

Factors Influencing Students' Attitudes Towards Learning English for Specific Purposes

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ABSTRACT: *Students' learning attitudes have been widely believed to be able to affect their learning outcomes. The paper examines Vietnamese students' attitudes towards learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the tertiary level. It also considers factors influencing their attitudes towards learning ESP. A questionnaire of 50 items was utilized to collect data from 251 non-English majored students. The research results revealed that the participants had favorable attitudes towards learning ESP in general and even towards factors in the ESP learning process such as teachers, classroom environment, course books and tests. Moreover, the findings indicated teachers had the most influential effect on the students' attitudes to ESP learning, while tests had the least influential one. Some pedagogical implications can be drawn from the research results for the improvement of students' learning attitudes and ESP learning outcomes.*

KEY WORDS: students' attitudes, influential factors, learning ESP, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, globalization has increased the need for communication in English at workplace in many countries in the world (Purpura & King, 2003). Huynh, (2019) also believes that English proficient students can have more job opportunities at multinational companies; and these businesses have more and more demand for human resources with fluent English (Huynh, 2020). Therefore, numerous studies on the innovation of English language teaching and learning have been conducted (Le, 2012). For the improvement of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam, many circulars and decisions and have been passed (Circular No.01/2014/TT-BGDĐT, Decision No.1400/QĐ-TTg, Decision No.711/QĐ-TTg; Decision No.2080/QĐ-TTg). The launch of National Foreign Language Project 2020 which has been extended to 2025 is an evidence of the effort to facilitate Vietnamese youth to confidently communicate, study and work in English in a multinational and integrated environment in the time of modernization, industrialization and globalization (MoET, 2018a; MoET, 2018b). According to Hoang (2018), English has become an optional subject for pupils from grade 3 and a compulsory one for students from grade 6 to grade 12 as well as for university students in Vietnam.

Despite these investment and effort to foster Vietnamese people's English skills, the results have not been as expected. According to a study by Nguyen et al. (2021), the results collected from 2542 students and alumni at eight high-rank multidisciplinary universities in Vietnam showed that most of the respondents got under 5 IELTS bands, indicating the low level of language proficiency within Vietnamese students. In addition, according to a survey on businesses in Vietnam, thirty percent of the participants admitted that their fewer than 10 percent of workers have satisfying English skills (VietnamNet, 2022).

The above issues lead to a need to investigate factors affecting the effectiveness of foreign language learning for the improvement of the situation in Vietnam. Among factors influencing the learning process are believed to be anxiety, intelligence, age, personalities, motivation, attitudes, learning achievements, ... (Gardner, 1960; Lehmann, 2006; cited in Shams, 2008), and learning attitude is one of the most influential factors (Fakeye, 2010). Due to the belief of a correlation between learners' attitudes to English learning and learners' performance (Momani, 2010), achievement (Fakeye, 2010), or learning outcomes (Gardner, Lambert and Burstal as cited in Stern, 1983), many studies have focused on learners' attitudes towards learning English. Little empirical research on factors affecting students' attitudes towards ESP in Vietnam has been documented in the literature. Therefore, this paper aims to examine factors influencing non-English majored students' attitudes towards learning ESP at the tertiary level in Vietnam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of attitude

The term *attitude* has been defined differently by different researchers (Ajzen, 1988, 2005; Al-Mamun et al., 2012; Brown, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Smiths, 1971). In the definition of Dörnyei (2001), *attitude* is simply considered as individual likes and dislikes. According to Ajzen (1988), *attitude* is defined as a favorable or unfavorable disposition to an object, person, institution or event. These simple definitions do not seem to convey enough to represent what *attitude* is.

Then, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) consider *attitude* as a psychological tendency formed through the evaluation of a particular entity with some level of favor or disfavor (cited in Tran, 2009). This definition seems to be broader than the first two definitions but still not to cover learners' evaluations and behaviors towards attitudinal objects. In Gardner's (1985) perspective, *attitude* is the signal of evaluating and reacting to one's referent or an attitudinal object, based on a person's belief and perception of the nature of the referent. Similarly, Smiths (1971) believes that *attitude* is comparatively continuing as it is learnt and it can be unlearned; and since people can learn attitude, it can be taught. In Brown's (2001) view, *attitude* shows certain emotive involvements of feelings and self-relationships in the community.

Attitude in language learning

Since attitude is considered as one of the most important factors that affect language learning (Fakeye, 2010), language performance (Visser, 2008; Tella et al., 2010), and language achievement (Clement & Noels, 1994; Gardner & Magoret, 2003) are used to explain linguistic behaviors. De Bot et al. (2005) argue that learners' positive attitudes can help enhance the second language learning process. Attitudes are also thought to impact people's behaviors such as speaking in a foreign language or choosing and reading books (Weinburh, 1998). Attitudes can

determine whether or not language learners will be able to study its details. In other words, language learning outcomes can be based on both learners' intellectual capacity and their attitude towards learning the target language. Therefore, language learning should be approached not only simply as an academic process, but also as a social and psychological phenomenon (Padwick, 2010). Similarly, learners' ability to acquire a language is believed to be influenced by both language skills and their perceptions or attitudes towards that language (Abidin et al., 2012; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Moreover, they add that attitude can impact the nature of learners' beliefs and behaviors towards that language, as well as its culture and community; therefore, it can result in their effort to master that language, and improve the learning outcomes. That means the restoration, preservation or death in the life of a language is basically determined by people's attitudes towards that language (Baker, 1992). Lightbrown and Spada (1999) state that with positive attitudes to the target language's speakers, learners would desire to have more communication with them. In short, attitudes play a substantial role in learning a language.

Factors influencing learners' attitudes to English learning

Many researchers have mentioned a taxonomy of factors impacting EFL/ESL learners' attitudes which in turn influence learners' language performance (Getie, 2020; Brown, 1994; Conteh, 2002; Ehrman, 1996; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Spolsky, 1989).

According to Conteh (2002), the learner is probably the most prominent variable, and their characteristics can decide their personality and attitudes. A combination of characteristics inside the learner, including lack of self-confidence or risk-taking and anxiety may have impact on their learning practice as well as their learning achievement (Brown, 1994; Ehrman, 1996; Spolsky, 1989).

Additionally, the teacher's important role cannot be ignored in the consideration of learners' attitudes to language learning because a better interaction between the teacher and the learner can improve much chance of effective education (Spolsky, 1989). The teacher-related factors such as personality, knowledge, classroom management skills, dedication and enthusiasm all have various effects on learner's motivation and attitudes. Dörnyei (2001) believes that the student adopts similar belief, attitude, and behavior through interaction channels with the teacher.

Ehrman (1996) indicates that the learning situation can affect learners' attitudes and success. In that learning situation, learning materials and other conditions such as the physical condition of the classroom with adequate and functioning equipment also have an impact on the learning experience (Conteh, 2002). In his opinion, the text authenticity and the simplicity of tasks in the learning materials should be considered in order to enhance the learner's attitude and success.

In a study by Dörnyei (1994), the influential factors consist of students themselves, parents, classroom environments, teachers and their teaching methods, learning materials and tests which are considered within the learning and school framework. Other factors like social context and gender have a direct or indirect influence on their attitudes towards language learning (Brown, 1994; Ellis, 1997; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Spolsky, 1989)

In Vietnamese contexts, many studies on motivation and attitudes towards English language learning have been of interest of many researchers, such as Nguyen (2008), Duong (2009), Tran (2009) and Le (2010). However, these studies focus on students' attitudes and motivation towards specific contexts or aspects of language and language learning, including speaking, writing, and

reading. Little research has been carried out to examine factors affecting learners' attitudes towards English language teaching and learning. For instance, Luu (2012) proves that learner factor and teaching methods of the instructor have certain influences on learners' motivation and attitudes. Another study by Le (2011) shows that the Khmer are motivated by learning environment but the Kinh are motivated by neither learning environment nor teachers. Additionally, Ngo (2008) indicates that non-English majored students do not have positive attitudes towards ESP course syllabus.

In short, because of the importance of attitudes on the determination of success or failure in language learning, such factors as teachers and teaching methods, classroom environment, course books as well as tests are taken into consideration in the current study. Since attitudes are situational and can be self-generated within a frame of reference, the research results are hoped to indicate ways to increase students' positive attitudes towards learning ESP.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study followed a descriptive design which centered on quantitative aspects in analyzing collected data. Non-English majored students were the respondents to a questionnaire to show their attitudes towards learning ESP and factors influencing their attitudes.

Participants

The subjects of this study were 251 non-English majored students at the average age of 21. Most of the participants started their English learning in grade 3 or grade 6. They majored in different disciplines of economics at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Fifty-eight of the students were male, while the female students accounted for 193. At the time of participating in the research, they finished ESP as a compulsory subject in their course and had enough knowledge to clearly and accurately convey their attitudes in learning ESP as well as influential factors to their attitudes for data collection.

Instrument

A questionnaire was employed in this study in order to investigate the students' attitudes towards learning ESP and factors affecting their attitudes towards learning ESP. The questionnaire was designed with two parts:

- (1) The first part consisted of five questions about the participants' personal information such as gender, age, the taken ESP course, and length of their English learning;
- (2) The second part contained 50 statements in form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Level 1 (strongly disagree) to Level 5 (strongly agree), among which the first 30 items were used to measure learners' attitudes towards learning ESP. The items used in the questionnaire were adapted from survey instruments developed by Abidin et al. (2012), Boonrangsiet al. (2004), Gardner (1985), Mamun (2012), and Rukh (2014). Based on the Three Levels theory by Dörnyei (1994) and the researchers' experience as ESP teachers, the last 20 items were developed to find out factors influencing learners' attitudes towards learning ESP.

The internal consistency of questionnaire was tested by SPSS Statistics and the reliability coefficient Cronbach's alpha was 0.97, which showed a high level of the reliability to be used for this research.

Data analysis

The collected data were coded and synchronized data to be processed by SPSS software. Then some SPSS tests were run to identify the questionnaire reliability, the students' attitude level and the percentage and correlation of the factors influencing their attitudes.

RESULTS

The students' attitudes towards learning ESP

The students' attitudes towards learning ESP

The learners' attitudes towards learning ESP are illustrated in the following table.

Table 4.1. The students' attitudes towards learning ESP

Attitudes towards learning ESP	N	Min	Max	Mean (M)
From S1 to S30	251	3.27	4.57	3.78

Table 4.1 shows the mean score of the students' attitudes to ESP learning is 3.78. This figure is higher than the average scale 3 in the five-point scale with the mean difference $SD = .57$ and the significance level $p = .00$. This mean score indicates that the students had favorable attitudes to ESP learning.

The students' attitudes towards factors in the ESP learning process

The following figure shows the students' attitudes towards factors in the ESP learning process including ESP teachers, classroom environment, ESP course books and tests.

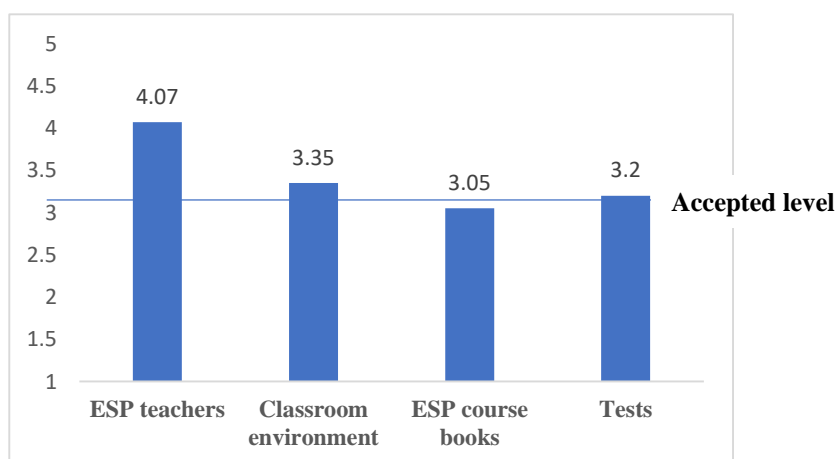


Figure 4.1. The students' attitudes to factors in learning ESP

The data from Figure 4.1 and one sample t-test indicate that the students had positive attitudes towards the factors ESP teachers, classroom environment and tests because the mean scores of these factors are all higher than the accepted mean score 3 in the range from 1 to 5 ($p = .00$).

However, among the three factors, factor ESP teachers got the highest mean score ($M_{ET}=4.07$). In contrast, the results do not show any significant difference of the mean score of ESP course books from the average level 3, showing the students' neutral attitude towards this factor. The students' attitudes towards ESP learning factors are analyzed specifically as follows.

Table 4.2. The students' attitudes towards ESP teachers

<i>ESP teachers</i>	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Percentage of Agreement (%)
Q31. Your ESP teacher applies appropriate teaching methods.	1.00	5.00	3.9004	.90887	74.1
Q32. Your ESP teacher has positive attitudes to your class.	1.00	5.00	4.1594	.79404	86.1
Q33. Your ESP teachers uses reasonable and clear scoring methods.	1.00	5.00	4.1952	.78341	87.3
Q34. Your ESP teacher creates opportunities for students to practise all language skills (Listening – Speaking – Reading – Writing).	1.00	5.00	4.1036	.86558	80.5
Q35. Your ESP teacher has ways of rewarding to encourage students to learn English better.	1.00	5.00	4.0080	.85319	77.3

The table shows that the students had positive attitudes to their ESP teachers with high mean scores around level 4 in the scale from 1 as the lowest to 5 as the highest. Especially, the teachers' attitudes and scoring methods were highly appreciated by more than 80% of the students. Approximately this number of students admitted that their ESP teachers created opportunities for the students' language skill development.

Table 4.3. The students' attitudes towards classroom environment

<i>Classroom environment</i>	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Percentage of Agreement (%)
Q36. The number of students in your ESP class is appropriate.	1.00	5.00	3.6972	.95287	65.3
Q37. The time allocation for your ESP class in a week is reasonable.	1.00	5.00	3.8645	.83760	73.7
Q38. The classroom facilities are suitable for for teaching and studying ESP.	1.00	5.00	3.4701	1.01691	53.3
Q39. The classroom is well-equipped with modern facilities for good ESP teaching and learning.	1.00	5.00	2.7849	1.58793	40.7
Q40. You are satisfied with your ESP classroom environment.	1.00	5.00	2.9283	1.58077	45.9

The data about the students' attitudes towards classroom environment reveal their very positive attitudes towards the time allocation for the subject with high mean score ($M_{CE} = 3.86$) and high

percentage of agreement (73.7%). The students also thought that the number of students in their class was accepted. However, they did not feel very satisfied with the classroom environment. The main reason could be due to the less modern facilities for ESP teaching and learning with rather low mean score for this issue (M= 2.78, <3.0).

Table 4.4. The students' attitudes towards ESP course books

<i>ESP course books</i>	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Percentage of Agreement (%)
Q41. The difficulty level of your ESP materials is suitable.	1.00	5.00	3.1633	1.60537	57.7
Q42. The topics in the ESP materials are varied, practical and easy to understand.	1.00	5.00	3.2351	1.63845	61.7
Q43. The ESP materials are presented clearly and beautifully.	1.00	5.00	3.0478	1.60178	52.6
Q44. The ESP materials help me develop all language skills (Listening – Speaking – Reading – Writing).	1.00	5.00	3.0677	1.60480	52.1
Q45. There is no need to change the ESP materials.	1.00	5.00	2.7410	1.53123	37.1

As can be seen in Table 4.4, the learners' attitudes towards ESP course books were not high. Although 61.7% of the participants thought that the topics in the ESP course books were varied, practical and suitable (M=3.23), many of them still thought that their current ESP course books needed some adaptation. The difficulty level, clarity of the presentation and format, as well as the value for skill development of the course books did not get high satisfaction from the users.

Table 4.5. The students' attitudes towards tests

<i>Tests</i>	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Percentage of Agreement (%)
Q46. The frequency of taking the ESP tests (1 mid-term test and 1 final test) is reasonable.	1.00	5.00	3.2869	1.65330	64.1
Q47. It is appropriate to administer the mid-term test (at week 8 - week 10) and the final test (at week 16 - week 18) in the semester.	1.00	5.00	3.3546	1.66786	67.3
Q48. The difficulty levels of the tests are appropriate.	1.00	5.00	3.1394	1.62741	57.7
Q49. The tests assess students' ESP ability.	1.00	5.00	3.0956	1.57697	55.8
Q50. The students' language skills (Listening – Speaking – Reading – Writing) are fully assessed.	1.00	5.00	3.1195	1.66182	56.9

The table above show that the students had rather high agreement with the tests. Especially, more than 60% of the students agreed with the frequency of the tests as well as the time for test

administration. However, the test difficulty and skill assessment did not get high satisfaction because the mean scores for these factors were just around the average level 3.0.

Influential factors to the students' attitudes towards ESP learning

Factors influencing the students' attitudes towards ESP learning are investigated through testing the Pearson correlation between the students' general attitudes towards learning ESP and factors in the ESP learning process. The analysis results are presented in the following table.

Table 4.6. Pearson correlation between the students' general attitudes and factors in learning ESP

		ESP Teachers	Classroom environment	ESP course books	Tests
Learning ESP	Pearson Correlation	.670**	.467**	.329**	.320**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	251	251	251	251

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4.6 shows the significantly positive correlation between the students' general attitudes and factors in learning ESP ($p=.000$). Among the factors, ESP teachers had the highest level of correlation ($r_{ET}=.670$), while classroom environment, ESP course books and tests had lower levels and ranged in the decreasing order of correlation (respectively $r_{CE}=.467$, $r_{EB}=.329$ and $r_T=.320$). It can be concluded that ESP teachers had more influential impact on the students' attitudes to ESP learning, the second influential factor was classroom environment, and tests were the lowest influential one. This result is in line with the result about the students' attitudes towards factors in the ESP learning process, and could be explained as follows.

ESP teachers had great effects on the students' attitudes towards learning ESP. They had positive attitudes towards the students and proper teaching and scoring methods. The classroom environment had lower effects because of the unsatisfactory facilities. The tests and the course books also had some effects on the students' attitudes. However, these two factors need some improvements in terms of book format and skill sequence in the textbooks and tests.

CONCLUSIONS

The research results indicate the students had favorable attitudes to ESP learning. Especially, they showed very positive attitudes towards to the teachers, and this was also the most influential factor on their ESP learning process. Other factors like classroom environment, course books and tests also showed their positive effects on their attitudes. However, these factors seemed to need more attention for better improvement. The results imply that teachers have very important role in shaping students' attitudes and learning outcomes. Their attitudes and methods have high influence on students. Besides, classroom, textbooks and tests also need consideration because of their importance.

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