

# **Bilingual people's attitudes towards learning English in Finland**

**Bachelor's thesis**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Yhä monikulttuurisemmassa maailmassamme jopa 66% prosenttia lapsista kasvatetaan kaksikielisissä perheissä. Kaksikielisyys on rikkaus, joka vaikuttaa muun muassa yksilön kognitiivisiin toimintoihin – kuten oppimiseen – monin eri tavoin. Edelliset tutkimukset ovat osoittaneet, että uusien kielten oppiminen on helpompaa kaksikielisille ihmisille, ja kieliasteilla ja motivaatiolla on tärkeä merkitys uutta kieltä opetellessa. Kaksikielisten ihmisten kieliasteet ovat olleet jo aikaisemmin tutkimusten kohteena ympäri maailmaa – myös Suomessa. Aikaisemmin Suomessa ei kuitenkaan ole tehty tutkimusta, jonka aiheena ovat kaksikielisten kieliasteet englannin kielen opiskelua kohtaan, ja tämän takia tämä tutkimus tehtiin. Tutkimuksessa kaksikielisillä ihmisillä tarkoitetaan ihmisiä, jotka ovat kasvaneet kaksikielisessä kodissa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa selvitettiin, millainen kieliaste suomalaisilla kaksikielisillä on englannin kielen opiskelua kohtaan. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa pyrittiin selvittämään, millainen motivaatio heillä on englannin kielen opiskelua kohtaan, ja kuinka helposti he kokevat oppivansa sitä. Aineisto tutkimukseen kerättiin lähettämällä kysely eri Yliopistoihin ympäri Suomea, kaksikielisistä ihmisistä koostuvaan Facebook -ryhmään ja kaksikielistä Suomea edistävään organisaatioon. Kyselyyn vastasivat 64 iältään 19-58-vuotiasta kaksikielistä ihmistä.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittivat, että kyselyyn osallistuvilla kaksikielisillä ihmisillä on hyvä asenne englannin kielen opiskelua kohtaan. Tulokset osoittivat myös, että heillä on motivaatiota opiskella kieltä ja he kokevat oppivansa sitä suhteellisen helposti. Tutkimuksen tulokset tarjoavat lisää arvokasta tietoa aiheesta, osoittaen kaksikielisyyden vaikutuksen kieliasteisiin ja kielenoppimiseen suomalaisessa kontekstissa. Tuloksista voisivat hyötyä opettajat ja vanhemmat käyttämällä tätä tietoa altistamalla yksikielisiä lapsia vieraille kielille jo varhaisessa iässä.</p>	
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## 1. Introduction

As our world is becoming increasingly multicultural, being bilingual or raising children as bilinguals is not uncommon nowadays. Approximately half of the world's population speaks additional languages, and it has been estimated that almost 66 % of children are raised in bilingual homes (Smith & Meek 2018). The benefits that come with being bilingual have been an intriguing subject for a long time, and many studies have therefore been done on that topic. One of the most interesting questions about bilingualism and its effects on one is how it affects one's cognitive abilities, such as learning. In addition, researchers have been interested in students' attitudes and motivation and the importance of these factors when learning additional languages (Liando 2013: 267-268). Studies have shown that there are learners who are better at acquiring new languages (Bilyeu 1982), and many of these learners are bilingual as it is believed that early experience with more than one language system facilitates learning additional languages later in life (Kaushanskaya & Marian 2009: 709). One of the reasons behind this may be rooted in the fact that bilingualism improves cognitive processing, leading to better information processing, which consequently affects learning (Marian & Shook 2012: 3).

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding language attitudes and motivation, and how they affect language learning. For instance, a study conducted by Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) investigated the relationship between these aforementioned factors, and the results showed further evidence that attitude and motivation have major roles in language efficiency and proficiency. To be more specific, some researchers have their perspective on bilingual people when studying language learning. Notably, the perspective is on people who speak an additional language in addition to their mother tongue, meaning that they did not grow up in a bilingual home. For example, Afsharrad and Sadeghi Benis (2015) conducted a study that aimed at finding differences between monolingual and bilingual students' reading comprehension. In their study, people who understand another language in addition to their mother tongue were considered as bilinguals (2015: 35).

Similarly, in Finland, bilingual people and language attitudes have been the subject of many research. However, I failed to find any that investigated the language attitudes bilingual people since birth have towards English. I am therefore interested in studying the language attitudes bilingual people have towards learning English in a Finnish context. The subject of my study are more precisely people who grew up in a bilingual home and have two mother tongues. In other words, the overall aim of my

research is to shed new light on bilingual people's language attitudes towards English in Finland. Additionally, I am interested in investigating their perceived motivation and ease of learning as they are strongly connected with each other.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Bilingualism as a concept**

Bilingualism is a difficult concept to define as different people interpret it in different ways, and it has several definitions that differ from each other. Merriam-Webster's dictionary (n.d) defines *bilingualism* as 'the ability to speak two languages', and *bilingual* as 'using or to be able to use two languages especially with equal fluency'. However, some people think that this definition does not take into account speakers who do not have this capability. Therefore, they prefer to define it as the possession of a minimal competence in a language other than their mother tongue (Hamers & Blanc 2000: 6). Related to this type of definition, Liddicoat (1991: 1) brings up a definition according to which bilingualism starts when a speaker of one language can produce meaningful utterances in an additional language. According to them, bilingualism could even start when a person just only understands utterances in the other language. There are more definitions for bilinguals and bilingualism, but these are some of the extreme ones.

In today's world, bilingual families are not uncommon. Similarly to bilingualism, a bilingual family is also a challenging concept, which is why there is not just one definition for it. A bilingual family is a mixture of two languages – at least – and two or more cultures, and one parent is away from their own culture and country in almost all the families (Barron-Hauwaert 2004: 5). In a study conducted by Gonzales-Barrero and their colleagues (2021), bilingual families are defined as families that have two or more languages at home. There are different types of bilingual families; some have emigrated from another country and, therefore, speak different languages. Another type of bilingual family is a family who lives in a bilingual community, such as bilingual families living in India where different Indian languages and English are spoken (Gonzalez-Barrero et al. 2021: 2). In Finland – where there are two official languages –, an example of bilingual families would be Finland-Swedes. It is also possible that just one of the parents has left their home country and started a life and a family with

someone from another country and culture, and two or more languages are therefore spoken in their family. In my research, when referring to my bilingual participants, I mean bilinguals who have grown up in a bilingual home where two or more languages have been spoken their whole life. In other words, my research will be focusing on bilinguals who have two mother tongues.

## **2.2 Bilingualism and language learning**

When learning an additional language, it is clear that motivation and attitudes play an important role. A 'social psychological model' has been proposed, according to which language learning is dependent on attitudes towards the other language community, motivation, and orientation towards language learning (Ghazvini & Khajepour 2011: 1210). Motivation is the reason behind why individuals decide to do or pursue something, and such a complex skill as learning another language is almost impossible without goals, persistence, and effort. (Kormos & Smith 2012: 64). According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), motivation related to second language learning can be divided into two: integrative and instrumental motivation. On the one hand, integrative motivation means the desire to learn the other language and the attitude towards learning and the other language community, and, on the other hand, instrumental motivation means the interest in learning the additional language for utilitarian benefits (Ghazvini & Khajepour 2011: 1210).

As mentioned before, motivation and attitudes towards language learning are both crucial factors, and they affect each other; if one does not have the motivation to learn a language, the attitude towards it is most likely poor, and the other way around. Children's language attitudes can be affected by their parents, and Gardner (1968: 141) has distinguished two roles that parents have: the active and the passive role. According to this distinction, the active role means the role where the parent actively encourages their child to learn the language, and the passive role means the attitude the parent has towards the language community. These aforementioned factors are more than important when learning an additional language because it has been proven by several studies that they have a major impact on language acquisition (Gardner 1968: 142).

When it comes to childhood bilinguals, language acquisition has been shown to be easier for them. Findings from a study conducted by Eisentein (1980) indicate that childhood bilingualism has a positive effect when learning additional languages as there is a correlation between bilingualism and language aptitude. Language aptitude means the cognitive abilities that predict how well an individual will learn a second language (Li & Zhao 2021: 25). According to Marian and Shook (2012: 13), the

reason behind the correlation is the improvements in bilinguals' sensory and cognitive processing that leads to better information processing. In addition, a study conducted by Kaushanskaya and Marian (2009) indicates that children that have been raised in a bilingual home have the advantage of learning new words more efficiently than monolinguals. They give one possible explanation for this, according to which bilingual people have a higher working memory capacity. Bilingualism can be associated with better cognitive control because bilingual people have both of their mother tongues active simultaneously at all times, which leads to an enhanced frontal-posterior attentional control, which consequently leads to other enhancements in cognitive control (Bialystock et al. 2013: 3-8). These aforementioned factors – such as attitude, motivation, and cognitive control – are crucial parts that lead to academic achievement. Since bilingual learners' brains are already used to working with more than one language, language learning achievements can increase motivation towards it even more as feelings of success are obtained.

### **2.3 Inspiration of the present study: Liando (2013)**

There are multiple studies done investigating bilingual people and their language learning, motivation, and attitudes. Liando's (2013) research studies the relationship between the attitudes towards learning English and students' achievements in class. In addition, they examined whether female or male students have higher English learning achievement. The inspiration for my research came specifically from the part where Liando examined the students' attitudes. The participants were junior high school students from a bilingual class and a regular class, 30 in each. In the bilingual class, Indonesian and English were spoken. The data was collected from the students by giving them a questionnaire that had several questions regarding attitudes towards English. The questionnaire included ten different questions to which students could answer with a scale from 1 to 5; 1 being 'disagree' and 5 being 'strongly agree'. The results show that students in the bilingual class have a better attitude towards learning English as an additional language.

The method used in Liando's research is suitable when studying attitudes. A survey is an efficient method when gathering data from a large group of people (Judd, Smith & Kidder 1991), and it is easier to compare the answers between the bilingual class and the regular class. However, generalizations cannot be done on the basis of this study since there were not many participants, and they were only from a junior high school in Indonesia. For that reason, I would suggest that similar research would be done in different contexts and with more participants. Therefore, I want to conduct a similar study in Finland. Another difference in my study is that all the participants are from a

bilingual home, not a bilingual class. Since my questionnaire is only for bilinguals, comparing the answers of both bilingual and monolingual people is not possible. However, surveying only bilinguals will help to confirm whether bilingual people in Finland have similar types of attitudes to bilinguals in Indonesia.

### **3. The present study**

#### **3.1 Aims of the study**

In Finland, there is no research done on the language attitudes bilingual people have towards learning English. I want to examine this matter in a Finnish context with participants who have been bilingual since birth. The aim of my study is to research the language attitudes Finnish bilingual people have towards learning English, and, furthermore, look into their perceived motivation and ease of learning as they are strongly connected. My overall aim is to give further evidence and understanding of the subject in question.

My research questions are:

1. What kind of language attitudes do bilingual people from Finland have towards learning English?
2. What is their perceived motivation towards learning English?
3. How effortlessly do they feel they learn English?

#### **3.2 Data collection and participants**

In order to collect data for my research, a questionnaire was designed. The participants were invited to answer the survey by sending an email to different universities and organizations. The email had an invitation text which included information about the research and for whom the questionnaire was. The questionnaire was kept as short and simple as possible, and the participants were informed that answering the questionnaire would only take a few minutes. By doing this, the participants would be



more encouraged to answer the questions and not get frustrated or bored when filling out too long a survey.

There are several reasons behind the choice of data collecting method; for example, a survey is an efficient method whenever there are a lot of respondents (Judd et al. 1991), and they are from different locations (Denscombe 2014: 154). As mentioned before, attitudes are investigated in my research, and, according to Denscombe (2014: 154), using a questionnaire is also suitable when the research is about people's behavior, attitudes, beliefs, or opinions. Additionally, I wanted straightforward information and data that would be ready to be analyzed, and surveys make that possible.

The data for my research was gathered from people from Finland that have been bilingual since birth and have two mother tongues. The questionnaire was sent to different student organizations at Åbo Academi University, the University of Jyväskylä, the University of Helsinki, and the University of Lapland. Additionally, the questionnaire was sent to a Facebook group whose members were bilingual and an organization called Svenska nu. Åbo Academi University is a Swedish-medium university in Finland that has many Finland-Swedes – that are often bilingual – as students. Sending the questionnaire to Svenska nu and asking it to be shared by them, an organization that promotes bilingual Finland, was another way of finding bilingual Finland-Swedes. All the participants were adults since the questionnaire was only aimed at them.

At the beginning of the survey, there were some questions to help me describe the respondents. There were 64 respondents of all ages in total; the age range was from 19 to 58 years old. There were widely different mixes of bilingual respondents – most of which were Finland-Swedes. The rest of the participants were bilingual – in addition to Finnish – in French, Russian, Polish, English, Turkish, Croatian, Romanian, Hungarian, Estonian, and Italian. Additionally, some participants were bilingual in other languages than Finnish; Romanian and English, English and Italian, and Polish and Russian. Some of the participants also reported that they still speak these languages at home today. Not all, though, since they have different living situations compared to their childhood homes.

### **3.3 Describing the data**

The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions. Three of these questions were about the age and home languages of the participants. As mentioned before, by doing this, I got some background information so that I would be able to describe my participants. These are the first three questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What languages did you speak as your home languages in your early childhood?
3. What languages do you speak as your home languages today?

The rest were close-ended Likert-scale questions about their language attitudes towards English, most of which were the same as Liando (2013) used in her study. According to Nemoto and Beglar (2014: 2), some of the advantages of using a Likert-scale are that gathering the data happens relatively quickly, and they can give highly reliable information about personal abilities. In addition, my survey had some additional questions about motivation and the ease of learning since previous research shows that they are strongly connected with each other and crucial factors when learning additional languages. The participants had to respond to all of the statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These are the rest of the questions:

4. Learning English is really great.
5. Studying English is/was hard.
6. I plan/planned to learn as much English as possible.
7. Learning English is a waste of time.
8. I think it is important to learn English.
9. I hate English.
10. I find the study of English very boring.
11. I learn English words easily.
12. I prefer/preferred to use my time on courses other than English.
13. I have/had no goals for studying English.

### **3.4 Methods of analysis**

The gathered data is quantitative data which means that the results are presented in numbers (Denscombe 2014: 242). As mentioned before, launching a questionnaire makes it possible to get data that is ready to be analyzed. The data was analyzed by means of descriptive statistics. Based on all the answers, a table for visual presentation was made.

## 4. Results

All in all, there were 64 responses to give some insight about the situation in Finland. The respondents' answers are presented in Table 1. The table illustrates the percentage and the total number of the people choosing a specific number on the scale to express their opinions, and it additionally shows the average of the answers.

**Table 1. Answers (n=64) to the statements in the survey**

<i>Strongly disagree</i>	1	2	3	4	5	<i>Strongly agree</i>
4. Learning English is/was really great	1.6% (n=1)	3.1% (n=2)	10.9% (n=7)	28.1% (n=18)	56.3% (n=35)	Average: 4.3
5. Studying English is/was hard	46.9% (n=30)	26.6% (n=17)	12.5% (n=8)	10.9% (n=7)	3.1% (n=2)	Average: 2.0
6. I plan/ planned to learn as much English as possible	4.7% (n=3)	7.8% (n=5)	26.5% (n=17)	26.6% (n=17)	34.4% (n=22)	Average: 3.8
7. Learning English is a waste of time	84.4% (n=54)	12.5% (n=8)	1.5% (n=1)	1.6% (n=1)	0.0% (n=0)	Average: 1.2
8. I think it is important to learn English	0.0% (n=0)	1.6% (n=1)	3.1% (n=2)	12.5% (n=8)	82.8% (n=53)	Average: 4.8
9. I hate English	84.4% (n=54)	12.5% (n=8)	0.0% (n=0)	1.5% (n=1)	1.6% (n=1)	Average: 1.2
10. I find the study of English very boring	42.2% (n=27)	32.8% (n=21)	15.6% (n=10)	6.3% (n=4)	3.1% (n=2)	Average: 2.0
11. I learn English words easily	1.6% (n=1)	1.6% (n=1)	15.6% (n=10)	26.5% (n=17)	54.7% (n=35)	Average: 4.3
12. I prefer/ preferred to use my time on courses other than English	48.5% (n=31)	28.1% (n=18)	15.6% (n=10)	3.1% (n=2)	4.7% (n=3)	Average: 1.9
13. I have/had no goals for studying English	40.6% (n=26)	26.6% (n=17)	23.4% (n=15)	7.8% (n=5)	1.6% (n=1)	Average: 2.0

The answers to the claims about attitudes reveal that the participants of this study have a good attitude towards learning English. When looking at statements 4 “Learning English is/was really great” and 8 “I think it is important to learn English” – both of which are positive claims –, the averages of the answers are 4.3 and 4.8. This means that most of the people strongly agree with the claim. Similarly, statements 7 “Learning English is a waste of time”, 9 “I hate English” and 10 “I find the study of English very boring” are negative claims about attitudes, and these questions have averages from 1.2 to 2.0, meaning that most of the respondents did not agree with the claim.

The participants’ answers to the statements about the ease of learning reveal that they feel that they learn English quite effortlessly. These statements are statement 5 “Studying English is/was hard” and 11 “I learn English words easily”, the former being a negative claim and the latter being a positive one. 46.9% of the respondents disagreed strongly with the negative claim as the average was 2.0. However, the positive statement had an average of 4.3 with 54.7% of the participants agreeing strongly.

Lastly, the claims about motivation indicate that the bilingual participants of the present study have or have had motivation to study English. Statement 6 “I plan/planned to learn as much English as possible”, which is a positive claim, had most of its answers placed at 5 on the scale, meaning that most of the respondents agreed strongly with the claim. However, as the answers were a bit more divided, the average of this claim was 3.8. Statements 12 “I prefer/preferred to use my time on courses other than English and 13 “I have/had no goals for studying English” are negative claims with which most of the participants disagreed strongly, giving them averages of 1.9 and 2.0.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

### **5.1 Discussion**

Bilingual people’s language attitudes, motivation, and ease of learning were discussed in chapter 2 Literature review: bilingual people are believed to have better language attitudes (Liando 2013: 271) – with which motivation is intertwined – and to learn languages more efficiently (Eisenstein 1980).

When analyzing the results of my questionnaire, it can be seen that the results support these aforementioned claims.

For instance, the majority of the respondents agreed with the positive statements related to the attitudes towards learning English. On the other hand, most of the participants did not agree with the negative statements related to language attitudes. Therefore, based on these results, it can be said that the participants of the present study have a good attitude towards learning English since it seems that they enjoy learning English and understand its importance. The results indicating that bilingual people have a good attitude towards learning English agree with the findings of Liando's study (2013: 271) according to which bilingual students have a better attitude towards learning English as a second language than monolingual people.

Correspondingly, the results of my questionnaire about motivation indicate that the bilingual people of this study are motivated to learn English. The participants disagreed with the negative claims regarding one's motivation towards learning English. However, when looking at statement 6, which is a positive claim about one's motivation, it can be seen that the average of this statement was 3.8, meaning that the answers were a bit more divided. Nevertheless, it can be said that the respondents agreed more with the statement than disagreed, and most of the participants agreed strongly with it. Based on these results, it can be said that the bilingual participants of the present study are motivated to learn English.

It can also be seen that the participants agreed strongly with the positive statement regarding the ease of learning. They additionally disagreed with the negative claim regarding the same matter, as predicted. These results indicate that the participants of this study learn English efficiently. Additionally, they support previous beliefs about the ease of learning of bilingual people; for example, the results of my study agree with the results of the previously mentioned study conducted by Eisenstein (1980), according to which early bilingualism has a positive effect on language aptitude later in life. Moreover, these results support the aforementioned claims made by Kayshanskaya and Marian (2009), as they claimed that bilingual children have the advantage of learning new words more efficiently than monolinguals because of a higher working memory capacity.

To sum up, my findings support previously made claims about bilingual people's language attitudes and motivation when learning English. As mentioned previously in chapter 2 Literature review, both motivation and language attitudes are crucial factors when learning additional languages, and they affect each other. Gardner stated (1968: 141) that children's language attitudes can be affected by their parents, and, when thinking about bilingual homes, it can be assumed that the parents affect their

children's language attitudes in a positive manner since they want to maintain different languages in their lives. This could be a reason behind my participants' attitudes and motivation towards learning English. Consequently, since they have a good language attitude and they are motivated to learn English, they learn English more easily, as it has been proven by many studies that these factors have a major impact on language acquisition (Gardner 1968: 142) – in addition to a higher working memory capacity. This could be the reason behind the fact that the participants of my research feel that they learn English easily.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

To conclude, the overall aim of the present research was to shed new light on bilingual people's language attitudes towards English in Finland. I wanted to look into what kind of language attitudes bilingual people from Finland have towards learning English. Additionally, I wanted to examine their perceived motivation towards learning English, and how effortlessly they feel they learn the language. My findings suggest that bilingual people in Finland have good language attitudes, and they are motivated to learn English. Additionally, it seems that they have a good language aptitude. I have always found it intriguing how a bilingual brain functions and, fortunately, many studies related to it have been done. Namely, language attitudes, motivation, and ease of learning have been the subject of different research. However, I wanted to bring this to a Finnish context, and the most suitable way of examining these previously mentioned factors was with a questionnaire. The results of my questionnaire supported previous findings about language attitudes, motivation, and the ease of learning of bilingual people. Therefore, my research implies that bilingual people in Finland have a good language attitude towards English, they are motivated to learn it and they learn it quite easily.

My research offers new valuable information about this topic, and it shows the effects bilingualism has on attitudes and language learning in a Finnish context. The present study increases the reliability of previous research on this topic since it was done in a new context, and the findings agree with the previous ones. As it seems that bilingualism is related to better language attitudes, the results of my study give further valuable information to teachers and parents. For instance, teachers and parents could use this information and start exposing their monolingual children or students to an additional foreign language at an early age. By doing this, children are used to multiple languages, and, consequently, they would have the benefits of it; a more positive language attitude, motivation, and

better language acquisition. In addition, they would have better academic achievement, as previous studies have shown.

However, there are some limitations to my study. Firstly, my research has relatively few participants to make any greater generalizations about the situation in Finland. Furthermore, even though my research had participants from their twenties to almost sixties, there were few older participants. This means that the age range is not too big, and this should be taken into account; older people may generally have different attitudes than younger people. Another limitation of my study is that, in my questionnaire, there were only a few questions related to the different factors discussed in this research. Hence, it is challenging to make wider generalizations based on my survey. In Liando's study (2013), there were a group of bilingual people and a group of monolingual people so that their answers could be compared. This was not done in my study, which is an additional limitation.

As a consequence of the limitations of my study, I have suggestions for future research. Foremost, this kind of study should be done with a bigger participant group. In addition, it should be taken into consideration that the group would have an even number of people of different ages. It would also be beneficial to conduct a similar study with an additional group of monolinguals so that comparisons between the groups could be done. When thinking about the questionnaire, it should be broader with diverse questions regarding language attitudes, motivation, and ease of learning. Moreover, to increase reliability, a similar type of study should be done in different countries and different contexts. It is intriguing to see what kind of consequences bilingualism has on one. It would therefore be interesting to see further studies regarding solely the ease of learning or motivation of bilingual people in different contexts. Future research about motivation could examine the type of motivation – integrative or instrumental – bilingual people feel they have. Additionally, it would be interesting to see how different learning disorders – such as dyslexia – affect these factors discussed in my study. All of these things would give further understanding of the bilingual brain and valuable knowledge and tools to apply to teaching.

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