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Student Attitudes Toward a University Course on World Regional Geography

Abstract

This research is the first study to be carried out to determine the attitudes of university students toward the course in their curriculum on world regional geography. The study participants were a total of 473 students from the Necatibey School of Education and the School of Science and Literature at Balıkesir University in Turkey. A questionnaire of 20 items was used to measure student attitudes toward the World Regional Geography course. Ultimately, male and female students displayed a statistically significant difference in their perspectives on the course. It was found that male students had a more positive outlook compared to their female counterparts. It was also discovered that there were striking differences between student attitudes depending on their academic fields. It was seen in this context that students ща Social Science Teaching and Geography were again more positive in their attitude compared to other students. Students in Class Teaching, Elementary School Mathematics Teaching and Pre-school Teaching displayed more negative attitudes toward the world regional geography course compared to students in other academic areas.

Key words: *student attitudes, World Regional Geography course, geography education.*

Introduction

An "attitude" according to Papanastasiou (2002) is described as a person's positive or negative emotional disposition toward objects, people, places, events and ideas. An attitude is not an observable behaviour; it is a disposition that

causes behaviour (Bloom, 1976). Although they cannot be observed, attitudes have a significant impact on an individual's behaviour (Forsyth & Maier 2006; Esses, Haddock & Zanna 1993; Bodenhausen, 1993). The nature of an individual's attitudes can be measured either according to his/her behaviour displayed or in terms of what the individual says about his/her own attitude. There have been many studies to determine student attitudes in the educational environment. These studies, however, are seldom used to enhance learning.

On the subject of student attitudes toward their courses, Bloom (1995, p. 123) states that an attitude is actually a single quality that is polarized to reveal a range that extends from having positive thoughts, liking the course or having positive sensory feelings about it to the state of having negative thoughts, disliking the course or having negative sensory feelings about it. There is a close connection between student attitude and learning. When students have a positive attitude toward a course, they are more comfortable in the classroom situation, having the tendency to be more active and able to be more effective in problem-solving. Despite the fact that this is generally recognized, there has been limited interest in examining feedback on student attitudes. Measurements of student attitudes have largely been made through the informal observations of the teacher in the classroom, a practice that cannot be considered adequate for enhancing the learning process (Walker, 2006).

Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to explain the differences seen in student attitudes toward the world regional geography course in terms of gender and to further explore the differences in attitudes toward this course in terms of the students' academic fields.

Significance of the study

The course on World Regional Geography provides students with an opportunity to discover the physical, historical, social, economic, cultural and political features of the regions of the world (Aspaas, 1998). The course is an important part of the school curriculum; its content has a potential attraction for the student. It may also be considered one of the more difficult courses included in the curriculum of both secondary schools and universities. Achievement in this class is a function

of both time and effort (Herper, 2004). One of the factors having an important impact on the learning process, we know, is the student's attitude toward any particular course. If this attitude is negative, the student's learning process might be adversely affected. As far as can be seen, a look into the literature shows that there have been no studies examining student attitudes toward the World Regional Geography course. The researchers thus developed a "World Regional Geography Course Attitude Survey" in order to determine student attitudes toward this course. The survey may be used at universities to explore student attitudes toward this particular course.

Research questions

1. Are there significant differences in student attitudes toward the world regional geography course in terms of gender?
2. Are there significant differences in student attitudes toward the world regional geography course in terms of the student's academic area?

Literature review

Various studies indicated that an attitude plays an important role in teaching geography (Forsyth & Maier 2006; Sack & Petersen 1998; Baker & White 2003; West, 2003; Solem & Foote, 2006). Although research into student attitudes has relatively increased in the last ten years, the number of studies is still considerably limited (Forsyth, 1995; Walker 2006; Forsyth & Maier ,2006). Boehm and Petersen (1997) provided a classification of methodology to be used in future research on the teaching of geography but the list itemizes 46 potential areas for research, not one of them on the subject of attitudes. Stoltman (1997) reviewed work on teaching geography throughout the period of 1930–1997, concluding that there is no study in this period on student attitudes. Similarly, Gerber does not mention student attitudes in his work on teaching geography entitled "International Handbook on Geographical Education" (2003).

Education is an important tool in both determining attitudes and in changing negative ones. A review of the literature shows that there are many studies on this subject (Fraser, 1981; Print, 1990; Francek et al., 1993; Escalada & Zollman, 1997; Parkinson et. al., 1998; Ussler & Hoffmann, 2000, 2002; Jones, Howe & Rua, 2000; Gerber, 2001; Jarvis & Pell, 2002). The limited number of studies on student attitudes in geography instruction that have been carried out so far concentrated more on student attitudes toward technology or geography. The focus in these

studies was on the use of the Internet in the classroom (Lee, 2001; Ross, 2003; Toriskie, 1999), geographic information systems (GIS) and their impact on student attitudes toward geography (Baker & White, 2003; West, 2003).

In a study by Sack and Peterson (1998), data on the attitudes toward geography of 1400 students in the public schools in San Marcos, Texas, over the years 1983 and 1993 was collected and analyzed. The study concentrated on the fact that in both years, geography was the subject that students were the least interested in and in this context, focused on creating more active learning environments and eliminating negative attitudes. According to the researchers, the methods and contents of geography instruction should be improved and more importance placed on training teachers. Another study on the attitudes of students, aged 11–16, toward their classes showed that the subject of geography was not their preference (Colley & Comber, 2003). In contrast, some studies in fact established that students have a positive attitude toward the school subject of geography. One of these studies was carried out at the high school level, setting forth that students regarded geography as a necessary course (Adey & Biddulph, 2001). Other studies conducted in Turkey at the university level have also shown with similar findings that student attitudes toward geography are generally positive (Doğanay & Zaman, 2002; Demirkaya & Arıbaş, 2004; Cin, 2008). As can be seen, while some research results indicate a positive attitude toward geography on the part of students, other findings point to negative student attitudes toward the course.

In order to be able to determine student attitudes in geography education, researchers need to produce reliable tools of measurement that will enable them to collect and analyze their data. The literature contains reliable scales of attitudes that were developed to establish student attitudes toward the school subject of geography. Walker (2006) developed a 29-item "Questionnaire on Attitudes toward Geography" composed of four sub-scales. Another work by Vincent (2004) makes use of a 15-item, 7-grade scale to measure student attitudes toward geography.

Methodology

Study universe and sample

The study universe comprised first-, second – and third-year students in different academic areas (geography, social studies teaching, class teaching, elementary school mathematics teaching and pre-school teaching) who were taking a course in world regional geography for the first time at schools of education and science-literature at a Turkish university.

The accessible sample comprised first-, second – and third-year students in different academic areas (geography, social studies teaching, class teaching, elementary school mathematics teaching and pre-school teaching) who were taking a course in world regional geography for the first time at the Necatibey School of Education and the School of Science-Literature at Balıkesir University during the academic year 2009–2010 . 473 students participated in the study. Of these, 189 (40%) were male and 284 (60%) were female students. Table 1 displays the distribution according to the academic fields and gender of the students taking part in the research.

Content of scale, development and data collection

A "Questionnaire on Attitudes toward the World Regional Geography Course" (Appendix 2) was developed as part of the study to measure student attitudes toward the school subject of geography. The stages in the development of this attitude questionnaire were the following (Gay, 2000): a) Formulating the items on attitude, b) Consulting with an expert, c) Pre-testing , and d) Calculating reliability.

In designing statements of attitude, the literature was reviewed as to the objects of attitudes and existing attitude surveys (Demirci, 2004; Walker, 2006) were examined. At first, a pool of items consisting of 34 attitude statements was compiled. The statements, "I agree completely" and "I agree" were used for the positive items in the scale and "I don't agree" and "I completely disagree" were used for negative items. The statement "I'm undecided" was used for items that did not contain any positive or negative ideas (Gay, 2000). The 34 attitude statements collected in the item pool were presented to specialists in geography instruction and in survey assessment. The survey items were also reviewed by a linguist. After the survey had been examined and assessed by the experts, some items were removed upon their suggestion, some were revised and the final form of the first prototype was thus completed. The questionnaire now comprised 30 items. The questionnaire was then applied to a total of 80 students in various academic fields (geography, social studies teaching, class teaching, elementary school mathematics teaching and pre-school teaching) for a pilot study, which was carried out for factor analysis. The data collected from the students was analyzed using an SPSS 12.0 package program. According to the results of the analysis, the factor loading was accepted as 0.45 and values over 0.45 were chosen for the second analysis with a total of 20 items ultimately being considered operable. To increase the validity of the data, an attempt was made to devise an approximately equal number of sentences containing positive and negative concepts. The questionnaire consists of 11 positive

and 9 negative attitude statements. The factor loadings of the items on the scale vary between 0.454 and 0.730. The Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient was determined as .88 for the overall survey.

Data analysis

To carry out the data analysis, the scores of the students' responses to each item in the questionnaire were first added up and divided by the number of items to find each student's questionnaire score. Scores were assigned as follows: in the group of positive statements, "I agree completely" was scored as 5, "I agree" as 4, "I'm undecided" as 3, "I disagree" as 2 and "I completely disagree" as 1. In the group of negative statements, "I agree completely" was scored as 1, "I agree" as 2, "I'm undecided" as 3, "I disagree" as 4 and "I completely disagree" as 5. All the data was analyzed using the SPSS package program, Version 12.0. Following data collection, the information was assessed according to the variables of gender and academic fields using the t-test and ANOVA. The findings are presented in detail below.

Findings

Table 2 presents the data obtained from the t-test used to determine whether there was any difference in the attitudes of the male and female students toward the school subject of world regional geography in the attempt to find an answer to the first research question.

As can be seen in Table 2, there is a 3.14 point difference in favour of the male students. To determine whether this was a significant difference, the t-test was performed using the SPSS 12.0 program; the result found was $t = -2.402$. Since $p=0.017 < 0.05$ (due to the reliability interval of 95%), the difference between the scores of the two groups was found to be significant. When the arithmetical mean was calculated to ascertain which group this difference favoured, it was seen that the difference was pronounced in the group of male students. In other words, there is a significant difference in favour of the male students between the attitudes of the males and females toward the world regional geography course.

To find an answer to the second research question (Are there significant differences in student attitudes toward the world regional geography course in terms of the student's academic area?), mean and standard deviation values were first calculated for each academic area. These are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 3, the total scores indicating the attitudes of the students studying in the Social Studies Teaching and Geography Teaching Departments toward the World Regional Geography course were high. To understand whether the difference between the students in the various areas was coincidental or an

actual indication of achievement, a variant analysis (ANOVA) was performed. This data is presented in Table 4.

When the Anova table is reviewed (Table 4), because value p is smaller than 0.05, it can be seen that there is a statistically significant relationship between the academic area and the attitude toward the World Regional Geography course ($p<0.05$). To see which pairs of groups showed significant relationships, a Tukey Test table was formulated. This data is presented in Table 5.

In Table 5 it can be seen in the significance column that the difference between the average scores of the students in class teaching, elementary school mathematics teaching and pre-school teaching indicating their attitudes toward the World Regional Geography course is not significant. There is, however, a significant relationship ($p<0.05$) between the scores of all the other groups. In the light of these findings, it was found that the attitude toward World Regional Geography of the students in Social Studies Teaching showed a more positive significant difference (on the basis of the arithmetical mean) compared to all the other academic areas and that, similarly, the students in the Geography Section had a more significantly positive difference in their attitude toward the course compared to the students in class teaching, elementary school mathematics teaching and pre-school teaching. Moreover, the Tukey test also showed that negative attitudes toward the world regional geography course are present in class teaching, mathematics teaching and pre-school teaching students but that there is no significant difference between those groups.

Results and recommendations

A "World Regional Geography Course Attitude Test" whose reliability was tested was developed as a measurement tool in this study to provide researchers and practitioners with the means of determining the attitudes of university students toward their world regional geography courses.

The results obtained from the present study showed that the male students exhibited a more positive attitude toward the world regional geography course compared to the female students and that in addition, the students displayed differences toward the course depending on their academic fields of learning. To eliminate differences in attitudes between males and females and between academic fields in this context and encourage a positive attitude, the educational curriculum, teaching approaches used by teachers, the content of textbooks and the attitudes of teachers themselves toward the course must be reviewed. The effort

to eliminate differences in attitude toward a world regional geography course in terms of gender and academic field should be focused on student-oriented teaching approaches and on using tools and equipment at the right time and place (Sack & Peterson, 1998).

Some recommendations as to how future research can be conducted on the subject of student attitudes toward World Regional Geography courses are as follows: Firstly, there is a need for research on class strategies geared to improve student attitudes toward the world regional geography course, particularly the attitudes of female students. Secondly, it is important to study the factors underlying the development of positive and negative attitudes toward the course at lower levels of the educational program. Thirdly, there is also a need for research to determine the attitudes of teachers toward the World Regional Geography course.

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Appendix-1: Tables

Table 1. Distribution of Academic Fields and Gender of Participating Students

	Female	Male	Total
Geography Teaching	61	79	140
Social Studies Teaching	38	36	74
Class Teaching	72	27	99
Elementary School Mathematics Teaching	88	44	132
Pre-school Teaching	25	3	28
Total	284	189	473

Table 2: Findings Related to the World Regional Geography Course Attitude Scale According to the Gender Variable

Gender	n	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	df	t	p
Female	284	70.81	13.08	471	–2.402	0.017
Male	189	73.95	15.09			

Table 3: Academic Areas, Mean and Standard Deviation

Academic Area	n	mean	SD
Geography	140	78.07	12.81
Social Studies Teaching	74	83.37	9.60
Class Teaching	99	66.55	12.55
Elementary School Mathematics Teaching	132	64.62	11.24
Pre-school Teaching	28	66.75	13.94

Table 4: ANOVA Results of World Regional Geography Course Attitude Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	25632.389	4	6408.097	44.898	.000*
Within Groups	66795.446	468	142.729		
Total	92427.835	472			

*p<0.05

Table 5. Test (Tukey) Results Showing Relationship Between Academic Areas

(I) Section	(J) Section	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Geography	Social studies teaching	–5.30695*	.018*
	Class teaching	11.51587*	.000*
	Elem. school maths teaching	13.45022*	.000*
	Pre-school teaching	11.32143*	.000*
Social Studies Teaching	Geography teaching	5.30695*	.018*
	Class teaching	16.82282*	.000*
	Elem. school maths teaching	18.75717*	.000*
	Pre-school teaching	16.62838*	.000*
Class teaching	Geography teaching	–11.51587*	.000*
	Social studies teaching	–16.82282*	.000*
	Elem. school maths teaching	1.93434	.741
	Pre-school teaching	–.19444	1.000
iElementary school maths teaching	Geography teaching	–13.45022*	.000*
	Social studies teaching	–18.75717*	.000*
	Class teaching	–1.93434	.741
	Pre-school teaching	–2.12879	.912
Pre-school teaching	Geography teaching	–11.32143*	.000*
	Social studies teaching	–16.62838*	.000*
	Class teaching	.19444	1.000
	Elem. school maths teaching	2.12879	.912

*p<0.05

Appendix–2: The Survey

Your gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Your class: 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐

Your Academic Area: ( ) Geography Section
☐ Social Studies Teaching
☐ Class Teaching
☐ Elementary School Mathematics Teaching
☐ Pre-school Teaching

This survey has been prepared to learn what your thoughts are about the World Regional Geography course. The statements given below have no definite answers. Opinions about each statement may differ from person to person. This is why the answers you give should reflect your own opinions. Before indicating your thoughts, please read each sentence carefully and then decide which statement is most appropriate for your thoughts and feelings. Please circle the number that represents the statement that is most suitable for you. For example, if you agree completely with any of the sentences given below, circle 5. If you completely disagree, circle 1. Circle the numbers between 1 and 5 depending on how little or how much you agree with that statement.

TEST FOR ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WORLD REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY COURSE

Please circle only one choice for each statement.	**1-I completely disagree 2-I disagree 3-I'm undecided 4-I agree 5-I completely agree**
1. The World Regional Geography course is exciting and entertaining.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I am not interested in the World Regional Geography course.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I really like the World Regional Geography course.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I hate the World Regional Geography course.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I'm wary of the World Regional Geography course.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. The World Regional Geography course is an opportunity not to be missed for my development.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Please circle only one choice for each statement.	**1-I completely disagree 2-I disagree 3-I'm undecided 4-I agree 5-I completely agree**
7. I don't like studying for the World Regional Geography course.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I regard the World Regional Geography course as a course to memorize.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
9. I frequently participate in class discussions on the regions and countries in the world and I enjoy doing this.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
10. I find that too much time is spent in the World Regional Geography course .	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
11. The World Regional Geography course stimulates my interest in travelling abroad.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
12. Learning about the world's regions and countries is important for every student, regardless of his/her academic field .	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
13. I don't like watching programs on different countries in the world that are shown on TV or on the Internet.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
14. I don't believe that the World Regional Geography course will add to my professional development.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
15. I believe that I will be able to use what I learn in the World Regional Geography course in many ways throughout my life.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
16. I regularly follow up on publications (magazines, newspapers, e-magazines, websites) about developments in the countries around the world.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
17. I like reading about different people and places.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
18. Maps and globes don't interest me.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
19. I like talking about different places and people.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
20. If I were to buy a gift, I would want it to be a book about other societies or locations.	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5