A Review on Learners' Language Attitudes in Multilingual Contexts: Insights into Research Methodology

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Abstract: Language attitudes in multilingual contexts have been a rapidly growing research area. This paper presents a critical review of research methodology used in 32 empirical studies on learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts from 2003 to 2023. Firstly, it starts with a brief introduction to the background and research significance of learners' language attitudes in a multilingual context. Secondly, this paper gives an overview on language attitudes and the existing literature of language attitudes in multilingual contexts. Thirdly, through the process of paper selection and review, the development and change of quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part are analyzed and identified. Lastly, with a summary of the major findings and future trends of research methods used in this field, the conclusion part discusses limitations of this paper and implications for future research on language attitudes.

Keywords: Language Attitudes; Multilingual; Quantitative Methods

1. Introduction

The world today has increasingly become a global village with economic integration, global migration and highly developed network, and the role of languages in people's social life counts. Due to the role of wider communication, English as a lingua franca has spread all over the world because of globalisation (Coleman, 2006), and it has gained popularity to be part of the educational curriculum as an important foreign language in many countries (Halupka-Rešetar et al., 2020). In recent years, an increasing number of countries around the world have implemented many language policies in schools and universities to promote multilingualism and positive language attitudes among younger generations in a multilingual context (Calafato, 2021). Therefore, in many multilingual areas around the world, ethnic minorities not only speak their own first language but also need to have a good command of some foreign languages, especially the foreign language of English. With social changes and globalization in the 21st century, individuals' language learning would be impacted in linguistically and culturally diverse communities (Ward, 2019).

Meanwhile, as a country of 56 ethnic groups, China has distinct ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. the government has made a series of laws and policies across recent decades to promote both Mandarin and champion regional varieties (Shan, 2022; Wang, 2015; Wang & King, 2022). For example, China has made and implemented multilingual education policies (1982, 1984) for many years. With the philosophy of being a state of Duoyuan Yiti (Fei, 1989), Putonghua is promoted for all ethnic minority groups. As the medium of instruction in classroom, Mandarin is learnt formally by ethnic young children since kindergarten. In the year of 2001, English was introduced into the primary school curriculum, which means Chinese students need to learn it since grade three. Therefore, Chinese language learners, especially ethnic minority language learners, are learning language in different linguistic and cultural contexts including the above-mentioned multilingual communities.

Since the beginning of this century, the learning of more than two languages in educational contexts has become very commonplace all over the world, especially in the many places where a minority language is spoken (Lasagabaster, 2003). According to many scholars (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006), language attitudes have been an important indicator in learners' language learning. As an important concept in sociolinguistics, research on language attitudes has aroused much scholarly attention (Wei et al.,

2019), and several researchers begin to attach great importance to learners' language attitudes in a multilingual context in the past decades (Gao & Lai, 2018; Kang & Kim, 2012). And considering the diversity and distinctiveness of multilingual contexts around the world, it is of both theoretical and practical values to investigate the learners' language attitudes, to provide them with guidance to better and more successful experience and outcomes at school and in social life (Hua, et al. 2020). In addition, knowledge about learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts could offer teachers and parents insights into teaching practices and learning activities to cultivate more effective linguistic and cultural competence. What's more, the exploration of learners' language attitudes in a multilingual context helps us better understand the related effects of the educational system, which may aid the implementation of language policies of multilingualism based on the linguistic landscape, ideology and demography.

Recognizing the significance of learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts, this paper offers a critical review of research methodology used in 32 empirical studies on learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts from 2003 to 2023. the review sheds light on future trends of quantitative methods used in this field, which the present study aims to address. In the following, the paper firstly gives an overview on language attitudes and the existing literature of language attitudes in a multilingual context; and then it discusses the development and change of quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part based on an analysis of those 32 empirical studies; lastly, with a summary, limitations of this study and implications of research methods for future research are provided in the part of conclusion.

2. Language Attitudes

As an increasing popular research area, language attitudes research has received considerable attention in recent years (Garrett et al., 2003; Ianos et al, 2023). Language attitudes play an prominent role in language learning (Garrett, 2010; Hua et al., 2020; Rasool & Winke, 2019), identity construction (Szyszka, 2022) and language policy design and implementation (Nga & Zhao, 2015; Tannenbaum, 2020). In the following, this part

firstly gives a brief review on historical development of language attitudes research and related definitions, and then it discusses the existing literature of language attitudes in multilingual contexts.

2.1 What are Language Attitudes?

In 1966, Labov conducted his pioneering research on the social stratification of speech communities. Since then, language attitudes have been an indispensable concept in sociolinguistics, and research on language attitudes has attracted attention of researchers from different fields, among which Gardner and Lambert (1972) are forerunners. And considerable studies have been conducted to enhance both theoretical foundations and methodological development. Later, in the year of 1985, Krashen proposed Affective Filter Hypothesis which suggested that attitudes were also important prerequisites of successful L2 learning. Many researchers began to focus on language attitudes in the field of applied linguistics (Csizér and Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei 1994, 2003, 2009; Gardner 1985; Szyszka, 2022). the study of language attitudes concerns not only what attitudes people hold but also what determines and defines such attitudes (Garrett et al., 2003). Language attitudes are regarded as the most relevant perspective when making strategic options for language teaching and learning (Lasagabaster, 2005). In recent years, more and more scholars begin to pay attention to some aspects on learners' language attitudes in specific contexts to explore their attitudes towards different languages and the relationship between language attitudes and other aspects like learning proficiency, motivation and identity, etc.

As an important notion in sociolinguistic studies, language attitudes have been defined by many scholars during the past decades. Some researchers have endeavored to discuss the nature and components of language attitudes. As one of the influential scholars in this field, Baker (1992) put forward an important theoretical perspective of language attitudes as being constructed of cognitive, affective and conative parts. And Edwards (1982) pointed out that attitudes comprised three components, namely, attitudes can be evaluated from cognitive, affective, and behavioural perspective. Ryan and Giles (1982) also agreed with this point and they provided a

more specific explanation that language attitudes meant that any affective, cognitive or behavioural index of evaluative reactions towards both different language varieties and their speaker. Attitudes are affective because different languages can evoke speakers' or learners' different emotions; attitudes are cognitive because they incorporate individuals' world view and sense of values; and attitudes are behavioural because attitudes decide the certain ways of people's social action (Garrett et al., 2003). Other researchers have given different definitions from social perspective. Blommaert (2006) recognized language attitudes as "socially and culturally embedded metalinguistic conceptualizations of language and its forms of usage" (p. 241). Language attitudes are embedded in the process of individuals' language socialization and contribute to the explanation on the relationship between linguistic and social phenomena (Dragojevic et al., 2013).

Considering the above reviewed definitions, language attitudes can be interpreted in a wider sense in sociolinguistics. This term means people's subjective attitude towards a particular language or language varieties, language use and linguistic elements and their evaluation, which can be made through affective, cognitive, and behavioural perspectives. As a key factor in sociolinguistics, language attitudes colsely tie up with language learning in different linguistic and cultural contexts, which has been proved by many researchers (Bensoussan, 2015; Hua et al., 2020). In the following, language attitudes in multilingual contexts will be discussed.

2.2 Language Attitudes in Multilingual Contexts

At present, being multilingual is a very common phenomenon in many countries in the world. Multilingualism refers to the circumstances in which a person is confronted with more than one language in his/her everyday environment (Grosjean, 1982). Due to changes of language policies and reactions to expanding globalization processes, multilingual pedagogies in education have become widespread in recent years in many countries. Multilingual education could be regarded as the teaching of several languages including heritage language, mother tongue, foreign language and global language at different levels for learners' needs within different contexts

(Tannenbaum et al., 2020). As mentioned, language attitudes is closely related to learners' language proficiencies. Thus, it is of great significance to pay attention to language attitudes in multilingual contexts.

As to language attitudes in multilingual contexts, it has been a rapidly growing research area. Researchers have devoted great attention to measuring attitudes in multilingual contexts, and studies on language attitudes in multilingual contexts are ample and fruitful ample and fruitful in terms of research content, methods, and theoretical development in the past decades, especially in western countries. At the beginning stage, researchers focus more on language attitudes towards languages. For example, Laugharne (2004) analyzed language attitudes of students at different levels of schools in Wales by presenting her data with regards to Welsh, English and the L3. As to research methods, related studies have been carried out by adopting different methods including quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Rasool and Winke (2019) conducted mixed-methods research to investigate undergraduate students' attitudes towards English as the official language of Pakistan and as the medium of competitive examinations. Moreover, for studies on theoretical development, Dekker, Duarte and Loerts (2021) investigated children's explicit and implicit language attitudes in a highly diverse primary education. They examined socially significant language attitudes and children's stereotypes towards prevalent minority and migrant languages.

Meanwhile, with the theoretical basis and practical implication offered by western scholars, more and more domestic researches have been carried out currently (Yang, 2015; Yue & Fan, 2022). However, most of them are introductions and translations concerning related theories and empirical studies, which falls at the stage of preliminary exploration. Wu (2005) introduced the development and process of language attitudes research and its related research methods across the world, and she summarized the great work on minority language attitudes in western countries. Besides, Dong and Zhan (2021) synthesized the key issues and research methods of language attitude studies at home and abroad, and they pointed out that the future research should be conducted by adopting an interdisciplinary

perspective. However, only several researchers begin to conduct empirical studies of learners' language attitudes in multilingual education. An example is from Yue and Fan (2022), who aimed to explore language attitudes, especially towards multilingualism, among members of the Li minority group in Hainan, China.

Based on the above discussion, research on language attitudes in multilingual contexts are an increasingly popular academic field in the world. At present, it has been developed further by a great number of researchers (Aziakpono & Bekker, 2010; Huguet, 2004; Ibarraran et al., 2008; Klapwijk & Walt, 2016; Santos et al., 2017; Xie & Cavallaro, 2016), especially in western countries. the flourishing development of this field not only provides important theoretical references, practical implication and inspired exploration, but also illustrates how to conduct relevant studies in a more comprehensive perspective. In future, more and more multidisciplinary researches can be conducted around the world, and Chinese scholars should carry out more empirical studies. To have a better understanding of how to conduct related empirical studies, the following part will give an elaboration on the development and change of quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part that used in this research field.

3. Review on Research Methodology

This paper aims to provide a critical synthesis and analysis of the state of research methodology used in those 32 empirical studies on learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts, which could shed light on the development and change of quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part adopted by scholars in this field. In this part, the review process and the development and change of quantitative methods will be discussed as follows.

3.1 The Review Process

Guided by the aim of this paper, a set of selection criteria are established to search the existing related literature for this review. Firstly, research topics should be relevant and focused on learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts. Studies concerning parents' or teachers' or even adults' language attitudes should be excluded, and studies on both learners' language attitudes and multilingual contexts should be selected. Secondly, the studies must be empirical and conducted with quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part. Thirdly, studies should be published in almost recent 20 years as required, which means this paper focuses on the time of related studies from 2003 to 2023.

Since the participants in relevant empirical studies of language attitudes in educational domain are often referred as different social groups including parents, teachers, students, learners, and even adults. As to participants of learners, relevant expressions like pupils, primary school students, secondary school students, university students and learners are often used. Considering the first point of selection criteria, the selection criteria is established to use key words of "language attitudes", "multilingual", "not parents", and "not teachers" when searching the literature. After refining and excluding database and research areas, a total of 251 journal articles are yielded by the searches of Web of Science core collection. As to CNKI, with the key words of "language attitudes" and "multilingual", a total of 47 journal articles are yielded by the searches. Therefore, there are 298 journal articles in all for the first-round screening, with 251 in English and 47 in Chinese respectively.

Then, based on the above criteria and consideration, the second-round screening is conducted to exclude non-empirical studies, non-quantitative studies or non-mixed-methods with emphasis on the quantitative part, or not focusing on learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts. As a result, 32 empirical studies were left including 27 English articles and 5 Chinese studies respectively. Through a systematic process of paper selection and review in this research, three categories of those selected 32 empirical studies were classified, namely, first, studies on language attitudes towards a particular language or some languages (n = 16); second, studies on influencing factors of language attitudes in multilingual contexts (n = 7); third, studies on the impacts of language attitudes on some language issues in multilingual contexts (n = 9). And they all are conducted in quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part. the earliest empirical study was conducted in 2003, which means the

research time of this review ranges from 2003 to 2023. These 32 studies form the pool of literature for review in this study. In the following part, a detailed discussion of the development and change of quantitative methods will be given.

3.2 Development and Change of Quantitative Methods

In this section, the synthesis and analysis of research methodology used in these studies will be elaborated. This review has detected differences in research methodology in terms of research sampling, research method, and data collection and analysis among these identified studies. the distributions of these 32 studies on each of these aspects are showed **Table 1**.

Table 1. Methodological Information of the Reviewed Studies

Participants	Research methods	Data collection	Data analysis
University students: 21(66%) University & secondary school students: 1(3%) Secondary school students: 6(19%) Primary school students: 3(9%)·Primary & secondary school students: 1(3%)	Quantitative methods: 24(75%) Mixed methods: 8(25%)	Questionnaire survey: 32(100%) Interview: 8(25%) Test:2(6%)	Quantitative Descriptive: 31(97%) Inferential: 13(41%)

Notes: 1. In the column of "Data collection", "interview" refers to formal interviews with individual or a group of participants. 2. In the column of "Data analysis", for studies adopting mixed methods, only the quantitative part is considered and showed.

Firstly, in terms of participants, the number of participating students in these 32 studies ranged from 33 to 1, 659, which means the sample sizes are varied. And, 21 studies (66%) investigate university students' language attitudes in multilingual contexts. Six studies (19%) focused on secondary school students' language attitudes, and three studies (9%) investigated primary school students' language attitudes. As to a combination of students at different educational levels, there are one study (3%) on both university and secondary school students and one study (3%) on both primary and secondary school students. Such a distribution indicates that more attention has been paid to university students' language attitudes in multilingual contexts (Hilton, 2010; Moratinos-Johnston et al., 2018; Laugharne, 2004; Szyszka, 2022). Meanwhile, less attention has been paid to younger groups of secondary school students (Madariaga et al., 2016; María & Andrea, 2023) and primary school students (Bokhorst-Heng & Caleon, 2009; Dekker et al., 2021). As to studies on a combination of different students, there are only two in these 32 empirical studies (Hua et al, 2020; Yue and Fan, 2022).

This review also considers latest studies conducted from 2019 to 2023, and there are ten studies in all, among which there are three on university students, three on secondary school students, two on primary school students. In particular, the above mentioned two studies with a combined participants of different students are also conducted during the latest five years. Obviously, this distribution shows the trend of research sampling when carrying out quantitative studies on learners' language attitudes. Traditionally, language attitudes tend to be emphasized in higher education for adult students (Lasagabaster, 2003, 2005), whereas these latest studies in our review have shown that younger learners' language attitudes are worthy of academic attention and can be evaluated. Thus, more future studies should be devoted to understanding different and varied groups of students' language attitudes in multilingual contexts.

Secondly, as for research approach, most studies (n = 24; 75%) adopted the quantitative approach, while less studies (n = 8; 25%) adopted a mixed method. Traditionally, researchers preferred conducting language attitudes in multilingual contexts with quantitative methods. But, in recent years, an increasing number of scholars begin to realize the fact that attitudes are subject to modification by experience (Halupka-Rešetar & Rácz, 2020), and a supplementary qualitative investigation can provide a comprehensive picture of learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts (Szyszka, 2022). Among the above mentioned ten studies conducted during the latest five years, five of them (Dekker et al., 2021; Ianos et al., 2023; Rasool & Winke, 2019; Tannenbaum et al., 2020; Yue & Fan, 2022) made use of a mixed methods approach, which can prove the development

and change of research methodology in this field. What's more, eight studies among these 32 empirical studies pointed out the limitation of the adoption of quantitation methods, and proposed that future research on language attitudes could draw on data collected using qualitative instruments to complement the quantitative data (Bokhorst-Heng & Caleon, 2009; Halupka-Rešetar & Rácz, 2020; Hua et al., 2020; Ianos et al., 2023; Moratinos-Johnston et al., 2018; Madariaga et al., 2016; Mohr, 2018; Szyszka, 2022).

Thirdly, in terms of data collection, the predominant method was questionnaire survey which was used by all these 32 empirical studies. the design of questionnaires is characterized by the consideration of two main parts. the first part targeted participants background information (n =20, 63%), and the second part investigated language attitudes (n = 32, 100%). And, for studies with a mixed-method research approach (n = 8; 25%), all of them made use of interviews with individuals or a group of participants, which is the second preferred method among these empirical studies. Besides, two studies (6%) adopted a challenging method of tests to explore learners' language attitudes.

Lastly, for data analysis, according to the last column of Table 1, obviously, the predominant data analysis method was descriptive statistics (n = 31, 97%), which helped researchers summarize findings by describing the overall spread and general tendency of the data (Dörnyei, 2007). the most used measures of descriptive statistics, including frequency, mean, percentage, standard deviation etc., were used to describe central tendency and variability of the data (Yitzhaki, 2011; Ma & Blachford, 2016). And then, 13 studies (41%) made use of inferential statistics, which aims to analyze the relationship and draw any generalization concerning the wider population based on the sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Some inferential statistics measures like ANOVA analysis and regression analysis were used to examine the hypotheses in those studies (Chakrani, 2015; Ianos et al., 2023).

Based on the above analysis and discussion, the reviewed studies show that varied-scales, quantitatively-oriented, and descriptive research design was the dominant choice of the existing research on learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts. Although such a methodological choice has generated much understanding of learners' language attitudes, the related impacts and influential factors, the significantly preferred adoption of quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part has limitation of offering a comprehensive picture and an in-depth discussion on language attitudes, which can be modified by social experience. Therefore, future scholars can take advantage of qualitative investigation to further strengthen interpretative research design. Besides, more attention should be paid to different groups of participants with different scales to provide rich and diverse understanding in this field.

4. Conclusion

Studies on learners' language attitudes in multilingual contexts can be a valuable source of information beyond issues regarding their linguistic repertoires, language learning and use (Cao & Yao, 2015; Wang, 2017). This review makes a critical appraisal of the quantitative methods adopted in the existing literature and demonstrates the incomplete understanding and analysis of research methodology in these 32 empirical studies. the paper firstly gives a brief introduction to the research background and significance, and then it provides a historical overview on language attitudes and the existing literature of language attitudes in a multilingual context. Following that is a methodological review on the development and change of quantitative methods or mixed methods with emphasis on the quantitative part. Lastly, the limitations and implications are given to guide subsequent researchers to make a methodologically orientated description and interpretation.

As discussed, some limitations to this study might be caused by how we conduct the review. First, this review incorporated a relatively small sample of 32 articles including both western and domestic studies. Second, the review only selected studies that focus on learners' language attitudes while other important social community members like teachers and parents in multilingual contexts are not considered. Therefore, we believe that more review studies should expand their scopes to include more research works with a longer time, and focus on different participants and incorporate more qualitative data to provide a more detailed description and interpretation in future.

Research on Language attitudes in multilingual contexts is a vibrant area that continues to attract academic attention at home and abroad. This review outlines new directions of research methodology, and it is hoped that it can provide methodological references and practical implications for future researchers, especially Chinese researchers, to carry out more studies in the fields of language attitudes and multilingual education.

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