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Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Grade 7 Students in Thailand: Genre-Based versus Traditional Method

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Torok, S. and Waugh, R. Muban Chombueng Rajabhat University, Thailand. Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Grade 7 Students in Thailand: Genre-Based versus Traditional Method

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ABSTRACT

This study compared a genre-based method of teaching English to Prathom (grade) 7 secondary students in Thailand and a traditional method. Rasch-generated linear scales were created to measure reading comprehension (based on 18 items with 300 students) and attitude and behaviour to learning EFL (based on 36 items with 296 students). The data for both scales had a good fit to a Rasch measurement model, good separation of measures compared to the errors, good targeting, and the response categories were answered consistently and logically, so that valid inferences could be drawn. Ninety students from three secondary schools in Ratchaburi, Thailand, were assigned randomly to an experimental group (N=45) taught using genre-based rhetorical structures (narrative, journalistic, expository) and a control group (N=45) taught by a Thai traditional method. Pretest and posttest measures were administered and mean differences were tested for significance using ANOVA (SPSS). It was found that: (1) students improved their English reading comprehension under the genre-based learning method significantly more than under the Thai traditional method; (2) Students improved their attitude and behaviour towards learning EFL significantly more under the genre-based learning method than under the Thai traditional method of teaching.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language in Thailand

Since Thai law requires all students to learn both Thai and English – with English as a foreign language – the question of how to best teach English as a foreign language is very important. Do students learn English better, for example, when they are taught using a genre-based approach compared to the traditional Thai approach? The research reported here tests this question with a sample of Prathom 7 students in Thailand.

Since 1996, English has been a compulsory subject in the Thai school system, often taught by the traditional approach. In traditional teaching, teachers start by introducing vocabulary items and

grammatical structures and then they let the students read aloud, or repeat the sentences after the teacher. Students read and translate sentence-by-sentence for the whole class, or individually. This traditional method of teaching is boring, can lead to negative attitudes towards learning English and reduces incentives for active learning because students cannot reconstruct the message encoded by the writer for the particular purpose intended (Johns 1997). This means that the traditional method of teaching English as a foreign language does not allow students to relate the text, purpose and context of the reading material easily. It was suggested that other methods may lead to more positive outcomes such as improved reading comprehension and more enjoyable classrooms. Thus, the genre-based rhetorical structures teaching method could be one way to make these improvements for Thai students.

At the Rajabhat University where the study took was planned, it is the recommended practice for trainee teachers, with some recent modifications such as stressing learner-centred activities. The teaching procedure involves five parts. One, the teacher presents vocabulary items and necessary expressions in the text to students in both Thai and English. Two, students practice, by repeating the words and sentences after the teacher, together as a whole class, then in groups, and individually. Three, students may then read the whole passage silently or aloud, and have a group discussion to answer a set of given questions orally. Four, students then practice reading and vocabulary work in pairs, and discuss in groups to find the main idea, supporting ideas and sequencing order. Five, students do the production exercises by reading the text and completing the reading comprehension exercises individually. Second language readers obtain meaning from the texts by actively using both lower and higher level skills to decode the smaller elements and construct the meaning and, by relating what they read to what they already know, they are able to understand the main ideas, sequence the order and obtain detailed information.

Wongsathorn et al. (1996), using a UNESCO survey framework to establish national economic, social, and educational profiles for Language Learning and teaching in Thailand, suggested that desired English levels were not being achieved and that improvements were needed quickly. Vacharaskunee (2000) identified training and methodological problems with the teaching of English in metropolitan Bangkok. The view was that student standards in English were not very high and that teacher standards of English were, in many cases, not very high either. This produced a focus for researchers. How can the teaching of English be improved, for teachers and students?

In teaching English as a foreign language, the emphasis is on the development of English reading skills and this is said to be important in a globalised world (Bell and Harrison 1998, Coaldrake and Stedman 1998). However, because very few English teachers have high levels of English fluency, most students achieve only a low level of English proficiency. Therefore, they cannot read, write or communicate in English, at a sufficiently high standard to be effective. Vacharaskunee (2000) studied the problem of English teaching of the teachers in Metropolitan Bangkok schools, where the best qualified teachers are most likely employed. She found that most students cannot effectively use English. Two other research studies in Thailand showed that students couldn't achieve the main objectives of the syllabus, such as reading for information, comprehension, and critical reading of the texts (Sawasdiwong 1992, Vannichbutr 2000). It has also been suggested that the traditional method of teaching English as a second language is inappropriate for Thailand and that many current teachers lack appropriate English language teaching skills (Secondary School Education Report, 1981-1985, p. 40, Noisaengsri 1992, and Chittawat 1995).

Genre in Reading Comprehension

A genre can be defined as a category of spoken or written text, as an expression of intent. Genres perform a purpose such as narrating, reporting, arguing or defining. There are three related definitions given by recent linguists and each definition is overlapping. Freedman and Medway (1994, p.192), well-known American genre scholars, give their view that context determines the shape of genre: "Situation, motive, substance, form-each plays a part in defining genre. But the whole is greater than and different from the sum of these parts." Christie (1999, p.168), an Australian linguist, highlights textual features themselves and defines genre as: "A text may be said to have 'genre structure' because it has an overall characteristic pattern of shape, making it identifiably different from some other genre, whose functions will of course be of a different kind."

Swales (1990, p.58), an influential scholar in the development of English for Special Purposes, places the stress on communicative purpose and says that both content and form are determined by the purpose of the communication: “A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rational for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style.”

The genre method of teaching English reading is based on rhetorical structures as described by Pappas (1993) for expository texts and by Hasan (1989) for narrative texts. The journalistic genre method was described by Marin (1994) and, combining features from both Pappas (1993) and Hasan (1989), involves students experiencing the way ideas and propositions are ordered in a text for a particular purpose. When the students learn by themselves for understanding, they can comprehend the main idea(s) and supporting details more easily.

The procedures of the experimental method of genre teaching in this study involved the following five steps. One, an explanation of each kind of genre-based rhetorical structure (in both Thai and English) is given and then students practice vocabulary learned from the text of the lesson, using the structures from exercises, as per the lesson plans. Two, they use role play (personification of some inanimate categories in explanations) to directly experience the meanings of the text. Three, students then do vocabulary work individually and discuss the meanings in pairs. Four, students run group discussions using the genre-based theoretical structure to read and find the main idea(s), supporting ideas, and sequencing order. Five, students then do individual text analyses and hand them in to the teacher for marking.

LINEAR SCALE OF READING COMPREHENSION

Rasch measurement is currently the only known method by which researchers can create linear scales for reading comprehension (Wright 1999, Waugh 2006) and it was used in the current study. Using a sample of 300 Prathom 7 students in the Ratchaburi Province and 60 reading comprehension items, data were analysed with a Rasch measurement model (Rasch 1960/1980). The computer program used was RUMM (Andrich, Sheridan and Luo 2003) and the actual Rasch model used was the Partial Credit Model of Rasch (Masters 1997). A linear scale of reading comprehension was created using 18 items (see Table 1) and the rest of the items were discarded. The linear scale was reliable and uni-dimensional, and there was good item and person fit to the measurement model. The targeting was not ideal (that is, the items were a little too difficult for the ability levels of the Thai students), and this meant that the Separation Index (0.42) was not as good as one would like. That is, the errors were a little too large compared to the separation of measures along the scale. In a good scale, the measures should be well separated in comparison to the errors (which should be much smaller). It would have been better to have more students with higher English language abilities to create a better scale. Nevertheless, all other aspects of the data fitted well with the measurement model.

LINEAR SCALE OF ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR

Rasch measurement (Rasch 1960/1980) is currently the only known method by which researchers can create linear scales measuring attitude and behaviour (Wright 1999, Waugh 2006) and it was used in the current study. Using a sample of 300 Prathom 7 students in the Ratchaburi Province, a questionnaire of students’ self-reported attitude and behaviour was created with 48 items (see Table 2). Each item was answered from two perspectives: an attitude (ideal expectation) and behaviour (what really happened) and this meant that, effectively, there were 96 items (48 times 2). The computer program used was RUMM (Andrich, Sheridan and Luo 2003) and the actual Rasch measurement model used was the Partial Credit Model of Rasch (Masters 1997). A linear scale of attitude and behaviour was created using 18 items (effectively 36 items because each item was answered in two perspectives) and the rest were discarded. The linear scale was reliable (Separation Index = 0.92) and uni-dimensional: it had good item and person fit to the measurement model, the targeting was good (that is, the items were about the right difficulty for the ability levels

of the students), and there was good separation of measures along the scale compared to the errors (that is, the errors were small compared to the separation of measures). This means that valid inferences can be made from the scale data.

Table 1
Difficulties of the 18 items for reading comprehension (from easy to hard)

Item number	Item difficulty (logits)	Item description
1	-1.16 (easiest)	Expository: making inferences from word meanings
2	-0.85	Expository: understanding the supporting idea
3	-0.61	Narrative: sequencing the order of events
4	-0.27	Expository: understanding the main idea
5	-0.13	Expository: sequencing the order of ideas
6	-0.10	Expository: understanding the supporting idea
7	-0.07	Expository: understanding the main idea
8	-0.05	Expository: understanding the main idea
9	+0.02	Expository: understanding the main idea
10	+0.10	Expository: understanding the supporting idea
11	+0.17	Expository: understanding the supporting idea
12	+0.18	Narrative: understanding the supporting idea
13	+0.19	Expository: understanding the supporting idea
14	+0.25	Expository: understanding the supporting idea
15	+0.39	Expository: understanding the main idea
16	+0.53	Narrative: understanding the meaning
17	+0.70	Expository: understanding the meaning
18	+0.70 (hardest)	Narrative: understanding the main idea

Notes on Table 1
1.The full items involve diagrams and text (see Torok 2004)
2. Item difficulties are calibrated in logits (the log odds of answering positively) on the same linear scale as the student measures of reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension measure
The research question can now be answered: Do the students improve their English reading comprehension as a result of being taught using genre-based learning compared with being taught using a traditional method?

The Rasch generated linear scales were used as the measures in the experiment to answer these questions.
Ninety students from three secondary schools in Ratchaburi, Thailand, were assigned randomly to an experimental group (N=45) taught using genre-based rhetorical structures (narrative, journalistic, expository) and a control group (N=45) taught by a Thai traditional method. A strong effort was made to treat both the experimental group and the control group the same, except for the different teaching method. That is, classes were arranged at the same time of the day, class times were the same, course content was the same, the same homework was given and teachers were monitored so that they kept to the required teaching method. Meetings with teachers were arranged from time to time to ensure that the controls were being implemented and so everything that could reasonably be done to ensure fair comparisons between the control and experimental groups were done for 16, 50 minute periods of the experiment. Pretest and posttest measures were administered and differences were tested for significance using ANOVA (SPSS, Pallant 2001).

Table 2
Attitude and behaviour items by difficulty (in logits) and by perspective

Item number	Item description	My ideal expectation	This is what really happened
Interpersonal attitudes and interactions in the classroom (16 items)			
Opportunity of interaction (student/student)			
1-2	I can have more opportunity to participate in activities among friends	-1.50	-0.50
3-4	I like to talk or study in pairs	0.94	-0.40
5-6	I like to learn new words from friends	0.77	-0.32
Student and teacher in class			
7-8	I like the way my teacher teaches me English reading	0.56	-0.05
Group work (student/student)			
9-10	I like to compare different points of view found in reading with friends	0.40	0.53
11-12	I can tell my friends whether I believe what I have read, or not	0.35	0.55
Student and teacher out of class			
13-14	I can discuss my hobbies and my future plans with my teacher	-.16	+0.86
15-16	I can talk to my teacher informally about news, sport and everyday life related to my reading assignment	-0.14	+0.85
Subgroup: Perceived behavioural controls in the classroom (10 items)			
Classroom assignments			
17-18	I can study reading materials in groups with other friends.	-0.45	+0.51
19-20	I can participate in class discussion	-0.37	+0.25
Self discipline			
21-22	I can use note for stories, information about my reading assignment	-0.25	+0.76
23-24	I can finish my reading tasks in time	-0.03	+0.84
25-26	I can make an appointment to see my teacher in his/her office to discuss my reading.	-0.02	+1.21
Subgroup: Genre based learning text (10 items)			
Meaning			
27-28	I like to guess the meaning of the words in the text	-0.75	+0.51
Purpose of using text			
29-30	I find English reading is useful	-1.43	-0.69
31-32	I can read English at home	-0.39	+0.23
Comprehension			
33-34	I can find the causes of the problem after reading	+0.07	+1.16
Text for reading			
35-36	I like reading news reports in English	+0.44	+1.81

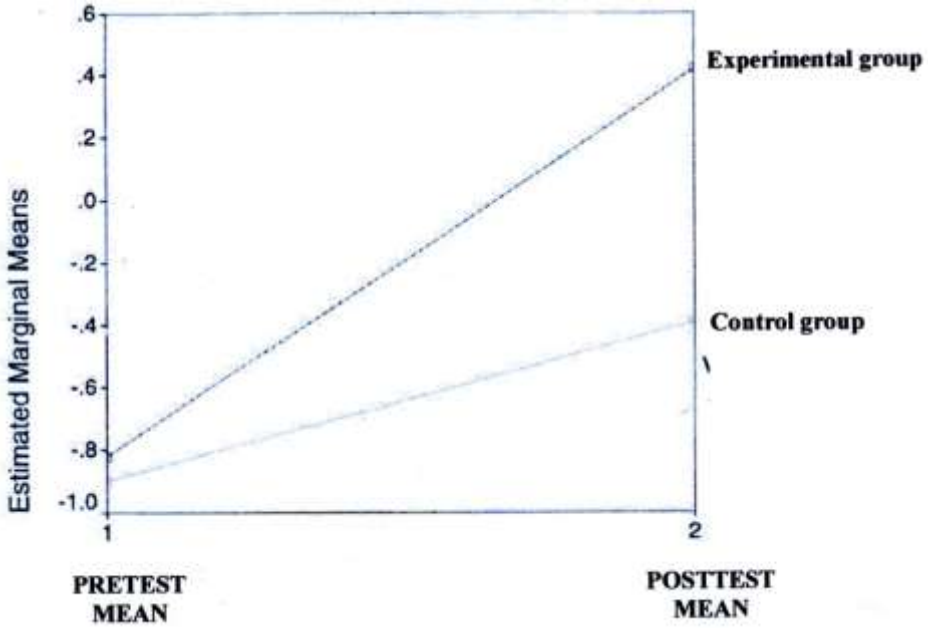
Note
1. Item difficulties are calibrated in logits (the log odds of answering positively) on the same linear scale as the student measures of reading comprehension. These are the units of a Rasch linear scale.

2. The Separation Index was 0.92 (very high).

Interaction Effects
The interaction effect was statistically significant (F=64.74, df=1,88, p=0.000) and the partial eta squared was 0.42 which, according to Cohen's rules (1988), is a large effect. This means that the experimental group achieved significantly better results in reading comprehension than the control group and, therefore, that the genre-based teaching method produced better reading

comprehension results than the traditional Thai method of teaching English as a second language (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Graph of pretest/posttest, experimental/control group, means for reading comprehension



Posttest/Pretest, Experimental/Control Group Results

Table 3: Statistics for the reading comprehension measure

	Experimental group (N=45)		Control group (N=45)	
Pretest	$\overline{X}$	= -0.82	$\overline{X}$	= -0.90
	SD	= 0.52	SD	= 0.52
	CI	= 0.32	CI	= 0.31
	SE	= 0.05	SE	= 0.08
Posttest	$\overline{X}$	= +0.42	$\overline{X}$	= -0.39
	SD	= 0.67	SD	= 0.54
	CI	= 0.35	CI	= 0.33
	SE	= 0.10	SE	= 0.08

Note

1. $\overline{X}$ is the mean and SD is the standard deviation
2. CI is the 95% confidence level and SE is the standard error

At the beginning of the experiment, the students in the experimental group were not significantly better than those in the control group in regards to reading comprehension in English ($F = 0.59$, $df = 1, 89$, $p = 0.47$), but they were significantly better at the end ($F = 39.6$, $df = 1, 89$, $p < 0.001$) . This supports the view that the genre-based teaching method was better than the traditional method for teaching students English as a second language.

For English reading comprehension, the students in the experimental group performed significantly better on the posttest than the pretest ($F = 64.74$, $df = 1,88$, $p < 0.001$). This means that the reading comprehension of the students learning under the genre-based learning approach was significantly better at the end of the experiment than at the beginning. The effect size, eta squared, equals 0.73 and, under Cohen's (1988) rules, this is a large effect.

For English reading comprehension, the students in the control group did significantly better on the posttest than the pretest ($F = 17.33$, $df = 1,89$, $p < 0.001$). This means that the reading comprehension of the students learning under the traditional teaching method was significantly better at the end of the teaching than at the beginning. Eta squared is 0.17, a medium effect size (Cohen 1988).

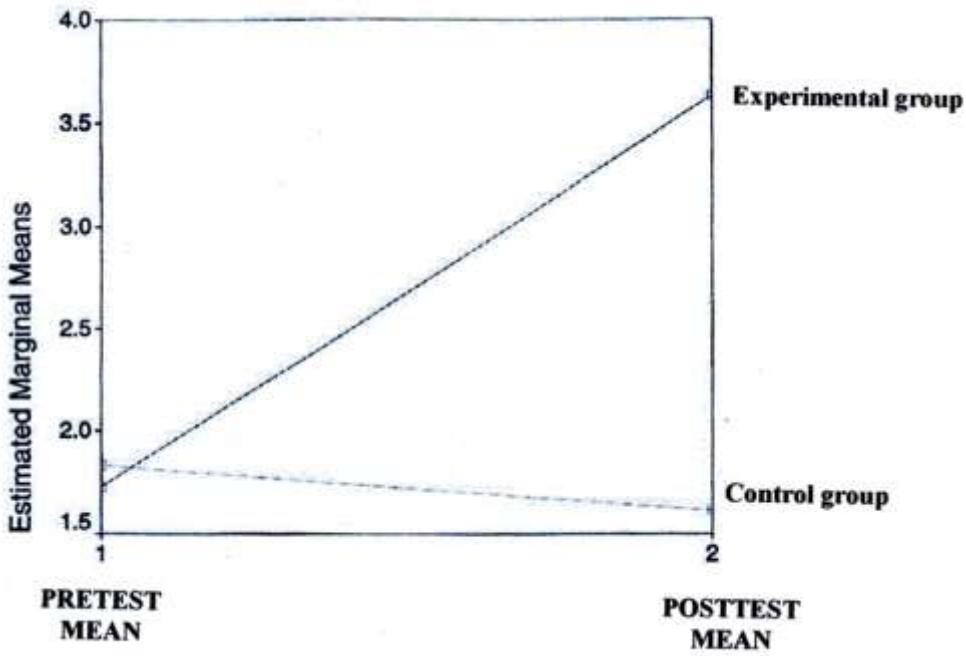
ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR MEASURE

Research question two can now be answered: Do the students improve their attitude and behaviour as a result of being taught English using the genre-based method compared with being taught using a traditional method?

Interaction effects

The interaction effect was statistically significant ($F=726.34$, $df=1,88$, $p=0.000$) and the partial eta squared was 0.89 which, according to Cohen's rules (1988), is a very large effect. This means that the experimental group exhibited significantly better attitudes and behaviour than the control group and, therefore, that the genre-based teaching method encouraged students to show better attitudes to learning and exhibit better behaviour in the English classroom than in the classrooms where the traditional Thai method of teaching English was used.

Figure 2: Graph of pretest/posttest, experimental/control group, means for attitude and behaviour.



Posttest/Pretest, Experimental/Control Group Results

The results of the experiment for attitude and behaviour are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Statistics for the attitude and behaviour measure

	Experimental group (N=45)	Control group (N=45)
Pretest	$\overline{X}$ = 1.73	$\overline{X}$ = 1.83
	SD = 0.93	SD = 0.95
	CI = 0.14	CI = 0.14
	SE = 0.58	SE = 0.57
Posttest	$\overline{X}$ = 3.62	$\overline{X}$ = 1.61
	SD = 1.20	SD = 0.70
	CI = 0.18	CI = 0.10
	SE = 0.72	SE = 0.41

Note
1. $\overline{X}$ is the mean and SD is the standard deviation
2. CI is the 95% confidence level and SE is the standard error

At the beginning of the experiment, the students in the experimental group were not significantly different from those in the control group in regards to attitude and behaviour in the English classroom

($F = 0.27$, $df = 1, 88$, $p = 0.61$), but they were significantly better at the end ($F = 99.4$, $df = 1, 88$, $p < 0.001$) . Eta squared was 0.52 and this is a large effect size (Cohen 1988). This supports the view that students' attitude and behaviour in the English classroom was significantly better during teaching under the genre-based method than it was under the traditional English teaching method.

The attitude and behaviour of the students in the experimental group was significantly better on the posttest than the pretest ($F = 99.4$, $df = 1,88$, $p < 0.001$). This means that the reading comprehension of the students learning under the genre-based learning approach was significantly better at the end of the experiment than at the beginning. The effect size, eta squared, equals 0.52 and, under Cohen's (1988) rules, this is a large effect.

The attitude and behaviour of the students in the control group was not significantly different from pretest to posttest ($t = 1.24$, $df = 88$, $p > 0.01$). This means that the attitude and behaviour of the students learning under the traditional teaching method was not significantly better at the end of the teaching than at the beginning.

DISCUSSION

This study was driven by the question about how best to teach English as a foreign language to students in schools in Thailand. Is teaching based on a genre method better than teaching based on a traditional method? There has been wide debate on this question in western countries and, now that all students in Thailand have to learn both Thai and English, it is an important question for Thai educators.

The present study used current world's best measurement practice to make the measures (that is, Rasch measurement, see Waugh 2005). Linear scales were created in standard units (logits) for both measures with good fits to the measurement model. Measures were calibrated on the same scale as the item difficulties. The experiment to compare reading comprehension, and attitude and behaviour, was conducted under standard and strict guidelines to ensure that any outcome comparisons are valid. Everything that could reasonably be done to ensure comparability between the classes taught by the two methods was done. Given all these aspects, we can be reasonably sure that the inferences drawn from the measures of the experiment are valid, but they are, strictly, only valid for the small sample of N=100 prathom 7 students used in the experiment. More studies are needed with students from other grade levels and other provinces in Thailand before policy

makers have enough evidence to decide that genre-based teaching of English should be implemented Thailand-wide.

There are four main inferences. One, students improved their reading comprehension in English as a second language under both the genre-based learning and traditional methods of teaching. Two, students improved their reading comprehension in English as a foreign language under the genre-based learning method significantly more than under the traditional teaching method. Three, students improved their attitude and behaviour towards learning English as a foreign language under the genre-based learning method significantly more than under the traditional method. Four, students did not improve their attitude and behaviour towards learning English as a foreign language under the traditional teaching method.

The outcomes from the experiment means that educators in Thailand should seriously consider teaching secondary school students English using the genre-based method. The evidence is that students learn English better, enjoy the genre-based method better, and have better classroom attitudes and behaviour, than when taught using the traditional method. The results also mean that the Rajabhat Universities should seriously consider training their teachers using the genre-based method and phase out the traditional teaching method for English because this is a strongly believable result of a scientifically controlled experiment. Researchers in Rajabhat Universities should replicate this study across different provinces in Thailand. If the results are found to be similar in a number of scientifically controlled experiments, then the policy-makers have firm evidence on which to make a good decision to implement genre-based teaching for the benefit of Thai students and teachers.

There is a theory relating attitudes to behaviour (see Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, Ajzen 1989) and there is a well-documented body of research in relation to attitudes and behaviour. Little of this literature is believable though. It uses separate measures of attitude and behaviour based on different items using True Score Theory measurement which itself is not believable. True Score Theory postulates that one uses a set of items un-ordered by difficulty and that the number correct = a ‘true’, undefined, measure of attitude (or behaviour) + a random error score over all the persons answering the items. Almost any set of unordered items will fit this model and it is the worst measurement model that can be used, yet it is ubiquitous in the education literature (and in education use). These ‘measures’ are non-linear; that is, equal differences between the numbers on the scale do not represent equal amounts of attitude (or behaviour), although they are often interpreted as being linear. Furthermore, Michell (1999) has shown, using logic alone, that someone scoring higher on these ‘measures’ (with True Score Theory) does not necessarily have a higher attitude (or behaviour) than someone scoring lower. This occurs because True Score Measurement does not comply with the so-called cancellation condition of measurement. And there are still more problems.

The literature is ‘full’ of correlations between attitude and behaviour between zero and 0.30. This means that attitudes ‘explain’ between 0% and 9% of the variance in behaviour, which is useless, practically, and unbelievable. The present study shows a correlation of 1 - that is, attitudes to second language learning completely ‘explain’ behaviour to second language learning – and this must also clearly be a wrong interpretation. The correct interpretation appears to be that attitudes are a necessary pre-condition for most (but maybe not all) second language behaviour and attitudes influence behaviour such that attitudes are easier than behaviour. The present study supported this interpretation.

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