller cities are considered quota 2, and villages and very small cities with fewer facilities are considered quota 3. This finding can be explained based on the globalization of English in which the importance of the English language is increasing, and this language is learned in many rural and urban areas around the world, including Iran (Her, 2007). This shows that the place that people live does not affect their attitudes toward English, but more contextual factors such as family income and education might affect these attitudes.

Finally, to answer the fourth research question, we examined the role of English language proficiency in attitudes toward the US government and the English language. The findings showed that although English language proficiency did not play a role in

Iranian University students' attitudes toward the US government, it did have an effect on their attitudes toward the EL. Based on the results of the study, students with higher language proficiency had more positive attitudes toward the English language. This finding is in line with previous studies, which showed that there is a significant relationship between positive attitudes toward learning English and higher language proficiency levels (Tseng, 2013). Moreover, this finding supports Gardner's (2020) socio-educational model of second language acquisition, in which attitudes play an important role in success in second language learning.

Results of this study imply that fostering positive attitudes toward learning English can be related to language learners' proficiency. Therefore, teachers should use techniques and strategies that negative attitudes toward a second language change into positive attitudes. For example, teachers can talk about the importance of learning a second language, job opportunities that students can get by knowing a second language, listening to second language radio programs, and watching programs and movies in a second language.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution because of some limitations. First, we used a sample of Iranian university students at one university. Future research can replicate the present study by gathering data from other places and countries. Second, we just used questionnaires to gather the data. Future research can use qualitative research methods such as interviews and observations to shed more light on the findings of this study. Third, we just focused on general language proficiency, which was based on participants' scores in the university entrance exam, including vocabulary, grammar, cloze, and reading comprehension items. Future research can examine the role of attitudes in other language skills and subskills. Finally, we did not examine how attitudes might be related to other important affective and cognitive factors in second language learning. Future research, for example, can examine the relations between attitudes, emotions, and motivation in the L2 context.

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