

## SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH LEARNING: A STUDY AT UNIVERSITY OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY – THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating non-English majored students' attitudes towards learning English focusing on three components of attitudes (cognitive, affective, and behavioral), and towards teaching methods. A total of 207 second-year students at University of Information and Communication Technology – Thai Nguyen University who were doing a course in English 3 took part in an online survey via Google Form. An adapted questionnaire consisting of 15 five-point-Likert-scale items based on Hohenthal (2003) and Ahmed (2015) was employed as the data collection instrument. The research results revealed that students' attitude towards learning English was positive in terms of cognitive component, but their attitude was rather negative in terms of affective and behavioral components. In addition, students expressed diverse attitudes towards current English teaching. Some pedagogical implications are suggested. This study is not only useful for English teachers who are interested in studying learners' factors, especially attitudes, but also significant for training institutions with similar contexts in examining the educational objectives.

**Keywords:** English teaching; attitudes; language attitude; cognitive; affective; behavioral

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## THÁI ĐỘ ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC HỌC TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ HAI: MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG NGHỆ THÔNG TIN VÀ TRUYỀN THÔNG – ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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### TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu thái độ của sinh viên không chuyên đối với việc học tiếng Anh tập trung vào ba yếu tố của thái độ (nhận thức, cảm xúc và hành vi), và đối với việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh. Tổng số 207 sinh viên năm thứ hai tại Trường Đại học Công nghệ Thông tin và Truyền thông – Đại học Thái Nguyên đang theo học học phần Anh văn 3 tham gia trả lời khảo sát trực tuyến thông qua Google Form. Bảng câu hỏi điều tra được thiết kế dựa trên nghiên cứu của Hohenthal (2003) và Ahmed (2015) bao gồm 15 nhận định với 5 mức lựa chọn theo thang Likert được sử dụng làm công cụ thu thập dữ liệu. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy rằng trong ba yếu tố của thái độ, sinh viên thể hiện nhận thức tích cực về việc học tiếng Anh, nhưng cảm xúc và hành vi của họ đối với việc học biểu hiện khá tiêu cực. Ngoài ra, thái độ của sinh viên với việc dạy học tiếng Anh hiện tại khá đa dạng. Nghiên cứu cũng đưa ra một số gợi ý về giảng dạy tiếng Anh cho đối tượng sinh viên không chuyên. Nghiên cứu này không những là một nguồn tài liệu tham khảo hữu ích cho các giáo viên tiếng Anh quan tâm đến việc nghiên cứu các yếu tố cá nhân của người học, đặc biệt là thái độ mà còn hữu ích cho các cơ sở đào tạo có bối cảnh tương tự trong việc rà soát các mục tiêu giáo dục.

**Từ khóa:** Giảng dạy tiếng Anh; thái độ; thái độ ngôn ngữ; nhận thức; cảm xúc; hành vi

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## 1. Introduction

These days, English has become a dominant language for communication in business, finance and banking, science and technology, popular culture, and international relations around the world. It is widely accepted that fluency in the English language is a key to success in life. However, the success of learning a foreign/second language is affected by multiple factors of which student's attitudes towards learning the language is one of the leading predictors and are believed to directly influence learning behaviors [1] – [4]. Having positive attitudes towards learning a language is a good start to learn a language. Therefore, teachers and educators should consider the attitude factor when designing English language training and instruction.

In the curriculum of University of Information and Communication Technology (ICTU), English subject accounts for 12 credits distributed into four courses English 1, English 2, English 3 and English 4, respectively. The general objectives of English courses are: By the end of these courses, students are expected (1) to achieve the English language proficiency standard of A2 according to the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR) if they graduate before 2021, and to achieve the English language proficiency standard of B1 if they graduate from 2021 onwards; and (2) to have positive attitudes towards English learning. In order to obtain these objectives, despite ICTU English teachers' continuing efforts to innovate the teaching methods, re-design the syllabus, and adopt new teaching materials, the results are very limited, and teachers have frequently complained that the students' engagement in-class learning activities is passive and less motivated. Driven by the learner-centered approach, teachers should, therefore, draw their

attention to investigate students' personal factors such as motivation, attitudes, beliefs, and cognition.

Being a complex concept of social psychology, attitude has been defined by various researchers since its essence. Allport [1] stated 'an attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related' (p. 810). Attitudes are said to have cognitive, affective, and conative or behavioral components of which the cognitive component refers to the individual's belief structure or thoughts about attitude objects, the affective component refers to emotional reactions, and the behavioral component refers to the tendency to behave towards the attitude object [2], [3]. Crystal [4] argued that attitudes towards language are the feelings about one's language and the languages of others, and they may be positive or negative. We can see although these definitions of attitudes slightly differ in some respects, they all keep the core idea of "favour and disfavour" intact.

Empirical studies have shown that while positive attitudes is related to success in language learning, negative attitudes can impede learning a language [5], [6]. However, a student's negative attitudes can be changed and turned into positive ones and facilitate getting a positive result [7]. For instance, students may have negative attitudes at the beginning of learning a language but then they realize what a good advantage it is to know this language and their attitudes change. Attitudes are enduring and can be changed by various factors while learning the language [1] - [3], [8]. Attitudes can be categorized along a dimension of *specificity/ generality*, *relevance* to second language achievement, and *educational or social* aspects, and

research has shown that specific attitudes are more correlated with many indices of achievement [5]. Students' attitudes in current research mean specific attitudes towards learning English at ICTU context.

To sum up, these studies have shown that the concept of attitudes is multi-dimensional, and that there is a significant relationship between the students' attitudes and their learning outcomes and linguistic behaviors can be explained by language attitudes.

For ICTU context, an insight into students' attitudes is substantially significant for teachers to understand and foster students' positive attitudes for achieving language proficiency requirements. Besides, the study provides the administrators and teachers an empirical evidence to examine the described objectives of English courses for any necessary adjustments. So far, there is no comprehensive research conducted to investigate the attitudes towards learning English of ICTU students. This study, therefore, aims to document the students' attitudes towards learning English with expectation to contribute partly to improving the English teaching-learning quality at ICTU.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research questions**

Based on the scope and the research aims, the study addressed the two following questions:

1. What are second-year students' attitudes (cognitive, affective and behavioral components) towards English learning?
2. What are second-year students' attitudes towards English teaching?

### **2.2. Research setting**

ICTU, a member university of Thai Nguyen University, specializes in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Its students who are non-English majored have frequent interactions with the information and communication systems, tools, and devices the

display language of which is mainly English. Therefore, English is considered crucially important to students' academic achievements and future professional development.

Due to the specific university admission requirements of the technical and engineering training field, good English scores are not required for a high school graduated candidate to be admitted to ICTU. In fact, most of them possess a poor command of English, which causes certain difficulties for English education at tertiary level. The statistics from the standardized English proficiency tests for the graduation show the proportion of students passing in the first time taking the test accounts for a relatively low rate of about 35% - 55%. According to a report of Division of Student's Affairs, by January 2020, the number of students who have not qualified to graduate in time is 787 students of which 361 (nearly 46%) have not satisfied the English proficiency standard yet. This fact pushes the administrators and English teachers to find the solutions to improve the quality of English teaching and learning.

### **2.3. Participants**

A total of 207 second-year students aged from 19 to 20 who were doing a course in English 3 took part in the survey. Since a majority of ICTU students are male, so in this study, sex differences were not taken into account.

### **2.4. Data collection instrument and analysis**

The adapted survey questionnaire based on Hohenthal (2003) [9] and Ahmed (2015) [10] was employed as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire consists of 2 sections and 15 statements. The evaluative opinions for statements were designed based on 5-point Likert scale with value 1 = "Strongly disagree", 2 = "Disagree", 3 = "Undecided", 4 = "Agree", 5 = "Strongly agree". To facilitate and ensure students' understanding of the statements, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese,

and then administered via Google Form to 263 participants in seven full-time English classes to investigate their attitude towards learning English. Thanks to the help of English teachers teaching seven English classes, 207 participants completed the survey. The response rate (78.7%) was good and statistically significant. The collected data was put into Microsoft Excel to calculate the percentage and analyzed.

### 3. Findings and discussions

#### 3.1. Student's attitudes towards English learning

The first section of the questionnaire aimed at exploring students' attitudes towards English learning. Table 1 illustrates their attitudes towards English learning.

Questions 1 to 5 were set to gauge students' perception about the usefulness of learning English. It can be seen that most students generally had a clear and positive perception of the role of learning English in their personal development. Specifically, 95.2% of students (both "Agreed" and "Strongly agreed") reported that learning English would open more job opportunities for them. Nearly 90% of students thought that learning English would help the growth of their mind, and 87.9% admitted that learning English would help them with higher academic achievements. The number of students believing that learning English would improve their personality

received the lowest positive ratings but remained quite high at 60.8%. Finally, 159 out of 207 students, accounting for 76.8%, realized that learning English would help promote their businesses in the future. Facing the employers' increasing demands on the attitudes and capacity of graduates in the period of industrialization, modernization and international integration, these students' perception is extremely valuable and serves as a premise for their behavioral tendency in learning English, cultivating knowledge and practicing skills to meet recruitment requirements.

In short, students have realized the usefulness of learning English, which in turn reflected their positive cognitive component towards learning English.

Clear perceived usefulness and practical experience of learning English in a tertiary environment can influence and form students' affection and behavioral tendency. For one year of having learned English at ICTU, students have had exposure to new teaching-learning activities and environment which are quite different from prior experiences at high schools. This experience helps students develop their emotions and behaviors for learning English. Table 2 shows students' feelings and behavioral tendency towards English learning.

**Table 1.** Percentage and Number of respondents on the usefulness of English learning

| Statements   | Evaluative opinions |              |               |               |                |
|--|---------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
|  | 1                   | 2            | 3             | 4             | 5              |
| 1. Learning English helps the growth of my mind.                 | 6.3%<br>(13)        | 2.4%<br>(5)  | 3.4%<br>(7)   | 32.9%<br>(68) | 55.1%<br>(114) |
| 2. Learning English will improve my personality.                 | 6.3%<br>(13)        | 9.2%<br>(19) | 23.7%<br>(49) | 25.1%<br>(52) | 35.7%<br>(74)  |
| 3. Learning English will open more job opportunities for me.     | 3.8%<br>(8)         | 1.0%<br>(2)  | 0%<br>(0)     | 9.2%<br>(19)  | 86.0%<br>(178) |
| 4. Learning English will help me in higher academic achievement. | 2.4%<br>(5)         | 2.4%<br>(5)  | 5.8%<br>(12)  | 29.0%<br>(60) | 60.4%<br>(125) |
| 5. Learning English will help me in promoting future business.   | 2.4%<br>(5)         | 2.4%<br>(5)  | 18.4%<br>(38) | 26.6%<br>(55) | 50.2%<br>(104) |

**Table 2.** Percentage and number of respondents on the feelings and tendency to English learning

| Statements  | Evaluative opinions |               |               |               |                |
|---|---------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
|   | 1                   | 2             | 3             | 4             | 5              |
| 6. I do not feel feared or unpleasant when learning English.  | 9.2%<br>(19)        | 14.0%<br>(29) | 27.0%<br>(56) | 27.1%<br>(56) | 22.7%<br>(47)  |
| 7. The fear of making mistakes (such as grammar and pronunciation mistakes) has negative influence on me. | 8.7%<br>(18)        | 21.3%<br>(44) | 21.2%<br>(44) | 25.1%<br>(52) | 23.7%<br>(49)  |
| 8. I actively organize and take part in learning English activities.                                      | 6.3%<br>(13)        | 10.1%<br>(21) | 35.7%<br>(74) | 30.0%<br>(62) | 17.9%<br>(37)  |
| 9. I will continue learning English after completing compulsory English courses at the university.        | 6.2%<br>(13)        | 1.0%<br>(2)   | 8.2%<br>(17)  | 29.0%<br>(60) | 55.6%<br>(115) |

Questions 6 to 7 explored students' feelings towards learning English. Only 103 of 207 students (49.8%) who responded to the survey reported that they did not feel "feared or unpleasant" when studying English. The remaining 27% of students had no idea and 23.2% experienced studying English with fear or discomfort. This finding is reasonable because the students' command of English as described is poor. Consequently, many of them cannot complete their learning tasks both in and out of classroom leading to their discomforts. Making mistakes while learning is inevitable, but the proportion of students did not feel negatively influenced by their mistakes was only 48.8% students. One-third of surveyed students ("*strongly disagreed*" and "*disagreed*") replied that their emotions were negatively affected by mistakes. From adults' characteristics, it is noted that they are often afraid of "losing face" and losing confidence in front of the crowd when making mistakes, so they rarely argue or express their ideas during learning activities. The above figures are reliable and understandable, but they reflected students' negative affection towards English learning. Januariza and Hendriani [11] argued, "If the negative feeling is allowed to grow in the students, they will not be able to communicate their thoughts, ideas, and feeling by using the new language they are learning." (p. 468)

Emotions are supposed to affect human behaviors. The above findings on the affective component influence students' behavioral tendency towards learning English. Questions 8 and 9 explored the

students' current and intention behaviors in English learning. Specifically, only 47.9% (99/207) students reported that they actively planned and participated in English learning activities. This number is consistent with the students' behavior manifestations observed and reported by English teachers. Obviously, this was students' negative expression of the behavioral tendency towards learning English. However, 84.6% of students responded that they would continue to learn English after they completed their compulsory English courses. Combined with the cognitive component, we find that this tendency is reasonable as students are aware of the benefits of learning English.

### 3.2. Students' attitudes toward English teaching

In addition to the three components of the attitudes, to serve the innovation of teaching methods, we designed questions to explore students' attitudes towards English teaching. Table 3 shows ICTU students' attitudes towards the current teaching used at ICTU.

It can be seen that up to 86.9% of students ("*agreed*" and "*strongly agreed*") reported that their basic purpose of learning English was to be able to communicate with foreigners. This finding showed that students had a positive perception of the target of English learning. More than two-thirds of students (74.9%) liked to learn English through listening skills while 72.5% students disagreed and strongly disagreed that being able to read in English was enough. Regarding the role of language skills, 196 respondents accounting for up to 94.2%

reported that all four language skills were equally important in learning English. Obviously, from the theory of foreign language learning, four language skills are inseparable but linked and complementary to one another. The two receptive skills (listening and reading) help to provide students with linguistic inputs on which they can develop their productive skills (speaking and writing). Vice versa, productive skills help consolidate and improve receptive skills. Having identified the equal role of four language skills, students expressed their positive attitude towards developing all four skills evenly. Learning English through ‘grammatical rules’ and ‘vocabulary memorization’ is commonplace and is also the students’ preference at high schools in Vietnam [12]. However, the collected responses in this survey reflected a change but diversity. Specifically, 7.2% and 34.8% strongly disagreed and disagreed to choose this learning method respectively while 48.3% (both “*agreed*” and “*strongly agreed*”) considered memorizing grammatical rules and vocabulary was their preference. The last question relates to teaching environment. About two-thirds of students (64.3%) reported that they liked to study in “All English” environment (the classroom setting in which teachers use only English as the medium of instructions and communication). Noticeably, there were 40 respondents (approximately 20%) expressed their neutral attitude or reluctance to be totally immersed into English

and 34 surveyed students did not like “All English” environment. These figures can be explained by students’ poor English ability which may hinder them from understand the lessons delivered totally in English.

#### 4. Conclusion and implications

##### 4.1. Conclusion

The students’ success in learning English is affected by multiple factors in which students’ positive attitudes are both the educational objective and one of the crucial determinants to obtain educational objectives. This study has reported the current state of second-year students’ attitudes towards two respects of English education: learning English and current teaching methods at ICTU. The findings can be significant to teachers as well as the administrators to examine their educational objectives of English courses for any necessary adjustments. Especially, to the teachers, the survey results help them to understand their students’ psychological factor – attitudes – to develop their positive attitudes towards learning English. Only when students have those positive attitudes, can their academic achievements be improved, and objectives of English courses be obtained. This study limited to exploring the students’ attitudes towards learning English, there should be further research into factors influencing students’ success in learning foreign/ second languages like students’ personality, beliefs, motivation, and contexts.

**Table 3.** Percentage and number of respondents on English teaching

| Statements   | Evaluative opinions |               |               |               |                |
|--|---------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
|  | 1                   | 2             | 3             | 4             | 5              |
| 10. Being able to communicate with the foreigners in English is a very basic purpose of English. | 3.4%<br>(7)         | 6.8%<br>(14)  | 2.9%<br>(6)   | 28.0%<br>(58) | 58.9%<br>(122) |
| 11. I like to be able to listen to and understand everyday English.                              | 6.8%<br>(14)        | 11.6%<br>(24) | 6.8%<br>(14)  | 12.6%<br>(26) | 62.3%<br>(129) |
| 12. It is enough to be able to read in English.  | 48.8%<br>(101)      | 23.7%<br>(49) | 7.2%<br>(15)  | 12.6%<br>(26) | 7.7%<br>(16)   |
| 13. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all equally important in learning English.     | 4.8%<br>(10)        | 0%<br>(0)     | 1.0%<br>(2)   | 18.4%<br>(39) | 75.8%<br>(157) |
| 14. I like to learn English through ‘grammatical rules’ and ‘vocabulary memorization’.           | 7.2%<br>(15)        | 34.8%<br>(72) | 9.7%<br>(20)  | 28.5%<br>(59) | 19.8%<br>(41)  |
| 15. I like to learn English in an ‘All English’ environment.                                     | 2.4%<br>(5)         | 14.0%<br>(29) | 19.3%<br>(40) | 20.3%<br>(42) | 44.0%<br>(91)  |

#### 4.2. Implications

As has been pointed out in the previous section, albeit non-English majored students have clear perception of the roles or usefulness of learning English to their personal development, their feelings or emotions and behavioral tendency when taking part in learning activities are rather negative. Therefore, when organizing instructional activities, teachers should:

(1) be methodologically innovative to arouse students' interests and free them from negative feelings towards learning English by organizing a wide range of relevant activities to engage students into learning activities.

(2) both raise students' awareness of making mistakes and encourage students by giving them constructive feedbacks when they make mistakes. This can help students develop self-efficacy and confidence gradually.

(3) prepare students with extra learning resources (either printed or digital) and life-long learning guidance for their autonomous learning because of their tendency to continue learning English after compulsory courses.

Concerning English teaching, teachers should take into consideration for the following matters.

(1) Students liked to listen to and understand everyday English, so teachers should select materials having topics, knowledge, and communicative situations are closely related to or linked with students' daily life but guarantee that learning objectives are obtained.

(2) Students showed positive attitudes to the equal development of all four language skills, and new language learners tend to develop their receptive skills first and then acquire productive capability. Therefore, teachers need to provide students with adequate and appropriate linguistic input while teaching reading and listening so that students can speak and write effectively.

(3) It would be better for teachers to teach grammar and vocabulary communicatively and implicitly. In addition, "All English" environment might have a counter-effect on students' academic achievements. Therefore, beside giving instructions in

English, teachers can consider using Vietnamese instructions if relevant.

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